

Interview: Artist Ian Rosen and Art Critic Minoru Shimizu:

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Ian Rosen: My work consists, quite literally, of nothing. This statement is meant to be understood as a simple statement of fact. "Nothing" is meant in its common, vague sense, and the statement itself is not intended as a subject for examination. My intent is to explore a progressive alternative to post-conceptual practice. With regards to the exhibition under discussion, please see attached an installation view from my exhibition with Galerie Kosak Hall / the Haus Wittgenstein. This image is meant to accompany critical text written about the work. A brief explanation... The image is originally from 1972, from a book written by Bernhard Leitner on the Haus Wittgenstein. It is interesting to note that the image was digitally manipulated by Leitner for reproduction - several elements were removed from the original photograph in order that the image might better serve Leitner's argument. My use of the image as an installation view is in no way meant to invoke appropriation. The image is reproduced as a straightforward installation view of my exhibition with Galerie Kosak Hall. Additional installation views of my exhibition exist and range in time period from the 1970's through the early 1990's. That this exhibition took place is based, in part, on an understanding between myself and the gallery - the Haus Wittgenstein was not involved in the process of exhibition organization; no formal announcement was made, there was no exhibition schedule, opening reception, etc..

Minoru Shimizu: Looking at your works, I would like to begin with these lines of yours: <My work consists, quite literally, of nothing. This statement is meant to be understood as a simple statement of fact. "Nothing" is meant in its common, vague sense, and the statement itself is not intended as a subject for examination. My intent is to explore a progressive alternative to post-conceptual practice.>

And my intent is to try to clarify what this progressive alternative to post-conceptual practice can be. As you know there have been a number of artists, especially photographers, who use so called 'found photographs'. It is no novelty. Let us remind of many modernist photographers who never wanted to intervene between the world as it is and their photographs. To be 'nothing' is their ideal because the ethic and authenticity of modern photography lay in capturing the unembellished reality just as it is. The photographer had to be as transparent and 'nothing' as possible, thus reducing any artistic intention or manipulation to zero. Or we can think of contemporary artists like Christian Boltanski, Fiona Tan, Thomas Ruff... and others who use found photographs in order to express their artistic concepts. I think you don't belong to these artists, but rather to those artists who use found photographs in order to express 'nothing' and just to present them as they are. One of these artists is Tacita Dean. Recently, I incidentally read an interesting essay about Dean's work FLOH, consisting of found photographs that Dean edited and reformed in an artist-book. Regarding the method Dean uses in the book, and in



comparison to other artists who also use found photographs, George Baker recapitulates as follows:

"In fact, returning to FLOH, we can now say a lot to clarify what Dean was NOT doing. She was not using found photographs to de-skill photography, nor was she reflecting on the difference between family photographs and other kinds of photographs. She was not appropriating formerly well-known images to change their established signification, nor as she producing an anthropological study. This was not an archive that claimed a false documentary status, nor was it in any clear way a fictional enterprise or an investigation of fiction. The photographs, in other words, were not really found or presented for any immediate apparent ulterior motives. 'What you see is what you see': they are just there, collected in the book.(OCTOBER 114, p.102)" I would formulate that Dean's work deals not with the found photographs themselves, nor with any contexts or concepts outside of them, but with how we look at them. What you see is what you see --but What do you see when you see photographs? How do you see when you find some photographs more interesting than others? What are you doing when you see photographs? Like the title of Szarkowski's famous book, 'Looking at Photographs' is her theme. Besides, "found photograph" seems now to be a very actual theme in contemporary art, in so far as a lot of publications and exhibitions have appeared in these years one after another (Robert Flynn Johnson ANONYMOUS - enigmatic images from unknown photographers. 2004; Thomas Walther OTHER PICTURES, 2000; SNAPSHOTS - the eye of the century. 2004 etc.) Does your concern have anything to do with this theme of looking at photographs? I have seen just three of your found photographs, somewhat somber and taciturn, deserted scenes. What made you select these photographs? What attracted you? How will you install them?

Ian Rosen: The images are not meant to be installed outside the context of the present and possible future discussions about my work... they are to appear, for the time being, exclusively in print or other media; i.e., the internet, journals, etc...As stated in my first mail to you, the images are meant to supplement critical text written about my work. To date, I have considered my work within a broader context than that of the photographic, though as I have used found photography it seems reasonable to consider my work within the context of a discussion about photographic practice. I am comfortable with stating that the present project may serve to prompt consideration of the questions you mention : "What do you see when you see photographs" and "What are you doing when you see photographs?". That said, I believe my use of found photography to be vastly different from that of the artists you mention and that of photo-conceptualists practicing in the past and present day. At this point it may be useful to consider a few statements of fact about the exhibition which prompted this discussion. From my first mail to you : "That this exhibition took place is based on an understanding between myself and the gallery ; no formal announcement was made, there was no exhibition schedule, opening reception, etc... " Following the understanding and agreement reached between myself and the gallerist involved in the organization of the exhibition, it was not in any way necessary to present one or a series of images....As I was subsequently invited to participate in the present project, I found myself considering how one would present documentation of such an exhibition - a natural enough consideration when working within the magazine format. Given my understanding and knowledge of the use of photography within conceptual art practice, it seemed, possibly, reasonable to use photographs to document the exhibition. But this would only be interesting if such use were to function in a radical manner; i.e., were to extend the boundaries of what may considered photo-documentation.

