SUPERFICIAL IMAGES
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In this collection of photographs, *Superficial Images*, Peter Tillessen puts a broad spectrum of contemporary culture on show. This culture is, of course, interesting—and participants think of themselves as experts, even if they rarely reflect on this expertise. Tillessen is no critic of what he comes across; nor does he go in for systematic or exhaustive analyses of whatever it is that catches his eye. He seems to take pictures intuitively and to put them aside for future reference, hoping that he can eventually make sense of them and find an appropriate context. Some of his categories are in the public domain, and would be recognised by institutional researchers. He remarks on Wealth, for example, and on Marketing, but without rigour and without taking sides. He seems to have investigated both developed and developing worlds with a great deal of curiosity but with no overall programme in mind. Viewers and readers of *Superficial Images* may be tempted to take the collection as an attractive miscellany drawn from contemporary life and to leave it at that—but they would be wrong to do so.

Interpretation

His tactic is to establish an inclusive continuum made up of readily recognisable small events interrupted from time to time by more structured scenes, which look as if they are meant to be interpreted and to act as prompts for what is to follow. In one of these allegories, right at the beginning of the collection, a man reads a story by Philip Roth, and a woman seated by his side consults a travel timetable. They are in the countryside and engaged in quite different kinds of mental activity. Tillessen doesn't, though, pause to establish a case or to provide a conclusive follow-up, choosing rather to leave his proposals as intriguing possibilities to be borne in mind as he deploys his illustrations. Thus, *Superficial Images* proceeds in a state of creative promise as the artist moves from one topic to another. Each motif introduced reads in a variety of ways, depending on context and precedent. There may be simple thematic connections within a group of images, common properties that suggest a single underlying issue. The reader may be relieved to have found a viable code which looks as if it might apply widely, but finds that it isn't repeated—perhaps intentionally or because of a lack of relevant material. Sometimes, on the other hand, disparate visual material is arbitrarily connected by captioning, deliberately breaking the relationship between word and image. In most cases the relationship between them is self-evident and reassuring, but in some cases it has to be searched for—and even imagined.

Any reader of *Superficial Images* has to think about the kind of epistemological tests set by the author. Tillessen opens, for instance, with a mute image of the back of a van, stationary in a queue at a frontier crossing, at a toll gate, or at a busy filling station. Vans can't be seen into and their contents identified, and sometimes their plates and their inscriptions can't be read. Vans resist comprehension, but at the same time it is consoling to decipher what little there is to read in terms of trade names and numbers. We look for information of any sort, no matter how basic it might be, especially when the alternatives are so uncertain. The vehicle in question is a Chevrolet and its licence number PEC 5756, and the details can be followed up amongst the millions of other similar details held by the US authorities. Why look further, though, for the search might not end there? Tillessen often instigates such searches—and they are worth consideration.

Like the rest of us, Peter Tillessen travels—for he is a professional photographer. He stays in hotels where he is greeted by screened messages. In the Comfort Hotel in the centre of Frankfurt the welcoming screen offers him cordial greetings, as does another in the Sokos Hotel in Lappee in Finland. He records these screened greetings as cultural curiosities, even though they are familiar to most travellers. It would, however, be almost second nature for any reader to wonder just what the Comfort Hotel is like in Frankfurt. TripAdvisor is the obvious place to turn for exhaustive details of the actualities of that particular hotel—as of the other one in Lappee. TripAdvisor is one of the most widely known photographic institutions of our time, with a reputation for telling the truth about cramped living spaces and showing views of oil-stained car parks. Nowadays TripAdvisor is synonymous with hotel-going, less because it contains critical reviews or is especially revealing than because it offers a plenitude of options and evidence. What it generally shows is that most hotel spaces are soon cluttered by their occupants. Beyond that, it touches on questions of evidence, on how legible its photographic records are. To be convinced, it is necessary to look at more and more images, and even then there can be no certainty. What the enquirer is left with are multiple options characterised by marginal differences—and it is this vast epistemological hinterland that fascinates the photographer.

