

BETWEEN VISION AND DOCUMENTATION

New Photography by Students from Landau Art Institute

by Günther Berlejung, Tina Stolt and Christoph Zuschlag

The first ever exhibition of photography in a museum of art was held in the Hamburger Kunsthalle in 1893, organized by its director Alfred Lichtwark. The Museum of Modern Art in New York, in 1940, was the first to institute a photography collection. These pioneering achievements were followed by an unbroken rise in the importance of photography both in art and in everyday life, with virtually explosive growth in recent years. We have now reached the stage where photography's claim to be recognized as art is no longer seriously disputed and its presence in museums has been universally accepted. Largely due to these factors, photographic art is changing hands for record prices. At the same time, millions of photographs are made available every day via the internet, smartphones, and social media. Never before in the history of mankind have images circulated in such numbers, at such speed, or so widely. The phrase "postdigital image culture" has already been coined to refer to the complete permeation of all areas of life by digitalization. The first digital cameras were sold in the early 1990s. "Although it avails itself of the aesthetic properties of the analogue and complex image", wrote Gottfried Jäger in the German-language anthology "*Fotografie nach der Fotografie*" (1995), "digital photography is entirely different. It is something other than the play of light on the surface of the objects and its direct uptake and storage in the light-sensitive coating". And that is not all: digitally generated images (along with scanned analogue images) can be post-processed on a computer, providing artists with a whole universe of new options.

A creative approach to the possibilities offered by the digital creation and processing of images—precisely that is what fascinates students from the "digital native" generation about photography as a medium. For them photography is a self-evident component of their communication networks. The ever-present view on the world, the moment, the "still" in the constant flow of images is recorded in a photograph and often communicated within seconds. The students' internal world of images is constantly replenished by their own photographs, and also by other photographs absorbed into their individual mental image archives during research into a topic. This must always be considered when engaging oneself

with photography as art, and it applies to the selection of photographs by 35 students of the Art Institute on the Landau campus of Koblenz-Landau University in this exhibition.

The courses at the Institute for Art Theory and Fine Arts in Landau are divided into three mutually complementary areas of instruction: Artistic Practice, Art Didactics, and Art Theory/ Art History. Special emphasis is given to the development of didactic abilities and teaching competence. Artistic Practice involves the teaching of painting and drawing, sculptural design and printmaking techniques, photography and digital image processing. We are convinced that the ability to later teach the subject of art to children and adolescents at school presupposes long-term and multifaceted artistic practice on the part of students. For teaching art at school involves much more than just imparting the skills and techniques of artistic practice. Good art instruction fosters the creativity and imagination of individuals, not by animating them to imitate, but by focusing on their autonomous, creative production. In this way good art instruction boosts the self-confidence of children and adolescents, making an important contribution to the development of their personalities—true to the maxim of the ancient Greek poet Pindar: “Become such as you are”. What holds for instruction at school is also true for art studies at the university: theory and aesthetic practice have to be closely interwoven. In the famous words of Leonardo da Vinci: “He who loves practice without theory is like the sailor who boards ship without a rudder and compass and never knows where he may be cast. Practice must always rest on good theory”.

What form is taken by the practical instruction in photography and digital image processing, which in Landau lays in the hands of Günther Berlejung? How can the creative process in the studios of the Art Institute be envisaged? Several topics (always new) are set at the beginning of each new term, but the students have licence to interpret their tasks freely and variably. The goal is to avoid repetition and provide impulses for reflection, inventiveness and the development of a personal perspective. Ultimately, it's about learning to see. What counts in photography and the quest for motifs is not just pressing the button on the camera (“If I

take 500 pictures there are bound to be 5 decent ones.”), but a creative approach to the technical and artistic potentials of the medium. Even at the moment of activating the shutter, the future image should be considered and composed. Seeking and recognizing motifs is an important part of the work, along with constructing the image by devising situations created with a wide variety of materials and auxiliary aids. Minor details can become important, unheeded objects can transform themselves into the centre point, change their perspective, loom threateningly, or glitter appealingly. For instance, motion can be captured on film by dropping objects into liquids such as water or milk in a controlled laboratory situation.

The images the students bring along are first optimized on the computer, that is to say details are selected, any divergent parallels are straightened, colours are harmonised, noise is removed, and the image dimensions are decided. These processes are not new; rather, they are familiar from analogue photography, where films are developed and enlargements produced using chemicals in the laboratory, images are filtered and post-exposed, and the paper type is selected. The computer then offers further options for configuration and modification of the image material. On the one hand, the classical photomontage, but with the capacity for far greater precision and sophistication; edges and interfaces are softened using the tools of photoprocessing, so that the final result cannot be told apart from a traditional photograph. Unfamiliar objects suddenly present themselves in a picture we know well, an irritation, not recognisable at first glance, and whole new worlds come into being. On the other hand, photographs can be transformed into pure graphics, the artist plays with colours and shapes—overlays them, moves them around, intensifies them—to the point of exaggeration. All this throws up fundamental new questions for art theory: Where does photographic documentation end and the photographer’s aesthetic ambition begin? How do I deal with the difference between the small image on the display or screen and the much enlarged photographic print on the wall? How do I ensure that the artist’s intention is supported by the technical preconditions—and not the other way around? The primary teaching aim—reflected in the term “picture lab”—is always to promote

our students' creativity in taking advantage of the possibilities offered by digital image production and processing.

This catalogue shows a broad spectrum of photography: close-ups of the natural world together with motion studies, stark architectural (detail) studies alongside almost surrealistic collages, purely abstract colour, black-and-white, and structural compositions next to images reminiscent of the classical photographic genres of (self-)portrait, landscape and still life. No less eclectic is the range of artistic devices used: from blurring, cross-fading and distortion through enlargement of details and unexpected perspectives all the way to extreme exposures, unaccustomed colour contrasts, or confusing colour manipulations. The images cannot always be clearly assigned to the categories staged photography, conceptual photography, or close-to-life photography. Quite the opposite: one characteristic trait of the students' creativity in implementing the new potentials of digital photography is precisely their confident self-assurance in cutting across the boundaries between these categories.

Where does photography stand today? It has "become an important medium for dreams and fantasies and thus for hopes and the quest for identity", write Petra Roettig and Mechtild Achelwilm in their introduction to an exhibition of photography entitled WHEN THERE IS HOPE, presented in the Hamburger Kunsthalle as part of the Phototriennale Hamburg 2015. They continue: "Yearnings and expectations are enacted in the image. At the same time, however, the photograph documents the bitter reality of social and political upheaval. This tension between vision and documentation characterises photography today".