The Echo of Memory

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I. The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away

Many years ago, my flatmate invited his parents for dinner. During the evening, his parents told us the story of their neighbor that had lived next door to them for almost three decades. They never spoke to or were in any kind of contact with him. In fact, he struck them as being odd and antisocial. They had decided to willingly ignore the bad smell that came out of his apartment, and when he left his home or came back, he was so quick at closing the door behind him that they never had a chance to get a glimpse of his flat. But recently, signs of something being very wrong had been accumulating and developing into a situation that begged for action. The neighbor's kitchen window adjoined their kitchen window and one day my friend's mother discovered a thick, black, stinky substance leaking out from underneath the always closed shades. After trying to talk to their neighbor with no results, they called the police who came and opened his flat by force. What they found was a huge dump instead of a flat, the floor and every inch of the walls were covered and filled with an undistinguishable mass of waste and trash. The smell was breathtaking and it was hard to figure out how and where the man had been able to live in the sense of sleeping, eating, being. The police tried to find legal documents on his identity, all the while the man cried and whined about the strangers making a mess in his place. Before he was taken away, he was allowed to take one thing from his flat, and to my friend's mother's great amusement, the man took his vacuum cleaner with him.

The story stuck with me. In contrast to my friend's parents, who had regarded the man as a lunatic, I thought of the line that separated me from him as a thin one. I had always asked myself at which point the will to collect and keep things would turn into something obscure. Was it the space I had at my disposal that would dictate the number of things I could keep? Would I throw fewer things away if I had a huge house that I could just fill up? Or was the decision I took by keeping a photo but not a cinema ticket a consequence of my hierarchy of events, the value I put on memories? When does the archive turn into a mess?

In his text *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, Ilya Kabakow describes a man who carefully organizes every material detail of his own past.[1] He

1 Ilya Kabakow: The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away (Moscow, 1977); first published in English in *Ilya Kabakow: Ten Characters (*London Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1989); reprinted in Boris Groys, David A. Ross, Iwona Blazwick: *Ilya Kabakow* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998) p. 99-103; in: The Archive, Documents of Contemporary Art, ed. by Charles Merewether, The MIT Press 2006, p. 32-37

gives all the things he has the same value, because everything is connected to an event and the recollections of all those events are tied together to ultimately form “the story of our lives”.[2] The man creates the absolute archive, and even if it means that it consumes his life, he asks himself why common sense should be stronger than his own memories.

II. Collecting photographs, starting to see

I am a collector too. I collect images. Not only do I take photographs myself, I also collect postcards, books and magazines.

It all started with a series of books called the Time-Life series on photography that friend of my parents gave me when I was 15 and had just moved from Berlin to Switzerland. The captured moment that a photograph represented had always interested me, but up until this point, I was not aware of a general history or theory on photography. By browsing through the books, I discovered images that told me long stories without a text, a split of a second was able to tell a life. I was completely fascinated. It were images that described moments that had passed and somehow related to my state of mind. I had left the city of my childhood to live in an unfamiliar place and all I could do was to get myself into yet another world, one that was just as detached from the presence as I was.

The books triggered my great interest in the medium that led to me studying photography at the Arts University of Zürich. Taking pictures became a habit, my camera followed me everywhere and I collected a huge amount of photos that are documented memories.

Often when I got a film back from the lab, I was surprised to find images I couldn't remember having taken, or images I had taken with a sort of unconsciousness. Images, it felt, that came to me by their own volition, by the camera's contingency or the lights' abstraction. By the fact that a certain moment had been made irrevocable, a story emerged from behind the image, a feeling or a rift. The pictures that accurately showed what I had intended to photograph were much less interesting to me. I began to choose and collect pictures that had something unrecognizable in them.

One method of taking pictures that quickly became my favorite was that of

2 Ibid. p. 33

instant photography. A Polaroid camera had the wonderful ability to render a visible moment into an image of a strange quality. The Polaroid technique anticipated an era of "everything, especially photography, being instant".[3] The medium has an immediacy to it that I felt suited me. There is only one copy of every Polaroid picture, the negative and its print being bound together. Its high cost and its preciousness made me look out for the right moment to take the picture. This right moment was, as I had learned by looking at the images I had taken before I started to use polaroids, defined by a feeling, or a way of seeing that I had become to develop.

A factor of chance came into play as the way a photograph would turn out while developing before my eyes in broad daylight was unpredictable. There was magic at play. And something else turned out to be very important to me: the image immediately became an object, the paper and even the framing popping out of the camera within seconds. This fact made the polaroid supremely archiveable. No extra steps were needed to turn the photograph into a visible and tangible image. The picture was right there to be stacked into a box or glued into an album.

