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Transcription of the conversation between Natalie Czech and Christian Ganzenberg.
The artist talk took place on July 18, 2015 at Daimler Contemporary Berlin.

Natalie Czech was born in Neuss in 1976. From 2000 to 2005 she studied at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf with Thomas Ruff. She has lived in Berlin since 2008. Her works appeared in numerous national and international solo exhibitions, at the Kunstverein Hamburg, in Braunschweig, and also in Ludlow 38 (Deutsches Goethe-Institut N.Y.) in New York and, most recently, at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

CG:

The works of Natalie Czech are a new kind of conceptual photography, in which she uses texts, quite literally, to curate existing images in relation to one another. With her photographs it is always a matter of viewing and reading simultaneously, and thus the question is: what can one see or understand.

I would like to structure our conversation in such a way that we attempt to understand your artistic work and your ways of thinking in relation to the major work groups. Let us begin with the ***Hidden Poems***, a series of works created since 2010. We know that Marcel Broodthaers' artistic oeuvre had a clear starting point: the discovery of a poem by Stephane Mallarme, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* from the year 1897. I would like to hear about the first time you saw a poem in an image?

NC:

Perhaps I should begin in a more general way, in order to give an idea of what is happening with the *Hidden Poems*. Extracts from 20th-century books, newspapers, magazines, and poems provided the materials and basis for the *Hidden Poems*. The central process is a subjective "reading-into", a kind of discovery of collected poems in independent texts. To achieve this, I mark out individual words in a text: if one reads them chronologically, then, taken together, they create a poem that engages in a dialogue with the surrounding text and with the image. It took me a long time to arrive at the *Hidden Poems* with this process. I had previously done a lot of work with texts, for instance with old diaries, filmic quotations, and unfinished novels. It was in this context that I first began to write down poems that I had read and that had moved me into a notebook. This made me want to integrate these poems into my work in some way. It was also clear to me that I could not simply take a poem and put a

D

A C

Daimler

Art Collection

photograph next to it. That would be to work against the poem. Ultimately, I would say: this poem needs an image. And yet every poem is in fact an abstract image in itself, needing no visual illustration. It was this train of thought on how I could create an equal balance between the photograph, the poem, and the surrounding text, that produced this artwork.

I would like to return to the question that you asked at the start: when did I find a poem in a text for the first time? Actually, it was online, and I must admit that if I had not found it online, I might not have known that it was possible: I used a Google function to search for a poem by E.E. Cummings. I thought that there must be more background information, or perhaps that other people had already written about this. So I simply put the whole poem into the Google search window, and when I clicked on the cache function, the list of results, suddenly all the words of the poem appeared marked in different colors, in a legal text. I don't know if you're familiar with this, but in the Google cache function, for every word you input, there is a different color assigned, and hence they are marked in color.

At that moment, something clicked. I was already looking for a way of working with these poems. Later, I thought that if it's possible digitally via machine modes, then it should also be possible in analogue form, with books, magazines, and other source materials that interest me and which I read in order to find these poems.

CG:

I would like to pick up on this point with a quote from you: "The poems find their text and the texts find their poems." Apparently, the way in which you "read" these poems into their new context is entirely a subjective thing.

How do you decide that your specific poems, the source texts, should be combined with new texts? Where do you begin? Do you begin with the poem, or do you initially have a new source text, a template? If we are talking about the Ramones album, do you have the record inlay? Or would it be true to say that you have the poem in your head? Or do you actually have the finished image in your head?

NC:

Well, there isn't any principle that applies in the strict sense. As a matter of fact, I'm often asked where I start, but actually it's like this: sometimes I have a text and I notice that there are things in it that interest me, or a page where I can say that something is going on that is also interesting with reference to my work, where I would like to find a poem. Sometimes it's the case that I have a poem

D

A C

Daimler

Art Collection

that I want to find at all costs, and sometimes my working method is similar to “indexing”. For instance, I might read the word “red”. I have any number of poems containing the word “red”. And then I begin to match the word, to see whether I can find this particular poem in the text. As you say, it is a subjective reading process, a process of reading and finding. Sometimes these texts lie around for months. Sometimes, the poems simply cannot find a text.

