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Archiving and Processing Dispositifs: Five Positions from Archives, Re-Assemblances, and Surveys

The exhibition *Archives, Re-Assemblances, and Surveys* brings together different artistic positions, connected by more than their classification as “Austrian artists” (or active in Austria). Also the use of the photographic medium that is also offered in the subtitle of the exhibition as an indication of common features is not sufficient to provide an understanding regarding the merging of different positions in this project. Although all participating artists consider photography to be their medium and their works are of photographic nature, this still does not mean that they are necessarily interested in the production of their own photographic images, or that they constitute the core of their work. They rather probe the field of different cultural and social practices and areas of activity in which photography appears as a mediating means, and formulate their own critical positions from the involvement with what is already existing, found, or visited. In different forms of reconfiguration of their material, they propose new readings. In their formal and aesthetic appearance, their artworks emerge from an analytic work mode, and—regarding their artistic attitude—they are media-reflexive in a special way. In that sense, these artists represent a generation of visual artists from Austria, which still builds upon a central art paradigm of the twentieth century—conceptual art, developing their current image strategies from this point of departure. The exhibition *Archives, Re-Assemblances, and Surveys* finds its conceptual emphasis there.

Already the title of the exhibition indicates that the paradigms of conceptual artistic activity have again been shifted during the last few years. In the dispute with the strategies of the Concept Art of the 1960s and 1970s, which should be sought within the framework of leaving the picture,

overcoming of the object, and the commercialisation of art, today a basic tension between method and aesthetics emerges. Currently this inspires many artists to repeated involvement in the issues of the historical conceptual art. Already in the 2000s a notable revival of conceptually inspired works could be observed. With the exhibition curated by Reinhard Braun and me, *First the artist defines meaning*, mounted at Camera Austria in 2006, and its second part titled *Then the work takes place* in 2009—the title of this two-part exhibition project is a quotation from a Dan Graham text on the work of Sol LeWitt, which points to the traditional narration of conceptual art: in the centre is the priority of the idea over the work—this tension between the image and the idea, between the visible and its representation, between methodology and meaning already became evident. The priority of the idea over the work, of that which can be thought and said over the sensory was the essence of the works exhibited at that occasion. One could observe that the conceptual in contemporary art practices could less be determined in the use of a specific *method* than in the specification towards media- and system-critical, i.e. media-reflective ways of working, which we can see presently as well. The insight we had attained as curators already from these former exhibitions was formulated as follows: “The conceptual in contemporary photography possibly does not consist of a certain method, but of a critical and conflicting relation to the visual. The works on display are accompanied by a fundamental scepticism towards the manifold frameworks of photography as a technique of showing and seeing. They stage almost seductively—but by no means romantically—a kind of crisis of the photographic image that cannot be solved, because it is constitutively inscribed in it.”

This critical and contradictory relation to the visual, formulated out of a crisis of the photographic image pervades also the current project, *Archives, Re-Assemblances,*

and Surveys, curated by Sandra Križić Roban and Reinhard Braun. Exemplary for this are the works of five artists in this exhibition, which shall be examined here. What unifies them is that instead of “classically” conceptually motivated artistic assertions they seek formulations with whose help the crisis of the photographic image can be made visible. Their instruments are those of research, of immersion into the history of knowledge in whose construction photographic images always had their share, and of from there their formal-aesthetic points of emphasis in image series, developed in forms of critical distancing, and which in their aesthetic appearance rather have the character of commentaries than artistic assertions.

Compressing Time

With the help of word search “Time Capsule” in the archives of different American daily newspapers, Christian Mayer found press photographs from the early 1960s until late 1980s that show the burying and in some cases even the retrieval of time capsules. These containers, whose design shows the belief in technological progress, today looking somewhat dated, which were mostly lowered into the ground (or retrieved) in an official act under lively participation of school kids and local celebrities, contain documents and objects of mostly regional importance, showing public life. Christian Mayer managed to obtain the original photographic documents, reproduced in the local section of daily newspapers, and embedded each of them into passepartouts that show the backside of the respective photographs. These backsides contain the notes of the editors regarding the event, notes about the press photographer, issue dates, and sometimes also clippings from the news for whose illustration the photo had originally been taken. Now they can be again seen and read as the context of the images.

