On the Photographic Afterlife of the Palast der Republik

Esther Ruelfs

In an early text on photography, Oliver Wendell Holmes described it as “mirror with a memory.”[1] The idea of photography as a medium for memory is based on the automatic recording of light, on nature depicting itself. The “pencil of nature,”[2] as William Henry Fox Talbot called it in 1844–46, seems to register all details with “inimitable fidelity.”

The first photographic simulation of Bettina Pousttchi’s installation *Echo* recalls the nineteenth-century photographs that Wendell Holmes was looking at. Perhaps it is the “mildewy spots” on the water below the embankment of the Spree River, and probably it is the stillness and timelessness the image radiates: no passersby, no cars or bicycles, no bistro chairs to be seen far and wide – a little like the photographs from the early days of photography, in which all moving objects remain invisible because of the long exposure times. The sky is always cloudless.

This first impression is confirmed by the aesthetic process: the installation *Echo* began in the archives. During preparations for the work on the facade of the Temporäre Kunsthalle (Temporary Art Gallery) in Berlin, the artist visited numerous archives. She researched digital images in the Internet databases of news agencies and drew on documentary architectural and surveying photographs that had been taken for applications to the planning authority and landmark preservation office and were now stored in historical archives. Above all, she visited the architectural archive of the Akademie der Künste (Academy of the Arts), which holds the papers of Heinz Graffunder, the architect of the Palast der Republik (Palace of the Republic). She made use of images that filled a series of propagandistic, journalistic assessments in illustrated volumes of the 1970s in both the West and the East. She was not so much interested in any given photograph taken between the initiation of construction in 1973 and its demolition as she was in what Michel Foucault described as the order of the archive: the powerful rule that determines what can be said in a specific place about a specific matter by whom and what cannot, the order of discourse. What views were chosen for the official image of the Palast? How were photographs of it cropped? How did they create recognition value and the iconic status of this collective symbol?

Accordingly, Pousttchi did not choose a single photo graph as the point of departure for her work but rather a number of images she looked through, preparing certain structural features. She took from them the constructive elements that constitute the image: the state emblem of the German Democratic Republic on the main facade of the Palast, the two white pilasters on each side of the emblem, the grid structure, and the reflections on the glass of the building’s skin.

For both the archival photograph and for photographs intended to document the history of architecture, documentary neutrality is crucial to the respective genre: the object should be recorded unaltered for posterity and reality must be remembered in as much detail as possible. Many of the architectural photographs Pousttchi saw in various archives were modeled on this discourse.

In her work, however, the artist abandons the paradigm of photographic realism and of documentation. What she does with these images is something completely different: constructing and deconstructing. It is astounding to see how much the installation revives the memory of the Palast der Republik, even though the

constructed image deviates from the building in crucial respects.
First of all, the dimensions of the Kunsthalle are considerably smaller than those of the Palast. The white concrete elements on the facade, which frame the copper-insulated glass curtain wall like a bracket, are left out entirely by Pousttchi, as is the characteristic color of the gleaming brownish glass surface. The state emblem of the German Democratic Republic – a wreath of wheat ears with a hammer and compass – is converted into a clock, and the front facade is repeated on the rear of the building, to mention only some of the most striking changes.
The appropriation of historical archival material produces a hybrid revenant.[3] In addition to the changes she makes as part of reducing certain elements of the building, the artist employs a black-and-white palette to give the work distance from its real predecessor. Covering the Temporäre Kunsthalle with 970 paper posters is intended neither as a perfect simulation nor an imitative reconstruction of the Palast. One crucial perplexing aspect of these all too probable but nonetheless misleading photographs is introduced in the form of a grid placed on the photographic model. The three-dimensional exterior cladding conveys the impression of an image from the media, either because it is reminiscent of the lines of a television picture or because it is associated with a surveillance camera image or a newspaper photograph.
The formal dimension of the deconstruction comes to mind when one looks back at Pousttchi's oeuvre of the past ten years, since this work takes up once again a number of the artist's significant procedures. The blurriness produced by digitally editing the photographs recalls *Parachutes* (2006); she used this black-and-white raster previously in the photo series *Starker Staat* (Strong State; 2003), *Take Off* (2005), and *The Hetley Suite* (2008). The latter two also use the motif of a clock. In the video *Reset* (2001), she takes up a symbolically loaded public place and reflects on how history is written. The interest in the deconstruction of architecture is found in the video *Double Empire* (2000).
In *Parachutes*, Pousttchi shows us a series of photographs with various formations of helicopters against a dramatically overcast sky. By means of digital editing, she produces a painterly blurriness and a visual distortion whose streaks run diagonally over the picture plane. Petra Löffler is not alone in associating it with Francis Ford Coppola's scene of the helicopter attack in *Apocalypse Now*, saying that she hears Richard Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" in the background when looking at it.[4] The scene appeals to our collective visual unconscious, which is shaped not only by perceptions of "the real" but also and above all by images from film and other media. In an inter view, Pousttchi characterized this ambivalence as a "space of possibility for the imaginary."[5] In the twelve-part photo series *Take Off*, she works with comparable formal means to make us conscious of vague memories of familiar media images of state visits and hijackings. The series shows people descending a Jetway, the wing, and the letters and numbers of the airplane identification of a plane waiting on a taxiway, a man crossing a terminal, and two passengers passing through a security check. It is clear: they are topoi of the visual rhetoric of our media society.
Whereas the photographs in the *Parachutes* series feature a painterly blurriness, in *Take Off*, the black-and-white photograph is superimposed with wide horizontal stripes resembling distortion, pointing to the origin of the images in the media. In *Echo*, the artist takes up this formal means once again. With these aspects reflecting on the media, she makes it clear that it is not about evoking a vanished monument