My archive of Polaroids was the first series of books that I made.[4] Fixing the images onto the blank pages by the end of the day gave me a rewarding feeling. The work would presumably still be ongoing if it wasn't for the discontinued production of Polaroid films.

From my growing collection of Polaroids and my strengthening sense of what kind of image interested me, I continuously trained my seeing. I learned that the photography I was interested in was about finding and seeing what lies beyond the depicted. I sharpened my vision for the image that would haunt me – that would reveal its *punctum*.

III. Barthes' *punctum*

The *punctum* is a term that Roland Barthes coined in his last work, *Camera Lucida (La Chambre Claire, 1980)*. Barthes makes a distinction between the *studium* and the *punctum*, both terms that describe the way a photographic image can be perceived. In

3 The development of the Polaroid material would go hand in hand with the general acceleration of life style in the 1960ies. It was also from the beginning connected to a collection of photographs that would in reverse document the technical growth of instant photography. The collective character of the instant material was incorporated in its very emergence. Steve Crist in The Polaroid Book: Selection from the Polaroid Collections of Photography, ed. by Steve Crist, Taschen, Köln, 2008, p.9

4 See Appendix

the *studium*, the viewer (the *spectator* as Barthes calls it) is shown elements of the picture that the *operator* (the photographer) intended to photograph. It is the more obvious parts of a photograph that are revealed through the *studium* – It results in an understanding of the picture, an eventual liking, but never a loving.[5]

A far more interesting concept is the *punctum*. It describes a detail in a photograph that punctuates the *studium* and leaves the viewer "wounded". Often these details are unintended, not staged. The *punctum* doesn't reveal itself through the *studium*, rather it comes upon the viewer by an invisible force.[6] It is a private experience, depending on the viewer's personal response. Rosalind Krauss makes the distinction between the obvious meaning (*studium*) and the obtuse meaning (*punctum*).[7]

In his essay on the *punctum*, Michael Fried stresses yet another point.[8] Whilst those photographs, in which the subject appears to be unaware of being photographed, may induce a "shock", a photograph containing a *punctum* involves an unawareness of the *operator*. Only if the photographer catches a moment unintentionally can the *punctum* enter the image. Fried regards this as a form of *antitheatricality*, the opposite of a staged moment. He makes a fundamental distinction between seeing and being shown. The latter will not reveal the *punctum* in any way.

An important aspect of the *punctum* is its strong connection to memory. As Barthes puts it: "[...]if sometimes, despite its clarity, the *punctum* should be revealed only after the fact, when the photograph is no longer in front of me and I think back on it. I may better know a photograph I remember than a photograph I am looking at, as if direct vision oriented its language wrongly, engaging in an effort of description which will always miss its point of effect, the *punctum*."[9] The impossibility of simultaneity between the depicted and reality makes the photograph a document of the past without being real. Later in the book, Barthes even goes as far as saying that "the photograph is never, in essence, a memory [...], but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory."[10] Whilst the photograph itself threatens memory, the *punctum* in it could serve as a link between the depicted and memory. The

5 Roland Barthes: Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography. Transl. by Richard Howard, Fontana Paperbacks, London, 1990, p.27
6 "To perceive the *punctum*, no analysis would be of any use to me (but perhaps memory sometimes would, as we shall see)[...]" in Roland Barthes: Camera Lucida, p. 42
7 Rosalind E. Krauss: Notes on the Punctum. in: Photography Degree Zero, Reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida, ed. by Geoffrey Batchen, The MIT Press, 2009, p. 189
8 Michael Fried: Barthes's *Punctum* in: Photography Degree Zero, p. 141-169
9 Roland Barthes: Camera Lucida. p.53
10 Ibid. p.91

punctum is merely a metaphor or a symbol for a recollection. By freezing a moment, we implement death (being anything that no longer exists) into a photograph, not as such but as a notion of it. The "turning away from the obvious" lies at the heart of a mnemonic experience: a memory always enters the consciousness unwillingly. The experience cannot be retrieved intentionally. And it isn't the event itself that creates the reminiscence of it; it is certain tiny details that bring forward a past experience. It can be the smell in a certain place that recreates a situation that occurred in that place and that brings to mind a whole set of experiences unrelated to the smell itself. Henri Bergson calls these consequential recollections "echoes".[11] The *punctum* has the same character: it echoes, reverberates, a memory.

IV. Roots and what is left of them

I come from a place that doesn't exist anymore. I was born in East Germany in 1980. My memories of the wall coming down, the era of the Cold War ending and the era of capitalism starting are vivid. I was not old enough to participate in the changes but I was swept away by them. I was made a witness without a clue.

The economic changes had the biggest impact on me, not so much because of all the new stuff one could now buy, the pink chewing gum, the shiny exercise books, the fragrant shampoo, but much more because of the things that vanished. Products I had grown up with were replaced by new ones and soon after the reunification, the shops - having different names now - were no longer selling any of the things I was used to.

