

Modelling: Archive and Performance

Axel Wieder

In ‚Susanne Kriemann‘, Sternberg Press, edited by Kunstverein Braunschweig und Arnolfini, P. 116 – 124

How to do things with words – and how to do things with images? Looking at John Austin’s Speech Act theory, words and images can be understood as actions that not only mean something in themselves but also actively intervene in the world. Austin’s own examples refer primarily to the everyday use of language, such as declarations, commands or alerts. In a wider sense, however, non-linguistic elements could also be interpreted in a more complex context of the production of meaning and a performative mode of agency. The focus then is an analysis of contextual meaning rather than content: the way in which images are interpreted, how they function as a link in a chain of meaning, as a complex sign that can be associated with a new content. This process is particularly evident in the context of digital image processing and the rapidly growing circulation of pictures via image-based networks. If you move between different publication formats, from official news channels via blogs to social networks, the same image will mean something slightly different each time, depending on the frame and the formatting that this frame produces, but also depending on how we respond to that image and what it makes us do. What is in question here is not only our reception, but also the potential of images to influence our thinking and our actions. What do we do with an image, how do we link it to other information and tie it into a system of meaning, and how then is an interplay created between hegemonic and subjective interpretations, between collectively shared beliefs and traditions? The way images work and the impact they have has been enhanced by the accelerated circulation of digital formats. As a result, pictures have become more visible as a medium of exchange. In principle, pre-digital images also had performative potential, as in the case of the scientific photography used in ethnographic research, natural sciences and archaeology. Images from these studies documented not only discoveries and results, but in some way also created them: the recordings presented a specific perspective on the subjects being investigated, which led to certain conclusions in relation to the context of the research.

Series of images and their archival organisation, for example, have made it possible to compare and classify individual elements that would not have been apparent without this visual recording. When images are placed next to one another, our gaze focuses involuntarily on the similarities and differences between them, the images begin to interact with each other and with our own perception apparatus, with the standards and concepts that we have learned, with our visual grammar.

Susanne Kriemann has repeatedly examined the mechanisms of archives. Looking at specific collections of images, such the National Archives in Washington, a collection of military photographs that American aviation historian Dr. John Provan found in the garbage and has researched ever since, or Agatha Christie's archaeology photographs, her work firstly present results from her extensive research in these subjects. But Kriemann is not limited to this research-oriented impulse; rather, she is interested in a more general sense in what happens to these images when they are looked at – how they link up with new meaning, and how suppressed aspects of their content might resurface. In a way, the photographs start with stories but do not finish telling them, challenging our imagination instead. Where parallels are drawn the context is kept ambiguous, so that relationships between form and content refer to something that remains invisible as an organising principle. Beyond the exact meaning of the images, the works are also representations of a specific field of visibility; they illustrate a certain way of seeing the world that can be as varied as the fuzzy bird's eye view of aeroplane spy cameras or the crystal clear aesthetic of Albert Renger-Patzsch's *New Objectivity*. In this way, the works treat archives and image collections as both historical objects and a pool of images from which photographs with a specific historical charge are taken und associatively linked to other images. The images are supported and framed by precisely used elements such as frames, projectors, spatial interventions, lighting or architectural structures; these create a correlation and allow us to see the photographs in a particular light.

The starting point for Susanne Kriemann's exhibition at Arnolfini in Bristol is a collection of documents from the archive of an experimental design school. The programme, known as Construction School, existed between 1964 and 1979 as part of the West of England College of Art and Design (now part of the University of the West of England). Its alignment was strongly

influenced by its founder and long-term leader Norman Potter (1923-95), a politically motivated designer mainly known for his writing. The school was an attempt to establish an experimental programme in a regional context in the southwest of England, and was influenced by other major design schools of the 20th century such as Bauhaus and the Ulm School of Design. Contrary to the trend towards increasing specialisation in design, the curriculum of Construction School was deliberately interdisciplinary and collaborative. Study groups were combined not by year group but in 'family groups', each working on projects under the guidance of a tutor. Like other Modern artists, Potter did not understand art as a field of individual design disciplines with specific expertise, but as a comprehensive socio-political project dealing with the organisation – and improvement – of the human environment¹. Unlike the early Modernists and their sometimes paternalistic approach to society, Potter combined his understanding of design with an interest in vernacular aspects of art. His book *What is a designer* (1969) begins with the sentence 'Every human being is a designer' and study tasks regularly included examinations of areas of everyday life and their anonymous design.²

