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Frank Mädler – On photographic images: an attempt at a determination

The photograph of a Late Baroque church in the snow, half its dilapidated roof covered with a makeshift tarpaulin, was taken in a small village called Vižňov in northern Bohemia. The ailing architecture is mirrored in the image medium that underlies the print. Indeed, in the part of the photograph featuring the frontal spire of the church there are two circular holes in the photographic film. And through this irregular aperture the viewer's gaze alights on what is supposedly a black underlying background, but is in fact merely the reversal of the light achieved during the exposure in the laboratory.<sup>i</sup> For Frank Mädler, the flaw – attributed to an error during the development process – makes this photograph the pivotal image in the six-part series from 2011 entitled *Wiesen* [Meadows], which loosely references his own family history.<sup>ii</sup> The defect serves to highlight the fact that the poetically melancholy atmosphere is generated not just by the winter location itself, but equally by the photographic means themselves. Indeed, the complete or partial blurring effect is to be interpreted very much in that sense. Like a filter, it interposes itself between motif and viewer as a visual irritant, as the expression of a specific view of the world that hints at the aesthetic level at what is being mediated in terms of content: the question of proximity and distance, of past and present, and perhaps also the sense of grief and loss. All of which is merely intimated. Whether it's the graphic outline of the branches of a fruit tree with the red splashes of unpicked apples or the wooden fence arrayed in front of a snow-covered meadow: in terms of motif the photographs are pared back to a minimum to open up a space for thought as we contemplate them, and also to probe the viewing experience and the emotions it triggers.

Frank Mädler is an artist whose medium is (analogue) photography, and for some twenty years now he has adopted a serial-conceptual approach to create images that are far from easy to critique. The notion of the filter may well be one way in to his work; in the blurring effect achieved with *Wiesen*, it is certainly used as a knowledge-enhancing moment. But a filter not in the sense of a mechanical, apparatus-based device, but in the epistemological sense of an invitation to reflect on what photography actually is. Indeed, Frank Mädler's works are explorations of the photographic, a means and an end to the process of image production, images that can only be produced in this way and, therefore, can only take on one format, one specific form.

A retrospective gaze reveals key elements that always have to do with life circumstances that condition specific themes or approaches. In Frank Mädler's case we should mention cities

such as Leipzig, Madrid, Toronto and Cuenca, but ultimately these biographic pointers are actually irrelevant: everything could have happened or taken place elsewhere just as easily. For Mädler it is more about drawing on the coincidences of the here and now, the interplay between what is found on site and what is created out of it. So these are ultimately location-independent and time-transcending interests that emerge and then shape his work in its modified state. Particularly telling in this respect is a work such as *Traktor*, from 1997, part of the *Landeinwärts* [Inland] group of works: it depicts a heavy equipment vehicle travelling along a tree-lined pit along the bottom edge of the picture. This entire composition has been set in motion, as if an earth tremor had produced the momentum. It is mired in blurriness: contours dissolve and the horizon is tilted slightly to the left. The sense of instability is captured by the bright yellow sky that fills the industrial landscape. Knowing that a sky such as this is to be found in Sweden is as relevant as it's unimportant. Indeed, the blue colour portions were filtered out during the enlargement process, thereby intensifying the yellow. As a result, this particular sky is to be found everywhere and nowhere; it exists solely in the artist's intention to give it this particular form. Some twenty years later a similar question occupied Frank Mädler. *Brandung* [Surf] consists of five large-format panels with the motif of three wave crests, captured in continuous movement from left to right. A filter that eliminates blue was again used in the laboratory to enhance the golden-metallic light of a stormy atmosphere that was experienced in the situation, but not captured on film, an atmosphere into which this non-locatable phenomenon is immersed. The sky and the unsettled expanse of water, both virtually monochrome, appear to merge with one another. In the enlargement the imposing format of the prints (1.2 m x 1.8 m) brings the grain of the film to the fore. The panoramic experience of the photographs within the space certainly goes hand in hand with a sense of aesthetic overpowering and yet, at that very same moment, it is offset with the reveal of its design. Photography alone allows a movement to be deconstructed into visually frozen individual moments linked unalterably with that movement's progress over time – an experience the human eye is unable to make in the natural process of visual perception. Here the grain acts in harmony with the manipulated colouring as a means of triggering reflections on the production process, yet without even the hint of didactic suggestion; too stark is the visual impression that parries any analytical penetration with a synthesizing visual experience.