The vanishing of those products was a metaphor for everything else that disappeared. All the things that defined my childhood in a material sense were replaced by shiny, colorful, new versions of themselves. I no longer recognized the smell in my school, the touch of the fabric of my clothes, the taste of the food, the sound of the music, the topics people talked about, the holiday destinations, the

11 "[...]If after having gazed on any object, we turn our eyes abruptly away, we obtain an "afterimage" (image consecutive) of it [...]. [...] we are dealing here with images photographed upon the object itself, and with memories following immediately upon the perception of which they are but the echo." In this chapter of the book, Bergson is specifically writing about the recognition of images, and I dare say that for any number of the seeing population a memory goes for a visible experience, that then of course is intertwined with all sorts of sensations. Henri Bergson: Matter and Memory, authorized transl. by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer, Zone Books, New York, 1991, p.102 f.

content of films and books and so forth. Everything was new to me.

The material change wasn't visible only in shops or the public sphere, it naturally went all the way into peoples homes. Every bit of material that had been made in GDR was to be thrown out little by little. I remember the summer after the West German D-Mark had been introduced and the streets of Berlin were filled with sofas from East German production, all in the same style, piling up in front of houses and ready to be taken to the dump.

Ideology changed along the way. All the well-meant ideas about how to make the world a good place were suddenly worthless and their opposite was true. Language was just about the only thing I could rely on. It changed slowly, if at all. Vocabulary that seized being used due to its referent not being around anymore (e.g. Jungpionier) became a dusty, funny relict from a recent past. But the sound of the East Berlin slang, the intonation, I could continue to feel at home in.

That would change as well. When I was 15, I left Berlin for Switzerland. The dialect spoken in the German speaking part of the country, which I moved to, was so thick that it could be taken for a different language. Now, everything I had known from my childhood days had become a memory.[12]

V. Archives and Death Masks

After a year or so of my studies in photography, I realized that the way I was recording my surroundings was not satisfying me anymore. I was taking pictures incessantly, but I wasn't sure what I was looking for. Even though I had realized that my drive for taking pictures centered on finding a *punctum*, I didn't understand what it was telling me. I couldn't assign any specific meaning contained in a given photograph. The feeling my images were giving me constantly escaped categorization. It felt as if I had nothing to say, and that the images were silent.

My archive of photographs was growing simultaneously with my uncertainty about what I was pursuing. By looking long enough at some of my photographs, the depicted moment would turn into what was shown on the image instead of being part of my remembrance. The image of the memory replaced the memory itself. My

12 In her wonderful book *Zonenkinder*, Jana Hensel calls her (and my) generation a “generation that emerged in disappearance”. Changes have therefore always been farewells, breaches and not transitions. Jana Hensel: Zonenkinder, Rowohlt, 2002

archive was beginning to describe *any* past but mine.

In his foreword to a book by Jacques Derrida on photography, Gerhard Richter writes about "[...] a photograph working to preserve a memory whilst also threatening to put it under erasure, "signing onto" memory while also silently moving to displace it"[13] It matches the description of Barthes that similarly thought of the photograph as something that is not the memory itself but its substitute. And in his book „*Archive Fever*", Derrida himself puts it as follows: "[...] the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence. [...] The archivization produces as much as it records the event. [...] Archivable meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the same structure that archives".[14] In that sense, the archive determines memory, it forms a sort of prosthesis for the memory without which memory would not be experienced.[15] The archive becomes a realist machine that sustains itself through reproducing and circulating its own items.[16] Derrida specifically connects this effect to violence because the archive, through its productive dimension, forms part of the power system, even creates power. It is not only, as generally misconceived, a storage place of knowledge but also a tool of the ruling class. Derrida traces the word's roots to the Greek word *arkeihon* which is the residence of the superior magistrates and the place where the documents are stored. The powerless in history have never had a part in the archive, it is the place of the victors.

Applying this theory to my own activity of taking and keeping pictures, it meant that through photographing everything around me, I created my memory. The pictures were not depicting anything real but formed a new story that I adopted as my own. They substituted my memory. If I could find out what they replaced and understand the meaning of my interest in specific images, I would eventually learn why I took the pictures. If I could understand what the *punctum* in my images stood for, I could learn something about myself.

I watched myself taking pictures and quickly realized that I was drawn to

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13 In Jacques Derrida: Copy, Archive, Signature, A Conversation on Photography, Edited with an Introduction by Gerhard Richter, transl. by Jeff Fort, Stanford University Press, 2010, p.XXVI This quotation was footnoted by Richter about further reading on Derrida and his concept of memory and on the legacies of deconstruction.

