

PETRA LÖFFLER / BETTINA POUSTTCHI

CHECK-IN

in:

BETTINA POUSTTCHI - DEPARTURE

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Petra Löffler: When you told me about your new series *Parachutes* recently, it immediately occurred to me that there is a Coldplay album by that name. So I wondered what role titles play in your artistic work. What value does language have and what associations can titles like *Take Off*, *Lighthouse*, and *Parachutes* trigger in the viewer? By the way, I have always especially liked *Ocularis*, which, I admit, is in part due to the poetic title and the constellation between the title and the work. *Lighthouse*, the title of the multichannel video installation you exhibited at the Württembergischer Kunstverein a couple of years ago, for example, implies for me, beyond the concrete reference, a certain spatial arrangement. You could even call it a *dispositif* of perception that opens up an additional dimension of your work. Could the combination of image, space, and sound in many of your works thus perhaps be supplemented by the symbolic dimension of language?

Bettina Pousttchi: I know the Coldplay album, of course, but

I didn't choose the title of the series with that in mind but rather as an allusion to the various flying objects seen in the photographs.

I often think about titles and consider them an important element of my artistic work. At first I changed them frequently as well. They usually emerge during the work process and are often associative. If the symbolic potential of language produces latitude for interpretation between the work and the title, if an additional semantic level is created, then in my view the title works. In principle I like titles that lend the work a certain openness, those that do not restrict it but at the same time point perception in a certain direction.

In the video installations in particular I try to create a specific experience by combining image, sound, space, and title. This structural *dispositif* is what I intended by the concept I chose for my exhibition in Stuttgart: *Screen Settings*. Naturally the phrase has many meanings and refers in part to the cultural, political, and media framework in which images are perceived and given meaning.

PL: Something else I find interesting in your work is the alternation between moving and still images, especially between video and photography.

BP: I like switching between these two media. I really come out of photography, since that's what I've been working with longest. Video came later, and I was very enthusiastic about it, because suddenly the images acquired the aspect of movement and a sound as well. The relation of the moving image and music is still one of the most exciting for me. It's like the relationship between the title and the work: a new, additional level emerges. But precisely because film is such an infinitely complex medium, I am sometimes quite content to restrict myself to silent still images again. It produces a different kind of concentration.

PL: Yes, precisely. Video is, after all, an audiovisual medium. There are two aspects to this change in medium: between moving and still images and between the silent image and the audiovisual. In that context I find it interesting how you decide whether to do a certain project as video or photography.

BP: It depends on the theme and the material shot whether it becomes a video or a photo series, never both. The photos are not video stills in the classical sense. They are not derivations but autonomous projects, even if there is often a connection to the video works in terms of subject matter. For example, the photos in *Fans* are thus related to the video *Laola* and the docu clips *Die Katharina-Show* and *Auf gute Nachbarschaft* (To good neighbors) and the photo series *Take Off* to the video installation *Landing*.

I am particularly interested in the exchange between these two practices. That's how I came to work in photo series, which I see as "cinematographic sequences," like *Fans*, *Starker Staat* (Strong state), *Take Off*, or *Parachutes*. By that I mean self-contained series of photographs that establish a unity of form and content and circle around a kind of imaginary scenario. They are always presented in groups, never in isolation. The simultaneity of perception when viewing the series produces a kind of "film in your mind," which really happens anytime you perceive different images in rapid sequence. That's also the basic principle of montage in film: the associative merging of individual images. It's like visiting an exhibition. Depending on how you move about the space, the works are perceived in a different sequence, and you necessarily relate the works to one another differently in your mind.

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PL: I am not sure that I see your photographic series as self-contained. You emphasized how important you find the openness that results from the tension between title and work. That's something I too appreciate about the idea of the series as a potentially unending chain of individual images. It results in an order of images or even knowledge, an ordered cosmos of meanings, but at the same time in a semantic surplus, a space of possibilities for the imaginary—and that's precisely what always fascinated me about your series. By the way, I did not see your photo series *My Artificial Nature* and *Starker Staat* as self-contained unities either but rather as open works with multiple meanings with an inherent aspect of anarchy. Your current photo series *Parachutes* falls into this category for me as well.