This equilibrium is characteristic not just of those works in which the filtering modes are used in the production process – for instance the blurred motion due to long exposure times in *Basic Motion* – or in post-production, but also of those which use image-inherent elements,

i.e. elements found in the reality outside the image and captured on camera, elements that work as a productive disruption.

This interpretation certainly pertains to the seven-part sequence entitled *Gold*, created in Prague, a city to which Frank Mädler has an ambivalent relationship. Expelled during a stay there in the GDR era, he returned to Prague for the first time in 2011. The title alludes to the image of the Golden City as promoted by the tourism sector marketing, yet Mädler undermines it subtly by simultaneously showing and not showing Prague. Indeed, the view from the Petřín hill down onto the architecture of the Little Quarter stretching out below and the old city centre opposite is an obscured view, based on a complex interplay between foreground and background. While famous buildings such as the main tower of St Vitus Cathedral or the Charles Bridge are recognisable, the view is obstructed by the dense meshwork of leafless branches and twigs in the foreground. Like a dark, restless linear drawing they represent a parallel plan to the plane of the film. And running contrary to the principles of aerial perspective, the foreground itself has become blurry; by contrast, the city stretching out into the depth of the picture, perceptible in the gaps between the branches as it lies resplendent in the sunlight, is in sharp focus and clearly captured.

Quite different in its form, but comparable with *Gold* in its probing is the 2007 work *UT Silber*, something of a counterpart also through its title. For this work Frank Mädler used appropriated material, i.e. postcards used for advertising purposes by wedding photographers in Italy, Spain and Portugal. They depict loving couples in stereotypical scenes recreated for wedding albums, a sort of re-enactment of their relationship featuring their first ever meeting and special moments. The ideal of love is undermined by the creases and tears of the originals found on postcard stands. The transparency breaks open, a mechanism further enhanced by the light reflections created when the photographs were taken. The mediatisation itself is exposed, and the photo of a photo becomes visible. The exposure onto metallic paper further accentuates the sentimental motifs of the pictures, but without exposing them, as it were, to ridicule. There is something of a nostalgic moment in there, too, with *UT* standing for *untrennbar*, the German word for inseparable.

A poetic, romantic sentiment is associated with the series *Seerosen* [Water Lilies], a motif Frank Mädler has come across in various places over many years. And yet it is about something other than the nature motif, which in a way is merely the motive for a reflection on what constitutes an image. These fifteen photographs, some monumental in size, are inevitably reminiscent of Monet's paintings by virtue of their panel-like character; here Frank Mädler explores the relationship between two-dimensionality and depth, light and dark, and

