

Lending Images a Legend

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Reading texts about contemporary art one could think, since so many works dealing with the present are so literally inscribed by their external references, that the latter would be quite simple to read and decode – themselves being the signs of a social condition following the principle of legibility. However, the process of reference in contemporary art often becomes a formative principle in which references to other texts, works or contexts in a work actually reveal the limitations of any permeation of our increasingly complex present. (1) The references are part of the work, expanding its message while remaining in a way extrinsic and must first be decoded by the observer in their new contextualized meaning. Sometimes multiple layers build a palimpsest of meanings, each of which are present without needing to be completely apparent. Quotes point to other works, historical epochs and their significance for the present and so on. Playing with references and their overlapping referential systems seems like a strategy to evade Modernism's claim as an unequivocal force of innovation – without having to tread the thin ice of postmodernist quotation. Taking up complexly loaded contexts can also be seen as an informed way of handling a cultural repertoire laden with long referential chains that become entangled in formal or material (re-)appropriation.

Approaching images, forms or materials as bearers of ideology and meaning, and perhaps also questioning these as to their potential for re-appropriation, is also about questioning the past from the perspective of the present – not in a nostalgic sense, but rather as an attempt to understand the present as a result of the past, with all its flaws and ideals. This could well make the legibility of a work difficult, if one is unaware of the embedded historical contexts and references. Alone the notion of comprehensive legibility risks leading to the misconception that it is possible to entirely translate the figurative order of art into the discursive order of language – especially with regard to images. But more about this later.

It was Walter Benjamin, who perceived the world as a web of signs that one can decode and rewrite. For him, language was the sole means with which the antagonistic state of the world

and the phenomena of the present in their history and historicity could be examined ontologically. This allegorical perspective, which Benjamin distilled from Baroque drama and applied to the events of the 19th century, he also used as the foundation for his ruminations on photography, and he claimed the technically reproducible emblematic image as a constructive principle of representation. Since photography represents reality, it at first suggests a privileged access to reality. What it records however, is only the world of appearances. Since “reality has slipped into the functional,” as Bertolt Brecht and subsequently Benjamin so strikingly noted, the technical recording of reality no longer necessarily leads to immediate insight. Instead, social, economic, and political relationships and functions withdraw themselves from direct reproducibility. For Benjamin, politically informed photography was thus only possible through a consequent literary approach, because only the “caption (...) introduces the critical spark to the mixture of images, like a fuse.” (2) – “The caption sets in where the fixed image shocks the observer’s association to a standstill.” (3) Accordingly, do photographs need captions to verbally recoup a context that the image can no longer provide? Art photography in particular, which is conceptual in the broadest sense, delegates titles with important clues for approaching a work. In the works of Christopher Williams, for example, the title meticulously lists what is pictured and when and where an image was taken, so that this inventory of the material world immediately questions objectivity according to the premise that the seemingly objective reproduction of reality is the strongest criticism of its self-assertion.

The strategy underlying the works of Susanne Kriemann, however, is a different one. More strongly documentary, it initially seems to trust the photographic image, only then to probe the boundaries of its ability to represent and, much more, to *conserve* history. According to Benjamin’s emblematically influenced gaze, it follows that a “legible” reality manifests itself first in the meaningful constellation, in the interplay of images, words and things, and only then permeates the contexts, instead of being blinded by their surfaces. Kriemann’s focus thus rests not with the thing itself, but rather with the various levels of present and past layered within it, which overlap and partially obscure one another. This requires a different sort of reading: one that is oriented along the friction within an image, that observes the empty spaces, maneuvers about the edges.

I would like to further elucidate this based on some of her earlier works, which draw attention to casual scenes, to things, architectures or landscapes. At first glance perhaps appearing unspectacular, the precise visual composition of these works point to the meaning with which her motifs are charged, or at least suggest that they bear such meaning. In turn, this suggestive meaningfulness opens up a zone of uncertainty, in which objects or architectural details seem to address contexts unrecognizable in the photographs themselves, but which have inscribed themselves on the places and their architectures as sediments of past significations that today can no longer be discerned.

The photographs often have a collage-like effect, as different levels of reality appear staggered behind one another. In fact, Kriemann manipulates nothing. Much more, the impression of a subtle strangeness and distance results from the particular matt coloration of the images reproduced with an inkjet printer, which makes it difficult to date the pictures. In other situations, Kriemann uses archival film material, transporting a past aesthetic into the present. By forgoing any color brilliance that might maximize their effect, the motifs recall the technical standard of photographic prints from the 1960s and 1970s and the Cold War era. The present pushes in at the edges, as casual details point to the here and now. This layered overlapping of time and simultaneously, the subject's dislocation, interests Kriemann twofold: with regard to history's pictorial representation in architecture on the one hand, and on the other, the ephemeral moments of a present that has forgotten its past. This is evident, for example, in the commercialization of a historically charged place such as Nurnberg, where a carnival held before the congress hall of the former Nazi Party rally grounds makes the monumental building seem like a film backdrop in *Olympia (Nazi Party Rally Grounds Nuremberg)*, 2005. Here, two completely disparate moments seem to overlap, although the congress hall as a longstanding relic in the city is visible and thus likely already part of the active memory of this past.

Similar associations are triggered in the work *Orwell had imagined the future wrong (Copenhagen City Museum)* from 2006. The lecture hall of the Copenhagen City Museum is filled with rows of modernist chairs, while in the background beyond a glass wall stands a pile of slide projectors. The city history, metonymically presented as a slide show, is shown to be a history conserved only through images. The form of its presentation seems anachronistic, revealed through the images visible only in the projection. But in emphasizing its theatricality,

Kriemann underlines the staging of history in single animated moments: a past that is brought into the present time and again.

