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AKTUEL INFORMATION OM SAMTIDSKUNST

Interview: Idris Khan

Idris Khan in solo exhibition *every...* at K20

From press release: Since completing his studies at the Royal College of Art in London in 2004, the young British artist **Idris Khan** (born in 1978) has produced an intellectually lucid and visually impressive oeuvre in only a few years. Khan's subjects show his passionate interest in culturally coded works and artefacts from the spheres of literature, art and music. Photography and video are his media of choice. In his photographs he digitally superimposes pictures, texts or scores he has acquired onto one another. He has applied this method to postcards of Turner paintings, photographs of industrial buildings by Bernd and Hilla Becher, notations from Wagners *Parsifal*, pages of the Koran and from a treatise by Sigmund Freud. Idris Khan's composites turn texts, pictures and music into a vibrating turbulence and give them a new dimension of presence. **Idris Khan** is represented by **Victoria Miro Gallery** in London.

Interview:**Magnus Andersen**
Foto:**Simon Heibing** & © **Idris Khan/Thierry Bal**
Idris Khan (GB)
every...
26. januar - 09. marts 2008
K20 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen
K20 Kunstsammlung. Am Grabbeplatz, Grabbeplatz 5. 40213 Düsseldorf
web site:
Tuesdays to Fridays 10.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays 11.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. Closed on Mondays

You integrate a wide spectrum of West European fine culture from the last several centuries in your work. Is there a political aspect behind your choice of material?
In many ways my work could be defined as having an undermining political aspect to it. When one looks at my name and then looks at the work and views the layering as an attack on the different sources then it could be seen in this way. For me this wasn't the initial idea but I think art should provoke all sorts of discussions. I want my work to be seen as a homage to the art, literature and music that has influenced my mind and the way I see the world.

In many ways your photographic works are more like paintings due to the layers of material rather than "traditional" photographing. How do you collect your material? And do you photograph the original works "live" or from books?

Installation view

Installation view

It is very important to me to collect my material through existing objects in the world. So most of the work is produced by photographing or scanning from books that are accessible to everyone….i.e books that anyone can buy. I always wanted to be a painter : I can't paint. I've always wanted to be a musician : I was too lazy to learn to read notes and always wanted to play music by ear. I've always liked the idea of becoming a writer : But I can hardly write and reading frustrates me, because I find my mind wonders with images too much. The words always seem to move in front of my eyes and jump off the page instead of dwelling on my thoughts. Like many, I have to repeat a page again and again and I like this process. With each media, there is the different act of looking that you have to adopt to with each one. The one to one aspect of reading a book is an intimate experience, viewing art in a museum is usually a shared experience with you and the space that it is positioned in, listening to music can be both intimate and shared. A book is taken out of its usual intimate experience and becomes a large piece of art that can penetrate and pulsate in front of your eyes. The Music pieces envelop in front of the viewer and have the power of art instead of sound.

It is almost impossible to define your works' relation to time. What does a theme like "time" mean to you? And how do you handle it?

It is hard to avoid the aspect of time when producing what one sees as a photograph. The viewer observes one of my images as something that is not a frozen moment but an image made up of many moments and that is created over 'time' rather than taken. For me, photography is a constant battle with its surface. I like to think that when people look at my image that they no longer think about looking at what is photographed, for example a sheet of music, but look at the surface of the image with no real sense of depth but to push everything and flatten it to the surface of the paper. When the audience engage with the work, I rarely hear them discuss it as photography (but more about looking at the images as a series of marks or traces on a photographic surface). Its important for me to understand art without boundaries or constraints to what is or what isn't a painting or a photograph. All my images become in some way painterly or have a drawn-like quality and when I hit that point when making my images I know I've achieved what I wanted to achieve. It is a challenge to not define my work as a photograph but using the medium of photography to create something that exists on the surface of the paper and not to be transported back to an isolated moment in time.

