

## **Words about images about images about words**

(Text of the exhibition catalogue „In the Light of Shadows - Photography and the Presence of the Past“ with Susanne Greven, Kapa, Wojciech Prazmowski, Salvatore Puglia, Stadtmuseum Siegburg 1993, by Ralph Hinterkeuser)

Whatever the affliction, I am always beset with loss – loss of time, peace, money, esteem, my mind, the ground under my feet, friends, my beloved, my self-respect. We pass our days swimming against a tide of fleeting moments; we flounder into the future with every passing second – a future that assigns the current moment to the past. I only become aware of my adolescence at the moment of its end, and perhaps I will become conscious of my finiteness at the moment of my death only. Throughout our lives we endure a state of paradoxy. Every expectation, be it desired or feared, every memory, be it good or bad, distracts our attention from the momentary, deprives our mind of the only true moment of our very existence. Happiness and fortune are always somewhere else. And all endeavours to achieve a betterment of our lives merely multiply our losses.

The inventiveness of humanity is based on an incessant sense of insufficiency, want and loss. Creative artists are, by popular belief, those who suffer most intensely in this respect. Their proverbial, secular suffering is the precondition of their work, but also an impediment. Awareness is the artist's source of inspiration in the fine arts, literary work, music and philosophy. Each work is no more and no less than an exercise in presence of mind – a means of survival.

Photography is the perfect example of how we try to minimize the suffering caused by loss. Photography is quite unique in the simplicity of its approach to the problem: At the dividing line between past and future, photography records everything, at once, forever. It is an unerring prop for fading memories in the hastening pace of this heightened industrial age, and provides a rapidly expanding humanity with an affordable means for self-assurance. The response to the current pillage of landscape resources are picture of some distant paradise. Photography is a compliant art that will uncomplainingly accommodate conflicting perceptions, thus endowing itself with the aura of objectivity. Those actually indulging in photography are hardly affected by such contradictory conjectures. The professional photographer pursues specific aims, whereas the amateur preserves specific moments merely for their beauty. This results in an unparalleled flood of overlapping pictures that cancel each other out. Reality becomes obscured, banality is preserved for eternity, and tragedies sink into a sea of platitude. Faced with this mind-numbing

blanket of conformity, viewers invariably pass over the emptiness and become withdrawn. As early as in 1927 Siegfried Kracauer remarked: "In the illustrated magazines the public perceives the world the realisation of which is prevented by the magazines." The overwhelmed consumers withdraw to the private sphere of their own small world. The number of photo albums and shoeboxes filled in this manner are legion. How many times is there someone smiling into the camera? Yet these smiles neither change the ultimate fate of these pictures nor of those portrayed. For, as the life of the portrayed is finite, so the pictures rarely survive longer than a generation. And why should they? Memories don't last longer, anyway.

The artists exhibiting here attempt to rekindle a light in the darkness of these shadows. They are confronted with the challenge of this paradox when a definitive photo images a given moment, thereby visualizing the transitory nature of the present and the transient freezing of time. Susanne Greven, Kapa, Wojciech Prazmowski and Salvatore Puglia have taken advantage of the retrogressive nature of this medium to look into its future. They exploit the vitality stored in discarded photos – photos that have fulfilled their purpose and have become detached from the onetime context of their creation.

Kapa presents us with heroes of days gone by – the principal and supporting actors of a play that has long been taken off the stage. Their portraits have become unidentifiable, and therefore meaningless, to their descendants. Their identity extinguished with the passing of their life. All that now remains is the face of a person who is no more. Kapa merges their portraits with his own creations, some of them resembling stagelike productions. The props – like the people – are from gone by days and have become marked by the course of history: Books totally disintegrated into meaningless paper and print, bearers of memories, but memories of what: *Short Stories*. Perhaps they only conjure up the distant ambience of the forests whence they originated. Another of Kapa's pieces is composed of matt black charred and sooty boards and poles. Like in the past planks drifting to the shore announced the sinking of ships, so here perhaps for the last time faint likenesses appear like those of a sunken crew.

It is hardly surprising that works from Poland, as those by Wojciech Prazmowski, present the tribulations of loss as pain. His *War Machine* bears the semblance of a toy, but also that of a funeral procession laying childhood to rest. Images of a threatened or long lost peace appear as a dark dream, except that this dream is a hideous reality. The noise of battle has been sustained as it echoes through little more than letters and faded photos. Yet this past is constantly catching up

with us. Europe – *Fin de Siècle*: once again the vicious circle of violence has closed to resurrect the course of death and destruction. Thousands of nameless *Soldiers*, arranged as a crucifix or perhaps an angel, look down upon us. The fragility of Pracmowski's photo sculptures underscore the transitoriness of power and its symbols and emphasize the total loss of safety and stability that assails the people in times of war, making them the victims of their own fears and hopes.

Salvatore Puglia's relics sealed in lead and glass confront us with a tremendous flood of human communication endeavours: A silent, yet immensely eloquent sea of sounds, letters, gestures and colours; of interpretations and projections from the worlds of science and poetry; an orchestration of hopes directed towards the highest aspirations and objectives; a kaleidoscope of attempts to make manifestations tangible and meaningful; the presentation of interdependencies and illumination of paths to lead us through the darkness. The purpose of X-ray photographs is to make the invisible visible, to give the human eye penetrating faculties. Yet, at some point, they once more reach impenetrable layers, meaningless details, and cloud our perception of the interdependencies. Puglia merges the ruins of these failed cognition attempts into an absurd mosaic that refutes synthesis, and where meaning is purposely not enforced, thus becoming the creator of pure poetry. *Aschenglorie* is an indication of what will possibly survive. Even though this may not be material, the collective memory could still form the culmination of a search for sense and purpose that has lasted for many thousands of years.

Through the wall-filling installation piece of Susanne Greven we finally encounter the galaxy of present time – the universe embracing our minutes, hours and days. Myriads of brainwaves, flashes of inspiration, fragments of memory, moments and encounters are all sucked down by a whirlpool of cognisance, to reappear as a free association of memories, only to be instantly replaced by new old pictures that merge with the flood of impressions from the present, to create the colour that is determining our character and our own particular perception of the world. Each picture now has its own shade, its own size, its own valency within the subjective filtering system of our perception faculties. The world is as you see it. Everything revolves around outward appearances which, in turn, only revolve around you.

A photographic representation of life results from an appropriate composition of shadow and light, fixed on a sensitive support. In the test-tube of an exhibition again a primeval solution of thousands of photos is – perhaps – transformed into microscopic particles of life.