

Repetition and Transience

Time and Image in the Work of Katja Liebmann

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"Kierkegaard lesend No. 5" (Reading Kierkegaard No.5) is the title Katja Liebmann gave to a photographic self-portrait from 2002. Her head is depicted from the front, viewed from above, with her chin resting on her left hand. Beneath it lies a sheet of white paper on an open double-page, the text set flush - just as written philosophy always appears in books. However: The artist will not actually be able to read the text in such a position, even though her eyes are cast downward in the image, suggesting a state of deep concentration.

The concept behind this small series of nine images is that the (implied) reading time corresponds exactly to the camera's exposure time: thinking coincides with seeing and with being seen in the image. As seemingly minor as this series may appear within Katja Liebmann's extensive oeuvre, it nevertheless highlights several key aspects of her working method

First, there is temporal positioning: Katja Liebmann has left "Gotham City", which so preoccupied her in the 1990s; she has removed the mask and become visible as herself, later, for instance, in the 2006 series "Niemals endend" (Never Ending). The Kierkegaard self-portrait is exhibited again in 2026, and philosophical references continue to appear in subsequent works.

Self-reflection - beyond the instrumental use of specific imaging techniques - forms a foundation of Katja Liebmann's art. In this context, her employment of photographic processes is closer to *téxvn* (*téchne*) than to mere technique - that is, a form of craft that accompanies intellectual processes in order to make them visible. This is also how the use of old and obscure photographic processes should be understood: they are not merely procedures for creating visual effects - although such effects ensure attention in the visual arts - but evidence of an intensive engagement with the fundamentals of human perception.

One of Søren Kierkegaard's major works from 1843 bears the title "Die Wiederholung" (Repetition). For him, repetition is one of the fundamental principles by which the individual orients itself in the world - and this is precisely where Katja Liebmann's artistic concept starts:

She constructs a working method with a predictable image form - for example, using a large cardboard box as a pinhole camera to produce equally large negative images - and repeats the process over an extended period. This may involve, for instance, repeatedly travelling along the same bus route past the same square using the pinhole camera, photographing from a moving or stationary vehicle. This repetition serves to raise awareness of her own artistic practice. At some point, there is enough repetition and a series of images is selected - those that meet her own criteria of memory and composition, which are not necessarily linguistically definable in advance. This is followed by the process of artistic elaboration and especially further decisions regarding the repetition of earlier methods of image printing and presentation. This will be discussed in more detail later.

Repetitions characterise some, though not all, of Katja Liebmann's image series; all, however, are shaped by the moment - the shortest possible unit of temporal perception. The artist walks across a bridge in Berlin, thereby altering the position of her photographs and, with it, the perspective. Changes in traffic and the sun's position, along with the corresponding shadows, also become apparent. While the repetitions during the bus journeys and on the bridge are more sequential, in the series "Grenzstreifen" (Border Strip), they become discrete moments that only form a narrative when viewed together and they include - as is occasionally the case with Katja Liebmann's work - self-portraits as part of the pictorial scene. Other series are based on journeys, mostly on public transport with views through the window. In these works, the serial connection must be established by the viewer through the visual similarities between individual images. Groups of images, such as "Seismographische Aufzeichnungen" (Seismographic Recordings), already hint at repetitions in their titles, yet each consists of entirely independent images based on a concept combining photography and drawing.

Some of the image-making techniques employed by Katja Liebmann are rediscoveries rather than repetitions. This begins with her preferred use of the pinhole camera, which, in art photography around 1900 was regarded as a guarantee of a specifically direct form of photography without glass - a category of apparatus that guarantees the artist long exposure times combined with a great depth of field and is thus well-suited to works in which exposure time plays a significant role. In doing so, Katja Liebmann also places herself within a tradition of conceptual photography that, in the 1970s and 1980s, included constructing the photographic apparatus. Here, Vilém Flusser's dictum of "playing against the apparatus" is particularly relevant, as the artist redirects it toward the resulting images. A similar observation applies to Katja Liebmann's second rediscovery: cyanotype. This technique, too, was introduced into the artistic engagement with photography around 1900 and was long regarded as a specifically feminine technique. For Katja Liebmann, however, what matters is solely the monochromatic colour effect produced by this technique. It evokes both the fading of memory and the shadowy nature of the passing of time; above all, it is the subtle gradations within the monochrome spectrum - ranging between brown and turquoise - that generate the sensation of perceiving transience.

