

# The Theatre Memory System

About a group of works by Bernd Radtke entitled  
“The Space playing theater for itself”

A confined space is a room, ein Raum, une pièce but THE space is the outer space, l'espace, der Weltraum. Between both, the confined, limited room and the infinite space, there are many rooms. Which is that particular space which Bernd Radtke is referring to when he moves between these two extremes and yet close to limited, walled and opening out spaces called rooms?

Such rooms are known in painted pictures as frames, dwellings of the Holy Family, of biblical events, of princes, merchants and their wives or mistresses since the invention of the central perspective about 600 years ago, and they have held their ground until, 500 years later, painters being tired of the academic discipline have developed the air perspective and others.

At that time the story of photography began, a technique of picture-making which seems to be ending at the beginning of the third millennium. Together with Bernd Radtke we are now looking back on it – a series of portraits were made by him in a nostalgic way with a 19<sup>th</sup> century, large wooden camera on a collodion wet plate and developed in an improvised darkroom – and we know that in the digital age since the 70ies an era AFTER photography has begun, in which one new invention of picture making is following the other.

Just three of the pictures were made with an analogue SLR camera, all the others are the printed results of high-resolution photo-sensors which can be attached to large-format cameras. Thus they are not only exhibited as photos in passe-partouts and frames but predominantly as art prints on special paper, laminated on aluminum plates – as large as windows through which we are looking into the rooms.

For his exhibition, Bernd Radtke has found a title which explains why these rooms are empty of people: they are putting on a show for themselves. Since there can be no spaces in this overcrowded world which are not or were not lightened up by people, there are people involved in this show. Empty rooms

where people are going to live, showing at the most the traces of the craftsmen preparing them for their inhabitants, thus indicating a future life, are not of any interest for him. Radtke's picture-fantasy, his longing search for meanings is faced towards the past lives, the lived past, towards history and memory.

Longing is a difficult word expressing a feeling while watching empty spaces, zones and landscapes where someone has been. The discovery is disturbing and tranquillizing at the same time – as if for human beings there is nothing more horrible than absolute emptiness – emptiness in space as well as emptiness in time: the moments between the ticking of a clock.

The theater play of the rooms is the exhibition itself, whose spaces are occupied by pictures as large as windows, pictures attracting the attention into their rooms. They are fitting into this theater just like actors standing still, engaged in alternating dialogues and inviting the visitors to leave the observer's place (beyond the entrance), to enter the stage and to closely watch.

There are pictures of "closed curtains": the light-green slats of a Venetian blind with an alarming, shining red rectangle, the neon light letters PENTA ("events, hotels everywhere everything") above a shop-window in which the washed-out picture of a harbor-landscape can be seen, or the pending wire-fence in front of a wall on which a black cloth is hanging on a wooden slat just like a crucified.

These memory rooms are not in venerable ancient ruins, churches or palaces, they are not decorated with frescos and leather wallpapers. They are corridors, stairways, attics and courtyards with concrete walls, tiled, with plaster peeling off and covered with the rests of posters, in deserted buildings slowly revealing their purpose – a theater, a swimming pool, a wash house – and in the theater play performed by these rooms, the observer discovers the actors themselves – pegs on a laundry line, a vacuum cleaner, a chair leaning on a wall in a rather fragile way, a sign reading "Circulation interdite" – and the props abandoned by people: in a triptych on a door the painted inscription "Do not enter", opposite this a scribbled "Like this...SeQsii" and in the middle, on a wall with peeling plaster the small nude painting of a woman's back – or the dazzling graffito on a street wall in a dull curve: happy signs of life in a sad world.

It is not important to ask where these places are which are presented here in such a meaningful way: in the bright daylight, in backlit, in indirect light casting sharp shadows, in a diffuse light so that ghosts, apparitions, epiphanies are born; dark rooms opening into shining light rooms being extraordinary Kafkaesque corridors. Very rarely an exhibition space opens up in so many directions and offers so many exits – or entries – into the spaces of memory.

In the Cathedral of Aachen, Bernd Radtke's hometown, you will find the famous throne of Charlemagne. On one of the side panels a game of mill is carved in, according to the legend by Roman legionnaires in Jerusalem. This particular place is too significant, but in the wash kitchen of an abandoned abbey such a modest drawing would have attracted Radtke. All the venues of his theater are everyday places, and the traces he is looking for can be found wherever people used to live before.

In her 1966 book "The Art of Memory", Frances A. Yates describes the history of the art of remembering from the ancient world to the scientific methods of the modern age. In her view, the repository of memory is a theater, where the search and the regaining can find a system. The entries and exits of the stage, the crossing and the wandering from the real world to the world of apparitions and illusions are the foundations of the system. In this story the soul of man has got a memory. As a living mirror it shows the world as it was and as it is.

It is easy to understand that these days an artist, who works with the most fragile and transitory of all media, one that threatens to slip through his fingers like water, dedicates himself and his work to what just happened to be here but won't be here for long, to the ephemeral, to a fleeting trace of the past, to a memory worth being amazed about.