

Anne Neukamp

MARLBOROUGH CONTEMPORARY

Friedrich Kittler launched his lifelong investigation into how “media determine our situation” with a simple insight: that Michel Foucault, for all his brilliance, never reckoned with data storage systems other than the written word. The whole rich field of “German media theory” has emerged out of this blind spot. Kittler’s methods not only have transformed our understanding of analog and digital technologies, but also have alerted us to the technicity of writing itself. Typographic “operators,” like commas, quotation marks, and footnotes, all have their own complicated histories that Foucault never stopped to consider as he copied statements into notebooks at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Anne Neukamp, born in Düsseldorf, conducted a parallel pursuit in her exhibition “The Familiar Object,” named after a 1928 work by René Magritte. Her practice approximates a media-theory update to the principles Foucault set forth at the conclusion of his extended essay on Magritte, “This Is Not a Pipe,” first published in 1968. Foucault saw Magritte as having breached the division between iconic and symbolic representation that the Western tradition had upheld since the fifteenth century. Whereas modernism sought to refine image and word separately, Magritte mixed them together in the space of painting, catalyzing a kind of mutual decomposition. In a work such as *The Treachery of Images*, 1929, representation came loose from reference and lapsed into the simulacra of Pop. Foucault closed his essay with an incantation: “Campbell, Campbell, Campbell, Campbell.”

Neukamp takes from Magritte a flair for visual conundrum, but she replaces his emptied-out signifiers with technical operators. She abrades the surface of each canvas until it assumes the color and consistency of television tuned to a dead channel. Flat as a photocopy and thick as fog, this static surrounds marks and symbols recognizable as computer-code command keys and digital pictograms. Their stylized renderings convey contradictory cues, confounding all efforts to gauge their volume or depth. In *Sverve*, 2013, a pair of backslashes, like those of any website URL, drift through a diaphanous mauve squiggle. *Grid*, 2016, locks two hashtags between isometrically rotated puzzle pieces. *Memo*, 2017, slips an oversize brushstroke, red and glistening, straight into the flat embrace of a black-and-white paper clip.

This combination of Magritte and media analysis gives Neukamp a way around the interminable tug-of-war between abstraction and figuration that has become modernist painting’s principal bequest. It also allows for a more rigorous (yet nevertheless playful) exploration of information technology than much of what now passes for “Painting 2.0.” Much as Magritte’s painting commingled the activities of *reading* and *looking*, Neukamp’s imagery confuses *code* and *sign*—i.e., the function an operator performs in an application like Twitter versus the cultural significance that operator has acquired as a result of its function. Her slippery, self-canceling depictions of keys, clips, and envelopes isolate the metaphors of “desktop” interfaces that grant users the temporary illusion of control over their hardware.

Neukamp’s treatment of Magritte, like Foucault’s analysis, is only partial. Both focus on the Magritte of *Treachery of Images*, rather than, say, of *Le viol*, 1945, with its haunting vision of a woman whose sex supplants her capacity to speak. A full recovery of Magritte would lead to the question of how media determine our relation to difference and desire. Little in Neukamp’s choice of graphics speaks directly to such matters of subject formation. Instead, they arise only on the level of facture, in those passages where Neukamp’s own virtuosic skills as a painter come into contact with her application of stencils and other means of mechanical reproduction. That is, her paintings prod the viewer to search for traces of Neukamp’s hand, operating and being operated on. Where among these techniques and technical signs can we still locate the body, the body, the body, the body?

—Colby Chamberlain

Anne Neukamp,
Memo, 2017, oil,
tempera, and acrylic
on linen, 39 1/2 x 31 1/2".