The Construction School is an interesting example of an alternative educational model that was accompanied by political disputes and problems. In retrospect, there is surprisingly little material left behind from the school and the period of its existence, though the university still uses the same rooms in the campus at Bower Ashton. For several years, graphic designer James Langdon has been researching Norman Potter's work and building an archive of materials from the school's history. Langdon invited Susanne Kriemann to an event in Zürich, which sparked her interest in the archived documents, that relate to her previous projects investigating aspects of design history, including among other things collaborations with designers on books and posters. Unlike much of the source material which has previously played a role in her work, the archive materials of Construction School typically have no photographic background but are instead in text form such as study tasks, memos and letters. Interestingly, there are almost no known results of the programme, so the briefings work in retrospect as an open

¹ Potter quoted Le Corbusier: 'Architecture is organisation. You are an organizer, not a drawing-based stylist.'

² Norman Potter, *What is a designer, things, places, messages* (London and New York, 1969) quoted from the fourth edition (London, 2012), 10

framework of thought, something Kriemann compares to an 'unexposed film'. Together, the documents can be read as elements of a design theory. Many of the tasks focus on an understanding of design as a problem-solving process, which is analysed in respect to all aspects of design work, from assignment to budgeting and presentation, and is aimed at a clear social benefit. A briefing in December 1974 assigned first-year students the task of making a Christmas gift for which only wood was made available – additional material had to be purchased at their own expense.³ The moment of defining the problem played a particularly important role in the tasks and for a holiday assignment in 1975, students were asked to read Siegfried Giedion's *Mechanisation Takes Command* (1948) – a social history of Modern design – and then analyse current problem areas and develop possible solutions⁴.

In one of the earliest briefings entitled 'Job 1' (1964), students were asked to buy within a budget any quantity of various everyday objects (at least six, not more than one hundred), to sort these objects and to bring them into relation with one another. It was not specified which items should be selected – the briefing described in an abstract fashion as 'simple random phenomena' – and the nature of the relationship also remained optional. The order of these items, however it looked, implied a specific system developed on the basis of the objects. The solution put forward – how the objects were organized – required a specification of the assignment to determine the organisation criteria, and implied reflection on the definition of the problem before a solution could be offered. With this type of task, Construction School moved into the discourse of critical planning that has fundamentally rethought the social role of design since the late 1950s. The Swiss planner and author Lucius Burkhardt, for example, described polemically how design solutions were often applied to too narrow problems and thus the actual, unseen factors – and other of understanding the problem – were ignored. In contrast, the 'Job 1' briefing reflects the exact moment of defining a problem. In Potters' writing he describes this with accurate accounts of the communication between the client and the designer in a kind of running log that illustrates the contingency of individual decisions.

In Susanne Kriemann's exhibition, some of the documents and projects of the Construction School play a direct role, as a printed poster or an exhibit. However, there is another aspect of their involvement on a structural level. In

³ Document, *Departement of Design School of Construction, Year 1-4 December 1974 (479/Yrl/TQ)*

⁴ Document *Jim's Group, 2/3 Year, Vacation Work: 3 July 1975*

collaboration with the architect Andreas Müller, two briefings were used as references in order to design an architectural intervention to hang photographs and to determine sequences of the works. Even without knowing the exact context of the historical documents referenced in the exhibition, this intervention in the presentation mode acts as an interruption in the narrative flow of the works. It becomes an independent exhibition object in its own right, a reflecting surface for the exhibition, and creates a choreography that follows a different order. The unusual installation of the photographic objects and the architectural-spatial intervention relates to the rest of the exhibition without being congruent. Like the photographic series and their juxtaposition of images from different sources, which traverse stable narratives and their visual registers, the presentation form opens points of connection to different conventions and perspectives. Construction School is a theme of the exhibition, which relates to the question of images organisation: how do we define the criteria to sort our visual memory, how do we design our past? It also acts as a trigger for the formal organisation of the exhibition itself in which images became active.