I, too, take for granted the considerations mentioned by Baker in OCTOBER; however my work differs from that of Dean's (and Yuki Kimura's and other like artists) in so far as it bears an explicit relationship to matters of fact outside the photograph itself. Where my work is interesting, I believe in its assertion that photographs may serve to document a practice which consists, quite literally, of nothing. The Haus Wittgenstein images, as a group or individually, serve to document the exhibition. In light of certain basic matters of fact relating to the history of each image in relation to the exhibition itself, I believe that I am putting forward a progressive understanding of what photographic, and, more generally, art practice, may be. I find the practice of Dean and the like to ultimately exist as so much guilty pleasure and my work is intended to present a radical answer to such practice.

Minoru Shimizu: Your action is comparable - not identical - to Duchamp's, isn't it? You have found some photographs, as Duchamp found some readymade objects. Then you declare that they are documentation of your exhibition, as Duchamp declared that they are to be regarded as artworks. The process of artistic presentation is upset, for critical text and photographic documentation are prior to the exhibition itself, which exists only negatively.

Hence: "That this exhibition took place is based on an understanding between myself and the gallery ; no formal announcement was made,

there was no exhibition schedule, opening reception, etc... " [...] it was not in any way necessary to present one or a series of images.... and you wrote [...] it seemed, possibly, reasonable to use photographs to document the exhibition. But this would only be interesting if such use were to function in a radical manner; i.e., were to extend the boundaries of what may be considered photo-documentation. Photo-documentation is based on realism that a photograph documents what existed in reality. An interesting complication begins here. Photography was at the beginning no artistic, no creative activity. It was just a documentation of reality that was 'ready' there (but still not ready 'made' in so far as the reality cannot fully be regarded- as human made). Photographic documentation survives so long as we can believe that the documented reality is simple and virgin, not manmade/readymade, for, if so, then any photo-documentation would nothing but a selection of readymades. You quit this belief. Your exhibition need not take place in reality, and you use found photographs of which authenticity one can never be sure (as one of your found photos is already digitally manipulated). Thus, your found photographs are completely readymades and it is understandable that you are writing: I believe that I am putting forward a progressive understanding of what photographic, and, more generally, art practice, may be. Now, I have a question: That you can use Wittgensteinhaus-images as photo-documentation of your exhibition is due to the indexicality of photography. After Pierce a photograph is an index sign which is a physical trace of something and it remains to be the index sign even if this something is not known. Therefore, a photograph can be of anything. A photo can be of Wittgensteinhaus and of your exhibition. Duchamp realized that a readymade could not be of arbitrary selection. 'Anything' can be a readymade object, but for this 'any'-ness, a readymade needs specific qualities: perfect indifference and neutrality. As you know, Duchamp paradoxically manipulated some readymades in order to realize these qualities. How about your works? 'Any' photograph can be a found=readymade photograph, but for this 'any'-ness what is needed? or not needed?

Ian Rosen: My intent is neither for this photographic documentation to be understood as existing prior to the exhibition [itself] nor for the exhibition to be understood as existing only negatively. The chosen images were-in fact- originally produced within a relatively wide range of time. The previously mentioned agreement between the gallery and myself was made in 2004. This discussion is taking place now. These are some of the basic matters of fact relating to the history of each image in relation to the exhibition [and my practice] itself to which I refer in my previous mail. And it is these facts, some of which I have previously stated explicitly -in addition to other considerations- that served as the basis for my image selection. Rather than suggest that the images and the final form of this text exist prior to the exhibition, I am proposing a more radical understanding of what an exhibition and, by extension, critical text and photographic-documentation may be. Certain negative statements of fact; e.g., "there was no exhibition schedule, opening reception, etc...", may contribute to such a reading. Such a reading is, in any event, not unreasonable from the outset; however, it is not my intent to present documentation of an exhibition which did not take place in reality but, rather, to suggest a possible reconsideration of what it might mean for an exhibition to take place in reality. And again, to bring the discussion back to the photographic, it would be fair to state that this may prompt a reconsideration of what photo-documentation may be.

