

Raffaela Bielesch
Red Herring
8.11.–15.11.2024

Curated by Stephanie Damianitsch

Raffaela Bielesch's work *Red Herring* combines different stories from her home village of Stripfing in eastern Lower Austria, which are set in or around the Second World War. Dropped chaff (tin foil strips that interfere with radar) as Christmas tree decorations, a family secret, three dead soldiers and a murder: different narratives are combined to form a dense fabric that does not create a coherent story. Instead, the artist strives to show how exceptional situations and conflicts—both social and private—find expression in rather inconspicuous everyday situations. How they become embedded in places and objects with memorable value, which keep these tensions just as present as they conceal them through their everyday “harmlessness”—like a skillful diversionary manoeuvre.

The starting point of the project was the story of a neighbor who recalled her childhood during World War II. She told the artist about the chaff that was dropped to disrupt enemy radar. The children would gather the silver-glittering tinfoil strips to hang them on the Christmas tree. The military diversionary maneuver that the chaff represents runs parallel to a process of psychological defense and personal confrontation with history: the chaff—transformed into Christmas decorations—denies the reality of war. The sense of threat associated with the object is dissolved in the celebration of love.

The way in which repressed fears and conflicts crystallize in everyday objects also occupied the artist as she photographed her late uncle's dilapidated farmhouse. Since her childhood, the estate—now accessible to her in full for the first time—had held many mysteries. The photographic documentation of the house and its objects thus resembled a search for clues and an interrogation of things as silent witnesses to paradoxical circumstances and denied conflicts. Even though the family secrets could not be fully uncovered, the artist discovered, for example, that the *Ausnahm*—the part of the house where the elder farmers live once the next generation takes over the farm—was destroyed by her uncle after his parents' death and never restored. It seems that threatening emotional states were suppressed through actions and interactions with external reality. In this process, the world of objects takes on a catalytic role for inner psychological dynamics.

In the *Red Herring* project, the photographs do not merely document the depicted places and objects in the traditional sense; rather, they portray them as representatives of repressed life events and existential conflicts that were acted out through or upon them. For the artist, photography as a medium correlates with the performative character of the depicted objects. The moment of “acting out” and engaging with external reality, which the photographed objects represent, aligns with Bielešch's understanding of photography as a performative act.

The interplay of performative and photographic elements in the artist's work is vividly demonstrated by the photograms in the *Red Herring* series. These were created by letting the chaff's tinfoil strips fall directly onto the photographic paper. Through this act, the artist not only reenacted the story of their original release but also transformed the material itself into an agent, leaving traces on the paper. The abstract pattern that emerges from this

performative act is less a depiction of the object than an expression of the abstract fabric of memory, of the traces that remain. The photograms appear in different material forms throughout the presentation.

(1) As a large-format, unique piece, one photogram resembles a depiction of the night sky, alluding to the place from which the chaff was originally dropped. At the same time, the image bears a striking similarity to how the chaff appeared on enemy radar screens.

(2) Around seventy small-format photograms appear in rapid succession in the artist's video work. The quick transitions between images seem to reenact the act of dropping the chaff onto the paper, constantly generating new graphic constellations. This evokes the fluidity of historical memory: as Walter Benjamin might ask, which “threads of the past” surface in the present, which remain obscured, and what diverse narratives are spun from these threads? The photograms alternate with views of the uncle's farmhouse, documenting both the traces that time has left on its architectural substance and the objects that reveal aspects of daily life while remaining silent witnesses to their former owner.

(3) The photograms ultimately take on an object-like quality through a curtain, whose pattern is created by layering individual photograms. As an object, the curtain connects the dynamics of remembering and forgetting with the relationship between seeing and concealing. It also serves as a commentary on the museum's role as the exhibition venue. The museum preserves objects from the past to convey history; however, because it must always make a selection, the question arises: which objects are deemed worthy of display, and which are not? The authority of historical narrative, vested in the museum as an institution, is critiqued in the presentation through its approach to display structures: the museum's display cases and pedestals fail to perform their usual function of showcasing and protecting selected objects. Instead, they remain empty and thus become erratic objects themselves—like the items in the farmhouse—scattered within a grid inspired by the farmhouse's floor plan. In this way, the boundaries between institutional and private spaces are blurred—just as in the curtain object—to emphasize the contrast between institutional and personal approaches to historical narrative and reconciliation.

(4), (5) In two small-format photographs, the artist addresses the impossibility of documenting certain oral histories. These

stories concern murders that took place in the village. In *Red Herring (The Three Soldiers)*, three small trees in the front yard mark the spots where, during the war, three dead soldiers were buried in wardrobes. *Red Herring (The Daughter)* shows the house of a woman whose aunt was murdered and buried by her father in the chicken coop. The connection between the depicted objects and the murder stories is tenuous, suggesting that these histories can no longer be adequately preserved through photographs alone. The objects that surround us thus reference not only our history but also “erased stories,” the forgotten.

