

EVOKING REALITY – Introduction

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The unavoidable reality of national and international conflicts, as well as personal, individual contingencies, form the area of exploration in our exhibition. Modes of representation are reflected and consciously transcended, and the presentation of documented testimony is transformed into a conceptual pictorial theme. (Re)construction, alienation, blending fictitious and real elements with one another, or the appropriation of media and technologies from areas unrelated to art (surveillance technology, border protection) all represent new strategies in a conceptual and image generating practice. While themes include events, conflicts, and the realities of the current age of globalization, these topics are not treated as anonymous facts. The focus is cast on people and their direct surroundings; people who might appear in one moment as actors, and as victims of the current political climate and socioeconomic constellations of power in the next. In many of the photographs on display, national identity is expressed as a construct that is both fragile and desired. In her publication “Regarding the Pain of Others,” Susan Sontag formulates this observation movingly and concisely: “To the militant, identity is everything.”¹ In reference to the thoughts of Sontag, the exhibition “Evoking Reality” explores how crises and conflicts on both personal and political levels are contemplated aesthetically, and references strategies for triggering the imagination through “the real.”

Historiography as a collective construct and memory as a subjective reflection on the past are central themes in the work of Maya Zack, Oskar Schmidt, and Tacita Dean. Their works illuminate the relationship between individual fate and national histories. Drawing on conversations with witnesses, Maya Zack uses digital drawing programs to reconstruct rooms from the past; specifically, living rooms in Berlin before the Holocaust. *Living Room* presents a black and white reconstruction of a location taken completely from memory. “Memory works with frozen images, and the individual image is always the basic unit.”² (Sontag) Oskar Schmidt takes a similar approach by creating three-dimensional reconstructions of iconic locations in photo journalism in his studio. His photo series *American Series* references Walker Evans, who photographed victims of the Great Depression from the southern United States in 1936. Evans’ powerful close-up of the haggard faces of a family on their dilapidated front porch, framed by the darkness of the doorway, has formed an indelible part of our visual memory. Schmidt removes the individual and historical elements of fate from these spaces by replacing the previous residents with articles of daily use. His photos cast doubt on our ability to experience history through photographic documentation; they subvert our trust in the possible, in the ability to “regard the pain of others” (Sontag) and to draw motivation from these works to take action in the present.

Historical postcards of tragic events from the World War I era form the basis for Tacita Dean’s photo series *The Russian Ending*. The motifs include scenes from war, whale hunts, natural disasters, and funerals. The artist alters the scanned images through the act of writing instructions for a possible film adaptation on the historic, ready-made material. While national history is presented on the front side, the unofficial, personal narration operates as its palimpsest. The interweaving of levels, separated by chronology and emotion, express “reality” as a multi-perspective complexity. The purpose of all three artistic positions is to sensitize the observer to stereotypical, redundant images of identity and reality.

The dubious nature of identity, in its irresolvable dependence on political structures and power dynamics, is the central theme of the twelve-part series *Congo Democratic* by Guy Tillim. How does the political structure of a government influence the lived reality of the individual, and what hopes and motivations drive the

political engagement of the individual? Tillim captures the utopian yet possibly futile impulses of potential democratic futures in photographs of public gatherings, manifestations and demonstrations, as well as the intimate spaces where personal opinions are formed. People, frequently depicted from the rear or side, converge in the gatherings as if they were blind, as if they want to disappear in the crowd. Unexpectedly, they become part of a movement that also absorbs, equalizes and nullifies the emotional furor of the individual. Tillim places images of private retreat, here the living rooms of decision makers from a variety of political movements, in contrast with images of the agitated masses. Their solitude and time alone to ponder individual questions and qualitatively new societal ideas, formulate what is likely the largest contradiction to the furor of the emotionally-charged masses. In *Congo Democratic* and his photo series *Petros Village*, Tillim removes the blue sky seen in tourist brochures, and instead focuses his lens on the earth, depicting the trodden, loamy soil and signs of daily life. The purpose of the photos is not to elicit pity from the observer. Instead, the artist places us within the context of fates, which are a part of our present age. The world press prefers to convey the negative aspects of the continent – perhaps one of the most powerful forms of racism today. Guy Tillim shows us in his ongoing series *Museum of the Revolution* the Africa of growing prosperity, economic development, improved infrastructure, increasing educational opportunities – and with it an Africa of hope, confidence and cautious optimism.

The artistic practice of the French filmmaker, video artist, and photographer Clément Cogitore can be located in the intermediate space between cinema and contemporary art. Cogitore considers fictitiously the traditional differences defining cinematic staging in opposition to a ‘true’ documentary and acts without those categories. *Les Indes galantes* (2017) is a contemporary staging of the Baroque opera ballet by the French composer Jean-Philippe Rameau from 1735. Rameau was inspired by the tribal Indian dances that were performed in Paris by Metchigaema chiefs in 1723 and included their rhythms and movements in his composition. By opening the elite location of the Opéra Bastille for the first time to K.R.U.M.P dancers, *Les Indes galantes* carries out a symbolic takeover. The dancers disrupt the barriers of visibility by at the same time entering the stage, filming each other with their smartphones and being recorded by the video camera. The work creates an artistic synthesis, a point of contact, of parallel societal realities and their ‘stages’ in media. K.R.U.M.P. (Kingdom Radically Uplifted Mighty Praise) refers to the Los Angeles Riots, an outbreak of violence on April 29, 1992 that lasted several days in reaction to the acquittal of the policemen who severely beat Rodney King, an African-American taxi driver, during an arrest. The psychological dimensions, individual experiences, and collective dynamics constituting the reality of repression and discrimination by racist structures of contemporary societies form the actual, socio-critical context, in which *Les Indes galantes* can be read.