The photographed time capsules testify to the desire to inform

the posterity of our experienced time. Buried in the ground, they promise their initiators that they would be “discovered” by future archaeologists, in this way becoming important *ex post*. But they are also an expression of the uncertainty of that which lies in the future. Here offensively naïve curiosity regarding the unknown view from the future into one’s present is blended with the latent fear of falling out of history. Due to the Cold War and the emerging nuclear threat in the arms race, precisely the years that Christian Mayer focused on in the process of selecting his photographs were also the years of a diffuse fear of the future, stronger interwoven with fantasies about the end of the world than in other generations.

The photos as such don’t give that impression, but on the contrary, they document formal and solemn actions of merry communities that pose in front of the camera in order to preserve the memory of this ceremony for themselves and their posterity. And yes: in each particular photographic document some form of importance of this event is manifested. However, in the arrangement of the images into a series both the exchangeability and uniformity of the particular events is shown. And if not before, then from the backsides of the photographs with their different editorial notes it becomes obvious: nothing is as old—and as ephemeral—as yesterday’s newspaper!

It seems that in his *Putting in Time* (2014), as this series is titled, Christian Mayer is less concerned with time capsules and their dated, in the view of new technologies of data storage almost childish functions and related rituals. It also seems that he is less concerned with information, equally important and interchangeable, which becomes evident in joining single photographs into a series, and also not with the fact that here with the photographic image half-life information is produced, although the subject matter asserts the opposite and wants to outlast time! Digging these pictures out of the

archives, Mayer rather suggests us to view photographs—or other forms of data storage—also as time capsules. Not only because on their front sides a moment of elapsed time and its history is preserved—history that we are exploring and which we can assemble into speculative chronicles, but also and above all because the haptic presence of the images witnesses of a past time and a specific approach: their analogue production procedure tells us this, same as the economised exploitation logic exercised upon them until their publishing in the daily media business. Today, both these aspects do not function in that way anymore; these are (to a great extent) obsolete procedures, already for some time replaced by new technologies. Christian Mayer’s *Putting in Time* can therefore be read not only as a genesis of specific communal events, but it primarily functions as a metaphor for the both functionally and in its attributions and media appearances constantly changing photographic image. To secure time in this way—which is a priori constitutively inscribed into the medium of photography—proves as a precarious project in *Putting in Time*.

Also the photographs from the series *Events Are Always Original* (2010) by Sabine Bitter & Helmut Weber show that the logics of exploitation through images has already become obsolete. The photographs originate from the Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. They were taken after the occupation of an administration building by a group of 180 students in November of 1968, documenting the state of the building after its vacation. The preceding political protest, and even less its consequences like a changed educational system or other structural measures cannot be observed in the photographs. They do not convey any information on that topic. The protest now exists only in statements expressed in documents left behind and in shifted furniture. This was meticulously photographically documented by the management and in the archiving process also carefully described, including the

omissions. The archive numbers as the best visible mark apart from the pictures indicate forms of conservation: time is compressed here. The event is broken down to a photographic document, whose meaning is inscribed as a kind of primary source through its (form of) archiving. In the same way the photographs, in spite of their function as source material, remain extremely speculative evidence, because they can only fail to represent. With the title *Events Are Always Original* (a quote from Henri Lefebvre), the artists in a certain way work against this exploitation logic, but confirm it at the same time. Using it, they insist on the eventfulness of political gatherings that give the incentive to social changes, i.e. achieve political efficiency. The photographs, especially the archive photographs with their claim to originality and source knowledge, are actually unable to represent either the event as such or its political consequences, although the pictures are full of traces of the events.

With the series *Super Students*, created that same year, and also in *The Templeton Five Affair* (both 2010) Bitter / Weber offensively work against the representation logic of the archive photographic picture. If the shots from *Events Are Always Original* show deserted rooms with their scattered traces of events, in their subsequent series Bitter / Weber work with images of large students’ gatherings, protests, and campus occupations in university contexts. They have been taken from a different perspective, by other protagonists with different interests. From the monumentally enlarged original photographs the artists have cut out the group of protagonists precisely as if with scissors: in that way, as people and as a mass they experience a different outline, a new form of visibility. On the other hand, the space surrounding them has been obliterated from the photographic image. Fragile outlines replace it; they do point to the modern architecture in which the gatherings took place, but their function is rather to structure the

image space than to provoke a story line in the photographs. In this way a stress on the political action is achieved, away from the purely photographic documentation. Hence Bitter / Weber avoid the dilemma that accompanies the photographic records that document gatherings of people to the same extent as an architecture that dominates the scene. Instead, with this formal and aesthetic division they aim at the assertion that the social and political aspects that can be found in utopian formulations of modern and modernist architectural notions do not pass by the people for whom this architecture was made and who enliven it.