It could be interesting to hear something about your working process in general?

Every layer is an effect that needs to be created. All the scans are done at 100% and then I choose the amount of opacity I wish to have with every layer. Each layer is a fallible human decision. When I layer each scan, there is a decision made as to what I want to stay and what has to disappear. This process allows me to cut out the camera completely. The decisions that are made become intrinsic to the work and how it looks at the end. How much I want each image to be aligned, or how much emphasis I want to give to certain marks. After the over layering I work on the image intensively with the paint tool and darken and lighten certain marks. When I feel a line meets a line or a mark distracts the eye I remove it.

It's important for me to understand the disciplines of contemporary art without boundaries or constraints to what is or what isn't – in this case – a photograph or even photography. I'm not sure what this is anymore myself. Thinking of analogue photography, I use to think of it as three objects. The object in front of the camera, the negative produced and finally the print. There is a spatial and temporal gap due to the analogue technical procedure. I like the fact that I use a process in which the negative is superfluous. Whether I photograph straight out of the book with a digital camera or scan every page, the

image never becomes fixed in the form of a transparent negative. And the process of the image generation accelerates when working with digital processes. It seems to be reduced to making an image and then print and that is something I find interesting; the fact that the image doesn't have a material existence and can be manipulated endlessly until it is finally printed.

There is a really fine match between music and pictures in your two video works *A Memory... after Bach's Cello Suites* and *Last Three Piano Sonatas... after Franz Schubert*. What is you relation to classical music?

I was interested in making a film about the Bach Cello Suites, because I became interested in the fact that Bach made them as daily finger exercises, a ritual that he did every morning, and not as solo suites to be played in front of an audience. I wanted to use this idea of an intimate ritual and then look at the compositions as a type of private prayer. I then filmed my father praying and used the rhythm of his movements to create a structure for the film. When he moved in his prayer, I took out or added a layer of sound or a layer of film.

Schubert's last three piano sonatas is the epic length and time given to create these pieces. He was practically on his deathbed when he wrote these masterpieces and they weren't just short halfhearted pieces. They were Epic long contemplative works that are 30 – 40 minutes long when played with all the repeats. They became his final genius mark on this world. For this piece each note played in these incredible pieces of music resonate throughout each piece as a type of cycle. Thematic, rhythmic and harmonic links are evident between the movement of each sonata and they also hold the idea that each piece is in some way inhabiting the persona of the lonely alienated wanderer. There are several bars of music specifically written out by the composer to lead back to the beginning. The last three sonatas form a kind of cycle and thus illuminate one another when performed.

Do you work with assistants? Which software do you use for editing...?

I work with one assistant, she has brown hair!, and I use Final Cut Pro and Photoshop a lot.

Do you want to unveil anything about future projects?

I have my first public art commission opening in April in London. The piece will be located in the pavement outside an old post sorting office that is being converted into gallery and studio spaces.

For this commission I have created a series of short films that combined my obsession with memory and repetition based on the historical significance of Howick Place as a Sorting Office for the Royal Mail. I built a post office film set out of cardboard and packing tape in my studio.

Contemporary society is increasingly dependent on digital communication and therefore communicating through writing is becoming obsolete. I became fascinated that Howick Place was a building that contained so many thoughts and words flooding through it daily and that its new function would also be a place of ideas and creativity. The films will contain different hand written or painted messages that shall be played in reverse. By reversing life we enter into a utopian world whereby complicated or the easiest tasks look beautiful and mesmerizing. I will be filmed ripping, throwing and sketching these messages, which could be seen as a message for our time.

The films shall be displayed on several plasma screens that will be embedded into the pavement directly in front of the entrance to the Design Studio. By placing the screens on the pavement the viewers shall have more interaction with the space and hopefully be mesmerized by my actions in the films.

Idris Khan: *Fragile (Howick Place)*, 2008. Image © Idris Khan/Thierry Bal