

In his exhibition entitled "Gizmo" Christian Kosmas Mayer is showing new works which take the currently disappearing medium of Polaroid as a starting point for a complex system of references.

The 7-part photo series "Threshold and Inertia" is a re-creation of an exposure test by Ansel Adams, one of the most famous American 20th century photographers, that was published in 1963 in his book "Polaroid Land Photography". At the time Adams was working for Polaroid as a consultant and experimented with the new 4x5 inch films, which were also intended to make Polaroid interesting for professional photographers. It was especially the 55 film that was intended to reduce reservations because it was the only Polaroid film that produced both an immediate photograph as well as a negative that could be developed in a dark room. In order to show readers the exposure spectrum of the film Adams chose a Navajo Indian hand-woven rug with motives made up of optical illusions which he exposed to various degrees.

45 years later, in February 2008, Polaroid announced the immediate stop of all their film production. With a 55 film from the last production series with its shelf-life ending in 1/2009 Christian Kosmas Mayer set about a remake of Adams' series with an identical Navajo rug. The barite prints which he produced from the negatives make the rug both appear and disappear as a motif and archive its image as a picture of a certain other culture which is repeatedly taken up, interpreted and once again forgotten by our history. What he provides for us to examine appears to be our own range of perception between forgetting and remembering, between an empty white page and a page covered in black writing, between new beginnings and endless history, between primordial darkness and the enlightened present. And with each disappearing medium our approach to these ranges of memory also changes.

The work "In the instant of memory, everything was swirling and dissolving" is about another form of a range of memory. In 10 frames the artist shows us an extensive collection of Polaroids, most of which are mounted back to front and show only their black reverse side. On the visible pictures we see tropical landscapes, indigenous inhabitants of a jungle village and people who look European, who in this context evidently appear as visitors or out of place. The pictures do not open up a clear narrative. And thus the question immediately arises: what do we not see? The doubt conjured up by the black pictures affects the visible pictures and makes us doubt what we are really seeing. What was the real situation and what precisely are these pictures showing us? Documentation from an expedition? Evidence of the penetration of a modern culture into the last refuges of pre-modern forms of life?

The doubt is justified because what the pictures actually show is documentation of the shooting of the film "The Mission" from 1986. The film deals with the genocide of the Guarani people which

really took place in the 18th century and was carried out by colonial Portuguese troops. For the film the inhabitants of a Colombian village belonging to the Waunana tribe were resettled at the film location 1,000 kilometres away. What we see are people representing an historical event that happened 200 years previously in a completely different place. However, since Christian Kosmas Mayer only shows us the pictures in which the film set cannot be seen, in which no cameras or microphones, no historical costumes or famous actors can be recognised, he leaves open the possibility that the pictures could be evidence of a reality coming from the immediate past.

The question as to who is playing whom, where fiction and reality can still be separated and who is using or exploiting whom is further complicated when one discovers that the Waunana agreed to take part in the film primarily to draw attention to the threat to the existence of their village structures from capitalist companies who were threatening to annex their land. The staging of a past conflict thus also takes on the character of an exemplary struggle in real late-capitalist scenarios. The intrusion of the film industry into this connection can only be described as a great confusion of image contexts.

The authenticity and directness especially attributed to the medium of Polaroid drives the fictive character of the film venture still further into the background and brings a contradictory level to the surface which is inherent in the undertaking of a staged production of images from historical events. When we re-enact an event pictorially we also create new realities which in turn build up their own power spaces.

This tension is differently interlocked in the video "Gizmo", a looped sequence from a television documentary film from 1968. The film shows Ted Serios, an American day labourer, in the attempt to expose the picture of a prehistoric person from his imagination onto the film of the camera directly. These thought photographs, for which Serios was briefly famous, took place as part of gatherings which could be described as a mixture between magical ritual and performance, and to which people were invited in order to bear witness that no kind of fraud was being perpetrated. The procedure was always the same: Serios held the Polaroid camera towards his face and pressed the shutter release accompanied by a cramp-like movement of his body. Usually only after several hours did the thought photograph he had previously specified finally appear on the Polaroid. In order to channel his imaginative energy Serios always held a "gizmo", as he called it, a simple piece of rolled up cardboard, between himself and the lens of the camera. A thing that works and conveys a picture, or perhaps not, it is unclear how or why but it does this or that. A little demon that conveys and determines the relationship between the subject and the world.

Irrespective of the question as to whether he really had the ability to create thought photography or not, Serios here hits a social nerve of the collective imagination: the idea of the possibility of the direct conveyance of a mental thought into materiality is deeply rooted in the imagination of modern people. At the time Serios embodied the belief that powers, energies and phenomena which can do what everybody imagines but cannot do themselves are always at work on the edges of society. In this connection Polaroid technology provides the possibility of objective evidence of a super-human ability. The automatic development, which the producer cannot influence and thereby has no chance to manipulate, reinforces the feeling of a reality upgraded by media. A feeling which has increased in modern society since the development of reproducible media and which is continually the subject of new theories.

Christian Kosmas Mayer's short step back to a disappearing technology enables him to present the pattern which is today behind this dual flow of the loss of reality and reality enhanced by media. The digitisation and automation of image production are two of the most banal examples today. Because this exhibition repeatedly examines the same medium, but proceeds in very different ways, it creates a dense thicket of references and translations and brings us up against the question of how we organise the visualisation and archiving of our reality. The outstanding assertiveness of our ideas today always takes place along with the involvement of our picture machinery, our incredibly fast growing collection of private and public, amateur and professional equipment. And unnameable spaces between which we could call "gizmos".

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