

# BROOKLYN RAIL

May 2004

**Ricoh Gerbl**

***Die Mutter und Wohnungspfropfungen (The Mother and Apartmentgrafting)***

**Smack Mellon**

This modest show in the front room of Smack Mellon is easy to pass by, and after a closer look this effect is fitting. The casual way in which a collection of C-prints and ink jet prints are displayed—excess white border, neither framed nor mounted, the bottoms of the prints slightly curling up—transforms the photographs into both images and objects, echoing the theme of this project which raises questions about the relationship between presence and context in photographed and real space.

The prints in this show are the documentation and evidence of Ricoh Gerbl's *The Mother and Apartment Grafting* project where she photographs her mother, aunt, and cousin, enlarges them to life size, and then documents where and how they are hung in different apartments. The photographs are distributed among the apartments of strangers throughout Berlin in what Gerbl calls a "grafting" process: the owners of the apartment hosting Gerbl's photographs throw a party to find more apartments and tenants to participate. Personal connection to the subject, artist, or even the aesthetics of the work is irrelevant to where it ends up. This layers Gerbl's intensely personal connection to the subject matter with the arbitrariness of the photograph's location.



Ricoh Gerbl, "untitled" (2003), from *Die Mutter und Wohnungspfropfungen* (*The Mother and Apartmentgrafting*), C-print. Courtesy of Smack Mellon.

Gerbl acknowledges the inconsequential meaning that her family members' photographs will take on in their host apartments. She poses them in ways that show the person supporting the objects instead of having the objects as props supporting the person. The figure seems to play a comic game of hide-and-seek in the photographs, as the photographs play the same game in relation to the apartments they are in. One of her family members stands in front of a wood-paneled wall with a slab of wood strapped to her chest. In an even more ridiculous attempt to "hide," a subject stands under a clothesline with arms raised and fingers clipped to the line with clothespins. Only after a second look do you notice that her intention is to blend in. This idea is further complicated and disoriented when the photograph is seen re-photographed, on the walls of different apartments. The question to be grappled with is whether to see the photograph as a personal family photo, or just another object in the room in which it is hung?

In contrast to the snapshot size documentation photographs, the four life size originals have a strong presence in the gallery space, and in relation to the viewer's body. In one of these photographs Gerbl's mother stands in the foreground of an industrial landscape on the side of a road with rectangular cement buildings behind her. She is dressed in a gray evening gown, strikingly out of place in the environment, while the color seems to have been specifically chosen to blend in. This piece demonstrates most clearly the intriguing mix of visual non-sequitors with intellectual coherence that characterizes this project. Gerbl's work dissects what it means to be attached in overlapping personal and random contexts, and how this layering creates a new space of its own.

—Sonya Shrier