The Pathos of Authenticity: American Passions of the Real

There is a growing consensus that postmodernism ended with the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Criticism is thus faced with the task of providing assessments of the contemporary cultural situation in the United States and the West in general. Scholars and journalists have proposed various names for the current state of affairs such as “the return of the real” (Foster), “the end of irony” (Rosenblat), and “the passion for the Real” (Badiou). The broad outlines of the transformation are becoming clear: if postmodernism was the cultural fascination with the symbolic and the imaginary (simulacra, fake, pastiche, jouissance), then what follows is the nostalgia for the real.

Our conference sets itself the task of analyzing the pathos of authenticity in contemporary American culture. Some of the key questions are as follows: How is authenticity invoked in historical and political representations of the real? What is the function of authenticity in contemporary fiction? How do critics differentiate between the authentic and the rhetorical, and how is this distinction inflected in the current political debates? Do we accept critical claims about the “collapse” of the symbolic? The historical resonances which the terms “pathos” and “authenticity” carry with them as well as the current nostalgia for the real necessitate an examination which takes the larger historical and cultural contexts into account.

The conference will begin on Thursday, June 21st with a keynote address by Bill Brown (University of Chicago), followed by a reception at the John F. Kennedy Institute. Five sections will provide a framework for discussion from Friday, June 22nd to Sunday, June 24th.

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June 21st - 24th, 2007
### Thursday, June 21st

**Opening of the Conference**

18:00 *Introduction*
Ulla Haselstein
(JFK Institut, Freie Universität Berlin)

**Keynote Lecture**
Bill Brown
(University of Chicago)
*Commodity, Nationalism, and the Lost Object*

20:00 *Reception*

### Friday, June 22nd

**Authentic Objects - Real Things**
Chair: Rüdiger Kunow
(Universität Potsdam)

10:00 *Catrin Gersdorf*
(JFK Institut, Freie Universität Berlin)
*Meat, Potatoes, and the Things We Eat: Authenticating the Natural*

11:00 *Bärbel Tischleder*
(University of Paderborn)
*“A Soap Bubble is as Real as a Fossil Tooth”: Physical Objects and the Presence of the Past*

12:30 *MaryAnn Snyder-Körber*
(JFK Institut, Freie Universität Berlin)
*And Susan Sontag Wept: Portraits, Grief, and the Gritty Grain of the Real*

18:00 *Susanne Rohr*
(Universität Hamburg)
*Laughing at Pain: On the Popularity of Holocaust Comedies in the 1990s*

### Saturday, June 23rd

**Ethics of Authenticity/Authentic Ethnicity**
Chair: Thomas Claviez (University of Stavanger)

10:00 *Sabine Broeck*
(University of Bremen)
*The Grounds of Whiteness: White Claims to Particular Authenticity*

11:00 *Ruth Mayer*
(Leibniz Universität Hannover)
*A “Rage for Authenticity”: Richard Powers, Jonathan Lethem, and the Turn to Race*

12:30 *Andrew S. Gross*
(JFK Institut, Freie Universität Berlin)
*Imaginary Jews and True Confessions: Ethnicity and Non-Conformity in Post-War American Modernism*

### Sunday, June 24th

**Documentary Impulses: Neo-Realism, the Detail, and the Camera’s Eye**
Chair: Christof Decker
(Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)

10:00 *Dietmar Schloss*
(Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg)
*Don DeLillo’s Underworld and the New Hunger for the Real*

11:00 *Peter Schneck*
(University of Osnabrück)
*Faked Lives, Real Literature: J.T. LeRoy and the Hustle of Authenticity*

12:30 *Hanjo Berressem*
(University of Köln)
*“Father, Can’t You See I’m Writing?” Eigenvalue, Authenticity, and Pathos in Bret Easton Ellis’s Lunar Park*