BP: I see multiple meanings as a way to escape not only the illustrative documentary but also the illusionism of the mainstream. Nonlinear pictorial structures make it possible to experience a different temporality thanks to the potential simultaneity of their perception.

That's why I have always liked feature films like Godard's *Numéro deux* or Alain Resnais's *L'année dernière à Marienbad*, for which Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote the screenplay. In the latter, the refusal to offer a linear narrative structure and clear readability results in a great film. At the same time, its semantic openness also raises the questions of representation and of the relativity of the visible.

PL: *L'année dernière à Marienbad* is a rather difficult film for many because of its aporetic structure. But I find the rejection of linearity important in relation to your work because it countermands the "normal" mode of reading. That is very revealing in relation to the semantic openness of your photographic series or cinematographic sequences as well. I imagine that especially with these forms of art it is always about an opening up of perception, about revealing a different modality, about another aggregate state of seeing—in short, about the possibility of seeing the supposedly familiar in different and new ways—and nonlinear sequences of images are naturally important for that.

The photographs in the *Parachutes* series have precisely the openness and resistance that affects me: the romantic pictorial motif of an overcast sky as a dramatic backdrop against which an explosive event

will play out at any moment—floating between life and death, the moment of calm before the storm. The political creeps in from behind, in a sense, entering these scenes which are, for all their drama, idyllic as well—just as an air attack always occurs from behind the lines, in the enemy's back. This confrontation of a Romantic subject and modern visual politics makes me think involuntarily—or is this rather an obvious reference from the reservoir of cultural memory?—of Coppola's war film *Apocalypse Now*. The helicopter attack on a Vietnamese village at daybreak, to the bombastic sounds of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*. That image marks for me the threshold between modern warfare and mythology: the idealization that is produced by the visual.

BP: It is interesting that I could take photographs of helicopters in Berlin in 2006 that viewers would subsequently believe were images from the 1960s, from Vietnam or elsewhere. I often try to create an atmosphere of ambiguity. The ambiguity between freedom and security is one I consider very important for our present social climate: to what extent does media paranoia transport us into a state of fear and restrict our freedoms and rights? And to what extent can this be connected to a need for personal security?

PL: That is indeed a burning question today, one that has increasingly occupied politics and the public sphere since 9/11. One important point for me is the extent to which the images that circulate globally of, for example, terror attacks or natural catastrophes provoke or at least reinforce this anxiety. The interesting question, from an artistic perspective as well, is what role such images play in shaping scenarios of anxiety and what ideologies they are used to serve. Unlike the images that circulate on the networks of the information society, works like *Starker Staat*, *Take Off*, and *Parachutes* have no index, that is, no signature that assigns the thing depicted to a concrete place and time. This produces the ambiguity of which you spoke. The images are ambiguous because no one knows whether and, if so, where and when the thing depicted could have played out. The old question of the authenticity of photographs arises: we always want to know what such a photograph bears witness to. The fact that this wish is always disappointed in your works

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produces in turn a diffuse anxiety not unlike that produced by the reporting of actual events in the media. That works so well because we have seen comparable images that we have already consumed with the associated emotions. In order to thwart this kind of unconscious closing of the circle (images of anxiety producing anxiety in turn), you repeatedly cross out the image, so to speak, in your photographic works. That at least is how I understand the black stripes that make the images recognizable as technically fabricated and simultaneously make the thing depicted unrecognizable. This specific pictorialness recalls at the same time the appearance of electronic images—that is, of television or video images, which are constructed from lines. It also stands for a certain type of use in the media and for the faith in the truthfulness of photographic or electronic images.

BP: It's true that my images often have no index and hence their locality and temporality cannot be specified. They could have derived from our collective visual memory. In addition to the selection it is the editing of the images that enables me to move from the specific pictorial motif to a more universal level.

In the case of *Take Off* I used the black-and-white horizontal stripes as pictorial element to heighten the impression of observation and control. After taking photographs on site I inserted them while editing the images, rather than shooting through venetian blinds, scanning newspaper photographs, or using images from surveillance cameras. I took the photographs for *Take Off* in Berlin in 2005 at Tempelhof Airport, from which I was flying frequently at the time. In addition to the building's unique history I was interested in the airport in general as a place where the nation-state's claims to authority over territory are manifested in a particular way and where the individual is restricted. This specific way of altering the images was intended to remove them from their concrete temporality and thus enable processes of memory and imagination.