Minoru Shimizu: Thank you for that you have formulated your intention clearly as: I am proposing a more radical understanding of what an exhibition and, by extension, critical text and photographic-documentation may be. But I think that any presentation, any text and any photograph can be regarded as an exhibition, a critical text and a photographic documentation, only if you declare or give any sign of being 'exhibited', being a text 'on' X and a document 'of' X. These notions escape any definition because they are of nominal character, aren't they? I find the point very abstract and too general, so for the moment I can see nothing to comment. it is rather my intent to suggest a possible reconsideration of what it might mean for an exhibition to take place in reality. And [...], it would be fair to state that this may prompt a reconsideration of what photo-documentation may be. Are you suggesting your consideration would be in the line of Jean Baudrillard's "The Gulf War did not take Place"? ' War' with 'Exhibition' replaced? If so, who would care? "The Iraq war did not take place in reality" would be a provocative assertion that will concern many people. But an art exhibition? Let us suppose that for an exhibition one needs only a sign (for example, a label with a title) that something is 'being exhibited', and that the exhibition needs for its distribution and existence in future (art history) some magazine articles, critical texts and visual documentations.... What will you add? Returning to your three photographs: the only concrete things. You use them in order to document your exhibition, which will

exhibit just what may be constitutive for an exhibition. But how and in which qualities are they showing what an exhibition is to be?

Ian Rosen: I intend for my exhibition to be understood as existing in reality- existing in 1972 and 1989 and 1990, the years in which the documentary photographs were taken. This is meant to suggest the possibility of the exhibition existing at any time at all. In so far as the conception of reality in which such a statement is understood as valid is mine and in so far as this conception of reality runs counter, I believe , to what would commonly be understood as simple and virgin reality, I believe that it fits your description of the ready-made...hence the photo-documentation fits your description of ready-made as it serves to document a reality which would generally be perceived of as conceived rather than obvious. I believe that this is an analogous situation to the one presented in your reading of my work in which an exhibition which need not exist is documented. In both cases reality is complicated through the existence of photographic documentation. I would suggest that the "any"-ness that is required of some-thing to fit the description of a readymade is supplied, in this case, by the photo-documentation's relationship to a conceived of reality... this relationship between the photos and reality is made explicit by the stated dates, their relationship to various apparently empty places (and parts) within the Haus Wittgenstein and the stated digital manipulation of one photo, all of which may serve to move the found photographs into a more ready-made state. Your version of reality-one in which my exhibition is to be understood as non-existing is different from mine, but I do not think that this has much bearing on whether or not the photo-documentation is to be conceived of as readymade. As to what I mean by progressive practice, at least in this instance, it seems as though we have agreed that I used photographic documentation to extend the boundaries of what may be considered photo-documentation.

Minoru Shimizu: In both cases reality is complicated through the existence of photographic documentation.

As to what I mean by progressive practice at least in this instance, it seems as though we have agreed that I used photographic documentation to extend the boundaries of what may be considered photo-documentation.

Now, one interesting characteristic of your found photos is that they are almost lacking any exhibited objects. An empty room and empty corridor -- We find nothing to behold. Maybe some would notice that the room belongs to Wittgensteinhaus. They would think that you had there a show, though in the photograph nothing is to be seen as any artistic works. People would ask you : "What did you exhibit?" "In what did your show consist?" How would you answer? By the way, why don't you use more photographs to document 'your' exhibitions?

Ian Rosen: In answer to the question : "In what did your show consist?", I would state "nothing". I would like to point out the many difference between each found image ;e.g. I deliberately chose an exterior, night view...And though I only sent you three images, I have actually selected 5 images to serve as photo-documentation of the exhibition. In the context of our discussion, I thought that 3 was enough...not too few and not too many...One of the remaining images- which I will send you shortly- foregrounds a hand-rail in the Wittgenstein Haus; my choice of a photograph which focuses on an "object" was deliberate in that it may serve to complicate the matter for a viewer who may be tempted by so much "emptiness" to ask about the lack of objects... 5 is still a relatively small number of images...I did not give this too much consideration...it simply seemed like more than enough visual material. At this point, I do not intend to use all 5 images to supplement this dialogue...

And if we are to follow the line of thought regarding the readymade nature of the photo-documentation under discussion, then Duchamp's words may also be relevant, "I realized very soon the danger of repeating indiscriminately this form of expression and decided to limit the production of "Readymades" to a small number..." I think that this speaks more to my use of found-photographs in future projects than it does to this one project; nevertheless...it does make sense to see this as informing my choice of a small number of images...

Minoru Shimizu: In answer to the question : "In what did your show consist?"I would state "nothing".

