FAKULTÄT FÜR PHILOSOPHIE, KUNST-, GESCHICHTS- UND GESELLSCHAFTSWISSENSCHAFTEN

Professur für Wissenschaftsgeschichte

GASTVORTRAG

Mittwoch, 21. April 2021, 16 Uhr c.t.
Anna von Mertens

Looking Closely, Closely Looking

Visual artist Anna Von Mertens’s medium is, perhaps, attention. She turns her attention to everyday details—the arrangement of emoji icons on our phones, for instance—or to scientific phenomena: drought cycles shown in ancient tree ring growth that align with the fall of empires, and artifacts captured in emulsion produced by starlight warping as it passes through a telescope’s lens. Von Mertens’s attention, manifest in the labor of her meticulous drawings and hand-stitched quilts, reveals the entwinement of natural processes and human work. Exploring data, exploring technologies, Von Mertens’s art takes a path through science and technological devices to consider how patterns, equally quotidian and wondrous, shape our lives.

Von Mertens will speak about her art practice, including a project she developed for the Radcliffe Institute for Advance Study where she visited the glass plate collection housed at Harvard College Observatory—the oldest and most comprehensive photographic record of the night sky. There, Von Mertens came across the story of Henrietta Leavitt who, a century ago, worked at the Harvard College Observatory examining some of the early photographic plates produced in the collection. Through her work, Leavitt gave us the first tool to measure the distance to faraway stars. From the study of a two-dimensional surface emerged a three-dimensional imagining of our universe. As a testament to Henrietta Leavitt’s life and work, Von Mertens stitched the stars arcing across the sky at dawn on the day of Leavitt’s birth and then again at dusk on the day of her death. In hand rendering some of the glass plates as graphite drawings, Von Mertens took up Leavitt’s action of close looking. Von Mertens learned from Leavitt that noticing specificity produces meaning. It is enough, to pay attention.

Zum Gastvortrag ergeht herzliche Einladung