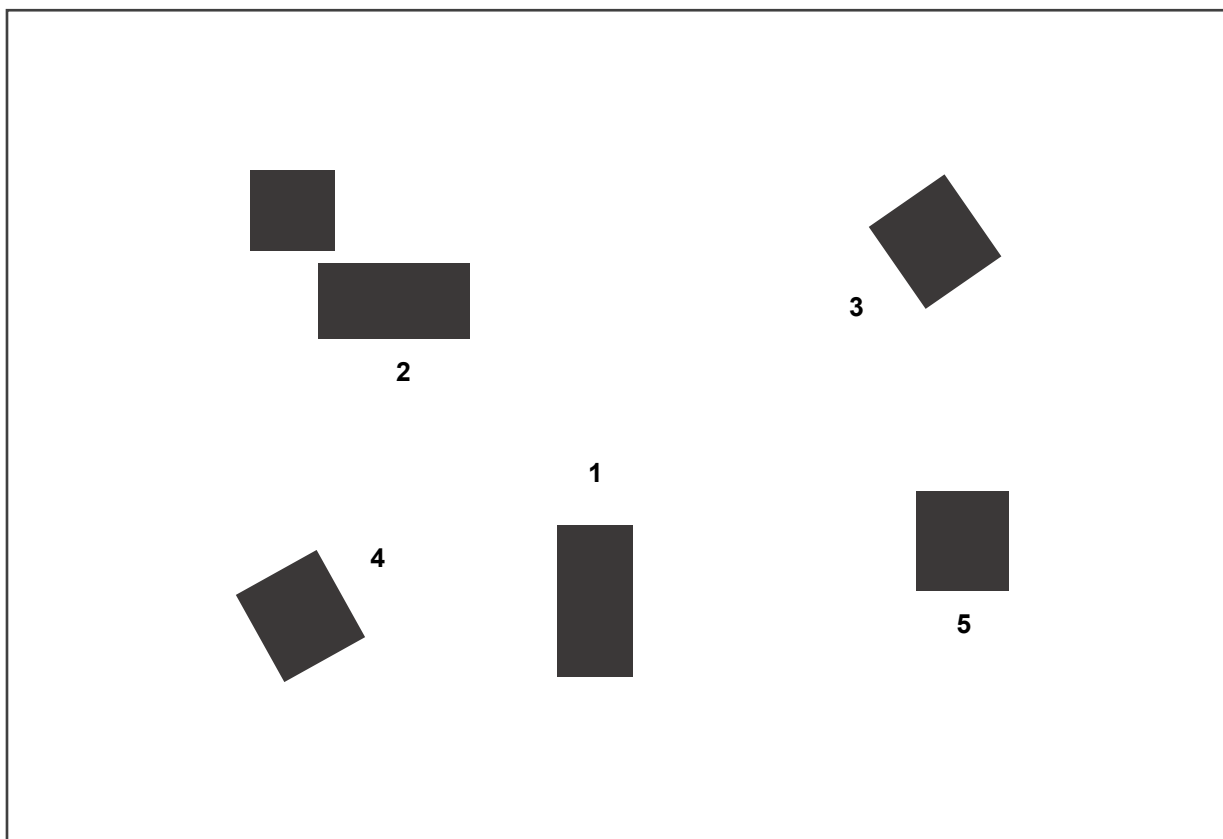
The installation *Red Herring* thus presents a complex intertwining of the questions that preoccupy the artist: Which artifacts remain? How are they used? And what does the interaction with these objects reveal about the unspoken, sometimes forgotten stories behind them? At the same time, it makes clear that we can only “retain” feelings, experiences, and events by turning them into objects. In this way, the installation links the function of photography as a recording medium for ephemeral situations to the fundamental question of what storage strategies people develop through the processes of collecting, archiving, or hoarding things. For it is the objects—and photography as a material object—that are what remains of individual occurrences, as well as of collective histories.

Biographies

Raffaella Bieleesch (*1984) studied at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna in the Department of Performative Art under Carola Dertnig. Prior to that, she studied Slavic Studies and Art History in Vienna, Moscow, and Basel. She completed her studies at the Friedl Kubelka School for Artistic Photography, under the direction of Anja Manfredi. In 2018, she was nominated for the Ö1 Talent Scholarship, and in 2019 and 2020, she received the ArtStart Scholarship from the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. In 2022, she was awarded the Theodor Körner Prize for her project *Red Herring*.

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Stephanie Damianitsch (*1982) is an art historian, curator, and author, as well as a student at the Vienna Psychoanalytic Academy. From 2018 to 2023, she led the Office for Contemporary Exhibitions at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. Prior to that, she worked from 2015 to 2018 as Coordinator for Curatorial Affairs and Curator for Contemporary Art at the Leopold Museum in Vienna, and from 2011 to 2015 as a research assistant and curator at Kunsthalle Krems.



(1)
Red Herring (Chaff #1 – Galaxy), 2024
Analog b/w print, mounted
50,2 × 40 cm
Framed

(2)
Red Herring (Stop Motion), 2024
Digital photo series
8:58 Min. (loop)

(3)
Red Herring (Curtain), 2024
Object made from printed fabric
Each 200 × 157 cm, two parts

(4)
Red Herring (The Three Soldiers), 2024
Pigment print
36,9 × 30 cm
Framed

(5)
Red Herring (The Daughter), 2024
Pigment print
36,9 × 30 cm
Framed

An artistic intervention as part of Vienna Art
Week 2024 at the Museum of Military History.