Night scene, exterior and an utility object -- your selection shows clearly your intention to "nothing", that is to say, normally impossible places (and object) for an exhibition. But how do you find if you would state "My show consists in anything." The found photographs are not arbitrary, they tend to 'nothing', but still you declare they are documentations of an installation and the Wittgensteinhaus is not nothing. What kind of role does this reference to Wittgensteinhaus play in the exhibition of "nothing"? Is it important for your concept, or rather facultative?

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I have thought of it, too. This was because of the principle of readymade to be totally indifferent and neutral. Do you require the same qualities of your found photographs?

Ian Rosen: As I said before, "nothing" is meant in a vague, literal sense. I do not want to place much emphasis on the word itself, as to do so would make its meaning a focus of this discussion and conceptualize things in a way I am trying to avoid. Perhaps "anything" would do just fine...but I sense that "nothing" works better. As far as my use of the Witgenstein Haus is concerned, the gallerist with whom I work is based in Vienna. I like idea of dis-placing things by having the exhibition exist not only at / with the gallery but also at the Wittgenstein Haus. Personal reasons aside (my fondness for Wittgenstein, my respect for the space itself and ...) it seems that, if we are to follow the readymade interpretation of my use of photo-documentation, that the associations that come with the Haus may serve a similar function as text on a readymade... in conjunction with the dates...etc...I am not particularly concerned with what, exactly, these associations may be because, again, I do not intend to conceptualize matters... I have thought of it, too. This was because of the principle of readymade to be totally indifferent and neutral. Do you require the same qualities of your found photographs? Maybe not of the photographs themselves but, perhaps, of my practice in general. So...limiting the number of times I utilize found-photographs may serve a purpose given the ready-made reading.

Minoru Shimizu: I like idea of dis-placing things by having the exhibition exist not only at / with the gallery but also at the Wittgenstein Haus. It seems that, if we are to follow the readymade interpretation of my use of photo-documentation, that the associations that come with the Haus may serve a similar function as text on a readymade...in conjunction with the dates...etc. Having read these lines I still find 'anything' more suitable to describe your action. You are using found photographs that stand in some historical and temporal contexts, and you displace them to a pseudo-documentary function. They are brought not to nothing, but dislocated to outside of the presumed contexts. Bringing something to nothing and displacing it to a different thing are separate actions: annulation and dislocation. That is to say, "The Gulf War took place in Hawaii" instead of "The Gulf War did not take place". In diffrence to Duchampian readymades that will be of total indifference and neutrality, also of undefinable nothing, your readymade photographs will be something, which is fragmented and dislocated, thus differing from the normal context. Duchamp suspends the question 'Is this (i.e.a readymade object) art?' because a readymade object is made to be nothing. You are trying to complicate the question 'Is this (i.e. your installation) an exhibition?' because the readymade photographs do show something, which show something different from our expectation.

Ian Rosen
Galerie Kosak Hall, Vienna
Installation view

Photograph: Berhard Leitner, Haus Wittgenstein, 1972
Photograph: Berhard Leitner, Haus Wittgenstein, 1999



Ian Rosen: I do not believe that what I am presenting is pseudo-documentary. Given the readymade line of thought in relation to what we allow a photo to be (via Pierce) it seemed to me as though this move was possible - that we were not dealing with the pseudo. Perhaps, in this case neither pseudo nor actual is applicable...with regards to what the photos are doing. if not, then perhaps things become uninteresting....and too abstract to be of interest. I am trying to engage rather than rely upon this nothing which serves as the foundation of art practice post-conceptual. I believe that, in this instance, my use of found photographs actually achieves this goal of engagement... hence the fair designation of progressive to my work.

Minoru Shimizu: Given the readymade line of thought in relation to whatwe allow a photo to be (via Pierce) it seemd to me as though this move was possible - that we were not dealing with the pseudo. I agree with 'neither pseudo nor actual' quality - or strategy. This goes without saying. And how do you find your works in relation to Duchamp's readymades? In the last mail I have tried to make out some differences. What would you respond to them?

Ian Rosen: We think of the photos as readymades of a readymade...which I think follows : Photographic documentation survives so long as we can believe that the documented reality is simple and virgin, not manmade/ readymade, for, if so, then any photo-documentation would nothing but a selection of readymades. You quit this belief. What does it mean to be a readymade at a remove? The photos become the text on the exhibition as the text was on the object in Duchamp. The exhibition, and more generally, my practice, is meant to consist of nothing and perhaps the photos help neutralize it in much the same way the additions to objects helped neutralize them for Duchamp. The focus again shifts to the exhibition itself but I do not see this as trapping us in a discussion about wall text, etc... Rather, we are left to deal with an exhibition / practice which consists of nothing...

Conclusion 3/27/06

Ian Rosen, lives and works in Tokyo

Minuro Shimizu has written and edited monographs from Wolfgang Tillmans, Gerhard Richter, James Welling. u.a.