FAIRE DIRE AUX IMAGES CE QUE PERSONNE N'OSE SOUPÇONNER QU'ELLES VEUILLENT DIRE

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In the leap year of 2000, Peter Tillessen's photobook *Gold* was brought out by Lars Müller Publishers—it was no larger than a paperback but rather thicker. The only golden thing about it is the book jacket, on which the word "Gold" is embossed, as is Peter Tillessen's name, only smaller. The book contains twenty-one photo series with titles that in part refer to the precious metal: *Gold Rush*, *Gold Piece*, *Silence is Golden*, and *Golden Mice and Golden Hamsters*.

In the series *Gold Rush 2* we find photographs of road workers with their construction machinery in an urban setting. German tax dodgers as well as those from Brazil or wherever—and equally, of course, Zurich taxpayers—will probably recognise the site the workers are digging up. It is indeed the stamping ground of the "gnomes of Zurich" surrounded by the banks Crédit Suisse and the Schweizer Bankverein, now long since swallowed up by UBS. Indeed, who knows, perhaps gold will actually be unearthed in the depths of the vaults on Zurich's Paradeplatz—but to be honest, this idea is a bit of a stretch.

Although the series *Gold Rush 1* also shows road workers digging holes and disappearing up to their waists in the earth, here there is no hopeful promise of any nuggets in waiting and we begin to suspect that the titles may be misleading. This suspicion is confirmed towards the end of the book in the series *Goldvreneli* (Gold Piece). The Swiss Miss or *Goldene Veronika*, as it is correctly rendered in literary language, is a mythical gold coin that older generations of Protestants in Switzerland often received at confirmation. Anyone hoping to find photographic reproductions of this nice shiny coin will be disappointed. Instead we see ten colour photographs—taken from a distance of about eight metres—showing a middle-aged woman from behind, as she wanders through Zurich's Old Town, carrying her shopping bag along the city's *rive droite*. And we haven't the least indication of what her first name might be. No gold then, and no Swiss Miss!

This is Peter Tillessen's method. Throughout the book. Getting images to talk, in a way we have never "heard" them before. Imputing things to his photos in order to escalate the ambiguity of the images to a critical point. This is a main artery in Tillessen's work: getting to the heart of the relationship that we have with pictures. That is to say, you either have faith or you don't. "Images, that's a matter of faith"—as Marie-José Mondzain put it in a talk held at the Centre de la photographie Genève in February 2016.

And to plunge us into complete bewilderment when we look at the pictures, another of Tillessen's series also includes a good number of people carrying bags—as well as large parcels and packs of loo paper as big as a child. But we don't see them as Swiss Misses, not by a long chalk. The artist has grouped them all under the title *Sherpas*.

Tillessen doesn't make things easy for us—on the contrary, he makes them more difficult. And we can't put much hope in the pen of an author who, with the best will in the world, caters to this very special way not necessarily of seeing the world but certainly of labelling it. Tillessen can certainly fall back on the history of twentieth-century modern art, on Alphonse Allais, who in 1897 gave the title *Combat de Nègres dans une cave pendant la nuit* (Negroes fighting in a cellar at night) to a rectangular surface painted black—which, according to the latest research, may even have influenced Malevich—or on Hannah Höch, who titled her 1936 photomontage of a sportswoman's body with an outsize head *Für ein Fest gemacht* (Made for a party). He can also point to Karl Valentin, who pasted a garden bench with German Reichsmark banknotes that had been devalued by inflation and called the work *Deutsche Bank*; or he might lean on René Magritte's *The Unexpected Answer*, a picture of a closed door with an anthropomorphic figure sawn out of it. Tillessen embraces all the scepticism vis-à-vis the relationship between words and pictures visualised by the Dadaists and Surrealists, akin to the humour of his contemporaries Fischli & Weiss and Joachim Mogarra.

With his new series *Superficial Images* the artist gets even more colourful. Not in the sense of using bright colours—in fact, quite the reverse, the photographs lack a splash of sunny yellow or blush red. And they all have a blue cast that makes them seem even less enticing. No—colourful here in the figurative sense.

His vibrancy may be right on the money for apologists of the John Szarkowski era.* Nonetheless, in his new works the artist addresses serious questions that have a direct bearing on photography. Such as its increasingly diminishing claim to verity. An example of this can be found in a picture on p.13: the skipper of a yacht is holding a large tiller with both hands. His eyes are closed. The picture is called *Sleeping skipper*. Who's to know if the man is asleep or just relaxing for a moment? The image tells us nothing more than that Tillessen was a witness to the scene. This is the condition of photography—to bear the testimony of someone with a camera. It is ultimately an ethical consideration.