of East Germany but rather about the deconstruction of the conditions under which we remember and under which the photograph participates in the remembrance. The artist visualizes individual memory as some - thing shaped by media images, rather than by the noncolors of a faded snapshot in a family album. Pousttchi grew up in West Germany from the 1970s onward. If she has any personal memories of the Palast from the time of the German Democratic Republic, they are formed from television images of ceremonial political events such as the conference of the Socialist Unity Party or state visits.

For her work *Reset*, the artist filmed on the eve of the millennium another site steeped in history and utopian/heterotopian potential: Times Square in New York. She set up her camera pointing at the red LED display presenting headlines of historical dates of the past thousand years as “millennium milestones” in the style of a news ticker. For her film she edited the display’s information to create a subjective history about the end of apartheid in South Africa. Whereas in *Reset* official history was transformed into subjective history by means of the rhythmic scansion of words with a house beat in the background, in *Echo* she explores the relationship of the photographic image to the construction of history.

Reset was filmed at the historical turning point of one millennium to the next, and historical time plays a role in *Echo* as well. The clocks on the longer walls of the installation show different times. The clock on the side facing the Spree reads 12:55; the other, facing Schlossplatz, reads 13:55. The latter time also appeared on the Big Ben clock in *The Hetley Suite* series and on another clock in Tempelhof Airport in the *Take Off* series. The clocks in the Palastinstallation break free of the notion of uniform time and emphasize with two different indications the relativity of time.

The Palast der Republik on Schlossplatz, which was completed in 1976 and demolished from 2006 to 2008, Pousttchi chose a site central to the memory of the history of a divided Germany. The disappearance of the Palast was viewed by the opponents of its demolition as the rigorous destruction of East Germany’s past.[6] Its demolition thus symbolizes the forgetting of part of German history. The artist makes this destruction her theme in part by employing a medium that has been thought of as the medium of memory since its invention in the nineteenth century. Only in the early twentieth century did an increasing number of people begin to distrust the analogy between photography and memory and instead to underscore the differences between these types of storage. The technological method of recording as an unbroken documentation was contrasted with natural memory, which works selectively. Siegfried Kracauer wrote: “Thus, they [memories] are organized according to a principle which is essentially different from the organizing principle of photography. Photography grasps what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum; memory images retain what is given only insofar as it has significance. Since what is significant is not reducible to either merely spatial or merely temporal terms, memory images are at odds with photographic representation.”[7]

This skepticism toward photography as a mnemonic medium runs through all of Bettina Pousttchi’s works. Rather than take up a realistic concept of photography, she approaches it from the direction of construction. Hence it is not about a realistic resurrection but about designing an echo that reflects on the conditions of subjective memory.

[1] Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (June 1859): 738–49, 739, http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/1859jun/holmes.htm (accessed January 27, 2010).
[2] William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969; orig. pub.1844–46).
[3] In recent years, the archive has become increasingly interesting as the point of departure for photographic production. Photographers such as Thomas Demand and Peter Piller have also shown an interest in appropriating and reinterpreting photographic images. On strategies of the appropriation, interpretation, and reconfiguration of the archive, see Okwui Enwezor, ed., *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. International Center of Photography, New York (Göttingen: Steidl 2008).
[4] Check-in: Bettina Pousttchi in Conversation with Petra Löffler,” *Bettina Pousttchi: Reality Reset*, exh. cat. Von der Heydt Museum Wuppertal (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2008), 135–39, 136.
[5] “Spiegelungen einer potenziellen Stadt: Bettina Pousttchi im Gespräch mit Markus Miessen,” *Spex*, no.323 (November–December 2009): 88–91, 90.
[6] Alexander Schug, ed., *Palast der Republik: Politischer Diskurs und private Erinnerung* (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2007); Moritz Holfelder, *Palast Republik: Aufstieg und Fall eines symbolischen Gebäudes* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2008).
[7] Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography,” (1927), in idem, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995), 47–63, 50. 88

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