

Staffages

Staffage (Beiwerk) in German means 'accessories' or 'decoration' referring to the descriptive term in painting for figures to whom no specific identity or story is attached and which are included merely for compositional or decorative reasons. Staffage are accessories to the scene, yet add life to the work and reinforce the main subject.

In the summer of 2017 artist Steffi Klenz immersed herself in the collections and buildings of Tunbridge Wells Museum & Art Gallery, Library and Adult Education Centre. Her resulting new photographic work, *Staffages* (2018) questions the way in which the meaning of objects, images and historical artefacts can transition when filtered through the hands of the artist or collector. Klenz selected, positioned and redisplayed objects from the Museum collection to form new arrangements and associations across timeframes and sites. Severed from their previous context in the Museum collection, and placed within non-hierarchical compositions, the objects and what they represent evolve into something new. In this work, the artist suggests that the collection is not a hermetic space as often presumed, but through rendering new connections between object, site and viewer, she proposes that the collection is a conceptual as well as a physical space.

Through researching the collections catalogue Klenz became interested in the process of donation and the selection of objects by museum curators. Klenz worked through the historic Museum registers, which together with current computer systems, record the complete Museum collection in a non-hierarchical way that does not represent society's perceived economic or cultural 'value' of these objects. Their value lies in the way they represent our shared stories. In her work mundane objects are accorded the same status as objects of perceived historical or economic value.

Every object in the collection is registered in controlled terms, described in detail and given an accession number. These accession numbers feature in *Staffages*, translated into a colour code used on the surfaces of the sculptured plinth, the framed work itself and as text on the wall.

The artist became interested in the traditional role of the plinth to isolate the object from its surroundings. In Klenz's work, the relationship between plinth and object transitions through the experimental use of the plinth, which becomes part of the artwork itself. Flexible modular constructions consisting of stacked and cantilevered geometric forms were made out of scrap and untreated wood. These plinths are improvised and unfinished. The crudeness of workmanship and the quality of the materials suggest a sense of incompleteness. The sculptural plinth not only holds the object but rather allows the objects 'to do' and 'to become.' Here, the plinth is not only an actor but also a mediator rather like the staffage in the paintings of the late 1700s and early 1800s, whose purpose was to mediate between the viewer and the subject of the painting.