

# Camera Austria

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## Benjamin Jones

### Nothing, Like Something, Happens Anywhere

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#### Not interrupted by Photography

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This email conversation between Benjamin Jones and Reinhard Braun took place in April and May 2020

**RB** Every project has its history, including cancelled ones. I'd been invited to hold the opening speech of an exhibition you had at Schumbad in Graz in December 2019, together with Alexandra Gschiel. In 2019, you stayed in Graz for six months in the scope of the Styrian-Artist-in-Residence (St.A.i.R.) program and nearly all the works you showed have been developed during this time. You then asked me to also write for the catalogue you planned to realise this spring. In parallel, my colleagues selected some of your work to be published in the Forum section of the March issue of Camera Austria International.

Altogether, this exchange over the course of several months led to the idea to do a presentation at Camera Austria in the scope of the annual festival "aktuelle kunst in graz" at the beginning of May 2020.

As we all know, it didn't happen, on March 13 our premises had to shut down by a decree of the Federal Government and since then we have made very different experiences with all the restrictions of public exchange, work, etc. — As always, these differences refer mostly to social stratification. Nevertheless, we agreed to somehow continue and to find a format to make our collaboration visible.

Actually, we are already in the midst of it — with some works online, accompanied by an email interview we are about to start. No elaborate concept of transferring a work into the digital sphere; no search for excitement or surprise; just markers — images, a text — that point to something that is happening elsewhere — as far as I'm concerned.

This "happening elsewhere" leads me to one possible step into your practice. Since you are nearly exclusively working with analogue material, every work includes something to happen; not only in front of the camera, but also — maybe mostly — in the postproduction, i.e. the darkroom. I still envision this as a very specific kind of performance with unpredictable options, but also with undeniable limitations.

As it happens, quite often one doesn't come up with the most self-ev-

ident questions in the first place — so maybe it's an odd starting point, but I never asked you why you engage so profoundly with the analogue? Does it already imply a kind of (critical) commentary to the fluidity of the visual today? Or to the mere immaterialisation of nearly everything? Does it include an obsession with materiality? Or was it a chance encounter which only later on enfolded its potential?

**BJ** Materiality is definitely a central concern. I'm conscious of analogue materials' uniquely tangible relationship to light and time, and the meaning embedded by a performative engagement with them. Speaking particularly about the non-representational works, I want a sense of cumulative time or a record of actions to be present; for a viewer to be millimetres from the surface and immersed in minute detail or tonal expanses; a space in which you don't feel yourself to be looking at a reproduction of reality/a printed image — unmasked by the presence of grain, digital traces or the singular perspective of the lens. These details and tonal expanses form a visual framework more akin to our resolution of reality, never breaking down no matter how closely you look. They are entirely photographic but not interrupted by photography, a direct imprint which (for me) elicits a visceral response. Engaging with photographic materiality is what has made these objects possible.

An analogue way of working also simply suits the way I think. It allows the work to evolve through constant experimentation, with the possibility to build works utilising processes and materials from photography and other mediums. For me this physical approach has the greatest sense of possibility and potential for discovery. Not to say that it can't end up eventually manifesting as a digital print, or with a digital component; I've been experimenting with publications recently for which a digital element is essential. Material limitations are also significant, helping condense otherwise endless possibilities for developing a work. They present finite options, for instance exploring chemical/material relationships, the distance photography creates from a subject, how reinterpretation alters perception; it is largely about developing a process which makes sense in the context. Analogue processes provide more dimensions in which to do this.

I think immaterialisation is an interesting point and perhaps a consideration now automatically present when using analogue mate-

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rials? The everyday relationship we have with photographs has changed so much, with images being more ephemeral than ever and encountered in quite homogeneous ways through phone or computer screens. I'm very conscious of the display/print/support as an integral component of experiencing a photograph, and I'm interested in this being an experience which is grounded in a material reality and a charged photographic object. Would you say the immaterialisation of photography is bound to the increased pace of life; a faster flow of information, online shopping, fast fashion, Tik Tok videos? Effectively more intense "hits" requiring shorter spans of attention?

**RB** I'm ambivalent regarding the notion of immaterialisation, to say the least. I still remember the euphoria of the 1990s with, e.g. the books of Paul Virilio and the like, or Vilém Flusser's transformation of photography into a manipulation of information. At that time, these ideas seemed to envision an outbreak of the still very conventional thinking about a work of art. I also think of the first communication works by artists starting in the late 1970s and throughout the 1990s — art production did no longer rely on very subjective and enigmatic abilities of individuals but became participatory, collective, a joint enterprise, it included not only what one could treat as outcome but also the processes of negotiation in advance and also the bureaucratic endeavours to set up the lines, to organise the equipment etc.

