

Directness is the most befitting word for Katja Liebmans's photographic work.

She has engaged with the history of the medium and works with apparatus from the dawn of photography including self-made pinhole cameras, or simple fix-focus cameras. This reticence in the photographic process is part of her strategy.

Amongst others it is this elementary practice which leads to the directness of the images. With growing experience the artist succeeds to realize her conception of the possibilities within this method and in doing so incorporates the surprises that this technology offers.

The long exposure time offers the possibility of recording the interplay and concurrence between incidents. It is precisely this that fascinates Katja Liebmans in her work with the pinhole cam. The result of the extended exposure shows us moments and situations that in reality we could not see, our eyes do not exist in this way. In order to achieve this, the artist presents sequences of the same motif in which the single photographs support each other and clarify the concept. Series, sequence and repetition are methods of presentation in which the single motif finds confirmation and continuation. The images are all regarded as being equal. The artist abstains from seeking the single, selected image in as much as she dispenses with the principle of sequential progression. In the images the viewer sees time embodied. Actions that have a time factor are noticeable, events in front of the camera have a longer duration which in turn, due to the exposure time of the camera can only be captured in detail. On the other hand, short term events disappear; passersby become shadows, perceptions of time change. Repeated images of a detail or a scene differentiate time even further, which the photographs communicate step-by-step.

Although the resulting photographs appear to be objective, the photographer is always a part of the decision making process; developing the concept, determining the position of the camera, as well as deciding upon the motif and the duration of the exposure. The intimacy between the artist and the apparatus, as much as that between the apparatus and the external world leads to a pureness of the event and an exceptional convergence with the world in which we live. It is just a by-product that a reflection on the tradition and the beginnings of photography is also connected.

The catalogue and exhibition contain five groups of work from the last two decades. In 1993 "Balkon" (Balcony) was created. It is the view from a camera obscura on to Elisabethkirch Street in East Berlin. The photographer leaned against the railings of a balcony. The camera captured her and a part of the surrounding environment. On this grey day an exposure time of 8 minutes was approximated. The result recalls the work of Daguerre whose famous composition (Boulevard du Temple", Paris 1838) is, according to legend, one of the earliest photographs ever taken. Unlike the setting on the balcony, the street in the distance hardly changes in appearance. The diversity of time intervals is a result we can observe in these series.

A year later the series "Grenzstreifen" (Borderland) was created. The chosen location was, due to political circumstances, for decades an inaccessible and undeveloped stretch of green where the Berlin Wall stood. The artist placed the camera on this stretch of green. Behind grass and shrubs isolated high rise tenement blocks are visible. One can see that they once belonged to a built-up street and after the war remained isolated. Katja Liebmans does not stress such relationships, yet they are intrinsically present, particularly because the borderland itself was a product of the post war confrontation.

The artist lay down in the grass in front of the camera obscura, with her face close up. Due to the long exposure time the portrait appears frozen. The difference between nature and man, between wild grass and a face is reduced, if not nullified. In this context, the transient becomes questionable. In addition, the viewer perceives the distance between the head and the building in the background and the relations and proportions of the details, otherwise the image would seem unreal, alien to the subject. A further distancing tool is the black and white of the image; it resists a romantic excessiveness and aids in objectivity.

The photographic series "Wasser" (Water) from 1998 consists of three images of a lake in Mecklenburg, taken with a fix-focus camera. In this instance the artist also incorporates herself as motif; she swims in the lake and also controls the operation of the camera. The exposures contain both the surface of the water

reflections from the subtly shifting water and between dark shores a turbulent surface filled with bright splinters of light. For this work, Katja Liebmans chose a blue colour tone, paralleling the motif of the water. This blue is also more suited to the feeling of happiness captured here rather than the abstraction of black and white.

In contrast to the older works, in this series a new element is included, that of movement. Like the notion of time, movement is multifaceted firstly visible through translocation, then in the minimal movement of the hand that holds the camera which cannot be kept still when swimming, and finally in the abundance of the vibrating

reflections that, through the movement of the water at the moment of exposure, lose their coherence. Here, to a certain extent, the principle of early cinema is implied.

A year later, in 1999 the series "Garten" (Garden) was made. That was also produced using a self-made camera that the artist placed in an apparently well-liked area of a garden on a still, but cloudy day. The exposure time amounted to between thirty and forty minutes. Because the plants did not move in front of the pinhole they have become a dark black, they are precise and reproduced with a substantial volume. It is not the orderliness of the garden, the rows of plants so similar to each other that are seen, but the individual plants with large fruits. In these images the garden is not the domesticated world, but rather the bush with fruits that may well grow in a garden, but nevertheless represents nature. The photographic adjustment that Katja Liebmman deliberately makes overrides the conflict between garden and nature, as does the purposeful reduction to black and white and the intensification of black through the lengthy exposure time.

Ten years after taking the photographs at the Lake in Mecklenburg, in 2008, the artist also bathed the photographic series "Fahrt" (Journey) in blue tones. She records a train journey in East Frisia on a rainy day, photographed through the train window. Here the photographic equipment does not play such an important role and a conventional camera is used. From time to time a picture will be taken, in which characteristic motifs are recorded a cottage, bridges over rivers and canals, an oncoming train, moments that reflect the character of East Frisia in an unsentimental manner, with an atmosphere that could have a rather oppressive affect. Yet the blue toning works contrary to the melancholy mood.

The title "German Landscapes" sums up the facts of the case: The images were taken in Berlin, Mecklenburg and East Frisia, in German Landscapes and cityscapes. The phenomenon in this exhibition is the simplicity with which complex concepts such as time, space, and movement, in connection with photographic procedures are brought forward for consideration. The instant of exposure is a process of elucidation. Without any kind of ideological intention, the work leads back to the core comprehension of reality. Numerous factors influence our day-to-day vista; mechanisation, the zeitgeist, visual overload, all based less and less on seeing directly. The work of Katja Liebmman shows the alternative to this form of perception in which she once again opens up new paths and closed areas.

Jürgen Weichardt / *1933-2025
German art historian, art collector,
writer, editor, and patron of the arts