A living being with closed eyes—are they actually asleep or are they dead or are they just having a brief rest? Another photo, entitled *Dead cat*, shows a reclining cat with closed eyes. Should we believe the artist?

* John Szarkowski was director of photography at MoMA in New York from 1962 to 1991

This question also comes up with the recurring images of street musicians, which all have the same title, *Musician playing Besame Mucho*. Since photographs are not audio documents, we can only take the author's word for it. What is certain, though, is that the photo accumulates lyrical power because, simply by virtue of the title, the artist opens up a musical space of the imagination, whose door we would not have stumbled upon if the title had been just *Musician*.

Frequently Tillessen's images give the impression that they were intended as nothing more than a joke. An example here is the picture *Wild woman*. We see a woman driving a car. She is viewed from behind—shot from the back of the car—separated from the rear seat by an iron grille. This raises the question, is the woman protecting herself or do others need to be protected from her? This photographic work implicitly asks which reading the photographer is opting for and thus very clearly raises a moral issue.

Tillessen's images often involve ethical questions, all the more so because he plays a part in his pictures as a guarantee of his presence as witness. Like, for instance, when he stands in his studio miming sleeping positions. We have no choice but to take his words—i. e. the titles he gives his works—at face value.

Peace Stone on p. 142 becomes *Mercedes Benz Stone* on p. 187 and the picture shows up again on p. 191 with the title *Crack in the stone*. In all three instances it is one and the same image. Is this a case of perceptual distortion? Or is Tillessen organising photography into the categories of sign and symbol very much in the tradition of Rosalind Krauss?

Men with blue helmets in New York is not a semantic problem but *Blue helmets in New York* (on p. 179) certainly is. To the best of our knowledge, no acts of war have happened in this city for centuries. Tillessen's manipulations stem from a delight in language games. "The War on Terror" was a semantic manipulation promulgated by the Bush government for a war whose disastrous consequences are still reverberating today.

If Tillessen's sophistry locates situations in which the physical world is turned on its head or arrives back to front (which is how photos are printed time and again as a result of negligence), the pictures seem like arguments for his strategy of overturning meanings, of brushing them against the nap of convention. What, for example, is a reversed speed limit? The image with the deceptive title *Pizzeria* on p. 27 actually shows a sign with the word "Pizzeria" above a façade with its steel roller shutters pulled down.

So much for tautology. To the right in the foreground is a traffic sign—the number on it, ringed in red and reversed, prohibits driving in excess of 30 kmph. The fact that this stands next to the picture *Salerno* is probably no accident. And not just on account of the Italian connection. But rather

because of another of Tillessen's roguish tricks. *Salerno* is shot from the same perspective with almost the same framing as Andreas Gursky's *Salerno* from 1989. Twenty-one years separate the two pictures and you can tell. The way the city has developed has wrought considerable changes.

This *veduta* gave Tillessen the idea for another photographic experiment. In 2012 he took pictures of the Fuorn Pass with exactly the same lens, at the same time of year and using the same light and framing as Andreas Gursky had done in his 1994 views of the same scene. Gursky is the master artist who commanded the highest price for a photograph by any living artist (auctioned at over four million dollars).

For the exhibition at the Centre de la photographie Genève five thousand colour offset prints were produced of this almost unaltered landscape and in conjunction with the Migros wholesale distributor they were put on sale for a Swiss franc, or rather 5 Swiss francs. With this initiative the artist not only asks who a landscape "belongs to" (in an age where even seeds are certified) but also subverts the market laws pertaining to photography with limited distribution favouring a few prosperous people. In other words, he resurrects the utopic notion of the endlessly reproducible photographic artwork.

Even if the only direct visual allusion to contemporary photographic history besides Gursky's *Salerno* is the child's tricycle on p. 151 (the title *Memphis* clearly refers to William Eggleston's famous tricycle with the same title from 1969/70), Tillessen's work is a continuation of the best moments of street photography—with a nod too to Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand.

Here's just one instance: a middle-aged woman in a summer dress is looking for something in her handbag—she has a plastic bottle of water in her mouth and is walking past a building façade with the semi-legible writing on the window front reading "hysiotherapie & Reh" (Winogrand). The other photograph is called *Two suns*. The shadow of the photographer—his upper body—is cast twice over on the asphalt among the shadows of leaves (Friedlander). Looking up, the photographer was probably aware that the light of the sun was falling on him from two directions, once from the sun, and once from a glass window that dramatically reflected it.

But Tillessen does not fetishisise this moment of photographic history as is often still very much in vogue; instead, as a follow-up image and a kind of critique of this deification of the black-and-white asphalt heroes, he proceeds on the next page to a colour reproduction showing a soft-cover book with the title "Bianco e nero" printed in red on a white background accompanied by the subtitle "Due romanzi d'amore".