I'm still fond of this approach, as I am of an idea by Hito Steyerl where she claims relevance for the "poor image" — it escapes high art or museum representation and is basically a shared image, trespassing numerous platforms and sites of appearance and appropriation, thus being altered and changed again and again. In contrast to this, I'm suspicious of the social relevance of low-end representation and where to detect its profound engagement with contemporary political disruptions. The mere access to means of production and communication hasn't proven to be a viable way to change politics (of representation) very much.

What these days becomes very obvious is how consumption, work, communication, production of all kinds, and the organisation of private life have merged so closely already that you hardly can distinguish them any longer. The run for more hits and clicks or the shorter attention span invade the field of art from all sides anyway; is it up to art to resist this? To insist on different formats of encounters or engagements with art? To cut a long story short, I think time is a crucial aspect. Is there sufficient time left to separate practices? Is there time left to reflect on something?

The way you describe your process of experimenting to me points to a practice of production that involves a lot of time. I'm sure a lot of images are photoshopped for ages as well, but mostly, as far as I'm concerned, at the same time hiding this process under visual complexity or density or astonishment . . . Do you think your work signifies this time span of production in a different way? Do you expose

time itself? Do you hope it signifies the time it needs to be analysed by means of reception to which — on the other hand — they never fully reveal themselves to? Maybe you answered this already by saying that you want the audience to get a sense of cumulative time. But what does this time mean? What does it enable or provoke, if anything? Does it open up a space for another time regime to get involved differently? How would we describe this "differently"?

To me this is not merely academic or theoretical, as we can see now how art institutions also migrate into the "virtual spaces" to present art, exhibitions. There is not one day without an online-artwork. But entering an art space is something completely different, it presupposes a different notion of the public and the social. Sometimes I wonder if it will come back anytime soon . . . This leads me to ask you to maybe elaborate a bit on where you see your work in relation to its presentation? Again, to me this relates to questions of immaterialisation as well, since we might speak about specific spatial organisations, relations of spaces, objects, and people.

**BJ** This valuing of clicks and engagement is on the one hand a necessary trade-off for accessing platforms enabling engagement with a broader audience — so a democratising tool. On the other hand — these platforms are not without gatekeepers, whose motivations are largely economic. Where I see this as problematic in terms of engagement with the art object, is that although fluid and visually optimised, these platforms are designed for high image turnover and maximising engagement; with engagement itself being defined by the host companies' measurable parameters, linked to advertising. How quickly can, should, or does an artist want to produce work, when it is shared on a platform that prioritises high turnover marketing via surface interactions? This type of platform turns the artwork into an advertisement for the artist's practice more generally and so in many ways is a valuable guide towards the physical encounter, that's certainly how I've used it. I think what should be resisted however is the change in relationship to (object-based) artworks that this speed of consumption drives; a temporary and non-committal type of engagement.

With Photoshop and digital printing, that final translation of information to a uniform dispersion of inks on paper requires the complexities and hours worked are literally flattened; the final print a pristine object, and a unified representation of the image. Works such as "Binder" and "Fog" are photographic surfaces physically recording a history of production encompassing many interactions, and have a finite lifespan; not surviving as reproducible, coded data. This history is material as opposed to image-based and so less compressed, more physically present, bound to the specifics of their scale and process. The finger prints due to the heat in the darkroom, the photogrammed imprints, holes from pins and marks of chemistry, are not part of a digital lexicon but refer to a defined period when that specific photographic surface was physically as well as chemically recording; in a way which traces interaction on a 1:1 scale, rather than reproducing an image of an unconnected event.

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This physical/active recording relates to the scale of time that we experience in the present; an accumulation of decisions and actions made over minutes to hours, fixed on the print's surface. This fixed "memory" is an accretion of those variables subjectively captured within the medium's parameters, the material echoing the subjectivity of our own memory. Other works might present an ancient landscape or a snapshot moment, respectively bringing to mind geological time and the momentary 125th of a second. I'm interested in how photography records and represents these various scales of time (those which we occupy and those we mechanically measure due to brevity or extreme length).