14 Jacques Derrida (transl. by Eric Prenowitz): Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression, Diacritics, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Summer 1995), p. 9-63, publ. by: The Johns Hopkins University Press, University of Chicago, p.16 ff.

15 Richard Crownshaw: Reconsidering Postmemory: Photography, the Archive, and Post-Holocaust Memory in W.G. Sebald's Austerlitz; Mosaic (Winnipeg), Vol. 37, 2004

16 Henk Slager: The Pleasure of Research. Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, 2012(sic!), p.76

arrangements of destruction and decay. I took pictures of dead birds, old and abandoned houses, faded flowers, my messy room. There was a lot of sadness going on.

I wanted to move away from this attraction to chaos and be more disciplined in taking pictures. I felt I needed a framework. After seeing a show by Thomas Ruff, I adopted a form of "typology".[17]His highly stylized portraits of people and the way the images were hung in the exhibition room especially impressed me. It was large format photographs in big prints, hanging high so it was as if the people in the pictures were looking down on the viewer. All faces were turned in the same direction. The backgrounds were in different colors, and the whole setup seemed standardized. In its size, the series made an almost creepy impression on me.

I started working on a series of portraits of women.[18] I determined the setup in a dogmatic way: The background of all images was black (I shot the images outside at night), the faces were frontal and expressionless. The prints I made were quite large, 90 x 120 cm. I didn't select faces, anybody was the same in front of the camera. I would go to crowded places, install my equipment outside and ask randomly for participants. The only restriction was that I wanted to portray women.

My real aim was to create a collection of death masks[19], because instinctively I knew that this is exactly what photography is capable of: leveling out differences by only showing a tiny part of reality. In this leveling, it resembles death and not for nothing is death called The great leveler.

Another now obvious thread was woven into the idea of the death mask: The archive was an included subject. The portraits were a serial collection of faces, in its sameness it resembled a library of sorts. My proceedings were systematic. I wanted to forge the images of those very different women into one form. The death mask had the same function: it was used to collect dead faces, in itself an impossibility.

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17 Thomas Ruff (b. 1958) is a german photographic artist that studied with Bernd and Hilla Becher in Düsseldorf. The Bechers are considered pioneers of concept photography due to their immense photographic archive of industrial buildings and structures which they call "typologies". Hoffmann Collection, Schaulager Basel, Switzerland, 2005

18 See Appendix

19 Usually a mold or plaster cast taken from the faces of just deceased people, it is often said that the expression is somewhat pleased or even happy, showing smiles in many cases. Susan Sontag argues that the photographic image bears similarities to a death mask: "Such images are indeed able to usurp reality because first of all a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask." in: Susan Sontag: On Photography, Doubleday, New York, 1977, p. 154 in: Louis Kaplan: Photograph/ Death Mask: Jean-Luc Nancy's Recasting of the Photographic Image, Journal of Visual Culture, SAGE Publications, 2010
See Appendix

I learned that what I was searching for in photography was somehow connected to death and transience. And I realized that the archive is dangerous: If I would only collect for the sake of accumulation, the archive would take over any meaning and I would lose sight of the thing behind the image. I had to be in control of the archive.[20]

VI. Austerlitz

In his book *Austerlitz*, W.G. Sebald creates a fictional biography of a man who finds out about his past by conducting a slow and painful research of his own memory.[21] Austerlitz is a Jew from Praque who escapes the Holocaust by means of Kindertransport to Wales at the beginning of the war at the age of four. He loses his whole family and subsequently buries his memories in a general feeling of loss and disorientation. The book is written through the eyes of another narrator that meets Austerlitz and writes down his story. By recounting the main protagonists tale in a nested form, intertwining the memories of Austerlitz and the nameless narrator, the difficulties of telling a story that cannot be told, the story of a Jewish fate in the times of the Holocaust, become felt. The story has to be a narrative reconstruction in order to be read as a story.[22] Furthermore, the narrators use of Austerlitz' photos, spread throughout the book, make it a tale of the narrator and a document about Austerlitz himself at the same time.

Austerlitz begins his journey into the past by traveling across Europe to places that tell the story of modern architecture. He thereby finds (or unconsciously looks for) an architecture that describes a „compulsive sense of order and the tendency towards monumentalism [...]“.[23]

In a detailed description of the Palace of Justice in Brussels, that Austerlitz

20 In his essay Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument, Okwui Enwezor argues that “because the camera is literally an archiving machine, every photograph, every film is *a priori* an archival object.” He further on writes about the limbo status photography has between being both an archival medium and a personal record simultaneously, and the contradiction the archival enterprise is caught in, because it destroys itself in its very coming to existence (Derrida). He then concludes in the aim of artists “interrogating the self-evidentiary claims of the archive by reading it against the grain”, changing the structures or functional principles of the archive that may result in other forms of archive. Okwui Enwezor: Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art. ex. cat., International Center of Photography, New York. Steidl 2008, p.11-18