The complex relationships between people and their living spaces is a central issue for many artists featured in this exhibition. The photo series *My future is not a dream* by Cao Fei includes the pictorial themes of social dislocation, otherness, and isolation. Posed portraits of workers in unnamed workshops in South China register the discrepancy between the reality of their lives and their individual yet alienated dreams. The photographic works of Jane Alexander demonstrate how fictitious elements can shed light on the radically inhumane social and economic disparities in lived reality. In *African Adventure*, Alexander combines urban environments and nightmarish figures in tense street panoramas. The latent intimidation of the bizarre plastic animal figurines, set against the reality of addiction and desperation, could hardly be more unsettling.

On the peripheries of society, existence and reality can seem almost surreal. Pieter Hugo effectively reveals the absurdity and aggressiveness of everyday scenes in the photo series *Hyena Men* and *Permanent Error*, which brings the repressed and uncomfortable into focus. Standing barefoot in a landscape filled with high-

tech garbage and shrouded in plumes of smoke emanating from burning cables, the figures pictured in the strange reality of Agbogbloshie, Ghana, assume an almost mystical prominence. These images evoke similarities to iconic war photographs or heroic paintings of historic battles and indeed for Pieter Hugo, history itself is a constant reference point: images generate more images.

“I saw the landfill for the first time in a photo in *National Geographic*. The fact that photos move me to create my own photos is a common theme in my work.”³ How is our perception of reality changed in and through the medium of photography? How does it influence our visual memory? Pieter Hugo: “It occurs to me that the Iraq invasion changed our view of the world. Before the invasion, infrared photography called to my mind nature photos, with leopards that were surprised while they were eating. Now, this makes me think of war and conflicts. I’m beginning to ponder the unique relationship between photography and surveillance, as well as the military industrial complex.”⁴ ‘Evoking Reality’ addresses this topic and offers a way for us to reflect on the mechanisms of our perceptions. How is our view of landscapes directed through global economic and industrial interests, and organic systems which are brought out of balance in the pursuit of development? Since 2012, Mustafah Abdulaziz has been capturing these ominous changes in a number of photo series, one of which is entitled *Water*. Artistic appropriation of image-generating technologies for surveillance and military purposes is both a conceptual and a political act. Richard Mosse uses this strategy on various visual and subject levels. Just like with Mustafah Abdulaziz’s works, the observer is drawn to the deceptive beauty of global landscapes, but the images prompt questions and doubt. The line between deceptive beauty and subcutaneous moments of aggression is highlighted when comparing the pink photo series *Infra* by Richard Mosse, which is based on infrared film used by the military and are imbued with ominous beauty.

Can national borders, as we think of them in the traditional sense, direct or even stop the migration of people in a globalized world? Can these lines that were once drawn on a map determine the lived reality today and provide or block opportunities? The aesthetically filmed, radically political rooted video entitled *Mermaids (Erasing the Borders of Azkelon)* by Sigalit Landau allows observers to experience these invisible dimensions of geographic borders both visually and physically. A desire for an area without borders manifests itself in the movement of the waves, which draw temporary lines in the sand. This video was shot on a beach between Aza (Gaza) and the Israeli city of Ashkelon, which are separated by the border. Viviane Sassen also addresses the metaphor of blurred surfaces by using silver foil as a reflector. When her face disappears, it transforms into the face of Narcissus, who observes himself in the moving surface of the water. In the photo series *Etan and me*, skin color becomes a reflection surface for questions related to the perception of self and of others. “Are we ever able to truly know someone, to truly know ourselves? And if I look at myself, can I ever get a clear view of who I am?” (Sassen). Our individual viewpoints, personal biases, and judgments guide and limit our perceptions and our understanding. The topic of race is addressed in Bernie Searle’s video *Snow White* in a way that is both powerful and poetic. Lit from above, a woman’s dark body is covered with flour, slowly turning her body white. Water is poured onto her and, with a ritualistic, archaic simplicity, the woman begins to knead dough.

The exhibition ‘Evoking Reality’ seeks to trace the various manifestations and interpretations of what we perceive as reality, and address the imaginative power and critical intellectual curiosity of the observer.

¹ Susan Sontag: *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York, 2003, p. 17.

² *Ib.*, p. 29.

³ Pieter Hugo. *Between The Devil and The Deep Blue Sea*, Wolfsburg 2017, p. 166/167.

⁴ *Ib.*, p. 238.