

LEOPOLD KESSLER

Imaging Links/On the interventions of Leopold Kessler

Imagine that you walk down a street, wait for a bus, sit in a bar or a park, and someone comes up to you asking for a cigarette. For smokers there's nothing unusual about this request as it usually evokes a habitual range of unspectacular thoughts: you sympathise with the wish and give away a cigarette — as maybe you reciprocate in the silent reliance on give-and-take — or not. However, most likely you are aware of that thin line separating this request from begging: the complicity between smokers conveyed through this demand.

In his work *Schnorrer* (56 digital photos, 2006–09), Leopold Kessler highlights these implicit assumptions and exposes the unexpressed agreements upon which this process is based on by requesting something in exchange: the permission to photograph the hopeful performer of the request — a collusion of tobacco consumers on common ground. However, offering a deal in reply shifts the ritualised exchange, juxtaposing another sequence of complicit exchange: the digital recording of the other person's image. Thus, Kessler highlights the manifold nature of the medium as well as the social interaction: the work can be seen as a series of portraits, as a photographic documentation of his interaction with a heterogenous group of people who do not share any other feature but that they are smokers, or as the economical equivalent to the cigarettes he offered in this process.

Kessler's interventions draw their force from the extraction of unexpressed assumptions about hidden economies in every day circumstances. Applying the Situationist's aimless walk, the *dérive*, to the realities of late capitalism, his works expose implicit social interactions which are woven into the fabric of economic interests, spatial and interpersonal relations. For instance, in *secured/London* (2005) the artist created a private space in a public phone booth by attaching a latch to the door of the cabin, thus blurring the boundary between private and public. In another piece, *Perforation cal. 10mm* (2007) he draws on shared perceptions of bullet-ridden street signs as media produced signifiers of urban warfare. By punching holes in Vienna street signs — with a special tool he developed for this piece — he subtly draws attention to the closeness of post-Yugoslavian violence to the Austrian people. Similarly, in *Import Budapest-Vienna* (2006), he unearths past realities of Vienna's location on the border between NATO and the Eastern Bloc by smuggling cigarettes attached clandestinely to Inter-City trains, while *Birdhouses/NYC* (2005) pokes fun at alcohol prohibition laws still in force in parts of the USA by setting up alcohol dispensing bird-houses. An equally daring use of a private amenity is Kessler's art school diploma work *Akademiekabel* (2004): in this project he secretly and cleverly ran an electric cable from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna to his home and used the school's electricity for a month — like an umbilical cord it alluded to the dependency of contemporary artists on the public.