PL: What role does it play that you digitally edit the photographs you take?

BP: The fact that it has obviously been edited establishes a certain distance between the photograph and the viewer. At the same time the photographic

images are exposed as constructs through this intervention. The idea is not an illusionistic approach to the image, which is why I show the traces of the editing in the pixel structure, for example. In this way the intervention also heightens the trace of the subjectivity of my position as an artist. This subjective, interpretative aspect of photography is something I want to intensify as a way of emphasizing my personal view of reality as specific to photography.

In general I see digital editing as a versatile tool that opens up an additional layer in the photographic process. I have been exploiting these possibilities for more than ten years now. They enable me to work out the photographs within the framework of my conceptual intentions. Interestingly, the aspect of photographing with a camera on site also took on a new value within my working process as a result.

PL: The question of the referentiality of photographs has been fueled by the discussion of the question of editing images using digital technologies. Nevertheless, this discussion has been going on for many years, ever since the technology came on the market. Many critics of digitalization try to push through their idea of a "pure" photography that is supposed to be a "trace of the real", as suggested by Roland Barthes's theory of photography. To what extent are you interested in photography as a referent of reality or in the debate on its referentiality?

BP: The referentiality of photography as its *noema* is certainly called into question by the possibilities of digital processes.

I do not perceive that as a loss but as an opportunity to raise the questions what "reality" is, whether and how it can be depicted, and how perception functions. I see it not as the end of photography but as a new chapter in its history.

PL: By taking photographs in real places and editing on the computer you want, on the one hand, to create distance as a way of making such places evident as elements of a symbolic order and, on the other, to bring out their potential for phantasmatic attributions. It seems to me that the levels of the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary overlap in photographs in a striking way. Looking at the discussions of the status of such

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images, it is evident how often this fact has led to feelings of insecurity.

BP: The interesting thing is the question of how representation functions and how knowledge is generated. The question of the politics of the image was already a concern in my photo series *My Artificial Nature*. It is the only series in which I have manipulated found footage, in this case scientific images. It was, in my view, the most rigorous example of breaking away from the referent because all that can be seen in the end are abstract forms.

I also find interesting the question of what documentary film can mean at all these days, particularly with respect to its claim to depict reality. In the hybrid genre of the "docu clips" I found a way to create portraits of people in which the levels of the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary overlap. They are documentaries of people in the form of music videos that incorporate the overall context of the people's lives in a very open narration.

PL: What is the standing of your photo series *Ihr Museum* (Your/her museum) in this context? Doesn't it place referentiality in a much larger framework?

BP: In *Ihr Museum*, as in *Katharina-Museum* before it, I was interested in the museum as an institution of the art world. The female torso next to the entrance on the museum's exterior facade, which seems to watch over the entrance to the building, represents the central motif of this five-part photo series. It was created as a mural relief when the museum was built in the early twentieth century, but for me today, against the backdrop of institutional critique and debates on gender, this caryatid raises the question of how women are depicted and represented at the museum, in the museum, and in society.

PL: That's an important point. The institutional critique begins in many ways in the exhibition space—either by emphasizing the site-specificity of artistic works or by reflecting on the conventions of the exhibition space as white cube or black box. That raises the question: how did you come to realize your video works as large-scale installations?

BP: The first videos were all single-channel works. Then later

I began to place objects in the room as well. That interested me because I could create a connection between the real space and the fictive space. At first they were just seats. For *Die Katharina-Show* at the Museum Morsbroich, there were old car tires to sit on, and for *Auf gute Nachbarschaft* viewers could sit on a stack of old mattresses lying in the auditorium. Only later did this lead to installations that occupy the entire space. For example, for *Locked* the entire room was filled with crowd barriers arranged in a kind of labyrinth. The viewers could move within it, but it was not made clear whether that was my intention.