Peter Tillessen issues invitations to investigate. He has taken pictures of a number of yellow and orange buildings somewhere in Germany, and he ascribes them to the property company Josef Funke. Is there such a company? To begin with, we only have his word for it and wonder if it might just be a mischievous invention. There is, however, a group of companies going under that name in Volkmarsen in the Kassel district in central Germany—and they are very well documented, and associated with the

colour orange. One branch of the business, Josef Funke GmbH, specialises in sand and gravel extraction. On a public site in Facebook you can see its heavy goods vehicles and extraction machinery, item by item, along with its workforce at work and play. If you are interested, you can go on to look at other companies active in the haulage and agricultural sectors, and you can make comparisons or just add to your impressions. Thus he invokes thoughts of plenitude, evident in all the road-haulage fleets of central Europe, part of the German *Mittelstand*, the SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) on which so much of the German economy depends.

Superficial Images is the work of an archivist and a showman with surprises in store. His intention appears to be to entertain just as much as it is to inform. His invitations to view are made discreetly enough. There is no obligation, for instance, to enter the archives of TripAdvisor or the database of any US licensing authority, but most of his proposals suggest some degree of finding-out—just to satisfy a natural curiosity. He indicates a stopping point and the visitor, already enchanted by glimpses of life in Josef Funke's sandpit, can't resist the invitation. Here, for instance, in Bangalore is what he describes as a *Barrier to keep out Americans*, made up of bollards set at intervals to restrict and to manage crowd flow on pavements. Well, that at least seems to be its intention. Some of the invitations in *Superficial Images* lead to more and more sensory delights but others lead quickly to imponderables. There is evidently a need for crowd control in Bangalore and for pedestrian management. Before you know it you are in the sphere of policy and social issues. Almost all of Tillessen's files give rise, sooner or later, to abstract thinking on freedom and control—just as the introductory Chevrolet van becomes an item in a databank, managed by an omnipresent authority.

Familiarity is a very important element in photography. We return to Walker Evans's *American Photographs* (1938) because Evans is a fastidious stylist with an eye for arrangements. We revisit Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1958) because of his ways with Death and the Stranger. Tillessen, on the other hand, doesn't act the part of a seer or a moody genius—or a Modern Master. He presents himself as more or less normal, as an Everyman who is very well aware of talent and of high achievement, but who may never himself be in the right spot at the right time to put these qualities into effect. One of his pictures features a young person scrabbling in a cupboard and trying, according to the caption, to transfer a 32-digit PIN number from the Wi-Fi network written on the back of a router. He will have to be careful, for in poor light a lot can go wrong. We can put ourselves in his position and sympathise with him, but only up to a point. Once upon a time photographers asked us to weep with and for the poor and the afflicted (Concerned

Photography). Peter Tillessen, however, likes to point out that we also take a passing interest in events. We pay attention because we don't know exactly what is going on, and don't even care if we misinterpret the scene. This may be the meaning of those pictures that he calls *Täter* which feature men met in the street and taken as potential wrongdoers. We should be ashamed of ourselves to think ill of casual pedestrians, but it is only a game.

History

In his picaresque archaeology of the present moment Peter Tillessen sometimes owns up to bafflement. He lives, as we all do, in History—and photographers have always been inclined see themselves as History Artists. It is almost an obligation to take account of history, and he makes his acknowledgements in a series of history pictures marking the death of such tyrants as Augusto Pinochet (10 December 2006). At the time he must have been travelling at night in a railway train and may have heard the news on the radio. History, as significant event, passes us by, for it takes place elsewhere or without our being properly aware. Nor is it clear nowadays what a historical event amounts to, for it might be the man with the 32-digit PIN number who is actually closest to the core of the contemporary.

