

25.11.2016 – 22.01.2017

Exhibition opening 24.11.2016

The exhibition *Superficial Projects* at the CPG is the first solo exhibition in French-speaking Switzerland of the work of Peter Tillessen (b. 1969 in Frankfurt, lives and works in Zurich). This exhibition is also an opportunity for the artist to display work that falls outside the photographic genre, with which he has been associated up until now, and features drawings, sculptures and installation work, thereby creating a kind of interdisciplinary dialogue. For the occasion of this first multimedia exhibition, a photography book bringing together ten years of the artist's work has been published by Spector Books (Leipzig). The same publishing house released a book of the artist's drawings earlier this year.

The CPG had already presented the *Ofenpass 2012* Project as part of the *fALSEfAKES* Exhibition in 2013, in the form of unique prints measuring 205 x 170 cm. The current exhibition *Superficial Projects* provides the opportunity to present a project begun three years ago, by printing 5,000 copies of a photograph taken by Peter Tillessen, sold to the public at cost price (5 francs), and depicting the same landscape shown in Andreas Gursky's *Ofenpass* photograph from 1994. The latter was sold at an auction price 100,000 times higher than the price offered here, and with only 6 copies printed. Andreas Gursky is the highest selling living photographer on the art market: some of his work has sold at over 4 million francs.

Sold in collaboration with the shopping centre MParc La Praille Migros, who are selling 1,000 copies, Tillessen's photograph was taken in similar conditions to those of Gursky's. The image shares the same focal distance and the same lighting; it was taken at the same time of day and the same season as its predecessor, and respects the same composition. With *Ofenpass 2012*, Peter Tillessen raises the question of ownership: who does a landscape belong to, or more importantly the representation of a landscape. In his artistic endeavour, Tillessen produces a photographic (and democratic) utopia: the artist's unlimited edition print is on sale at a price that is affordable to everyone, in contrast to the art market whose prohibitive prices make art available only to a rare few.

In the second room of the exhibition, a pile of 4,000 copies of the photograph can be seen. In the third and final room, there is a photographic reproduction of this pile of 4,000 photos, folded in order to occupy the entirety of the space: an allusion to the growing hype around animated 3D images.

#### A 'deceptive' photography

The particularity of Peter Tillessen's photographic work since his early career—which can be seen in the book *Gold* published in 2002 by Lars Müller—lies in its intention to willingly disappoint the public's expectations, a public eager to discover remarkable, artistically executed photographs. Not that the artist is incapable of producing such work. Far from it: his work has regularly illustrated the annual reports of big companies worldwide and his editorial work, for example for the *Tages-Anzeiger Magazin* bears ample witness to his talent. Rather, the artist intentionally chooses the most banal subject matter, taken from the streets of large cities, framed in an amateur fashion, with the subject always placed right in the centre of the photo (the artist prefers to refer to a childlike style of photography when for example, a child photographs his parents and places them right in the centre of his composition). Tillessen's photographs are also characterized by their lack of warm colours, a far cry from the warm reds and yellows of the Kodak-Gold era.

The bluish hues of all of his photographs inevitably evoke the images we consume on every possible screen in today's modern world: smartphones, tablets, and computer screens. Kodak—the world's first film manufacturer—estimated an annual world production of some 80 billion images in 2000; in 2015, *The New York Times* predicted this figure to reach 1.3 trillion in 2017.

As a photographer, there are different ways of dealing with the issue of the surplus production of images. Eugene Richards, for example, a Magnum photographer known for his photographs documenting the civil rights movement in the 1960s and 70s has talked of the growing pressure placed on professional photographers. According to Richards, the professional photographer is not only confronted with an ever-growing number of images—a trend he should resist—but with a panoply of platforms where amateur photographers can showcase and improve the quality of their work.

Artist Erik Kessels responded in a different manner. He filled an exhibition space with 350,000 photographs, corresponding to the number of images shared in one day on Flickr.

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Within this context, Tillessen, a professional photographer, seemingly reverses the contemporary situation by espousing an amateur aesthetic. This is perhaps an attempt not to be seen as a professional of the profession, as Jean-Luc Godard so rudely referred to professional photographers during a ceremony for the French film awards (Césars). It goes without saying that Peter Tillessen would not have generated as much interest had he not resurfaced after a break of almost 10 years, and adopted the photographic aesthetic of half of the world's inhabitants.

The deeply subversive nature of his work lies in its act of naming. It is through the captions and titles of his photographic series that Peter Tillessen generates a real sense of confusion. For example, in his new book entitled *Superficial Images* to be published on the occasion of the exhibition at the CPG, the same photograph is called *Friedensstein* (Stone of peace) on page 150 and on page 195, *Mercedes Benz Stone*. Later, on page 199, the very same picture is given yet another name *Sprung im Stein* (Cracked stone). May this be attributed to a lack of attentiveness or an oversight on the part of the author? Or may we interpret it according to the title he gives the image on page 160, showing an amateur painter from behind, painting on the quays of the Thames as if it were the 19th century.

In yet another example, Peter Tillessen captures a skipper sleeping behind the helm of his boat. *Skipper dormant* (Sleeping skipper) is the title of the image. But how can we know if this man was actually sleeping or if he had just closed his eyes for a short rest, or even if he were simply blinking. The photograph does not provide us with any more information other than the fact that Peter Tillessen was the witness of this particular moment. This is the particularity of photography, amongst other things: it attests to the presence of the photographer in a certain place at a precise moment.

Moreover, several other photographs bear the title *I've seen it*, as for example this blue racing car belonging to the Italian racing team, with the word 'Polizia' written in large letters on its side.

Let's return for a moment to the skipper. Is the person in the photograph with his eyes closed alive (sleeping), or is he dead? Or is he simply relaxing? Another image depicting a cat with its eyes closed is called *Chat mort* (Dead cat). Should we believe the artist? There is a similar ambiguity with the photographs depicting street musicians, all with the same title *Musiciens jouant Besame mucho* (Musicians playing Besame mucho). Given that we don't have the soundtrack to these photographs, we are obliged to take the artist at his word. And because we believe him, his photographs take on a poetic power. The artist encourages us to imagine a certain musical universe which we would not have explored had he not first opened the door to this imaginary space through his use of such an evocative title.

Peter Tillessen's work is not extraordinary. Indeed, one often has the impression that one is watching a magic show in a small, country circus where the magician performs a number of clumsily executed tricks in an attempt to distract the viewer. However, despite the banality, this artist has more than one trick up his sleeve, or even, more than ten! Each image contains a secret that the spectator is supposed to uncover, a visual puzzle of sorts.

In this regard, it is not surprising that the artist has undertaken such a task at a time in history when photography's ambition for truth is increasingly threatened. Photography, the product of the natural sciences, entrusted with producing the proof or evidence so desperately needed by the hard sciences, struggled throughout the 19th century to assert its artistic attributes. If we are to believe Peter Tillessen, these attributes are all that is left in an age where the impossibility of photographing certain scientific facts has led certain researchers to model images that look like photographs.

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