21 W.G. Sebald: Austerlitz. For the german version: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2001. For the english version: transl. by Anthea Bell, Penguin Books, 2001

22 Richard Crownshaw: Reconsidering Postmemory: Photography, the Archive, and Post-Holocaust Memory in W.G. Sebald's Austerlitz; Mosaic (Winnipeg), Vol. 37, 2004

23 Austerlitz (engl.), p.44

defines as „the largest accumulation of stone blocks anywhere in Europe“, an image for Austerlitz' state of mind which he himself is not aware of at that moment, manifests: “[...] this huge pile of over seven hundred thousand cubic metres contains corridors and stairways leading nowhere, and doorless rooms and halls where no one would ever set foot, empty spaces surrounded by walls and representing the innermost secret of all sanctioned authority“[24] By describing this building, he describes his own fears and his situation as someone living in a sort of amnesia. His investigations, initially intended as preparations for a dissertation, eventually lead him to his inner self by „obeying an impulse which he himself, to this day, did not really understand“.[25] Ultimately, after many long years of collating information about architecture in modern Europe, all the while not being able to see his own history in spite of being oppressed by memories, his „self censorship of the mind“[26] leads to a total breakdown, a paralysis of his linguistic faculties and the destruction of all his notes. At the same time a pressinge urge to understand and trace the past comes to surface and Austerlitz begins to consciously research the circumstances of his arrival in Wales and the whereabouts of his parents.

The idea of an unconscious guidance that our history gives us is of great importance for me. My method of seeing and choosing images was telling me something about my past on a purely visual level. The *punctum* of the chosen images triggers a memory, and vice versa, a memory chooses an image. Due to my past, that memory is most often connected to loss, change and unfamiliarity. More and more I understood that the images I was dealing with were all connected through the same visual reference: An unreality, a loss of direction, an impossibility and moreover, the presence of absence. By relying on the vehicle of the archive (the collected photos) being a prosthesis for my memory, I could inversely trace my memory through the image. At the same time, it was necessary to question the archive as the only truth. The same way that Austerlitz entangled himself in an archive that was only a reference to his own past, I shouldn't mistake my pictures for a story. There is no overarching narrative, only a notion of loss.

24 Ibid., p.38 f.
25 Ibid., p.44
26 Ibid., p.198

VII. Returning, now and then

When I had moved away from Berlin, I would return to the city on a regular basis as a sort of semi-resident tourist. Through the years I came back many times, only to find huge changes in the city every time; new buildings had been built, old ones had been torn down, parks had been redesigned, streets renamed, shops closed and new ones opened and history disguised, removed or polished.

I realized that I was given the opportunity to follow the transformation of the city in portions. As I didn't live in it, I wasn't witnessing an ongoing change which would have been hard to follow, like the growing of a plant, but distinct stages of metamorphosis. I could keep track of what changed by leaving out the time spans during which the change occurred. I saw the difference as images because I lacked continuality.

At the same time I dreaded the enormity of the changes, signaling an extreme transformation happening on a very large scale, brutal and rapid. Huge architectural complexes were constructed, somehow inhuman and impossible. Because I hadn’t seen the process of the transformation, the machines that tore down old buildings and the workers who built new ones, the change to me seemed instant, like a magic trick. It would leave me feel weak and small and confused. Some places looked completely unrecognizable after I hadn’t seen them for a year, and it felt like experiencing a sudden loss of reality, something that my brain and my memory couldn’t fully cope with.

I started to miss the empty lots, desolate, beautiful places that had no economic value yet invited to contemplate on time and the passing of it without a consumption or production being attached to it. The old houses with the bullet holes from the second World War, the dark corridors with the rotten linoleum, the crappy sidewalks, all the things that once let me breathe my past were swept away, renovated, tidied up. I couldn’t find the scars of my childhood surroundings, my real life *punctums*. They had vanished from everyday sight. Berlin had turned into one big museum.

Now the transformation of the city has slowed down. The patina of time will settle on all the new neighborhoods. But the big changes that happened influenced my way of seeing the world.

I started an investigation of change with the architectural evolution of Berlin

as example. I had collected postcards from after the war, showing views of ruins and rubble, destroyed buildings and also views of the wall and the structural elements that came with it.[27] I went to Berlin and took images from the exact same spots and so conducted a before/ after study. In some of the places, it was nearly impossible to determine the postcard's viewpoint because the city had changed dramatically, so my work took the trait of a detective game. I put the dual images into an album, facing each other[28]. But again I was trying to establish an archive and again I felt that it was a useless venture.

