

Meliksetian MB Briggs

# ARTFORUM

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## Johannes Wohnseifer

ISOLATION ROOM



Johannes Wohnseifer, *The Thin Commandments* (detail), 2010, ten silk-screened prints, each 27 3/5 x 19 2/3"

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Inside a seven-by-seven-by-nine-foot wooden box built within a living room in south Saint Louis, Cologne-based artist Johannes Wohnseifer posted *The Thin Commandments*, 2010. Emblazoned across ten silk-screened prints, the work relayed ten self-directed comments common to eating disorders: for example, THOU SHALT NOT EAT WITHOUT FEELING GUILTY; IF YOU AREN'T THIN YOU AREN'T ATTRACTIVE; BEING THIN IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING HEALTHY; and so on. Each dictum appeared on a discrete, brilliantly colored poster bearing subtle patterning, squeegee marks, modulations of saturation, and ghosted letters. In strictly visual terms, *The Thin Commandments* is a group of beautiful objects, their sleek Helvetica typeface set against ebullient fields of navy, mauve, lemon yellow, tangerine, pomegranate, and charcoal gray. But these surfaces seduced the viewer only to lay bare the essential role of the visual in producing fetishistic desire—a preoccupation in much of Wohnseifer's work.

Wohnseifer's text comes from a 1996 book by eating-disorder expert Carolyn Costin, in which these dictums are presented to unveil the psychology of the disease to nonsufferers. In the years that followed, pro-anorexia groups took up Costin's list, circulating it as "inspiration." Wohnseifer is keenly attuned to such moments of cultural fixation. First utilizing Costin's lines in 2003 for "Into the Light" (Ludwig Forum for International Art, Aachen, Germany), a Thanatos-themed solo exhibition addressing body optimization, speed, and sleek design, he juxtaposed painted renderings of the "thin commandments" with works depicting skinny fashion models and sports cars, as well as a graffiti-style wall painting that read SLIM FAST; pristine, minimalist sculptures made of lightweight aluminum, carbon, and Plexiglas; the opening spread of an article on the new Porsche featuring the words *MAGER-SUCHT* (anorexia), which he adapted wholesale; and various pieces inspired by *Two-Lane Blacktop*, the 1971 cult classic road movie. Comparatively, Wohnseifer's Isolation Room installation of *The Thin Commandments* was a bare-bones affair: Entering the extremely compact viewing situation, one found a grid of nine prints tacked to the right wall; the tenth print, hanging so as to face the others, read: THOU SHALT NOT EAT FATTENING FOOD WITHOUT PUNISHING THY SELF AFTERWARDS.

English-born gallerist Daniel McGrath describes the space (which he also designed) as a "gallery kit"—a prefab set of plywood and drywall that can be assembled and installed anywhere, as it was here, for example, in his own apartment. Such conditions coincide well with the logic manifested elsewhere in Wohnseifer's work: Take the 2009 series "Canon," in which the artist made quasi-functional shelflike sculptures, reworkings of Gerrit Rietveld's 1923 design for the *Berliner Stuhl* (which Rietveld himself intended as a DIY set), or Wohnseifer's *Prototype for a Mobile Exhibition Space*, 2005—an easily shippable, inflatable white cube, able to serve as ready-made gallery space anywhere, on demand.

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Something of this DIY-consumer spirit can be ascribed to *The Thin Commandments* as well, reading, as it does, like an instruction manual for redesigning the body to market-driven specifications. But the pathological drive toward thinness relies on an inverse calculus—or, as another poster reads, BEING THIN AND NOT EATING ARE SIGNS OF TRUE WILL POWER AND SUCCESS—with one's achievement commensurate with one's proximity to disappearance. Wohnseifer seems to revel in such paradoxes, sharing a taste for broad humor, cynicism, and guilty pleasure with many of his Cologne-based compatriots (not least among them the late Martin Kippenberger, for whom Wohnseifer worked from 1992 until 1997). But Wohnseifer's work resonates with a younger generation as well (as evidenced by the Swiss zine *Used Futures*)—a generation that understands design to be a complicit medium, appreciating its easy integration into a corporate/capitalist idiom, its psychological/semiotic significance (*logos*), and the fetish character of its objects without losing sight of its beauty. *The Thin Commandments* nicely embodies contradictions such as these, wrapping a pop-psychology version of a nightmarish pathology into pretty, packaged prêt-à-porter.

—Ivy Cooper