

Stilleben

The Ambiguity of the Common

by Arslhogo



Arslhogo, "Stilleben", Digital composition, 4961 × 3508 pixels, CMYK color space, 300 DPI.

Arslhogo's "Still Life" operates through a semantic compression that reveals its programmatic function in the very title. The traditional genre of still life—that contemplative observation of motionless objects—becomes a metaphor for social paralysis. The bench, positioned centrally in the golden light of an autumnal or wintry landscape, initially appears as an idyllic place of rest, an invitation to pause. Yet this apparent pastoral scene bears the burn marks of capital.

The Semiotics of Double Meaning

The wordplay of "gemeine BANK" unfolds its critical dimension through oscillating levels of meaning. In German, "gemein" carries connotations of both the ordinary or common (res publica)

and the nasty or mean-spirited. The bench itself exists in this dual encoding: as physical public seating and as financial institution. This linguistic ambiguity becomes a visual strategy when logos of various financial institutions—Sparkasse symbols and other bank insignia are recognizable—appear burned into the wood of the backrest like brands.

The Violence of Signs

The choice of branding technique is far from arbitrary. Branding evokes historical practices of ownership marking—from cattle branding to the marking of enslaved people. Arslougho transforms this violent history of signs into a critique of contemporary commodification: public space, symbolized by the bench as a site of community, is marked, branded, possessed by capital. The seemingly harmless logos become stigmata of a thoroughly capitalized society.

Nature as Soft Focus

The deliberately blurred natural backdrop—golden and brown tones suggesting autumn or winter—functions as a romantic soft filter that contrasts with the harshness of the burned-in signs. This blur can be read as a metaphor for our obscured perception of economic power relations. While nature dissolves into impressionistic abstraction, the corporate logos remain sharp and unforgiving in their presence.

The “common bench” becomes paradoxical: it promises public space (“gemein” in the sense of communal, shared), but is already colonized by private interests. The burned-in logos transform a potential meeting place into advertising space, a resting place into a marketplace. Arslougho visualizes the creeping privatization of the public sphere—a process that has become so ordinary that it barely registers anymore.

Craftmanship Against Branding: Appropriation Art

In the tradition of conceptual art since the 1960s, but also in dialogue with Appropriation Art, Arslougho appropriates the aesthetics of corporate identity to turn them against themselves. The craft quality of wood burning—a traditional, almost nostalgic technique—collides with the slick surface aesthetics of logos. This tension between craftsmanship and branding, between tradition and capitalism, amplifies the work’s critical dimension.

Still Life as Vanitas: The Corporate Memento Mori

Ultimately, Arslougho reactivates the vanitas tradition of Baroque still life painting. Where skulls and wilting flowers once reminded viewers of the transience of earthly possessions, corporate logos now function as modern memento mori. The bench, ostensibly a symbol of permanence, becomes through these burned marks a monument to impermanence—companies come and go, merge and disappear, but their brands remain in collective memory, burned into the material culture of public space.

Stilleben: still life, still living, still a bench—but branded. The logos burn into the wood the way capital burns into public space: slowly, almost tenderly, until the mark is indistinguishable from the material. The autumn blurs. The Sparkasse stays sharp. This is what the stilling of public life looks like.

Medium: Digital Composition