In her brilliant article *The Austerlitz Effect,* Pamela M. Lee suggests a direct link between architecture, photography and time in its passing, as a tool of distorting material.[29] Her starting point is Austerlitz: In his quest to archive the history of capitalist architecture, his personal drama of displacement becomes visible. She argues that by taking pictures of buildings, the very dialogue between photography and architecture becomes reversed: the monument, which doesn't move, is through a time-based process held in a never returning condition, the building deteriorates but its otherwise ephemeral photograph becomes the monument. The act is almost desperate: an attempt to stop time.[30] And she goes further: The simple act of collecting these images (creating the equivalent between form and content) lacks a critique. Modernist architecture mirrors the speed of transience that has captured society, and a sheer repetition of the process through taking pictures isn't enough. A point is needed at which the very dialogue between photography and architecture shows its complications to thereby open up to new perspectives.[31]

I felt that I had to create my own form of an archive. So I decided to make a film. In it, I am carefully investigating a postcard depicting a bombed site in Berlin in 1945.[32] In that video, I am trying to get as close into destruction as possible. I am

27 I had always been surprised about the fact that the view of a bombed site would end up on a postcard, and that it would be bought and send, "Greetings from Berlin". It probably shows how self-evident Berlins history of war and separation is a selling factor for the touristic industry.

28 See Appendix

29 Pamela M. Lee: The Austerlitz Effect: Architecture, Time, Photoconceptualism in Douglas Fougle (curator): The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960-1982, exh. cat., Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2003

30 Ed Rusha, being asked about his work *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (an accordion-fold publication that pictures every last building on the Sunset Boulevard in 1966), says: "I believe in this idea of the time capsule. [...]Time, as a property, seems important to me". Once again I see this link between the photographic collection and the desire to keep time. Lee, p.189

31 In her concluding sentences she calls the best work in photoconceptualism the one that not only bears witness to the phenomenon of historical dislocation, but a work that "attempts to register the mobilization of place while simultaneously grounding it". Lee, p. 193

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entering the image. Then I exchanged parts of the images I had taken in Berlin with parts of their associated postcards. I sampled and mixed, and I got closer to what I was looking for.[33]

VIII. Questioning the archive, shaking up perception

My dealings with imagery were reaching a point at which I took fewer and fewer images and concentrated on found material. My own pictures resembled too much an attempt to record my surroundings. All my intentions stood between the image and the memory it was supposed to describe. Found material much rather radiated the unawareness I was looking for. I saw things that really touched me in pictures that had been taken by others, or more precisely, pictures that were just there.[34] I felt I didn't need to take pictures myself, everything I wanted to see was out there already. Whatever was meant when the pictures were shot, I didn't need to apply to it. I could put my own meaning into them, use them to build my own archive. I only needed to appropriate them.

It started with encyclopedias on animals. I had found a whole set of volumes, 18 books, about the animal world. It was an edition from the 1970ies and was supposed to represent the whole animal world. My fascination was simple: I knew that every animal depicted in the books was dead by now. In a first attempt I tried to create an archive of all the animals, and for two months I would sit down and cut out every animal that could be cut out. Soon I realized that the attempt of creating an archive was somewhat silly as it was impossible to actually cut out *every* animal, but also because it didn't reflect on my initial urge to take the archive further. However, I finished my self-imposed assignment and have a box with roughly 400 animals to this day. I made a one minute video with them, assigning each animal a sound, and by only giving them a split of a second to appear, the video became a fast and absurd-sounding tour de Zoo.[35]

After I had failed to create a classic archive, I started to create new animals. I

33 See Appendix

34 Of course, no pictures are just there, there is always someone that took them. I am referring to the above mentioned "unawareness of the operator", in a sense the death of the author that Barthes himself wrote about. Pictures that are not there to show me something but simply exist, or that only become a picture through me, the viewer. I am completely aware of issues of copyright etc., but that shall not be part of this essay.

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put together fish, birds and deer and so formed new species. I followed an urge to appropriate those animals, to make them my invention. By mixing their body parts, I created my own series of new life forms.[36] Involuntarily I questioned the archive of the animal world because who knew if my creatures existed in reality? Were my created lifeforms less valuable because they hadn't entered in the canon of categorized science ? Ultimately, what remained of the work was one image that functions as a representative for all the rest: It doesn't depict the animal, but the white spot that is left after I had cut it out.[37]

I realized that I had transgressed beyond simply recording and collecting as categorization and that I had developed a "para-archive".[38] I had created images that were a visual impossibility. Pictures that didn't correspond with reality or my idea of it. And because my sense of reality is formed through my memory, the mental archive of the past, I unsettled the archive to get through to the memory. My images were telling me about memories that I didn't know I had.

