

Projects 16 : Bernhard and Anna Blume : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 13-June 20, 1989

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Date

1989

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2128

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16



This side and reverse:
Five untitled photographs from the series
Mahlzeit. 1986–89. Gelatin-silver prints, each
67 x 42" (170 x 108 cm). Courtesy Galerie
Magers, Bonn

Archive
MoMA
1519

**bernhard and anna blume:
*trautes heim***

Since 1980, the Cologne-based artists Anna and Bernhard Blume have collaborated on photographic theater pieces, or "photo-actions," producing series of staged photographs that purport to document paranormal occurrences in the lives of a 1950s petit bourgeois couple. Their present installation, *Trautes Heim* (*Home Sweet Home*), consists of some twenty large-scale gelatin-silver prints from two such sequences conceived since 1986: *Küchenkoller* (*Kitchen Frenzy*) and *Mahlzeit* (*Bon Appetit*).

As both directors and protagonists of these series, the Blumes place themselves in claustrophobic domestic settings and enact nightmarish encounters with animated foodstuffs and kitchen implements. While on one level *Trautes Heim* functions as a satire of conformism in German society, this work is autobiographical before it is political. The Blumes' performances for the camera may be seen as expressions of their own ambivalent feelings toward the prewar era of their early youth.

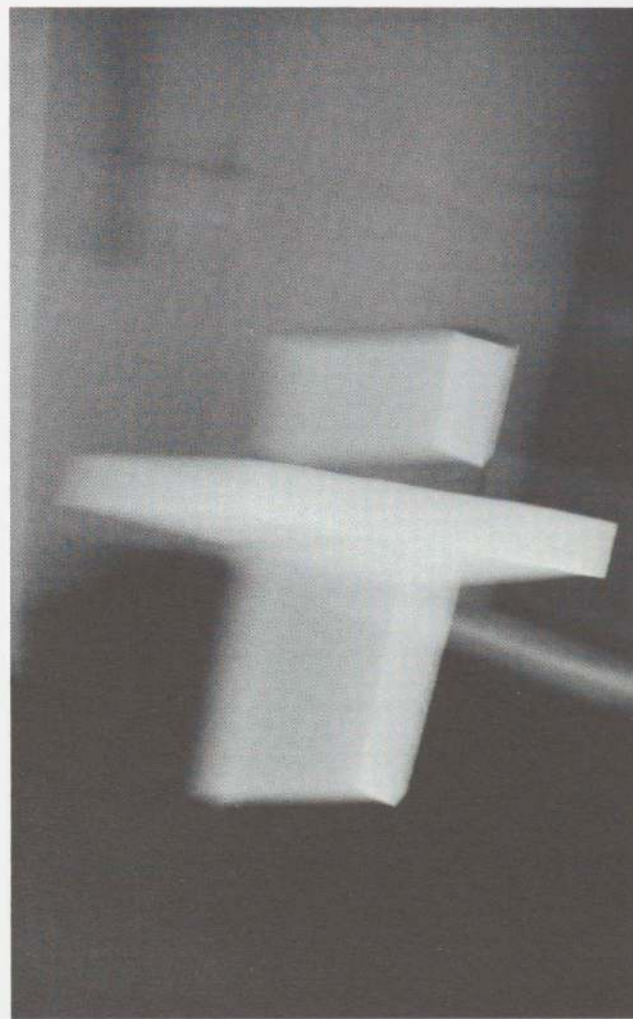
The two sequences of *Trautes Heim* refer both to repression in domestic life and to the fantasy life that an extremely controlled existence can provoke. Their titles are puns integral to their meanings. The term "*Küchenkoller*" can also mean "kitchen corset," a garment that metaphorically binds women to a traditional role. In this piece, the housewife (Anna Blume) is bombarded by the potatoes she peels, as if her disobedient thoughts have breathed life into the objects of her frustration. "*Mahlzeit*" is a German mealtime greeting that would be heard in a working-class household; it calls to mind images of hearth and table, sacrosanct symbols of domestic security. In the world of the Blumes, it seems, the challenge to the social order begins at home.