The mode of presentation in Tillessen's oeuvre is equally crucial. He frequently shows several photographs on a page with a lot of white around

them; he also presents his images in a similar manner in exhibition situations, as, for example, at the Centre de la photographie Genève. The arrangements do not produce any narrative thread but are instead reminiscent of Japanese haiku. The fragmentary configurations often resonate with a yearning for linear story-telling. However, since Godard, the words "voir ce qu'il y a entre deux images" also hold true in photographic circles.

While Tillessen's working method may at first sight seem highly random, the overall effect appears extremely calculated, following a secret logic that is probably unique to the artist. His aesthetic sensibility takes him to the borderlands of amateur photography: here, in light of his ongoing "object in the centre of frame" compositions, he likes to talk about child photography: "When children take pictures of their mother or father, they always put their primary or secondary caregiver in the centre."

His working methods can thus also be seen as a constant attempt to silence the punctum or, conversely, to have it operate at full throttle. His captions often come across like the cheap conjuring tricks of a local circus clown, who does everything in his power to try to direct our attention just where he wants it in order to keep the magic intact.

The titles of Tillessen's images also indicate a struggle over the meaning and absurdity of our semantic fields and, according to the artist, one might argue, of life too.

Yet we can also read his work as an intuitive inventory of our lifestyle habits around the turn of the millennium, particularly in the rich areas of the world. These habits include fiddling with mobile phones as well as parking (under the rubric *Lazy parking*), haunting electronic supermarkets, filling up with petrol (anyone seen putting fuel in their tank in his photos is called *Addict*), chatting on street corners, shopping, being a tourist (one of these pictures is called *Imperialism 3*).

This state of being permanently on the move, flying, travelling, is reflected in Tillessen's work with different settings. He takes photographs in the US, Indonesia, Italy, Switzerland, and a further twenty-five countries, but always with the result that the places can scarcely be told apart from one another and when one closes the book, one is left with the impression of having gone nowhere.

Tillessen doesn't just take photographs; his oeuvre also comprises installations, sound works, and drawings (see the book *Cial Drawings*, which was released in the same year and by the same publisher as this volume). Time and again the drawings reflect his photographic works or sketch out ideas for images that he is unable to find on the street, such as *Camera Looking Like a Handbag* or *Fucking Cars*. Another drawing shows a sign with the words "Flying makes you stupid". The fact that he had to subject

himself to this stupidification for five years getting on and off airplanes can be put down to his job as a photographer for big companies, a line of work that he has now abandoned.

Yet Tillessen's ideal of life is that of the philosopher Immanuel Kant (*Critique of Pure Reason*), who throughout his life never travelled more than 80 kilometres from the city he was born in and yet was able to discuss everything under the sun. He also came up with the insight that could be the artist's watchword: *Sapere aude*—"Have the courage to use your own reason."

The artist's photo archive, only a small part of which is presented in this book, also shows our existential habits: eating, sleeping, loving (on a single occasion), and working. This sounds very much like *The Family of Man*, the major CIA-sponsored exhibition showing the free (i. e. Western) world in the post-war period. The big difference to the pictures here is that the artist's photographs are not heart-rending, nor do they set out to idealise or mystify or to glorify what one might call universal values.

Quite the opposite: the images of working men and women, mostly in public spaces, give visual expression to those five-dollar jobs that today's ultraliberal capitalism brutally imposes on the workforce in the process of eliminating qualified jobs.

This oeuvre makes no claims to being encyclopaedic, but it radiates a psychosomatic atmosphere that approximates to our time, while using a subliminal humour to create a sense of distance which is completely lacking in the media images that stick like flies to the misery of the world; it also stands in contrast to the upbeat, distinctively arty photography where the boundaries between art and commerce have long since crumbled.

The artist's wholly subjective viewpoint, repeatedly introducing issues from the realm of media theory into his images, makes him a *peintre de la vie moderne*. No wonder then that the figure of the flâneur lives on in this book in its contemporary—that is, hurried—version.

Tillessen is our contemporary because his aesthetic quite consciously refers to our screen-based visual culture not by whitewashing what he sees but rather by colouring our view with a "blue dye". In his photos he has subtracted yellow and red. Though his first book may have been called *Gold*, this time round the film stock is definitely not Kodak Gold.

His determined cultural pessimism corresponds to the fears of this new century with its sense of "No Future"—a slogan circulated at the end of the seventies by a few bolshie punks and now the keynote of everyone on the planet. Even Karl Valentin was of the opinion that "the future used to be better too". Or to borrow Timm Ulrich's words, "Art is the memory of a better future."