



Ferdinand Dölberg

working is the beginning of all evil

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“Work, hard, intensive work that takes up all your brain and nerves, is the greatest pleasure in life”, says Rosa Luxemburg. “Working is the beginning of all evil”, replies Ferdinand Dölberg, freshly graduated as a Meisterschüler under Thomas Zipp at the Berlin University of the Arts. At the very beginning of his own working life, we look at Dölberg’s solo exhibition at Anton Janizewski’s at Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in Berlin. Bright rooms in a building designed by the grand architect Hans Poelzig. In the immediate vicinity: the Volksbühne, the ghosts of the disappeared KPD headquarters, Erich Mielke, Hans Haake’s public art, the ghosts of German history, of the labor movement.

After entering the gallery, one finds themselves in medias res in one of Dölberg’s works. It shows, of course: *Work*. *Kein Ende in Aussicht, es sei denn du hilfst* (No end in sight, unless you help) is the title of this room-filling triptych. In glazed acrylic and irreversible charcoal drawing, Dölberg has captured human figures on his canvas. People in uniforms interact, busily handling fragmented tools, abstract objects and mysterious things. Their faces are neutral, like placeholders of humanity. Their identity disappears into the collective, everything becomes a symbol, a metaphor: the people, the things, the interaction. Are we looking at narration or condition?

Like a triadic ballet of collective activity, the composition extends over six meters onto the canvas. Effortlessly, it can be lined up in the long tradition of the epic depiction of labour. Back in time, through the socialist realism of the East and the Industry Murals of Diego Rivera in the West, to Adolph von Menzel’s *Iron Rolling Mill*, the German painting of labour par excellence, revolutionary in its execution and symbolic power. But while Menzel, Rivera and the socialist art of the former Soviet Union understood the heroic depiction of the worker as an appreciation of industrial progress and the collective community, Dölberg’s work casts doubt on this interpretation. The quiet facial expressions are too restrained, the gestures too abstract, the interaction too questionable, the social structure too fragmented, the activity performed too vague.

“The depiction of this incessant, sweaty interlocking said nothing other than that hard work was being done here without contradiction. The praise of work was a praise of subordination”, contemplates the first-person narrator of the Peter Weiss novel ‘*The Aesthetics of Resistance*’, Menzel’s painting in the Alte Nationalgalerie just around the corner of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz. Ferdinand Dölberg’s work epics praise nothing. Both heroization and criticism need concretion in order to function. Dölberg plays with the ambiguity, the nuances, the complexity of his painterly skills, his references and our highly differentiated world.

At the front of the room, two small portraits complement the oversized spectacle. As in most of Dölberg’s works, the workers remain in their neutral facial expressions, even if their gestures and posture point to unusual emotional states, which are further emphasized by the seemingly threatening colours of the background. Are these people suffering from their work in the community or are they mourning the loneli-

ness of the viewers?

A profound ambivalence manifests itself in Ferdinand Dölberg's work. Somewhere between the longing for collective strength, the rhythm of collective creation and the fear of absolute ego dissolution in the exploitation logic of human capital lies the core of his artistic exploration. It is just as impossible for the viewer to fully decipher the meaning as it is to reconstruct the formal wholeness of Dölberg's painted sliding puzzle *Wie man so sitzt, sind Tätigkeiten schneller als Gedanken* (As you sit like this, activities are faster than thoughts). Here, too, fragment and reference are repeated, as we discover the figures that run through Dölberg's entire body of work. His humorously fragmented cosmos of images allows the viewer to interact and participate in the artistic genius, which is always impossible to fully understand.

“Everything that sets people in motion has to pass through their heads. But what form it takes in this head depends very much on the circumstances. It is quite possible to be a stockbroker and a socialist at the same time”, Friedrich Engels once wrote. Ferdinand Dölberg's work lets the mind run - and thus fits in seamlessly. Into this broken world, full of contradictory longings, identity concepts and interpretative sovereignties, collapsing societies and ambivalent simultaneities.

Hilka Dirks

Galerie  
Anton Janizewski,  
Weydingerstraße 10,  
10178 Berlin  
[antonjanizewski.com](http://antonjanizewski.com)