Most recent online exhibitions I've seen are centred around physical objects, exhibiting photographic documentation. As the exhibition is the site at which you experience the work rather than documentation, it seems these are something different. It's certainly a private experience and defined in part by the size and quality of your personal computer/tablet/phone. In my practice, the exhibition presentation is about direct experience and dialogue (each work having both autonomy and commonalities), and highlighting varied interpretations of collective themes, but also the poetic interaction of works with disparate settings/processes/objects. It is about directly engaging with the photographic object, so that everything we've spoken about in regard to time and materiality is present. Scale is also such a significant factor in the work; be it a tiny intimate notation, or large and immersive. This is an integral parameter, creating an intimate situation in public or presenting a 1:1 experience. So much of the encounter I look for in works is visceral, stimulated by their visual characteristics and the spatial relationship in that moment, which is why consideration of the print process is so important. Whilst concepts can still be communicated digitally, that viscerality is diminished. Allowing work to physically occupy space gives it a gravity or magnetism; with rhythm, collisions, and overlapping fields that all together are part of what has to be physically and mentally navigated. It activates peripheral vision, something redundant on the screen and necessary for a nuanced experience.

**RB** Speaking of the "poetic interaction of works with disparate settings/processes/objects", I'd finally like to address the role of the single work in relation to a series, or a tableau, or even some re-arrangement of previous works, since I see a strong red thread throughout your whole body of work. It seems that there is no fixed order of images, it all seems to depend on the specific context, a specific question or a specific issue addressed by varying orders, arrangements, layouts, or montages of images. Georges Didi-Huberman speaks of the montage as a means to put the images in a state of crisis, where their meaning is shaken and questioned, even reversed. In my text for your upcoming book I already wrote about this sense of disruption, both within the single image and its arrangement on site. To me it is very much about what happens between the images and not only within the image itself — what happens when you move from one image to the other? What does this gap mean? What about the importance of the invisible within (or in between) the visible? What is not there to be seen? What is missing? I think it is important

to get rid of the notion of the photographic image as one that has to cover, to show, to represent, instead it might be important to raise attention to all that is not represented, covered, shown, what visuality is lacking and maybe what photography is lacking as well.

**BJ** Just to relate back to your very first question, as I don't think I addressed these works; the photographs comprising arrangements such as "Better Together Than Further Apart" are again primarily made with analogue processes. The motivation for using a primarily analogue rather than digital process, is the visual character of the prints and their unifying quality of black and white. It highlights the presence of the photographic filter/apparatus — that this rendering of an image is a camera's limited interpretation, variably resolved granularly in 35mm or in high resolution through large format film. Contemporary digital equipment can now capture with immense resolution even the snapshot image, and in the montage eschew a singular plane of focus, with every part of an image incredibly sharp — a hyper reality. Film highlights the process of photographic transcription without proposing an intensified version of reality. With monochromatic recording stripping away so much information, the photographs relate to each other on level terms, as direct photographic impressions. It also avoids anchoring the photographs to the contemporary technological moment and the information-dense digital aesthetic this advanced technology produces, distancing them from the photographic language of advertising, fashion, and contemporary artworks made with ultra high-resolution equipment.

Hanging an arrangement of these works is a way of presenting a set of collected observations as motifs, as if isolated details of an unseen tableau. Missing is the "set" in which these elements are situated, and any unifying narrative. Each photograph is originally selected as a singular image and so these arrangements are an invitation for the viewer to resolve a relationship between their constituent parts; a relationship not concisely bound by any singular project but originating from a perceived thematic commonality I find intriguing. So turning from one photograph to the next, there is no affirmation of place or time and no linearity or guidance from the image, no documentary specificity. This is a gap I would argue we do not often expect with photography, with much photographic work being presented in series/projects and sequenced. The ascription of meaning becomes a circumstantial act determined by how a viewer fills that space between the photographs with their own experiences, observations, politics, and knowledge. That space between is one of indeterminacy and possibility, an informational gap between events pulled from a living archive.

Contextual information in those works and captions is limited, denying the where and when questions photographs are often addressed with, rendering invisible their concrete representation of a specific issue. This information would change the scope of the arrangements, instating cultural/historical/linguistic relationships outside of what is visually present. The urge to ask these questions and to make those connections, and the photographs' inability to provide the information perhaps highlights both what photography lacks and where it

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can be free. This freedom motivates both the arrangements, and presentations of singular photographs which have an interior dialogue between image and materiality. In your text for my forthcoming book you speak (paraphrased here) about how in the work “Ship Window,” disruptions made visible by a polarising filter highlight how the photographic apparatus has always inscribed itself within the image. Whether displaying singular photographs such as “Ship Window,” works from series such as “Binder,” or an arrangement, I wish to highlight photography’s subjective tracing of the world, its reactive reflexive nature; for the photographic object to have a dialogue with process and not to be limited by the images’ contextual information. So perhaps bringing together these disconnected events and experimental works from the darkroom creates a disruption between them on the level of the photographic image; negating the expectation of photographs in proximity to collectively address a subject, but reconnected by their physical / visual manifestations of the photographic process of seeing?