These photographs may be understood paradoxically as both a submission to and rebellion against prosaic and spiritual rituals. In *Mahlzeit*, for example, the daily meal becomes a symbolic event of mandatory participation. As if in a seance, the couple conjures parapsychological phenomena through intense concentration. In the first image, they obediently attend a gleaming pot, as if summoned to the table by an unseen force. But even as their psychic energy is released, the Blumes become victims, undermined by the violent actions of objects charged with special powers. Activity is dictated by the "food"—actually potato cubes—which turns into mysterious geometric objects that glow, float, and metamorphose into a cruciform before forcing its way into the Blumes' mouths. Finally, this substance is exorcised by Bernhard Blume in a graphic act of rejection. What remains are potato casings, shells of mundane material that has dissipated into the atmosphere as spiritual stuff.

In one image of this series, the table greeting "*Mahlzeit*" is written with strips of potatoes, a staple of the traditional German diet. Here, in the context of cross forms and transubstantiated food, the greeting has a second, equally important significance: this particular meal pointedly alludes to the Eucharist. Indeed, at one time Bernhard Blume considered becoming a priest, and his experience with Catholicism played an integral role in his thinking about this work. In the sequences that comprise *Trautes Heim* the Blumes explore parallels between domestic and religious activities whose highly structured, ritualistic nature elicit controlled responses.

The Blumes' work is a form of performance art, and the staging of it is crucial to its meaning. As the sole protagonists, they seek a cathartic release of tension and the confirmation of the self through action. They



often repeat violent actions in order to capture the desired image on film. This theatricality should be understood within the context of European conceptual and performance art of the past two decades. The couple's artistic outlook was informed by their relationship with Joseph Beuys, with whom Bernhard Blume participated in Fluxus events in Düsseldorf in the early 1960s. It was Beuys's shamanistic performances and persona that inspired the photo-actions. But the humorous, hysterical pitch of the Blumes' work is also intended, paradoxically, as an irreverent parody of their mentor's "life as art."

Other artists, including Americans, have performed for the camera to examine cultural codes. In the mid-1970s, Cindy Sherman began to impersonate clichéd female characters in her photographic series *Hollywood Movie Stills*. In the same period, Lucas Samaras created a series of nude self-portraits in which the artist's confrontational gaze aggressively engages the viewer. In some respects, however, the Blumes' photo-actions seem more closely related to the dreamlike narrative sequences of Duane Michals. But Michals's serial works are continuous narratives unfolding in a unified pictorial space, whereas the Blumes' sequences deliberately confound narrative progression.

Indeed, *Trautes Heim* subverts conventional narrative expectations and notions about the documentary nature of photography. To accomplish this, the Blumes exploit two elements of the photographic vocabulary that are often used to indicate the passage of time: the sequential format and the blurred image. The Blumes dictate the order in which the photographs are installed so as to deliberately scramble the narrative. Focus, distance, and viewing angles are juggled to provoke a sense of vertigo. And as the temporal viewpoint shifts, so does the formal treatment of the material: when the image