the potential of colour contrasts. The essence of photography as a two-dimensional medium is rendered through the motif. The plant's floating leaves, green, delicate pink or silver in sheen, are resting directly on the water, tripling the concept of two-dimensional flatness, particularly in those instances where the water is rendered opaque through reflected light. A metallic glimmer prevents us from glimpsing into its depths. In other photographs, the space that lies beneath the surface is hinted at darkly through the slender red flower stems drooping downwards. But sometimes they look more like intersecting lines. The fact that these are purely optical phenomena that could not be observed in nature itself is impressively demonstrated by the photograph in which the stems, which are actually straight, suddenly appear curved due to the refraction of light. In his study entitled *Bilder aus Versehen* [inadvertent images] Peter Geimer writes about the impossibility of making a clear distinction in scientific photography between 'intended effects and unwanted disturbances'<sup>iii</sup>. Neither one nor the other applies to the laconically entitled *Quer mit Bogen*. Instead, the phenomenon stands for a momentum in which the unintended is paradoxically transformed into precisely what constitutes the essence of the image. It can be a fish swimming in the deep blue that is only spotted on the photograph itself, not in the instant where the camera was trained on a birch branch floating on the water; or the realisation that the colourful birds observed in Spain are not parrots, but in fact brightly painted pigeons. Frank Mädler named the ensuing work *Eintracht*, or concord, with the birds in their colourful appearance photographed at times as a flock and at others individually, flying against the sky. While this series, like *Gold*, was created over a short period of time, other groups of works are the result of, at times, several years of activity. Motifs that are always valid as individual images, too, are collected over long periods of time and then, at some point, grouped together as a series. The actual dating therefore provides no indication whatsoever of the point in time at which the individual photographs were taken. Here the filter is time, and it is only as we sift through the archives that content-related lines begin to emerge.

The group of works entitled *Kopal*, more than 1,000 Polaroids taken over a period of sixteen years, addresses the aspect of time itself.<sup>iv</sup> Almost daily since the mid-1990s Frank Mädler has used an instant camera to take one of these unique photos of people, places, situations, and objects.<sup>v</sup> *Kopal* is arguably his most personal work and also transferable as a study of the particularity of the quotidian. In this chronological arrangement, series are created in which particular formal interests and private emphases are condensed and then make way for others – with the constants represented by individual persons, usually children, in whose gradual ageing the passage of time becomes manifest.

Condensed in two photographs that are part of *Apollo* from 2016 we find the pursuit that runs through Frank Mädler's entire oeuvre, namely discovering in the reality beyond the image that which is impressive, wondrous or sufficiently aesthetically appealing to assert its very own reality as an image in its own right. It can be a detail, something otherwise overlooked, a water stain perhaps. The composition features two circles aligned with reflective symmetry against a bright background: one small grease spot covered in grains of sand and floating on shallow water and its shadow cast on the sandy soil. This particular formation, unspectacular in and of itself, is in fact dissolved by the very next wave, and yet as a photograph of quasi abstract quality almost two metres in height it acquires an absolute presence: with the ephemeral specified visually. *Baum im Wald* [Tree in the Forest] operates along similar lines, except that here it is not a detail, but a much larger section of landscape that is captured, namely a stand of coniferous forest. In *Wege* [Paths] from 2003 Frank Mädler had already taken photographs of water, fields and meadows from an elevated position so these motifs usually fill the entire area of the image. These largely monochrome surfaces are structured by furrows, waves or wheel tracks. In *Baum im Wald*, however, a weather-related phenomenon lends its specific form to the section of forest shot from above. Heavy rain is falling in the space between camera and forest, its soft filter obscuring the situation. Even the contours of the trees are now barely recognisable, the stand merging instead into an undulating, dark-green mass out of which the wind-tossed crown of a single deciduous tree stands out luminously. This time the blurring effect is not generated photographically; rather, it is gained from nature itself, but it is a photographic phenomenon nonetheless that once again demands to be specified as such.

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<sup>i</sup> The photograph was taken by analogue means, with the print itself subsequently digitised.

<sup>ii</sup> See Agnes Matthias: *Heimat? Osteuropa in der zeitgenössischen Fotografie*, Kunstforum Ostdeutsche Galerie Regensburg exhibition catalogue, Bielefeld 2013, p. 36.

<sup>iii</sup> Peter Geimer: *Bilder aus Versehen. Eine Geschichte fotografischer Erscheinungen*, Hamburg 2010, p. 94.

<sup>iv</sup> Photography as a daily activity – as a form of visual spiritual exercise – also characterises the 2013 work entitled *Pen*, in which digital images are reworked on a tablet computer using a drawing program.

<sup>v</sup> See Frank Mädler. *Kopal*, Fotohof edition Vol. 186, Salzburg 2013.