CG:

When is the moment or a condition when you can say: now it's finished? Or is there a visual or aesthetic goal for which you can say that precisely this combination is “correct” and it is “right” to overlay these things on one another?

NC:

That can happen. For me, the ideal situation is actually for a dialogue to take place. If, for instance, I have a magazine in front of me in which I have found a poem, I see this as a number of different authors suddenly and inadvertently engaging in a kind of teamwork. When I look at the magazine, there is the graphic designer who creates the layout, who says that the picture should go there – there may also be graphical elements – and then he has selected a script; then, there is the photographer who created the image intended to illustrate the text, then there is the author of the text, then there is the poet who wrote the poem, and then there is myself, who has marked out the poem, and, of course, I have also made the visual decision concerning which section should be selected. All of these voices must come together.

And when these voices begin to communicate with each other, it becomes possible for new correspondences of meaning to emerge that suddenly open more doors. That's the moment when I can say: OK, I would like to exhibit that.

CG:

In viewing your works, there are widely varying interpretations and approaches possible. Literature theorists, of course, look at the texts first: the source text, the lyric. For art historians, it is simpler to start with the image and say: there is a multiplicity of references here, including to Appropriation Art. Sherry Levine, Richard Prince, and Louise Lawler are often named as reference points for your work. I would like to pick up on your personal statement that these are your references in literature and in lyric poetry. Where does that come from? Who are the historic predecessors who interest you?

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A C

Daimler

Art Collection

NC:

In particular, Italian futurists like Marinetti, Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, but also, along with many others, the Beat Poets influenced my way of working. What unites these authors is the effort to break lyrical conventions. Their intention is to find a different way to access the visual in order to create a directness of the kind generated by the fine arts. This was why they began to integrate everyday casual speech, "as-spoken" language, into their poems. What particularly fascinates me about lyric poems is the density of their language: in just a few lines, they open up a whole new cosmos. Poetry encounters the fine arts in a different, more open way than conventional prose texts, because poetry does not strive for clear meaning, but requires the reader to read it in a different way every time.

CG:

You work mainly with English-language lyric poets – you have already named a number of authors. Your native language is German. Is there no German-language equivalent? Why the focus on the English language?

NC:

Certainly I am also interested in lyric poetry in the German language. Up to now, however, I have found few poems in German suited to my way of working. However, one of the first *Hidden Poems* is dedicated to the German poet Rolf Dieter Brinkmann. It was Rolf Dieter Brinkmann who made me realize that there is a connection between photography and lyric poetry. The connection between lyric poetry and painting is a constantly recurring theme. Photography, however, is more often neglected in this discourse.

Rolf Dieter Brinkmann once said that a poem must function like a snapshot; like a photograph, it has to be direct. He also tried to transfer cinematic perception into lyric poetry. He did a lot of montage work: one thinks of Walter Benjamin and William Burroughs. Brinkman was also the one who brought the Beat Poets to Germany. Back then, he published the anthology *Acid: Neue amerikanische Szene* in Germany, and he was also the first to translate it.

Perhaps we should return again to American lyric poetry: with the Americans, I have the impression that a direct access to the visual exists. Also in dealing with everyday speech, with language as it is spoken. Additionally, I have a feeling that the access is much easier, even if it is no less complex the more one thinks about it.

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A C

Daimler

Art Collection

CG:

I presume that you have read the poems by the lyric poets in question in their original editions. Naturally, these books have their own haptic qualities, their own design and presentation, and their own story. To what extent does this influence your “pictures”? What relationship do you have to these models?

NC:

Of course, you could say that these poems are suddenly torn out of their context. But on the other hand, every poem can also stand alone, just as in the fine arts every image should ideally be sufficient in itself, independent of other images. The poems that I choose are generally very short, but they are not fragments. They are always complete poems. Certainly the background to a poem – the circumstances under which it was written – will sometimes play a role in my selection of a context in which I look for the poem. For instance, I am thinking of Gregory Corso, known for being a political poet, and also a real poet’s poet. I found one of his poems on the inlay of a record by The Clash that came out on the very same day that Margaret Thatcher was elected. There were many more aspects and dimensions to this that I found compelling. Then there is the Russian poet Vsevolod Nekrasov, who was classed as anti-Soviet and could only publish his poems in the underground scene. I found a poem by Nekrasov on the packaging of some headphones. Headphones that one can link together in order to play audio on a device. I liked the idea that other people are not aware of this, and that one can communicate things to each other nonetheless.

