

On 'Ashes and broken brickwork of a logical theory'

On the occasion of the exhibition at the Künstlerhaus Stuttgart, D and KIOSK  
Gent, BE in 2010

By Axel Wieder

The Weissenhofsiedlung, the 1927 model housing estate and open air exhibition of the "Neues Bauen" movement in Stuttgart, exists twice. For one, there are the physical structures as they stand today, renovated, added-on to, demolished, partially reconstructed, and, with the exception of one building used as a museum, still inhabited. The other version exists in photographs, especially in two canonized views, which are repeatedly shown, reproduced and discussed. These two parallel existences of the Weissenhofsiedlung are fundamentally different. While the first example implies the usage of architecture and the fluxuating reception history of modernity, the historical photographs reveal the radicality of modernist architecture. This double existence goes beyond the observation that Rem Koolhaas made about building preservation when he stated that it is difficult to determine which historical layer of a building is most significant (which doesn't necessarily mean the building in its original state). The parallel existence of the buildings in the photographs – as idea, which corresponds to the important role of modern photography in the framing of a new way of looking – and as residences standing in the hills, demonstrates to us the functionality of historical memory. It is an act of reconstruction that develops dialectically between idealized concepts and material artefacts, and which has been playing out, since the onset of modernity, with the aid of photographic or filmic images.

It is significant that in these interactions of modernity and photography in the case of the Weissenhofseidlung, a counter-image intrudes. On this, a well-known and infamous postcard of the Weissenhofseidlung as "Arabian Village" from 1932, tea-drinking people and camels are montaged humoristically within the Stuttgart housing development, a satirical attack on the cultural breach of the new images and lifestyles. The resentful caricatures attempt to devalue the coolness of the images, to associatively connect them to more familiar territories: to "mediate". Susanne Kriemann's project "Ashes and broken brickwork of a logical theory" departs from this postcard, following an interest in the role of photography as an area of negotiation of modernism, one that not only depicted modernity, but rather attempted simultaneously to develop a whole new modern visual language.

Also Agatha Christie, a further main figure in Kriemann's project, exists twice. At approximately the same time as the Weissenhofsiedlung was built, the already world-famous author participated in an archaeological excursion to the Middle East. Firstly, Christie visited the excavations of Leonard Woolley, whose book "Digging up the Past" (1930) later became a standard in modern archaeology, in northern Iraq in 1928. After 1930, she worked together with her soon-to-be husband Max Mallowan, for whom she made photographic records of excavated artifacts. The photographs of excavations played an increasingly important role in research; the interest of modern archaeologists was no longer just to find the most spectacular artefacts (treasures is more exaggerated. findings geht nicht), but to create a precise classification and a thorough and conclusive image of the past, which would be reconstructed out of many individual small-scale artifacts. To this day, the images that Agatha Christie made in her second career as archaeological photographer are an important component to those excavations. Conversely, her experiences during the monumental archaeological digs in the Middle East inspired many of her novels. The interplay did not only pertain to thematic story plots or locations. In a more fundamental sense, Christie understood the analogies that could be made between the reconstruction of archaeological artifacts into a representation of the past, the detective-like work with clues, and the questions which appeared in her novels of different, competing versions of reality (Agatha Christie's novels avoid obvious resolutions).

At the time of the excavations, heavy anti-colonialist conflicts were taking place in the research locations, sometimes with bloody outcomes. The research of local protohistory through archaeology and the tabula rasa of modernism – as well as the colonialist, forced modernization – are apparently in a state of tension that are perhaps never so well demonstrated as in the images of the desert, which appears pristine and untouched, yet under the sand lies countless protohistorical artifacts. With modernity, the focus was not only shifted to the future, but the idea of how to represent the past was fundamentally revolutionized, again an important milestone for photography.

Also Susanne Kriemann's project "Ashes und broken brickwork of a logical theory" has a sort of double existence. The exhibition at Künstlerhaus Stuttgart and at Kiosk in Ghent presents photographs of Kriemann as well as archival material from Agatha Christie and from the L'Institut français du Proche-Orient (IFPO) in Damascus. The exhibition was conceived as a prototype for a book, in which associative connections between various logics of images, for example the unconditional restart of modernity,

or how local traditions of image-making were begotten, experimented with. Conversely, the book references the exhibition, from which it came. It orders the images and fragments of discourse in a narrative, almost filmic sequence. Exhibit and book reference each other in a circular form, without one becoming more hierarchically important than the other, rather, point more so to their incompleteness, derived from their codependence. Instead of creating a conclusive result, the project's aim is to find a plausible form for history as collective process, which develops between the material artifacts on the one side, and imagination and interpretation on the other. In the interplay between photography and time, history and subject, and not lastly exhibition and book, this process is revealed and maintained.

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