History is a problem, for it is a test of worth—certainly as far as photography has been concerned. But if history doesn't present itself to us in an obvious way, what are we to do about it? Tillessen gives it plenty of attention but concludes that in the normal course of events we can't catch it on the wing. Even what seem to be its significant moments don't look any different to any other moments we come across in normal life. Surely, in that case, it is these other moments to which we should be attending, for somehow or other history is embedded in them. We have to attend to them, and hope that something emerges from our attention. He is persistent in his dealings with history, but always sceptical. In Indonesia, for example, he took a picture of a shop window with an advert for STP, an American motor oil company, and in his caption explains that US companies dominate the market. He is working in the manner of Concerned Documentary, one of photography's principal ways of dealing with history. The main figure, though, sleeps on, oblivious to the signs of exploitation writ large above him.

History interests him, largely because of its complexities. The photographer belongs to a noteworthy political family. Both his grandfather and his grandfather's brother were members of *Organisation Consul*, which was responsible, in the early 1920s, for the assassinations of the politicians Matthias Erzberger (1921) and Walther Rathenau (1922). The brothers are mentioned in Günter Grass's *My Century* (1999) and in detailed histories of the post-war years, and in 1922 they would have been marked out as

Täter—or "suspicious persons". Out of curiosity Peter Tillessen has visited and photographed the sites of both killings. His interest in his relatives is understandable, but anyone leafing through *Superficial Images* would want to know more, especially about the very intricate careers of Erzberger and Rathenau. Günter Grass, in his book, gives an account of 1922 in the persona of Theodor Brüdigam, an ex-soldier and informant who was familiar with *Organisation Consul* and with the authorities—who were sometimes one and the same thing. It is soon clear that events in Germany in 1921–2 came thick and fast and would take time to disentangle. The contrast between Peter Tillessen's peaceful sylvan scenes and the mayhem of the early 1920s could hardly be more extreme.

New Photography

Photography is an opportunist's medium. Photographers act in response to intuitions. Around 1930 they imagined the social scene criss-crossed by energies—exemplified by André Kertész's view of the viaduct at Meudon (1928). By 1950, on the other hand, they focused on responsive individuals as staged in the great *Family of Man* exhibition of 1955. By the 1960s they liked to express themselves in a dignified but melancholic monochrome. Modernists, Humanitarians, and Neo-Romantics thought in terms of images that might be presented singly or in complementary relationships. Peter Tillessen's pictures are, by contrast, more like signals intended to introduce sets and topics—unlimited image banks, almost infinitely extensible. What he is pointing to is a prevalent current condition similar to hyper-aesthesia, except that it applies to numbers and to systems. TripAdvisor may deal in discrete images of similar scenes shown a dozen at a time, and Josef Funke displays his haulage units one at a time, but proceed further and you are in a number jungle of the kind experienced by the youth in the corner searching for the 32-digit PIN. As an instance of this, see *Samsung UE75ES9080UXZG*.

Advances in photography are carried out uncertainly by explorers who know that the old modes are outmoded, no matter how imitable they might be. André Kertész in 1928 may not have known just how much of a Modernist he was, for his famous picture taken at Meudon was based on an etching of 1911 (by the American Lyonel Feininger). Pioneers proceed cautiously, for they don't know where the next step will take them. Peter Tillessen, surveying the new world, pauses from time to time to draw breath and to assure fellow travellers that his findings are well within their scope. He makes a nice picture, for instance, in the style of the *Subjektive Fotografie* of the 1950s, of cormorants perched on scaffolding—and another of the beach at Coney Island, a site made popular in the medium in the 1960s by

Robert Frank, another Swiss photographer. He is respectful of tradition, but at the same time puzzled apparently by what he finds. One of his preferred captions runs simply *I saw it*, a disarming remark that transfers some of the responsibility for commentary and interpretation onto the viewer. With such *Superficial Images*, so discreetly introduced, there is no need to feel inhibited. And haven't we seen it all before, on TripAdvisor and elsewhere? Yes, but we may not have looked, nor paused for thought.