

# *Katrin Korfmann*

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## **Katrin Korfmann and the Esthetic of the Conscientious Fragment**

James Scarborough

A group of people sit on an art museum bench in front of Rembrandt's painting, *The Night Watch*. We see them from the point of view of the work. The gallery's green walls can be seen off to the side. The gallery's entryway frames most of the group and provides a view of other galleries that recedes into the background. Reverent and awed hardly describe their collective attitude. More like indifferent and bored. Skittish.

Though bunched together like tired tourists waiting for a bus they each inhabit their own private world. They resemble participants in a disheveled and suburban *Last Supper* living tableau. They do anything but stare straight ahead. One points to the left. Another stares to the right. Two read by themselves. One speaks to someone behind them. Two converse with each other. They do everything but study what's in front of them. This indifference is not a coincidence: the same dis-interest can be seen throughout the 6-minute DVD loop.

If this is what passes for iconic reflection, then our world is not a very reflective place. If we cannot grant a work of art its requisite suspension of belief, then how can we reflect on other things that matter: our lives, our destinies, and our place in the scheme of things?

Katrin Korfmann's photographs, installations, and videos describe with subtlety, grace, and humor our indifference to art. Sometimes a studied indifference to art and its trappings on the part of artists can make for a viable subject of art. The whole *arte povera* movement, for instance, showed a delicious indifference to the ideas of quality and to the sanctity of the viewing space. But that's not the case here. Here we talk about viewers not makers of art.

Lost in the shuffle is the personal space within which we experience and understand art and by extension experience and understand ourselves. In his *Pensees* Blaise Pascal described this state of restless superficiality that Korfmann pictures as the essence of the human condition: the product of the inability to sit alone in an empty for an extended period of time.

This indifference is not so much an indictment a diagnosis of a sociological situation. No matter where Korfmann situates her work indoors, outdoors, in museums, in public spaces, you encounter the same indifference. You have seen it in the night

watch piece. You can see it in pieces in which people stand in galleries whose artworks have been removed with Photoshop, positioned in front of blank walls, thinking they're having an esthetic experience because that's what one does in a museum. They think the act of standing in a gallery in itself gives them occasion for reflection. You can see it in her placement of a huge pink rectangle in the middle of a neoclassical square which hardly creates a stir, much less invites vandalism. And you can see it in her placement of a white cube in the arrivals lounge of an airport in which she places people on benches. It's as anonymous as a sugar cube.

Not content to just describe this indifference, she offers three explanations that show how, despite the ubiquity of international art fairs, art offers no common ground that holds people together. Whether or not it's the nature or quality of the art is not the issue here. First, other things vie for our attention. Second, we have hummingbird attention spans. Third, the prevalence of public art has contributed to the neutralization of the aura of all art.

To see what really holds our attention, she offers the video installation, Counter-Strike. Each of six wall-mounted wall monitors shows the face of a young boy as he plays a round of the Internet-based game, "Counter-Strike" in a cyber café. As we saw with Night Watch, we look at faces of people who do something else. Each face barely moves, eyes barely blink, it's as if they were enraptured by an icon, so rapt do they concentrate on the game. They share a common experience, a common (albeit cyber) space, and focus their energy into a common pursuit. But it's not art, it's a video game. At the turn of the last century art was thought to be a universal language. Now, over a century later, it's the intersection of video games and the Internet that commands our attention.

To account for our attention-drift, Korfmann suggests that our brains cannot possibly process the stampede of visual stimuli that it encounters on a moment-by-moment basis. Lightboxes shows video stills of Cibachrome Duratrans mounted in lightboxes. Each one is pulled from a one- to two-minute video of an outdoor activity like soccer. She creates a backlit mosaic of every sixth frame. Green shows a slightly jerky scan of a lush green field, plays appear and reappear as if dancing in a disco under a strobe light. Similarly, Hospital, one-month shows a backlit mosaic of Duratrans images of the same three floors of a hospital building taken once a day for a month and then mounting the results. The result is a subtle gradation of light and slow-motion kinetics as people and objects change positions.

In White Wall, Korfmann places two 2.5 x 8 meters white panels on each side of a pedestrian walkway in Amsterdam. The empty panels look like primed billboard panels, about to be covered with advertisements or graffiti. There is no prompt that announces, "This is art. You are having an art experience." As a result, people may notice the walls but they don't have a frame of reference to raise the same expectation they might have were they to enter a museum. Instead of us framing the piece, the piece frames passers-by who become inadvertent works of art themselves.

Korfmann does the same thing with Pink Wall, a pink wall, 6x20 meters, that she installed in the Piazza Castello in Turin, Italy. The pink is bright and stands in stark contrast to the neoclassical faces that frame the piazza. Like White Wall, it also frames passers-by. What's surprising is not so much that the artist has put a large pink rectangle in the middle of a piazza but the fact that, as a work of art, it is barely recognized as art. Some people

may notice it, some may pose in front of it as they would in front of a fake seashore at a Coney Island tourist photograph stand but it is a mere backdrop, not a final destination

Be that as it may, her work itself also provides a remedy to this indifference that it so well describes. And that is in its viewing. Whether or not art can compete with things like video games is beside the point. Indeed as we look at these images and situations mediated by video and photographic film we complete the missing links between these fragmented images. We look at ourselves; we project ourselves into the work and thus complete it. And it requires not a little concentration.

Korfmann can show us that art loses its privileged status once it becomes neutral if not invisible or worse yet irrelevant. She can show how once the viewing context has been bleached of the aura which endowed it with the possibility of the sanctity of the viewing experience, we lose the possibility for a common and shared experience. But the one thing she cannot alter is the viewer, not the one in the scenes but the one looking at the pictures.

How? Because hers is the esthetic of the conscientious fragment. With film she mediates rampant pictorial fragments. Korfmann contends that while life may be experienced as a flux we can only perceive it in fragments. We re-imagine the absent connections.

It is always the viewer, me, you, who completes the work, gives it legs and sense and resonance. Korfmann subtly forces us, through scenic fragments and de-estheticized contexts, to reflect on what is before us and it is through this reflection that we individually once again become aware of art and its manifold possibilities of expression and transcendence and it is by becoming aware of art that we return to it some of its formally-privileged status and it once again becomes more of a language of humanity and not the babble of warring, distinct, and discrete tribes and while we may still squirm a little or let our eyes and minds wander a bit and even puzzle at what's before us, the work of Katrin Korfmann reminds us that if we take the time to give these fragmented, beautifully jerky images the benefit of the doubt, if we can once again permit ourselves to momentarily suspend belief then we can re-commence the recovery effort that will un-blur the distinction between art and life and render all the graces to art that belong to art and vice versa to everything else, its banalities, its sudden, as-of-now irrelevance, can best be described as non-art.

**Note:**

James Scarborough is a writer, living in Long Beach, California