



ARTIST

Beatrix Reinhardt

TITLE

Looker's Showcase Club, from the 'Club Series'

DATE

2006

DIMENSIONS

20 in H x 24 in W

MEDIUM

Chromogenic Color Prints

IMAGE NOTES

Edition 1/7

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2006.003

CURRENT LOCATION

2432-3C

BEATRIX REINHARDT

BORN

1972

BIRTHPLACE

Wolgograd, Russia

GENDER

Female

CITIZENSHIP

Germany

CULTURAL HERITAGE

German

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Main Gallery, 2006

Beatrix Reinhardt: Members Only Artist-in-Residence, 2006

Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 2016 – 2017

Place: Selections from the Light Work Collection Lecturer, 2006

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

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BIOGRAPHY

German artist Beatrix Reinhardt spends a lot of time knocking on doors or placing phone calls in hopes to gain access to members only clubs. Her series on clubs began in 2003. It has taken her to many places as far as Australia, Great Britain, and China, but in the end the series has returned her to her own neighborhood of the last one and a half years in Queens, NY, where membership clubs are plentiful and rich in photographic visuals. She views clubs as special entities that provide a community for their members while excluding everybody else. Membership dues can be minimal, but some exclusive clubs may require years on a waiting list and annual membership dues in the tens of thousands of dollars. In her photographs she is primarily interested in the marks left behind by members of the club. The images are devoid of people, though they speak volumes about the club's members. Since arriving in Syracuse for her residency, Beatrix has been printing color photographs from her recent venture to China, but has also approached a number of clubs nearby for access. Beatrix grew up in Jena, Germany and has lived in the United States off and on for over ten years. Her photographs have been shown internationally. Recent exhibition venues have included the Minnesota Center of Photography (Minneapolis), Silver Eye Center for Photography (Pittsburgh), Sam Romo (Atlanta). She is preparing for an exhibition this year in Finland. Before participating in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program, she completed residencies in Australia, India, and China.