One artist that works with the archive is the lebanese Walid Raad. His work deals with questions about how knowledge is produced, circulated and archived.[39] His focus of interest is post-war Lebanon, but his working method shines a light on a larger context: the archive becomes a pool of information that is there for the artist to be manipulated. As his synonymous Atlas Group, Raad uses photography and film, lectures and text to engage in a critical discourse on how history is being archived and recounted, thereby shifting the line between fiction and authorized knowledge. Indonesian-dutch artist Fiona Tan[40] and the british Tacita Dean[41] work with archives to create stories that rather evolve around obscure traces than specific well-known events. The sources both artists use are almost popular, but they twist them according

36 See Appendix

37 See Appendix

38 In his text *Critique of Archival Reason*, Henk Slager uses the term in the context of "a demonstration of the impossibility to categorize the contingent for the sake of representation". The para-archive is a reaction to the archive insofar as it finds a new form of representing a knowledge through appropriation, sampling, interpretation and interrogation without categorizing it in already established structures, thereby deconstructing a canon and opposing hierarchy. The para-archive is a tool to "derange the symbolic order". Slager, p.77

39 Gloria Sutton on The Atlas Group/ Walid Raad in: TJ Demos (ed.): New Perspectives in Photography. Phaidon, London, 2006, p.18

40 Especially *News From The Near Future* (2003), a quasi documentary about stormy weather, shipwrecking and other natural difficulties assembled from found film footage, aroused my attention. Kunsthallen Nicolai, Copenhagen, 2009, in connection with the climate summit

41 British artist Tacita Dean uses found imagery, sometimes just a single photograph, to construct broad stories with no end that feature imaginative and real events, intertwine future, past and present and circulate around "utopia" as "no place" in its literal meaning. See Hal Forster: An Archival Impulse. October Vol. 110 (Autumn, 2004), pp.3-22

to their own sense of storytelling.[42] The way they look at the material they use seems almost like a gaze without using the eyes. The stories that unfold are often uncanny, and they accomplish to touch me without my will. Even if I have no idea what it is about that I see, I get a feeling for it. Their work reaches the core of countermemory: By retrieving bits and pieces from a pool of authorized knowledge and assembling them anew, they create another form of knowledge.

IX. The image as a space

My actions in the photograph, the cutting and twisting, are not only an appropriation process. The destructive force is a method to make the picture an object. By not only looking at it but touching it, cutting into it, the image becomes a mold, a formable material. It is a process that takes time, it extends the split of a second that was needed to take the picture. The third dimension comes into play.

I needed to engage into the third dimension on a different scale. I invented an alter ego of myself, a figure that is neither animal nor human.[43] I made a costume and *became* that figure. I acted as the creature and filmed it. The figure is created through a feeling, it is deaf and blind and in my videos it is pacing the landscape without an aim, lost. The figure doesn't have a name or a real function, but it expresses a condition that I am sometimes in. Being in the costume, I allow myself to fathom that condition. The figure becomes an incorporated memory.

By making videos and using the dimension of time, I became aware of the possibility of expanding an image. By trying out different ways of showing the videos, I began to work in space. I wanted to bring the image off the wall. Size is one way to extend the content through form. Arranging a series of images in a specific manner on the wall is another. The archive/ collection opens up for a play with space. Also books are a way of giving the image space. A book allows to touch the paper, browse through the pages. The image and the object are united.

As I had become certain about the composition within the image, the figurative element so to speak, I started to try to moving the image into space. One

42 "The sources are familiar, drawn from the archives of mass culture, to ensure a legibility that can then be disturbed or *detourné*; but they can also be obscure, retrieved in a gesture of alternative knowledge or countermemory." With *countermemory* I understand all the knowledge that has not (yet) made its way into the archive. Ibid. p.4

43 See Appendix

attempt in that regard was my series „2D Sculptures“. The end result were flat prints on the wall, but my work process was happening in space. My intent was to create forms that were lasting only a short time[44] and that through photography would become a fixed sculpture, but in two dimensions, thus hiding the way the sculpture was made.[45] I wanted to play the M.C. Escher trick that was evoking the same feeling as when I would come to Berlin and find a familiar place turned into an unfamiliar one: Seeing something real, but not really believing it.[46]

An exhibition that opened my eyes for the possibility of an unreal archive was Cypriot artist Haris Epaminondas (b. 1980) show *Vol. I, II & III*.[47] It was truly mindblowing for me to be in a place that displayed found films, photo collages and objects in a manner that was both convincingly abstract and personal. The appropriated material was slightly refined and adjusted, but in such a discreet manner that it was getting away with seemingly being part of a large, canonized context. Her installations came straight from another time.

Since I have build several installations that take the idea of creating an impossible space further. I try to incorporate the visual material that *depicts* an impossibility into space and *make it* an impossibility. My dream would be to build an impossible sculpture.

