

CHRISTIAN RATTEMEYER BLACKOUT

in:

BETTINA POUSTTCHI - REALITY RESET

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Bettina Pousttchi's group of sculptures *Blackout I-IV* consists of two or more crowd barriers, colored a deep black and bent in several places to snake around each other, fold onto each other, cradle each other, and combat each other in a variety of shapes and positions. Some are placed standing, others are lying on their sides, and all are powder-coated black instead of their usual galvanized steel exterior. They rest on low white plinths, like sporting mats that define the quadrangle of their battle. Pousttchi has used steel crowd barriers in previous works, namely, *Locked* and *Landing*, in which they interact with the institutional surroundings and expectations of the gallery. But in *Blackout I-IV*, it is less the relationship to the institutional environment that is stake and more the object's capacity to relate metaphorically, to act as a marker for the narrative of violence. Its most direct predecessors are not Michael Asher's feats of institutional critique but the brutish sculptures of Olaf Metzel, particularly his 1987 sculpture *13.4.1981*, commissioned for the Berliner *Skulpturenboulevard* and often referred to as the "Randal-Denkmal" (Riot memorial), which is discussed in Jörg Heiser's text elsewhere in this catalog.

Pousttchi's objects achieve something akin to Metzel's symbolic action, albeit more subtly. Their withdrawal is marked not through the constructive scale change of fabrication, but through the stylization of colorization and removal. The black crowd barriers on a plinth are too precious and too finished to have been the victim (or victor) of real violence or containment. Rather, they enact the consequences of such exercises of power with formalist aplomb, in their sinuous torquing and turning, slanting and slithering of gate upon gate. There is a language of signification of violence, rather than a breakdown of communication into affect, which results from understanding them as actual victims of

the force they represent.

We have to keep in mind this crucial difference between real and symbolic action if we wish to understand the works' formal force. For if they are not to be understood as remnants of a real act of violence or revolution, how can we entertain the possibility that the smashed and crumpled gates might be the remainders of crowds breaking free, and thus act as a sign of liberation? In the end, this is where the fundamental complexity of the works' significance lies. Their material form conditions their function as symbolic objects; the carefully constructed, seemingly damaged gates allow us to consider the possibility of force as a transformative energy. But it is through the shaping of a new form, the creation of a formally valid object, that the positive potential of violence can be expressed. For the transformative powers of revolutionary force to be understood, you need a resolved product that can act symbolically and concretely; otherwise, all that remains is destruction.