There is something that I should perhaps add about the books: for me, books are for spending a long time with. If I read the text online or download it on the Kindle, that is of course different to a book, because the book is a three-dimensional object: it is used up over time, and during that time I can build up a connection with the book. If I then put the book on the shelf, I walk past it every day. Possibly one is no longer so aware of it, but it has a presence, and thus in some way it becomes a picture.

CG:

A central term that should be mentioned in connection with these works is intertextuality, as defined by Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes. It describes the phenomenon by which no text, within a given cultural structure, is thinkable without reference to the totality of all other texts. We have already discussed that, for you, these references are primarily subjective, and yet there are these phenotypical connections, the language structures, and then there are also the genotypical connections. I would like to ask you what your position is on this, given that you come to the texts as

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A C

Daimler

Art Collection

an artist and not as a literature theorist. Where do you start? Do you distinguish between different levels?

NC:

Precisely. Of course, that's an important factor: I studied classical photography at the Kunstakademie, and, previously, in Zürich. So I don't come from a literature background; instead, I'm a reader, a consumer of these texts. But intertextuality is definitely an elementary factor in my work. This brings up questions such as: how many parallel texts does any text contain? What is left unsaid in the texts? This subtext is an important factor – one can see this in the works in this exhibition. It is an elementary component that this subtext is not extinguished, but always remains readable. Otherwise, the artwork would not function at all. It is all about performing this act of reading in fragments, so that one can switch between the different levels.

CG:

Now we come to another series of works that is also presented in this exhibition: ***The Poems by Repetition*** series, created in 2013. Both works in this exhibition make use of poems by Robert Creeley. Perhaps we could begin by briefly explaining who Robert Creeley was, and to what extent you have involved yourself with his work and his biography? What is it about him that fascinates you?

NC:

Right now, I don't know how deep I want to go into the life of Robert Creeley, but he is certainly one of my favorite poets. Robert Creeley is surely one of the most significant lyric poets of the 20th century. He is distinguished by his ability to reduce poems to the most essential and most necessary elements, thus achieving a sense of immediacy. When you read a poem by him – if you haven't read any of his works, please buy some, they're brilliant – it always seems so simple at first. But there is a depth and multifaceted quality to these poems that I find very moving.

CG:

We haven't yet talked about the difference between the *Poems by Repetition* and the *Hidden Poems*. As one can see from the examples exhibited here, the Poems by Repetition are...

NC:

... for instance, the Clash artwork, which I mentioned when I was talking about Gregory Corso...

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A C

Daimler

Art Collection

CG:

... in effect a text that is multiplied, emerging multiple times, in which the poem reappears, as it were, in different forms. Is that right?

NC:

... I might describe it as follows: the *Poems by Repetition* are made by the repeated depiction of the same object or the same photograph, thus making a poem readable and visible – in contrast to *Hidden Poems*, in which one can read a poem in an image.

CG:

Often – as in the two artworks we have here – there are connections to music. We have records, inlays, texts, and articles, which are products, and sometimes these pads from some electric guitar in which you find things. Perhaps we should briefly discuss music and speak about why music ultimately plays such a prominent role in this series.

NC:

When I started the work, I also had a larger collection of poems involving repetition. I thought I would have to treat these poems differently to the poems for the *Hidden Poems*. What is repetition, and what do I associate repetition with?

