

GERMANY

REVIEWS



**STEPHAN  
JANITZKY & MAX  
SCHMIDTLEIN**

Deborah Schamoni,  
Munich

For this intriguing two-person show by Stephan Janitzky and Max Schmidlein, recent graduates of Munich's Akademie der Bildenden Künste, individual bodies of new work were exhibited along with several pieces the artists made together especially for the exhibition. Their shared outlook was inaugurated in the joint title: 'it's just a way to survive' / 'Zukunftswahn'. While the latter amalgamates the two German words for 'future' and 'delusion' to imply a perpetually obsessed or even crazed forward-looking culture or state of mind, the former suggests a weary submission to the reality of the present.

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Above:  
Stephan Janitzky  
and Max Schmidlein, 'it's just  
a way to survive /  
Zukunftswahn', 2013,  
installation view

Digital and analogue photographs, framing devices, wall-mounted objects and sculptural assemblages populated the gallery's series of rooms and the interconnecting staircase. This mystifying arrangement contained references spanning the 1970s architecture of the house-cum-gallery to the suburban neighbourhood where it is located to the historical landscape of Munich itself. A 2013 series of photographic prints taken by Schmidlein in the nearby Englischer Garten – the city's largest public park – depicts close-ups of discarded clothing and misshapen clay masks lying amongst vegetation or crammed into the hollows of tree trunks. Formally arranged behind thin glass panels adorned with cheap chain necklaces and clay-covered twigs, the implied presence of the individual in these images is trapped somewhere in between nature and culture, dematerialization and petrification.

Janitzky and Schmidlein clearly wrestle with the circumstances of living in a mix of formalist tendencies, homespun aesthetics, oblique references and deliberate evasiveness. However, it was the use of the acronym NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) as the show's unofficial subtitle that became the focal point. NEET is a derogatory term used by right-wing British politicians to categorize a public underclass and a sector of society lacking ambition. If NEET refers to disenfranchised youth, then Janitzky's work *sympathie fur die jugend* (Sympathy for the Youth, 2013) paid homage to a suspicion toward education and labour. This was a crudely made wall drawing of a pair of eyes with arched eyebrows raised in scepticism. What is being met with such distrust? Work ethic, social structures, the practice of art-making itself?

Normally applied as a political tool of marginalization, the term NEET takes on a more ambiguous connotation when Janitzky and Schmidlein employ it in relation to themselves. While it may be applicable to the young artists, who are operating outside of the formal structure of, say, art education, it's a complicated analogy to use in a show full of knowingly gestural clichés. Not only because of the cultural gap between its relation to a British underclass and the relative wealth of the Bavarian capital, but also because it implies a lack of ambition, insinuating they share this attitude as artists at the beginning of their practices. On the contrary, Munich has an active young art scene populated with artists like Janitzky and Schmidlein. Both often collaborate within a wider network while Janitzky co-runs the off-space Lothringer\_13.

The ideas and intentions behind 'it's just a way to survive' / 'Zukunftswahn' hinted at a consciousness of the social structures in which the artists themselves live and work. There was certainly a self-awareness and an inkling of shrewd observation, hovering somewhere between judgement and craft. Sometimes this came across as offhand, while at other points it homed in on particulars, such as the manifestation of lifestyles through objects. In this respect, the most convincing pieces in the show were Janitzky and Schmidlein's two collaboratively made sculptural installations *O.T* and *n.e.e.t* (both 2013). The former consisted of a small wooden table upon which were arranged cardboard facsimiles of books – possibly works of classical literature yet devoid of content. Display and ornamentation prevailed, but with so much emphasis on emptiness, what was left, other than a kitsch rendering of bourgeois taste and cultural appetites?

There were points of encouragement to be found here, where Janitzky and Schmidlein's works seemed to become affective installations with more ambition and more passion for the form that the artists' use to communicate their ideas. Certainly, their DIY approach begins to breach codified arrangements of object and material, but I would have liked to see them as haptic environments in which these lifestyles are emulated, questioned, felt and edified.