Because it is primarily architectures, which as emissaries of ideology and meaning enduringly speak of the past, their (re-)recognizability is prerequisite for access to history. The modernist concrete wall with its perforated ornamentation is first revealed in the picture caption as the entrance to the main building of the former Ministry of State Security in Berlin: *The building the author found herself in is the former ministry of state security (Berlin)*, 2006. The moment of surprise, as modernist forms join the shadowed past of the GDR, is clearly expressed in the title of the work. Yet ultimately for Susanne Kriemann, the images' compressed moments of a past revealed in the present with its multifaceted political and ideological implications are less important than the logic which connects individual pictures and thus enables them to be recognized as part of a larger context. It is not the single moment, but the subtle ideological implications revealed in the structure of the everyday, which – and here is a central motif of Susanne Kriemann's artistic work – attempt to describe the history of modernity as an open field of failed ideals and unfulfilled promises.

This can well be applied to the series *The originality of the avant-garde and other modern myths (former Central Post Office Rotterdam)* from 2007, which depicts Rotterdam's former Central Post Office during its demolition. The building constructed in 1959 succumbed to investors who converted the historical building into an office complex. Kriemann photographed the various sections of the post office – offices, cafeteria and sorting facility – shortly before the gigantic letter-sorting machine was dismantled. Except for equipment, the rooms are empty. Looking into otherwise inaccessible areas reveals new spaces, whose functionality has literally disappeared.

The view of the post office in the process of disappearing documents a fleeting moment in which various aspects intersect. On the architectural level, modernism is succeeded by a contemporary American-style architecture of glass and steel; from an evolutionary standpoint, the era of mechanization represented by the sorting machine yields to the digital era; and from an urban planning perspective, the public is forced out by the private sector. Past and future meet in a present marked by empty spaces. But these voids look neither nostalgically to the

past nor euphorically to the future, presenting instead the future of the past – a past influenced by the promise of modernity, which depends on technical feasibility, functional aesthetics, rationality, but also state control.

In their composition and color, the photographs recall modernist formal language, with its penchant for geometric figures and primary colors. The title – a quote from a collection of essays by Rosalind Krauss – augments this context with further connotations. In *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, Krauss postulates that postmodern artistic processes such as copy and repetition will also necessitate a new and different reflection on the art of the 20th century, in which the photographic paradigm of modernist art plays a decisive role.

In light of this title, that which is purported to be documentary becomes a photographic construction, which is not about the reproduction of something but rather about the convergence of different factors that one can read, can *decode*, as an ensemble. Benjamin's allegory of the ruins of history is here the dismantled post office as a relic of a time that no longer – or better: should no longer – exist.

The question as to how history inscribes itself in photography – through the imaging technique as well as the motif, yet above all through the perspective, the “view of things” – finds its answer here in the retrieval of commentary on different levels. There is the image, the title and the knowledge of the post office - the latter of which, however, acts like an external appendage to the image. Beyond the level of the motif, this photography in so far inquires about the possibilities and limitations of the photographic reproduction of reality as such, while simultaneously using its visual potential to effect a sense of aesthetic alienation. For even if we do not exactly know what it is we are looking at, we recognize it nonetheless.

(1) See André Rottmann, “Reflexive Bezugssysteme,” *Texte zur Kunst*, issue 71, September 2008, pp. 79 – 94.

(2) Walter Benjamin: *Gesammelte Schriften Band III Kritiken und Rezensionen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989, p. 505.

(3) Norbert Bolz, Willem van Reijen: *Walter Benjamin*, p. 111, Frankfurt am Main/New York:

Campus, 1991.

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Rosalind Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde', in '*The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths*', MIT Press, P. 167 f.

'Levine's medium is a pirated print, as in the series of photographs she made by taking images by Edward Weston of his young son Neil and simply re-photographing them, in violation of Weston's copyright. But as had been pointed out about Weston's 'originals,' these are already taken from models provided by others; they are given in that long series of Greek kouroi by which the nude male torso has long ago been processed and multiplied within our culture. Weston's print, opens the print from behind to the series of models from which it, in turn, was stolen, of which it is itself the reproduction. The discourse of the copy, within which Levine's act must be located has, of course, been developed by a variety of writers, among them Roland Barthes. I am thinking of his characterization, in *S/Z* of the realist as certainly not a copyist from nature, but rather a 'pastiche,' or someone who makes copies of copies. As Barthes says:

'To depict is to ... refer not from a language to a referent, but from one code to another. Thus realism consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy Through secondary mimesis (realism) copies what is already a copy.'

In another series of Levine in which the lush, colored landscapes of Eliot Porter are reproduced, we again move through the 'original' print, back to the origin in nature and – as in the model of the picturesque – through another trap door at the back wall of 'nature' into the purely textual construction of the sublime and its history of degeneration inot ever more lurid copies.

Now, insofar as Levine's work explicitly deconstructs the modernist notion of origin, her effort cannot be seen as an extension of modernism. It is, like the discourse of the copy, postmodernist. Which means that it cannot be seen as avant-garde either.

Because of the critical attack it launches on the tradition that precedes it, we might want to see the move made by Levine's work as yet another step in the forward march of the avant-garde. But this would be mistaken. In deconstruction the sister notions of origin and originality, postmodernism establishes a schism from across a gulf that in turn establishes a historical divide. The historical period that the avant-garde shared with modernism is over. That seems an obvious fact. What makes it more than a journalistic one is a conception of the discourse that has brought it to a close. This is a complex of cultural practices, among them a demythologizing criticism and a truly postmodernist art, both of them acting now to void the basic proposition of modernism, to liquidate them by exposing their fictitious condition. It is thus from a strange new perspective that we look back on the modernist origin and watch it

splintering into endless replication.

Washington, D.C., 1981