ESSAYS

Beatrix Reinhardt's grant insight to the private life of members-only clubs that are inaccessible to all but a few people. It is almost forbidden to see, and Reinhardt has had to knock on many doors to gain access. Prestigious or not, social clubs by definition are exclusionary. They are frequented by people who want to be with others of equal social rank, interests, backgrounds, or ages, and always at the expense of shutting out everybody else. Reinhardt's curiosity is unpretentious. She is as interested in the posh clubs of Europe as she is in small neighborhood clubs around New York City. She is equally open-minded about which organizations to include - any member association or business with "club" in their name is considered. The series stretches across different interests and social spheres. Some organizations are very restrictive toward new members and may require a nomination by a current member, a multi-figured entrance fee, and annual membership dues. Others may have an open door policy that requires nothing but a handshake and a few dollars toward coffee and a newsletter. They may be seeking 'young blood' or insist on old family ties. What is striking in Reinhardt's photographs is the wide variety of clubs and how each reflects the human need to congregate with likeminded people. Formalized social gatherings have been part of human existence since its early beginnings. They were common in ancient Greece, where members had to be elected to gain access to "public tables," while the Roman Empire bonded in bona fide organizations, such as guilds and collegia. Yet the idea and the term "club" is a relatively new concept, first appearing as "club" or "clubbe" in England around the beginning of the seventeenth century. In 1659 John Aubrey wrote "We now use the word clubbe for a sodality in a tavern." (1) He could have been referring to the Mermaid Tavern, located in London, which in 1603 was the meeting place for the infamous Friday Street Club that included literary giants such as club founder Sir Walter Raleigh, Ben Jonson, Francis Beaumont, John Donne, and possibly William Shakespeare. Other societies that made London's club scene famous as well as impenetrable included the Apollo Club, October Club, Scriblerus Club, King's Head Club, Kit Cat Club, Red Lions Club, just to name a few. In 1711 English statesman Joseph Addison grappled with an explanation for club participation as he wrote, "Man is said to be a sociable animal; and as an instance of it we may observe, that we take all occasion and pretences of forming ourselves into those little nocturnal assemblies, which are commonly known by the name of clubs." (2) Addison not only describes the group dynamic that has brought club members together in early and in current times, but also acknowledges the men-only attitude that has prevailed in many clubs. Today's heated discussions about continued gender-restrictions at many golf clubs and their men-only tournaments are symptomatic of a club culture that has long promoted gender separation. Reinhardt gently touches on the subject with the image of the Third Ward (Men's) Community Club. In the handwritten sign, the word "men's" has been crossed out and "community" has been penciled above it to reflect the recent name change. The artist chanced onto this project during a residency in Canberra, Australia in 2003, where much of everyday social life continues to take place in the structured settings of member clubs. She joined a few to entertain herself and meet people, and has been photographing clubs ever since. In addition to Australia, she has explored clubs in Great Britain, China, Spain, and the United States. Reinhardt deliberately chose to depict the clubs without showing people. The images guide the viewer through barren rooms and empty hallways during off hours. Neither club members nor the social activities these institutions are known for are part of this photographic series. She instead describes this reclusive world through the environment club members have created, but not through the members themselves. The images invite unrushed observation of places most people don't see. The selection of images is as international as it is democratic in its mix of meeting spaces for the common people or the elite. In this series, Reinhardt juxtaposes the grand and the plain, such as the gilded halls of the Chang Jiang International Club in Beijing; the luscious club rooms of the Gran Pena, Madrid's oldest men's club; the seductive settings at the Tantra Club in London; the simpler settings of the Pastime Athletic Club in Syracuse, NY; and the modest, yet proud decor at the Greek American Retirement Club in Astoria, NY. The dramatic difference in grandeur is significant to the viewer, but not to the club members. Members are at the club to socialize with their peers of equal social or economical standing. In the comfort of their respective clubs they are unlikely to care how the other half lives. Yet it is the viewer who is left to judge and compare when considering these various clubs side by side. As much as these photographs invite the voyeuristic act of quiet observation, many clubs are not flashy establishments set up to be viewed and admired. Instead they provide comfort and convenience for their members. These are homes away from home, halls for social events, private libraries, and only sometimes are they lavish stages where members can dress and impress. They are set up for exclusivity, yet once in, they are places where members can let their proverbial hair down to spend time with their peers of choice. Membership dues do not always stand in direct relationship with the general get-up of the club. As Reinhardt has commented, some of the clubs that were the most resistant to grant access were the least extraordinary in their decor. While the images may be dominated by empty chairs and basic room decorations, plenty can be read into these pictures. There is a psychology to interior spaces. Glenn Robert Lym distinguishes between an internal and external order in a home. As clubs are a sheltered space and not just a public venue, the same home concepts seem to apply. He writes, "Like