Bitter / Weber have not only radically enlarged the archive material found in the university context, especially in the two last-mentioned series, but also massively intervened in its appearance. They have processed the photographs in order to open other contexts of perception and to take action against the failures of representation in the photographic image. They have—in the words of Christian Mayer—opened the “time capsules” and highlighted the contours. Their interventions in the photographs can thus also be viewed as a kind of commentary on the crisis of the documentary image.

With Scholarly Approach against Misrepresentation

Photography misrepresents—this intermediate space is where Tatiana Lecomte’s activity takes place in her work *The El Alamein Positions – A Montage* (2012). She enhances the importance of what can be seen in the photographs shown here and generates new contexts in which the pictures can be read by staging a special framework for them. Only through their mode of presentation we can ascribe relevance to the photographs selected by Tatiana Lecomte for *The El Alamein Positions*, and only thus can space for reflection about them be opened. The pictures as such have to a large extent been separated from their original contexts; we must speculate

in order to develop notions about the displayed material and to establish links between the shots.

The El Alamein beach is the link between the photographs. Photographs of a woman in erotic to pornographic positions, probably taken in the 1960s under the sun of the Egyptian Mediterranean, later thrown into a garbage bin and found there by Tatiana Lecomte, are combined by the artist with images that show El Alamein as a theatre of war only a few years earlier: photographs from the “African Campaign” of the German-Italian tank divisions in 1942, which was driven back by the British Army at that point. To work against the individual inconceivability of war does not become easier if we become aware of the fact that its scenes are not exclusive or extra-territorial. Wars are fought on public ground where other forms of life also take place. The history of violent excesses is thus continuously written over by events that can be as banal as a beach outing of a couple with certain obsessions.

Like in many of her other works, with *The El Alamein Positions* Tatiana Lecomte also treats that unsolvable inner conflict that spaces are inscribed with traces of brutal history which escapes everyday perception because these places do not indicate them anymore. Through the combination of erotic or pornographic photographs of a lady on the beach with photographs of progressing German and Italian tank divisions, linked only through the location El Alamein, Tatiana Lecomte finds a corresponding image for the compliance and obscenity of war, which is—this we tend to insinuate on the basis of the photographs—the expression and effect of primarily male fantasies. Lecomte opens this reading without a moral warning, but offers it with a cool, prevailingly scholar-like gesture to her viewers. The material transferred to her photographs, formally highlighted through segment enhancements, is laid on green canvas. In this way the character of archive material

is stressed. A hand holds each photograph by one corner. This is a formal decision with which the artist clearly addresses the viewer: here something is presented, a story develops here. This gesture of showing demands our attention and our precise observation. The transfer of the images in a slide show finally stresses this presentation mode. Unlike in historical conceptual projects, a previously set order of things, created on logical parameters, whose documentality is usually supported by photographs in such projects, is not presented here. On the contrary: here image material is handled in a highly subjective way, whose origins cannot be more different, while the links between the images are simply asserted. A suggestive effect is thus developed. Through the form of linking the images in an ostensibly unemotionally analysing framework with a clear demonstrating gesture, *The El Alamein Positions* are literally conceptualised, while the photographic images do not function as a decisive variable of any somehow logical interpretation. This task is taken over by the setting of the work; *it* is the element that works towards interpretation. This form of reversal of cause and consequence is revelatory against the background that historic conceptual art often developed formal solutions with a scholarly attitude for its projects, in which the documentary shot took over *the* central function. Tatiana Lecomte works with this moment by giving her project a mock-scientific shape. The photographic image still plays the role of evidence material, but we concede this role exclusively to the form of its staging.

