

Performative Reading

A conversation with books, images and quotes

by Susanne Kriemann and Sophie Berrebi

The subject matter of our talk concerns notions of the document in photography today.

‘Within this practice, the notion of the document, understood in different semantic contexts that include the legal, the scientific and the historical, plays a central part.’¹

We will depart from interrogating the use of photographic documents in constructing our presence, our public domain, our daily surrounding. Further we hope to discuss not only what is on a picture, but its context, how the picture was published, made, printed, stored, archived, referred to and used.

In dialogue with Sophie Berrebi, I will present my research, entitled ‘Het Licht’. I focused on this location in the city of Ghent, because it opens up a dialogue between the presence and the past, the image and its reference, the document and documentation. This place is essentially linked to the medium of photography.

‘The old print workshop ‘Het Licht’ was in use until the 80ties for printing the newspapers ‘Vooruit’ and ‘De Morgen’. Then it got transformed into a cultural centre and now it is a squat in transition to become a building for student apartments, a project by Upgrade Estate. The building is currently in an indefinable state. Remains of the original art deco elements mingle with rusty triangular lamps and bright colours of an 80ties cultural centre. Over all, the squatters left their markings, most of it is text written onto walls, and large-scale graffiti, despite garbage, and excrements. I documented the wild melange of styles and visions, letting natural light be the sole guidance for my shootings.

The city archive of Gent is named ‘De Zwarte Doos’. Inside, all documents of Ghent’s urban spatial developments are safely stored away. In a ‘black box’, most of the traces of Ghent’s changing cityscape from 1100 to today are safely guarded. I collected some images that depict the ‘black box’ in different years; I have a small archive of damages done to the archive by parasites and ink that are interior tabula rasa (not exterior like war, weather, economical issues). And I took pictures of a huge amount of books named series 400, which solely document the financial matters related to urban construction. On some of these images we, photographing and using photographic lamps to let the film see the books, are visible. For me, there is a dialogue between ‘Het Licht’ and ‘De Zwarte Doos’, which goes

¹ In Afterall 28, Sophie Berrebi, ‘Jean-Luc Moulène: Photography as Training Manual’, p. 35

beyond the actual meaning of these places. In putting these two spaces into a new space, my work in process - a printed matter, and letting light and darkness, presence and archive communicate, I hope to compose an image of the current turbulent issues of photography and documentary itself. In today's digital realm, there are no longer darkrooms to develop a picture, and there are no longer issues related to light tracing information on film.

'Photography by definition is a very present medium. It's defined as the captured moment, I'd say. I think that the old cameras with their negatives forced the photographer to anticipate because he could not recheck. He had to rely on the relation to the motive and to the light. He couldn't just think about how he will change the image afterwards.' (Wim Wenders, 'On Photography', interview, source youtube.com)

The digital image is an image without reference, there is no factual and storable document of a light situation, as was possible on film. The monitor, which is there to let us see what we have shot, consists of light bulbs itself. These diodes change the atmosphere of a picture with each monitor, with each move of the mouse, with each ink jet printer.

I am very inspired by these challenges in photography –be it analogue, be it digital-, and I relate them to the incredibly strong desire to archive things nowadays. However, when seeing the massive and often unused / unusable amount of documents, I think of the most abstract entity I can image in my spatial understanding of things. Therefore, my research hopes to further extend the notion of abstraction in relation to the document and the archive, and not least, photography today.

The conversation between Sophie Berrebi and me will take 45 minutes. We will show books, and images, and texts that are emphasising the questions at stake. After the conversation, I will invite all to see my work in the 'Zwarte Zaal'.

Susanne Kriemann, November 2011