

ZURICH

## Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs

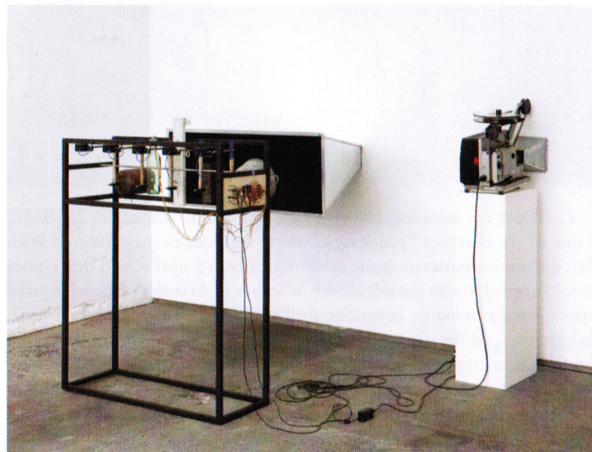
RAEBERVONSTENGLIN

There is a specifically Swiss sense of humor—droll, dark, sweetly absurd, weirdly winning—that effortlessly explodes smallness yet resoundingly resists critical explanation. See, for example, Robert Walser's modernist literary set pieces that chart the delusions of grandeur of clerks who would be kings (i.e., all of us), or Fischli and Weiss's more profanely material take on the existential traffic between the provincial and the urbane. Another Swiss duo, Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs, might be the latest entry into this singular national lineage. For the past decade, the pair, who studied photography at the Zürcher Hochschule der Künste and have worked together since 2003, have created an image-obsessed oeuvre that has moved from the sly photographic series of modeled and real American road-trip shots in their book *The Great Unreal* (2009)—which took a decidedly less pathos-ridden stance than did their fellow countryman Robert Frank's *The*

*Americans* (1958)—to their recent analog cameras crafted from tortoiseshells and stacks of art books.

Their newest body of work takes stock of their origins in photography, but also marries this reflective impulse to something less prosaic and more kinetic. Their recent show "Wozu Zeit" (Why Time) opened somewhat straight-facedly, with two rows of images—one color, one black-and-white—lining opposite walls. The color C-prints each feature a black background, dizzily broken by spectral, symmetrical forms in nearly fluorescent hues. Long exposures of handmade rotating devices, these images have a retro-futuristic look (they conjure the magic lanterns of early cinema, but also the glowing tracks of the 1982 sci-fi film *Tron*) neatly compounded by their faux-scientific titles: See 04 (*magenta yellow*) or 02 (*green*), both 2012.

The black-and-white images also feature specters, but of a different sort. Silver gelatin prints of hazy architectonic forms are overlaid with naked female figures (*Nude, descending, stairs*, 2012) or burned-out sunspots (*fog*, 2011). The affect here is also pointedly nostalgic, evoking Maya Deren's spookily ethereal midcentury filmic surrealism. Complicating these two genial if opaque bodies of photographs and their familiar referents was the racket from a contraption against the back wall, where a line of objects—a glass bottle, a tin pan, etc.—were methodically pinged by small hammers. A 16-mm-film projector sat nearby, projecting something through the wall into the next room.



Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs, *blockbuster*, 2012, mixed media. Installation view.

I went there, and found the exhibition's pièce de résistance: a black-and-white film of various scaled-down modernist buildings upon which the artists, standing on ladders, were steadily hammering in time with the noises from the machine next door: plink, plink, plink. Each building in *blockbuster*, 2012, had its own tone, but most were tinny, refusing the depth that is often ascribed to modernist architectonics today. The work's evocation of Jonathan Borofsky's tired *Hammering Man*, 1989, ever laboring in Basel's Aeschenplatz, did not seem accidental, but this beguiling work's ramifications were vaster than an easy, local putdown. Leaving Borofsky behind, I could not help but think of the pressure that contemporary artists too predictably place on modernist architecture—often via photo and film—as a way to yield easy (and therefore often empty) meaning. Onorato and Krebs's film seemed to address that emptiness (plink, plink), without entirely letting go of the real meaning that often preceded it (pound, pound), whether in architecture, early cinema, slapstick, or any number of other inspirational sources of pleasure to be found here. But then I stopped thinking, and just laughed.

—Quinn Latimer