Working against Labelling: Assigning a Body to Space, Not Time

The projects by Nicole Six & Paul Petritsch, as well as by Michael Höpfner, are to the same extent explorations of space and bodily experiences. They work at the same time with and against the modernist phantasm to measure and label the world. Although in their work they have crossed

space and travelled around the world, there is little to see in their photographs, nothing stands out to be identified or labelled. In that way they work against the historic forms of imperial claims, associated with the conquering of the foreign, and the appropriation of the exotic. Apart from that, although they methodically clearly refer to conceptual procedures in their works, they subvert one of the essential paradigms of conceptual art. With its documentary ambition, the historical Concept Art of the 1960s was taking on an ordering, demonstrative, and structuring function. From its (photographic) “mapping”, the historical conceptual art derived its political agenda and justified it with that mapping—often empirically motivated. Such expectations are quickly nullified with the projects by Nicole Six & Paul Petritsch and Michael Höpfner. Instead of generating space with their surveys, they give room to their bodily experiences.

Michael Höpfner’s photo series are created on weeks-long walking tours in deserts and steppe landscapes, they are a search for not precisely determinable (non-)places. *Outpost of Progress* (2010), the project that in its title refers to Joseph Conrad’s short story of the same name, was developed in an eight-weeks walking tour on the Chang Tang Plateau in North-west Tibet. The walking tour was illegal, because individual travellers do not have access to these regions whose size corresponds to Western Europe. In the process Michael Höpfner did not only visit untouched landscapes, but primarily an area marked by social turnovers and the destruction of the landscape. His black-and-white shots show both untouched nature and its devastation. What brings these images to a common denominator is that they can hardly be described beyond an immeasurable wasteland. These are seemingly always identical images of a pathless area that Höpfner photographed on his journey, modified by debris, without paths that would lead through it to the horizon with its alternating mountain chains. Only the contact

sheets mounted in exhibitions, or the long rows of slides placed on light tables show through their form that time has passed and that distance has been covered.

The *Atlas* project by Nicole Six & Paul Petritsch from the years 2009 to 2010 is a journey around the world in which they remain at the same spot. The point of departure for their work is the International Meridian Conference from 1884 that marks “the geographic beginning of the world” (from the press release of the *ATLAS* exhibition at the Vienna Secession in 2010). At this conference the zero meridian was established, a demonstration of power of the British Empire, because the zero meridian goes through the Royal Greenwich Observatory in London. Knowing about the size of the world and its division in time zones, Six / Petritsch chose a place on the zero meridian—a disused racing course in Spain—which was the starting and the finishing point of their 81-days journey around the world. With a moped they circled the racing course—several thousand times—until the mileage was identical to a travel around the world. This is to the same extent an illusionary and factual journey around the world—without seeing or showing it. The artists were rather concerned with “experiencing” the covered distance and the size of the world on their own bodies, its sheer corporeality and spatial extension.

Six / Petritsch have documented their journey demurely and unemotionally in an index with a tally sheet of daily covered rounds and mileage. It also contains 81 photographs, which show 24-hour exposures of the racing course. The pictures look equally mystical and non-specific; the world travellers themselves are not in the picture, because the camera was unable to capture even traces of their traversing the picture a hundred times: on their mopeds they were in a way always ahead of the shot time. Although Six / Petritsch as subjects traversing space must factually be present in the photographs, they cannot be seen there—equally

factually. They cannot be discerned as verified witnesses of the journey around the world. This journey acquires its “body” only through simple tally sheets; they are the index and the trace of the past time and the covered distance. Unlike the photographs, they also note the presence of bodies. Their drawn abstract form is closer to reality than the photographs and they provide the project with some kind of corporeality, which is more precise than the imaging medium of photography, which also in this project fails to represent in several ways.

The five artists, gathered in this text with their works as participants of the exhibition project *Archives, Re-Assemblances, and Surveys* are not unified only by their critical and conflicting relation to the visual, which enables them to develop projects whose aim is to capture the “crisis” of the photographic image or to help it to a (photographic) form of visibility. They are also adherents of a contemporary artistic work mode that can be seen within the framework of current archiving and processing dispositifs, which are not only an international and widespread cultural practice, but also a new form of conceptual work within it. Out of it emerges not only a critical and reflexive relation to the medium of photography, but with the instruments provided by photography, which here come to use in special ways, these artists primarily develop their political and critical positions. They help us to widen and sharpen the view of social, visually mediated phenomena.