

# frieze

## Judith Hopf

Croy Nielsen, Berlin, Germany

A convoy of black beamers pulls up to a farm and four spectators in clown make-up exit the vehicles to take up peeking positions over a wall. In a sand-covered horse school, Judith Hopf (for it is she) stands alert and expressionless, clutching the bridle of a well-groomed horse. 'Sieben minus Vier', one of the spectators says, and the horse stamps three times. A second onlooker laughs hysterically. A third says: 'Eintausenddreißig minus eintausendachtunddreißig.' The horse stamps a foot seven times.

This short video piece, entitled *Zählen!* (Count!, 2008), is presented in Croy Nielsen alongside three brightly coloured abstract woodcuts and a cheerful-looking circus whip. Produced at the same time, both are thematically, if lightly, related. The source material is the unusual story of Wilhelm Von Osten, a Berlin high school mathematics teacher, phrenologist, showman and mystic. At the beginning of the twentieth century, working from Darwinian postulates, Von Osten successfully managed to train his horse Hans in elementary arithmetic. The horse quickly became a sensation, making the front cover of *The New York Times* and prompting the German board of education to convene a 13-man board of inquiry.



The Hans Commission reported back in 1907. Analyzing the Hans' arithmetical acumen in terms of what would henceforth be called the 'Clever Hans effect', the commission concluded that the horse's true acuity lay in the realms of psychology. Rather than determining the mathematical answers directly, Hans worked, as many of us do, by decoding the correct solution from the body language of his interlocutors. As his stamping foot approached the magic number, the crowd would tighten up with tense excitement, subconsciously cuing the beast towards stopping correctly.

Hopf has sometimes been regarded as a political artist concerned with the exploration of power structures, something that comes through strongly, if unusually, in *Zählen!*. What is the relation between the crowd and the spectacle? How deep does the 'Clever Hans effect' go? In the video itself the self-possession of Hopf's own character (not to mention the know-it-all nonchalance of the horse) establishes a sharp contrast with the clownishness of the spectators (Hopf sides with the horse). At the same time, these questions also extend beyond the video to embrace the observational context in which it is itself embedded. How do the aesthetic effects of a white-cube environment cue the reception of the art it contains?

This is an old question, granted, but Hopf poses it idiosyncratically, from a quieter and more curious angle. Equally, independent of *Zählen!*'s narrative and theoretical qualities, there also remain its mathematical qualities. Due to the crisp starkness of the montage, it is hard to watch the film without continually counting. Four spectators. Three BMWs. Two sums. One horse.

**Daniel Miller**

## **About this review**

Published on 14/11/08

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