PL: The crowd barriers signify for me a new quality in your work. As an element of an installation, they do not illustrate but rather define the space in a very succinct way as political and repressive. The perception of the video thus becomes a concrete physical experience that plays out beyond what is actually visible. The *dispositifs* of power can thus be experienced physically.

BP: Yes, that's right. The crowd barriers interest me as objects that structure the public space and in general as semipermeable boundaries. In order to achieve a physical experience of confinement and uncertain exclusion

I completely filled the darkened exhibition space for *Locked* with crowd barriers, from wall to wall and from floor to ceiling. I didn't want to build an empty black box in which viewers can move freely but rather a completely filled space wherein they first had to find their way. Many visitors were uncertain and didn't know whether they could enter the structure or not. Many of them felt excluded just by the sight of the crowd barriers. But it was only possible to view the video loops on five monitors distributed within the structure if one penetrated the crowd barriers.

PL: I still remember the exhibition very well. The impression caused by the room as a result of the crowd barriers was really surprising, and I too believe that they frightened off very many viewers. These objects, so familiar from everyday life, apparently lent the ever so protected art space protected by them something "genuinely" threatening, perhaps even uncanny. The recorded sounds of thunder in *Lighthouse* had a similar

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effect on me. The same is true of the sound in *Landing*.

BP: In contrast to *Locked*, for *Landing* the crowd barriers were set up in the white cube of the gallery and did not fill the entire room. Ten monitors were positioned within a sculptural labyrinth in such a way that they could not be seen simultaneously from any point. The rather monolithic structure had to be circled in order to watch all the video sequences. The monolithic aspect was bolstered by the minimal movement of the images. Circling the sculpture led to a perception of the loops that was shifted in time. Only the sound created a connection; I had mixed it in a way that heightened the feeling of subtle, intangible threat and intimidating use of power that the images gave off. In the end I tried to create a kind of perception in which the images, the sound, and the movement of the viewers in the space would flow together to create an experiential moment.

Crowd barriers were featured again in the installation *Pertinent Block*. They were placed so closely together in the exhibition space that they could not be crossed. The viewers were left completely outside and could only watch the video *Line*, which was projected on the wall behind it, from a standpoint of exclusion.

PL: I found *Line* particularly interesting for the perspective from which it was filmed: the uniformed police officers in various groupings moving along a white line and stepping out of the image to the left and right in alternation. When they disappeared completely, the white horizontal line, which moved slightly, was seen as a kind of abstract painting. Only once did a passerby, holding a newspaper, cross the image.

It was exciting to see the ordering power that their movements along the line followed involuntarily, without stepping over it. This line was as much an absolute boundary as the crowd barriers in the installation *Pertinent Block*. That resulted in a constructional spatial relationship between the video shown in a darkened gallery space and the arrangement of the crowd barriers.

BP: Space is a subject I find very interesting in general. This interest developed from my working with positioning videos in space. At the time I found that the presentation of videos in the art world was very standardized. An empty black box in a clean white cube.

Or a black monitor on a white pedestal. So I began to think not of film in isolation but rather of constructing the cinema right in, thus reflecting on both the moving image and the form in which it is presented.

PL: That makes sense to me as a logical step. I find that the spaces as complex arrangements of perception belong together with media and their employment. They are too often forgotten because they have become a matter of course. For that reason I have always been interested in seeing the white cube and the black box in their interrelationship as the two crucial spaces of visual representation in the twentieth century: the cinema and the art space as two sides of one coin.

BP: My video installations never imitate classic cinema situations, with a projection screen in front and strict rows of parallel seats. Rather I try to undermine these parameters of a classic form of reception and create other viewpoints on the image. Often there are several screens that I arrange in different positions in the space. Often the projected, cinematic space is extended into the viewers' space, thus physically eliminating the boundary between the fictive and the real.

PL: I found that aspect particularly strong in *Lighthouse*. There were always images at your back like eyes staring out of an impenetrable night, as well as threatening noises from an unidentifiable source. It was really spooky: the multiplied eye of an uncanny nature to which you were exposed without protection, as a modern experience of contingency.

BP: The experience of contingency results from the fact that in the multichannel works the constellations of images are not rigidly fixed; rather, there is an inherent arbitrary element that comes from the way they are put together and assembled. The connecting element between the various pictorial sequences is, in addition to their atmospheric effect, the rhythm of the images, which have something very dancelike about them, producing a kind of choreography of contingency.