I see repetition as echo, refrain, rhythm, beat, tempo, or stuttering. This brings me directly to music, and I said to myself: ok, this must at all costs be the point of reference for these Poems by Repetition. So I concentrated mainly on consumer products related to music, such as records and instruments, or articles with a connection to music. These are usually diptychs or triptychs. Perhaps we should return to the works on display here: this is a work by Robert Creeley, specifically *A Poem by Repetition* by Robert Creeley, and here you can see a Ramones cover, the cover of the album *Pleasant Dreams*. And the poem that I have found goes: “Simple things one wants to say like what’s a day like out there who am I and where”, and here it is the same again – to return to Creeley, he says it in this way: “who am I and where”. These are simple things, but if one thinks about it some more, one of course knows that it is not so simple: it is philosophical. And I really did like the connection to the Ramones, because they also worked in such simplified terms – they were the first punk rock band, working with just three or four chords, and of course with many repetitions in the lyrics, and in the melody. They simplified whilst at the same time being deep and complex. Should I say something about the other artwork?

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A C

Daimler

Art Collection

CG:

Please do.

NC:

The other artwork in this exhibition shows an inlay of the album *Purple Rain* by Prince; here, I photographed a section of the inlay. The lyrics are printed, and I have marked the rest of the lyrics, which do not belong to the poem, with the same colors as the surrounding rain colors. The poem reads as follows: “Out one ear and out the other ear and out without it. You see this song: baby, I am a star und baby, I am a star”. This song is about a protagonist who tries to come onto a woman in a fairly presumptuous way, trying to convince her what a great guy he is. Naturally, he fails, and anyone reading it would think: no, I’m not taking that from you. But the song also contains a backwards message. In other words, if I play this record backwards, a very different message emerges. This has also been officially confirmed. The message is: “They don’t know anything, they have no taste, Baby, come on let’s go crazy”, and I thought this doubling of the messages was magnificent.

CG:

Perhaps at this point we should mention your most recent catalogue. In this catalogue, there is a section left entirely without comment, in which the reader is confronted with some 28 pages on which you reproduce adverts that plainly have something to do with music. You have revealed to me that this is the result of research in the Rolling Stones magazine. These pages appear to be both a source of inspiration and also a kind of documentation of things that have already happened, and thus also working material for you. What are these adverts to you? How did you come to do this research, and how did you come across these adverts?

NC:

Well, initially, they really were working materials. Sometimes, I buy whole archives, such as the Rolling Stones archive, which one can buy as a DVD set. I was interested in advertising language that tries to use lyric poetry. There are a number of parallels to my way of working. On the one hand, there are moments when concrete poetry emerges. But there is also an effort to operate synaesthetically. I am interested in how advertising tries to activate our senses, to make us taste, hear, feel or touch something, or see colors. There are many subtle references.

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A C

Daimler

Art Collection

CG:

You have already mentioned the central concept for this group of artworks – repetition. The repetition is often described as philosophical. I think that the term “difference”, which goes hand-in-hand with repetition, is even more relevant for you here. And then we come to Gilles Deleuze. I am interested in knowing how you understand the interplay of repetition and difference, because, ultimately, it appears to me as though there is basically a non-concluded and open quality to the texts, which you emphasize by means of repetition. Perhaps you could briefly explain what repetition means to you, and how you work with it in terms of method.

NC:

For the *Poems by Repetition* group, I largely worked with authors who make significant use of repetition as a stylistic device. This was the basis and starting point that allowed me to “write” poems using photographs. It was, in fact, the repetition of these poems that first made them “readable”. In our studies, we were given codes such as codes concerning how one should construct photographic series. For me, however, these prescribed codes did not function for *Hidden Poems* or *Poems by Repetition*. It would have meant that I would have to always use the same formats, always the same frame color or the same or similar fields of view. Whether I should use a white background or specific field of view, for instance, would be predefined. Or it might mean that the sources should always come from the same time, which is by no means a given with me. With me, it is more about this “how” and the language encountering each other, in an entirely everyday way. The artwork itself depends upon this diversity of possibilities. For instance, there is one artwork for which I worked with a variety of daily newspapers.

CG:

You have previously spoken about iPads, e-books and Kindles. Perhaps we could look again at a further example. Ultimately, your photo is almost a quotation from product photography. One sees the reading device, and on the display is a text, in which you find the poem. Here, the iPads are a new medium, another format, a new digital canvas for images. What do you find attractive about the electronic display? Where do you see the visual potential of this medium?