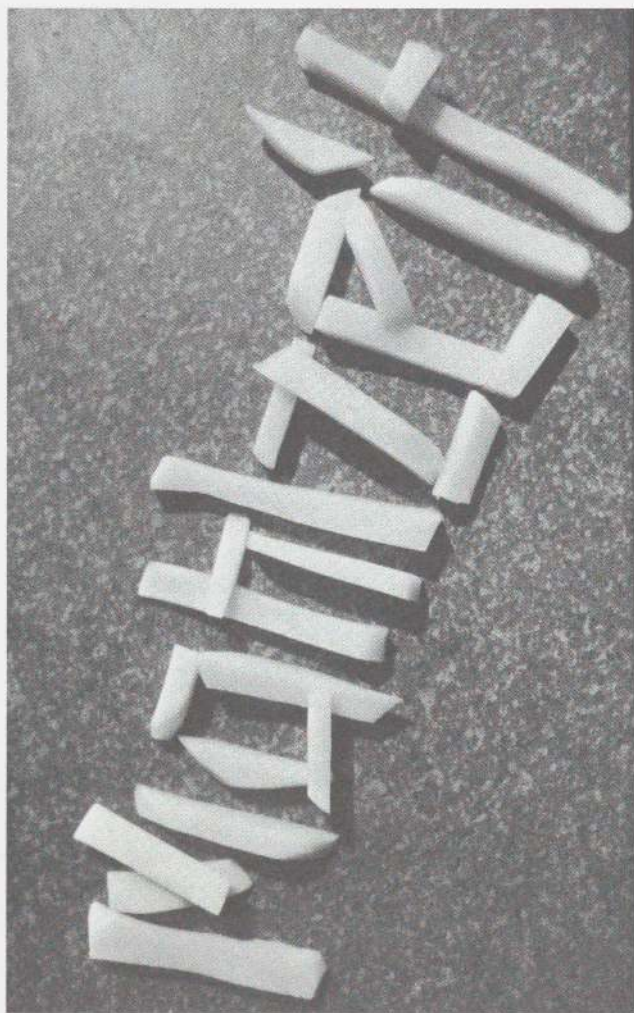


sequence moves from a shot of a highly plastic, clearly rendered form to one of blurred, painterly surfaces, the viewer becomes almost convinced of the fantastic metamorphosis described in the sequence. The Blumes' hyper-real yet obviously fictional imagery casts doubt on the supposed objectivity of the photographic medium.

Bernhard and Anna Blume employ photography to link together the natural and the supernatural realms. After working for years as conceptual artists, creating work in various mediums, they have developed in their photo-actions a way both to express metaphysical ideas and to explore the richness of forms. What interests the Blumes beyond the theater of the kitchen is how they are able to enlarge upon an autobiographical examination to illuminate broader cultural issues. Through the use of ordinary objects, the Blumes transform what is simple and obdurate into a transcendental experience.

Lisa Kurzner
Newhall Fellow
Department of Photography

Designed to present recent work by contemporary artists, the new **projects** series has been based on the Museum's original **projects** exhibitions, which were held from 1971 to 1982. The artists presented are chosen by the members of all the Museum's curatorial departments in a process involving an active dialogue and close critical scrutiny of new developments in the visual arts. This exhibition is supported by a grant from the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations, Stuttgart. The **projects** series is made possible by generous grants from the Lannan Foundation and J. P. Morgan & Co. Incorporated.



biographies

bernhard blume

Born Dortmund, Germany, 1937

anna blume

Born Bork, Germany, 1937

Both studied at Staatlichen Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf, 1960 to 1965. Married in 1966. Since 1988, both teach at Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Hamburg. Reside in Cologne.

selected individual exhibitions

1988

Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn*

Kölischer Kunstverein, Cologne*

1987

Kunsthalle, Basel*

Portikus, Frankfurt

1982

Museum Folkwang, Essen

selected group exhibitions

1989

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis*

Vanishing Presence

1988

The Carnegie Museum of Art,
Pittsburgh*

Carnegie International

1986

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art*

Behind the Eyes: Eight German Artists

1985

Palazzo della Società Promotrice delle
Bella Arti, Turin

*Rheingold—40 Artisti da Colonia e
Düsseldorf*

1984

Düsseldorf Messegelände, Halle 13*

Von Hier Aus

1980

Venice Biennale*

selected bibliography

Henschel, Martin (Leslie Strickland, trans.). "Bernhard Johannes Blume, Galerie Philomene Magers," *Artforum International* (New York), vol. 25, no. 8 (April 1987), p. 142.

Weiss, Evelyn. "Bernhard Johannes Blume: 'Magischer Determinismus,'" *Kunstforum International* (Mainz), vol. 18 (1976), pp. 188 – 205.

*A publication accompanied the exhibition.