PL: Choreography of contingency—that describes the effect of these video installations very aptly. The decisive thing for me in that context is that the changing images on the screens thus obtain something like the power to

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act. That is to say, they themselves take on a gaze that penetrates the viewers from behind. I couldn't help but think of the mythical encounter between Perseus and the Medusa. In your *Screen Settings*, however, he wouldn't have had a chance against the many-eyed "gaze" of the multiple projection.

BP: That was in part due to the particularly architectural circumstances of the dodecagonal domed hall in the Württembergischer Kunstverein in Stuttgart. The four double projects formed a circle that surrounded the viewers, as it were, so that there was no escape. Even changing your viewing position in the room could not alter the fact that you constantly had projections in front of you, next to you, and behind you. What interested me was extending the video loop as a temporal form to the spatial plane in a kind of spatial loop, much like I would do later, in a very different way, in the single-channel video *Cowboys*.

PL: This arrangement in *Lighthouse* reminded me very much of Bentham's panopticon, which Foucault analyzed so impressively, with the difference that in your work the gazes of the controlling power—that is, the "gazes" of the projections—ran from the walls of the domed hall to the middle of the room where the visitors to the exhibition were located—yet it retained the familiar effect of a loss of control.

The role of physiological and psychological automatisms seems to me to be very important in your work. Earlier I touched on the concept of the uncanny, which Freud famously gave its modern form. It seems to me that in the works described you wanted to uncover something like discontent in the connection with established orders of the gaze and their meaning for the *dispositif* of power. Whenever a situation of perception becomes uncanny, I begin to think about what triggers this initially autonomous physical reaction. In that respect your works are anything but pleasing and cannot be measured by the standards of a formalist aesthetic. In my view that is above all because of the way you address the viewer. In addition to the formal interest there seems to me to be a considered attention in your work to the effect of certain pictorial forms or patterns of perception. I believe this effect lies not in the formally beautiful—the "aesthetic" in the common sense—but in the conscious use of the physiological and

psychological potentials and automatisms of perception—and that also implies the *aisthesis* in the sense of a cognitive ability by means of perception.

BP: I find somatic experiences and reactions highly interesting, especially with sculpture. In 2005 when I was setting up *Resistant Poller* (Resistant bollard), a chrome-plated street barrier, for an exhibition I was very surprised by the reactions. Many people did not notice it at all because they were so used to looking at such poles that they automatically blocked them from their perception. Other viewers in turn did not perceive it as an artwork but leaned on it the way they would in the street.

PL: That's an interesting observation. It supports my view that it is important to use artistic means to create spaces that permit perceptions of the familiar that go beyond the everyday. In other words, they should make the obvious not seem obvious in order to make the microstructures of power visible, for example. After all, a street barrier implies a prohibition and is thus associated with a restriction on personal freedom.

BP: Finding the unusual in the everyday, producing new visibilities, is an important point. The projects are usually created in the place where I am living and are often triggered by things that surround me in daily life. Thus *Reset* and *Double Empire* were made when I was living in New York; *Locked* and *Starker Staat* were produced in Cologne; and *Take Off* and *Parachutes* were photographed and developed here in Berlin.

PL: You work conceptually—or at least that is my impression—and I would be interested in knowing how you develop your projects.

BP: It can't really be defined methodically; it's a running together of various processes and working methods. When starting a new work it's important to me to grasp the themes in a reflective way. That's how I make the connections and backgrounds clear to myself. At a certain point the process becomes increasingly intuitive. On the whole I would indeed describe my method as conceptual. But what do you

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understand conceptual work to mean, especially in relation to the role of intuition and association in the artistic process?

PL: I was primarily thinking of the conceptual penetration of a reflected perception or observation of the world. That is to say, that one precisely considers every step from the idea to its realization in part in terms of a claim to produce something socially relevant with an awareness of being in a discursive environment in which certain questions and positions are more relevant than others. Such reflection in the course of crucial decisions does not preclude intuition in the artistic process.

BP: That describes my approach very well.

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