all spatial orders, the home spatial order identifies space experience that is crucial to our experience of ourselves." (3) In essence we are how we live, and who we are expresses itself in how we arrange our living space. Lym continues in a description of external orders that seems all too appropriate in the consideration of Reinhardt's clubs. "This external order uses the public identities of nearby or conspicuously absent people further to delineate who we are. In an external order, we are selecting with whom we want to merge, against whom we want to set ourselves off, or who we want to avoid." (4) Club culture has changed since its early beginnings. Clubs have developed from social gatherings in English taverns and coffee houses to a medley of clubs bringing together people in their interest for social activities, hobbies, trade, discussions, literature, arts and crafts, and more. While not the social necessity that it was in England centuries ago, Reinhardt's photographs illustrate that the world of clubs prevails. Reinhardt is by no means the only contemporary photographer to direct her camera at the interiors of buildings. However her sensitivity to create a sense of human presence in their absence is remarkably unique. Candida Hoffer in contrast has been photographing the grand halls of theatres, museums, and subway stations, and similar to Reinhardt, human beings are noticeably absent in the photographs. Reinhardt allows a level of chaos in her images. A floor is left half-mopped, extension cords remain where the cleaning staff has left them. Chairs are torn from use and stand astray in the room. Footprints sully polished floors. This degree of untidiness distinguishes the photographs from Hoffer's pristine settings. While Hoffer's images are linked to silence, an echo of human presence can still be heard in Reinhardt's photographs. Reinhardt has left plenty of clues for the anthropologist/voyeur in everybody. While these various clubs may normally not be accessible to most, she has made them feel as familiar as a neighbor's living room. We may not be members, but she has made us feel right at home. Hannah Frieser, (c) 2006 1. John Timbs, 'Club and Club Life in London' (Chatto and Windus, London, 1872, printing 1898). 2. Joseph Addison, 'The Spectator,' ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), no. 9, March 10, 1711, 1:28. 3. Glenn Robert Lym, 'A Psychology of Building. How We Shape and Experience our Structured Spaces' (Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1980). 4. See note 3 above. All photography works in the spaces between our mind's eye and embodied social reality. But as photography has become more self-aware, recognizing that it is situated within both art and documentation, it has learned to handle old chores in new ways. For those with a social conscience this repositioning is a problem because we no longer see merely through the photograph into the thing itself. We also realize the photo is a framed entrance to such issues as absence, history, memory, even a melancholy yearning in equal proportions to the thing seen. Decisiveness is certainly not abandoned but it is no longer sufficient in a social world now understood globally through local conditions and without the easy solutions that marked past modernist assumptions. Beatrix Reinhardt speaks of a "purposeful displacement" in reference to her work. Certainly her biography—born in Russia, raised in East Germany, then moving to the United States—qualifies her as a global nomad, whose geographical site of identity is located in no particular place. Much of globalism argues that meaning and identity emerge from motion rather than location. True perhaps, in part, but such claims can appear too disembodied, too removed for those, like Reinhardt, who focus on the local human condition. Hers is not the position of a global tourist stationed on the outside wistfully looking in, but rather is an extension of her attempts to participate within communities. Her photographs record the physical meeting places of social clubs in which she frequently or variously resides or participates for a period of time. Visitor? Perhaps. But a club is a group of people who have diverse interests yet agree or need to come together occasionally to share common fragments of desire. No one pretends that momentary social interactions construct the wholeness of life, but they do construct valuable parts—and these are the heart of Reinhardt's photo journey. The photographic correlation to these realizations is the action shot, but Reinhardt chooses the documentary precisely to raise the question of photography's relation to its own genres. Her works look vacant, static, and powerfully formal in their point of view, like those of a portrait photographer who showed up late to the gathering. But look again. Formalism is used to signify, not represent, the scenes which are moments after something has happened. On a primary level she assumes we are attentive observers able to locate evidence of presence; traces remain. The lights are still on, ashtrays remain unemptied, dirty footprints from use mar prior clean environments. Yes, you did just miss it, but it was there. Time is layered, and reality unstacked as we, like her, pull it back through the details, our embodied eyes slowly moving through the room. These shots and scenes don't contain the seamlessness of a document, although at first view they seem to. Therein lies the tension. There is an apparent self-conscious struggle contained under the strongly posed certitude in order to theorize the concept of a document. The social resonance creates a purposeful tension against the constraints imposed by the strong frontality, formalism, and purposeful lack of people. As John Berger, the British critic, famously argued, what is important in a photograph is not in a photograph. The formalism and Reinhardt's concentration on objects tells us she negotiates the various realms of modernism, social connections and postmodern theory. It's not objectivity the documents are after, but rather a document of presence through absence. What at first seem like vacant settings are testimonies to the inadequacy of photographs as documents to claim the capture of reality. No system of representation, as the social documentarian Martha Rosler argued, can adequately represent what is real. Indeed, the very nature of the real has come into question and reformulation due to realizations over the imperfections within ourselves, at work in opposition to our very strong drive to construct a totality. It's not our lives that are at question here; it is how we conceive our social life, in whole or in part, and photography's relation to it. The apparent transparency of a photograph as document—its function as a delivery system into reality—is not recoverable. Other pathways are needed. ©2007 Richard Leslie Beatrix Reinhardt lives in Astoria, NY. She teaches at the College of Staten Island/CUNY, and participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in January 2006. Richard Leslie is a visiting assistant professor in art history at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and a member of the graduate faculty in the department of Photography, Video, and Related Media at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.