This also applies to the third technical component in the artist's work: the use of simple, older cameras with lenses that produce optical distortions, unreliable shutters and imprecise film transport mechanisms - in the latter case, especially those lacking rewind locks, which allow for full or partial double exposures on a single negative. Here, too, traditions exist - from the box cameras used by Paul Strand and Bill Brandt to create individual series, to loosely assembled sequences presented as collages, as in Valie Export's work, and up to the large-scale pictorial tableaux of the 1970s, which demonstrated an 'expanded photography' accompanied by a conceptual linguistic gesture. Many elements of this working method derive from experimental film from Austria and the Federal Republic of Germany, but also from the former GDR, characterised by the excessive use of handheld cameras, extensive blurring and a deliberate critique of technical perfection. By the late 1980s, when Katja Liebmman began her studies, this spirit of experimentation was equally vibrant in both East and West, albeit with very different opportunities for publication - through performance evenings and small offset-printed picture booklets.

All processes, all techniques and the associated tricks are extensively referenced in Katja Liebmman's oeuvre, whilst being transferred to a different level of understanding. The old, cumbersome and seemingly outdated photographic processes - which Katja Liebmman also teaches at university level - are neither ends in themselves, nor are they merely aesthetic stylistic device in the sense of a nostalgic glorification of bygone times. For that, the image motifs are far too contemporary; automobiles, advertising signs, and other markers allow for temporal identification. Over the years, the serial elements evolve and the techniques become more refined. For a while, the self-portrait becomes part of the visual world, which is then given rather ironic titles in series such as "Grenzstreifen" or "London/Berlin Ornament" - yet the artist's own sense of estrangement in the photographic process cannot be overcome, even through her presence in the image.

The layering of images, which she practises in London at Warring or Victoria Station, gives way to the incidental snapshots of a bus journey and is subsequently laconically labelled as "London 1" or "London 2". Thus, "repetition" gives way to the preceding category of "moment", which in Kierkegaard thought simultaneously points towards the "leap". If repetition now coincides with memory - which occurs almost automatically when viewing Katja Liebmman's images - this gives rise to that "leap" that philosophy understands as the process of becoming human through self-recognition - extending even to Roland Barthes' punctum, which can be found in every work by Katja Liebmman.

Chronologically situated between the two London series is a set of three works. In these three images, she once more stages the three-step sequence of moment, repetition and leap: The first two images, differing only in colour tone, seem to depict the artist leafing through a magazine, containing an image of a door, a young woman in a mirror and an indecipherable word in elegant cursive typography, all presented in a multiple superimposed negative montage. The first, brownish-looking image is repeated as the second in a stronger blue tone, whilst the third image marks the leap. Here, fingers reaching in from the left, appear to be grasping a magazine page that fills the right-hand half of the image, featuring an overexposed photograph - yet the fingers do not move the paper. Iconologically, these three images are quite distinct from the rest of the artist's oeuvre, yet, they draw on her long-established

artistic methodology and function almost paradigmatically as a hinge between earlier, more personal and spatially confined visions and later works that engage with media reflection.

"Wasser" (Water) (or: "Meer" (The Sea), "Fahrt" (Movement) and "Windows" are the central themes of Katja Liebmman's work over the past fifteen years. The earlier techniques remain: pinhole camera or inexpensive equipment, alongside cyanotype - now more frequently refined through toning and altered in their visual character. What had previously appeared merely as an element within a more personal visual narrative, now becomes a central theme: the suspension of time through the photographic act. Water and the sea can-not, in fact, truly be photographed; the temporal fragment captured in the image is essentially meaningless - no one steps into the same river twice - as the ancient saying goes - and the same applies to the photographic depiction of flowing water. The same applies to Movement: The individual moment of image-making is insignificant, but an image with form and meaning emerges, partly through its preparation for viewing. And in the Windows series, the layers of seeing are revealed: photographs taken through windows, views directed at windows, whose reflections are captured and once again photographed through a window - the counterpart to the shadow images of antiquity, in short, drawing with light. Here, an entire medium is recalled in its full historical context; Katja Liebmman's most recent works expand this act of remembrance by introducing a dimension of scale, while retaining the tactile quality that defines all her art.

A first, cursory glance at her work may create the impression of having seen similar pieces elsewhere.

On closer examination, however, it becomes immediately clear that this is not the case. Katja Liebmman creates distinctly contemporary artworks by drawing on all memories - including traumatic ones - that are available to her, and thus to us. In engaging closely with her work, we begin to recognise how our own worldviews are constructed

from layers of memory, which she brings to the surface. Her use of traditional techniques is never an end in itself, but rather a means of conveying the full range of what we are able to see and understand. Over three decades of intensive work, Katja Liebmann has developed an oeuvre that is as idiosyncratic as it is unique, thereby securing her a prominent place in the history of photography.

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