

DENVER

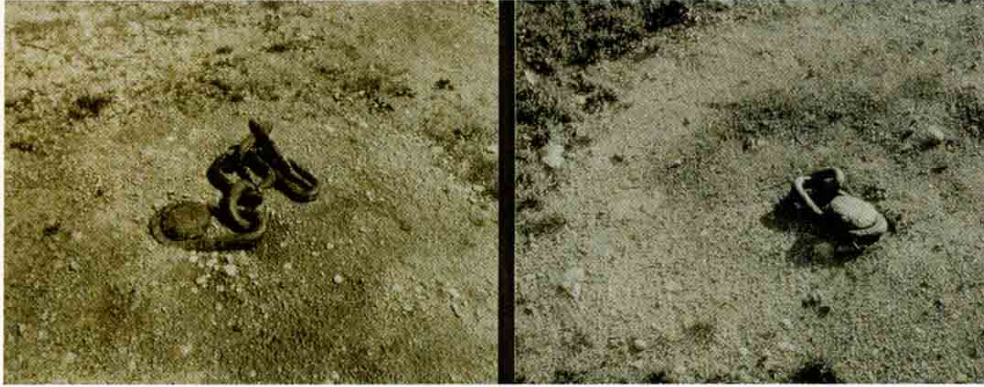
# Heimrad Bäcker

MCA DENVER

Visitors walking into the MCA Denver's Heimrad Bäcker exhibition might mistake it for a group show. With black-and-white photographs, floor-based sculptures, an austere group of prints, and fourteen issues of the journal *neue texte*, the various components do not immediately suggest the output of a single artist. Little known outside German-speaking countries, Bäcker (1925–2003) produced this complex body of work in two distinct historical phases: first, during World War II as a committed member of the Hitler Youth and the Nazi Party, then after 1968 as a photographer, writer, and editor working within the postwar Austrian neo-avant-garde and personally engaging in a long-term reflection on his own past actions. Organized by Patrick Greaney, this is the first exhibition of the material left behind at Bäcker's death and marks the first time his work has appeared in the United States.

To understand Bäcker's later output, one needs to begin with his photographs, the earliest of which date to his years as a photojournalist documenting Nazism in Germany and around Linz, Austria, where the artist lived (and where Hitler spent his youth). The high point of mass commitment to Hitler's program can be seen in *Closing Ceremony*, ca. 1943, in which tightly framed rows of uniformed boys are seen sitting and listening with rapt attention, a lone swastika visible on an armband. This conveyance of information through sparse, subtle clues continues in the pictures Bäcker made beginning in 1968, when he started regularly visiting the site of the former Mauthausen concentration camp outside Linz. If Bäcker's war-era images are fairly standard recordings of everyday events under Nazism, the postwar

ARTFORUM



Heimrad Bäcker,  
*Remnants of  
 Foundations in the  
 Wiener Graben Quarry  
 in Mauthausen, n.d.*,  
 gelatin silver print,  
 3½ x 10½".

photographs zero in on details that reveal how little the physical sites associated with atrocities are able to tell us about the past. Works such as *Technological Remnant*, ca. 1968–95, offer glimpses of mute material fragments from the general landscape of what remains of Mauthausen, but, without secure dates, one finds it difficult to gain any historical traction. Most of the photographs are shown in groups of two or more, as in *Foundation of Explosives Bunker in Wiener Graben Quarry*, n.d., which presents four views of a semicircle carved into the dirt, suggesting the absent building, though it could just as easily be a Land-art piece.

Indeed, it is the “art” component of Bäcker’s late work that proves most unsettling. Placed on the floor of the gallery, his *Fundstücke* (Found Objects)—acquired on his visits to Mauthausen—concretize the photographs’ traces. A coil of metal cable, five wooden trestles (possibly used by slave laborers, a wall label tells us), and an orderly arrangement of small pieces of metal and porcelain all possess the weathered material authenticity of a Joseph Beuys or Jannis Kounellis installation. As Greaney discusses in the exhibition’s catalogue, Bäcker struggled with the philosophical complexities involved in transposing these images and objects to a museum setting; the tension between archiving and aestheticization is everywhere present in his work. The queasy sensation of knowing where these objects were found keeps the works anchored in history, yet the context draws them into the realm of installation art. *SEASCAPE*, 1985, a series of framed letterpress pages with text lifted directly from a U-boat log, documents in dry, bureaucratic language how a German captain allowed three men stranded on a lifeboat to drift at sea, in all likelihood to perish. This project, a posthumous edition of which was lovingly published this year in book form by Ugly Duckling Presse with an afterword by Charles Bernstein, elevates a forgotten historical episode to the realm of poetry. Bäcker’s work as the editor of *neue texte*, an important venue for Austrian concrete poetry that he founded in 1968 and published until 1991 in collaboration with his wife, Margret, further testifies to his long-term balancing act between documentation and artistic experimentation. It is precisely the impossibility of separating these aspects of his production that makes this layered exhibition equally fascinating and disturbing.

—Gregory Williams