

## Shades of Modernism

Els Roelandt

“Let go of the political,” “detach the real,” “an abstraction of migration” are some phrases that crystallised out of a conversation with Susanne Kriemann during the preparations for the work *One Time One Million* at Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam. On a first reading, the presence of the political in *One Time One Million* might escape one entirely. After all, does this work not deal with the activities of ornithologists? Is it not about observation and ordering things? Perspective, photography, collecting, modernism, utopia? Well, yes, now and then some migrants do appear in the photographs, descending on places in elegant movements, with the same grace flights of birds have. But no position is taken regarding their presence; at the most it is insinuated that their migration is decorative, but that can hardly be called a political statement. Or can it?

An original Swedish Hasselblad camera is the point of departure for the work in the installation *One Time One Million*. Because the camera dates from 1942, this object launched Kriemann straight back into history, just as that happened when she made another work with a numerical title for the Berlin Biennale, *12 650 000*, the weight in kilos of the *Schwerbelastungskörper*. This architectural construction, built in 1941 on the orders of Albert Speer who wanted to test how well the soil of Berlin would support heavy concrete buildings, bore with it the dreams of Greater Germania, and was thus politically charged, par excellence. Yet in *12 650 000* Kriemann succeeds in pushing the concrete politics that adhere to this object into the background. That gives her the room to say so much more than she would have had a chance to say in a specifically political context: she can bring clusters together in new images, make new connections, rearrange things, tinker around, and thus arrive at new insights.

The reordering of first things, and after that of facts, a new classification that leads to other insights: that is also what is going on in *One Time One Million*. A close-up of the camera itself, Hasselblad's own images of birds in flight, similar photographs taken from the internet, aerial photographs of residential housing estates in Stockholm, apartments with satellite dishes, and finally images of post-war single family homes. The arrangement of images and facts creates a movement: from near by, as close-up, to aerial photographs or photographs taken from a bird's-eye perspective. Simultaneously with the formal movement, as a viewer you are invited to engage in a substantive exercise that leads you from the dream and utopia of modernism to a concrete experience of it, and that finally carries one back to

square one, to the realisation of the failure of the utopia.

Kriemann's manner of abstracting politics in her work is subtle: it is manifestly politically charged, even at first glance, but the precise deciphering of this charge is a challenge that can only be entered into via a spatial experience of the work. And, furthermore, this is precisely where the modernism that her work goes back to lies: in the consciousness of, and creation of a sensitivity for the perspective from which one views things.

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In *One Time One Million* Kriemann looks back over a specific modernist past from a contemporary perspective, but in the process she refrains from any critical statements. In her work the 'old' ideology and its effects reveal themselves as a sort of hermetic, mythological system, as an era from which we can distance ourselves but cannot yet leave behind us.

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