NC:

Of course, as soon as I see a text like this on a screen, it also becomes a picture for me. In the two artworks for which I used Kindles and iPads, I was interested in the advertising strategies of Amazon and Apple. With Amazon, it’s always the Kindle Reader, usually with a pencil placed next to it. This

D

A C

Daimler

Art Collection

pencil gives us a reference for the dimensions of the Kindle. I asked myself: why the pencil? The pencil is a reference to “Paperwhite”, to paper. In the case of the iPads, I had been photographing adverts on the street for some considerable time. This increasingly made me want to reproduce a similar advert myself. Just then, the iPad Mini came on the market. On the adverts, you always saw the same resolution: the normal iPads already had a retina display back then. The iPad Minis, on the other hand, had the old display with the poorer resolution, which was only visible on the photo. Whilst one display was perfect, the other had pixel structures – something Apple naturally didn’t mention. For this artwork, I used a “flip” function. These two images were actually taken within a few minutes of each other. If you rotate the right-hand picture back by 180 degrees, you can see a hand at the top, which is at the bottom in the other picture. It is in effect almost the same shot, and we worked with the iPad’s flip function, which also allows the reading direction to be changed. If you rotate this image by 180 degrees, you see almost the whole image, but with the texts turned upside down. It’s the same with an iPad. Depending upon how you lift it, the reading direction changes.

CG:

Natalie, I would like to look at two further work groups, because they reveal two other aspects we have not previously discussed: The synaesthetic elements, and the question of authorship. This is also interesting with regard to the cooperation with other poets, which is a very active element in your current works. Could we speak about the *Voyelles*? Perhaps you had better briefly describe the setting, to help people understand the principle.

NC:

As I said before in connection with the adverts, I was very interested in the ability of language to make us feel, taste, or hear something. *Voyelles* is a poem by Arthur Rimbaud, and is recognized as some of the first synaesthetic poetry. Arthur Rimbaud allotted a color to each vowel, and also various associations. Synaesthesia later became a popular stylistic element in literature. I asked myself: is there any kind of photography that can do that? Are there photos one would look at and say: now that I am seeing something – a color, for instance – it makes me taste something. What kind of photograph would it have to be in order to speak to senses other than sight? I discussed this with authors who were friends of mine, who do this everyday. I asked them to take on the role of photographer, and, in my name, to compose letters to themselves, in which they write about special photographs that prompt synaesthesia. As with Arthur Rimbaud, each author was allotted a color and a vowel. I later printed these letters, signed them myself, and photographed them in front of a background of a different color.

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A C

Daimler

Art Collection

CG:

In this case, the big difference is that you did not passively use an existing text. Instead, you have had someone else write the text, and required them, as it were, to take your role.

In other words, the authors wrote to you, and you then changed the authorship and theoretically gave it back to them.

NC:

There is a connection to the *Letters of a Seer* by Arthur Rimbaud, from which we know the famous sentence: "I, that is another". In effect, these authors are naturally also seers, and, if we read these letters, then we must envisage the images to which they relate.

CG:

I would like to conclude by putting the following question to you: you are a photographer. And the results of your artworks are photographs. In our conversation, we have talked about intertextuality, and it should be said that your artworks are also intermedial, because you work with and start from texts, transferring them into the medium of photography, in which every object and every word once again becomes an object. How significant is this change from marking-out of an original to photographic reproduction?

NC:

I believe that my works would not be the same if they did not exist as photographs. With the *Poems by Repetition*, anyone who sees these pictures can also buy the objects depicted in them because they are consumer goods. However, I am not interested in exhibiting these original found objects, but in defining a very specific detail field of view for each object, thus transforming it into a picture. I have the impression that, when I photograph the text, it transforms itself into an object in front of the lens. I don't see the final works as pure textual works, but as real language pictures, only superficially photographs. Another point that might be made is that photography is also a documentation medium. For me, they are like artefacts. Here, I have told you that the texts are marked on the objects by myself, but if someone else looks at these pictures, they will see images of found objects, of artefacts, of something that has happened to these found objects. I believe that capturing a condition or state is something that can only be conveyed by means of photography. Just as one does in an archive: an item is archived, then it is photographed, and then it is packed away.

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