The first sculpture that took this direction was *The Impossible Box*.[48] It was a simple structure, yet through the two dimensions of the photograph it turned into something impossible.

For my work *Vertical,* I used mirrors to create a depth that came from a screen, faking a waterfall.[49] In *Wishful Thinking*, I intended to create a museum survey about non existing places.[50] I had made collages from photo books about landscapes, I kept the book fold in the middle of the image or the page number at the bottom to suggest the image coming straight from an existing source. I had build a showbox and frames to give the installation a flair of seriousness. I managed to fill the space in a way that it suggested to showing artefacts from a real archive without having the visual chance

44 I was influenced by Erwin Wurm, an austrian artist who with his One Minute Sculptures combined the volatility of a shaky balance with the durability of a sculpture.
See Appendix
45 See Appendix
46 M.C. Escher (1898-1972) was a dutch graphic artist that was most popular for his architectural drawings which would, at a close look, reveal to be impossible structures.
47 Malmö Konsthall, 2009. www.harisepaminonda.com
48 See Appendix
49 See Appendix
50 See Appendix

of actually being real, thus unsettling the reality of the space. In *Waterfall*, I tried to make an impossible sculpture, using materials that were not bearing any resemblance to the organic structure of a waterfall.[51] The installation was my personal interpretation of a waterfall: confusing, inaccurate and not satisfying an expectation.

All my works evolve around the idea of images that are not to be deciphered through the *studium* but rather resonate memories, a lost world and visual weirdness. The new field for me is the set of difficulties connected with display, the arrangement of imagery in space and the sculptural element of any artwork. Only recently I started to let go of the wall as the place for an image. It feels like an inevitable continuation of what I have been doing. My notion is that the image itself *is* space, and our vision of space is an image.

As I live in Iceland now, my visual material has changed, but the aim remains the same: To mess up the certainty of what I consider reality. I have come a long way from using the camera randomly and finding through images that what I was doing was using the camera to reproduce an inner drive. Photography has showed me what my motor of creation consists of.

I still want to believe in the photograph as a slice of reality, but I also know that it has the power to deconstruct that very same reality. To take an image for an echo of a memory and not a depiction of the real is what I have learned.

51 See Appendix

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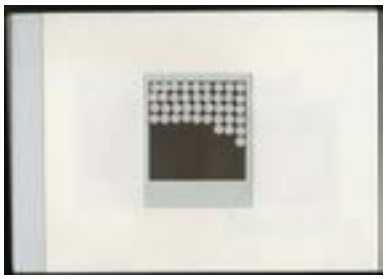
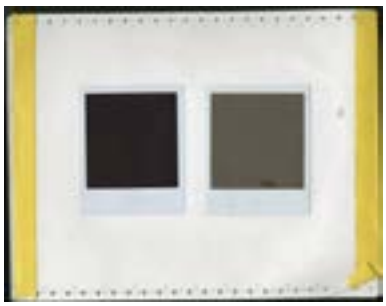
Appendix



4
5 books with polaroids, ca. 100 pages each book, about 1000 pictures in all.
2004-2008

19
L'Inconnue de la Seine
A popular death mask from the late 1880ies, it became an often seen item in artists homes




18
Women, 2006
extract

28
Berlin. Before/ After, 2011
The postcards mainly depict popular touristic sites. An interesting extension of this work could be to revisit places that have no specific touristic value, but then again it is difficult to find postcards of such places.

33
Ode To Destruction, 2011
framegrabs

32
Reichstag, 2011

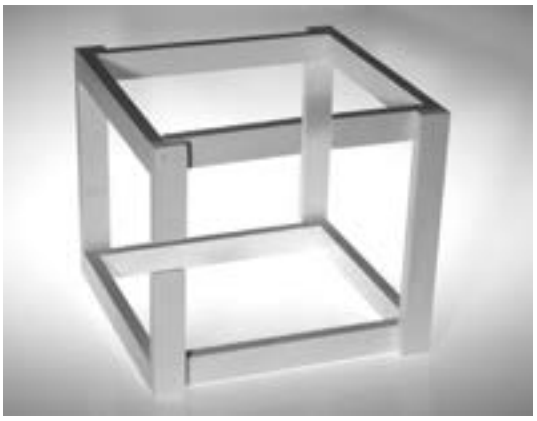
35
Animal Show, 2010
framegrabs

37
Spread Wings And Gone, 2010

36
Fortasse Existunt, 2009
The latin title is meant to mirror a scientific experimental approach.

43
The, 2010 (8mm filmstills)

45
2D Sculptures, 2009 (extract)



48
The Impossible Box, 2011

49
Vertical, 2010
It is probably obvious that I was not yet accustomed to taking pictures of my installations. Ironically.

50
Wishful Thinking, 2011
Installation of three parts

51
Waterfall, 2011