

## PICTURING THE DIFFERENCE

**Artists:** Daya Cahen, Yann Gross, Lucia Nimcova, Heidrun Holzfeind, Shimon Attie, Nate Larson & Marni Shindelman

As the title entails, we intend to reflect on the vulnerability and contradictions in the existence of a separate photo-scene, an independent canon, sustained by schools, magazines, festivals, experts, curators or museums, that represent a whole industry with hardly any links to a wider fine-art context. Photo-festivals are well-established systems with their own rules and habits, including exhibitions, contests and prizes, catalogue and portfolio-reviews. As one may perceive, most festivals are really for the festival's sake only, without much consideration about politics, culture, let alone our presence in the society in which we live. It is never about what the pictures depict; framed images cover the context instead of revealing them. This system sustains and freezes a set of artistic means and praxis (e.g. typologies, repetition, etc.) and limits it just by adding "photo" to the word "festival" thus locking it up in a neat frame. The infrastructures enable the restriction of expression for a large community of artists. It is often monotonous and dull, but nobody is willing to face this fact, and many are scared to acknowledge it.

We intend to set a counter-example as an eye-opener that links works that are not limited by the use of a single media. We exhibit pieces that, among other means, use photographs as tools of research as artifacts in complex and layered artistic processes for presenting stories untold and unseen. In these works, the contexts are always revealed and reflected upon.

New technologies present new opportunities for artists, whose role in the society is once again questioned. How do artists interpret and use collective memory to formulate a political stand? What artistic means help to interpret how photographs influences the way we perceive and construct our world? How does the artist participate in society in this day and age of political and economical turmoil?

"Picturing the Difference" opens in May 2012 and addresses these questions by presenting a suite of seven autonomous art-projects. This exhibition explores the use of photographs in complex, context-sensitive artworks that share interest in social and political engagement, which often use means of archival research, networking, collaboration, and community intervention. They make use of the shared photographic stock of the global community and interpret its influences on our communication and perception.

The artists chosen for this project include Shimon Attie, Daya Cahen, Yann Gross, Heidrun Holzfeind, Nate Larson and Marni Shindelman working as a pair, Lucia Nimcova, and Joachim Schmid. Each brings a different approach the project through his or her artistic praxis. This diversity demonstrates the various ways the artists examine aspects of community, history, and representation in a responsible manner that bears witness to their concerns both as artists and to their chosen medium.

For example, the 3-channel video by the American-born Shimon Attie addresses the representation of workers from a now closed automobile racing track that made up their world for many years. With a series of circular panning shots of each of the individuals set against deep black, Attie replicates the passage of automobiles lapping the track. Accompanied by a surround sound system that mimics the Doppler-effect of roaring cars passing, the workers re-enact their roles as flag men, maintenance workers, line judges, and so on, that defined their careers for many years. This work builds on Attie's other famous projects such as the "Writing on the Walls" where he projected historical imagery from

the mostly Jewish Scheunenviertel quarter of pre-war Berlin onto the facades of the contemporary city as a reminder to those living there now of those whose lives were destroyed between 1933-1945. With "The Attraction of Onlookers: Aberfan", Attie investigated the survivors of a notorious industrial accident in Wales.

Fascinated by mass psychology and indoctrination, Dutch artist and filmmaker Daya Cahen has been making documentaries in Russia for some years now. In 2006, she went looking for Stalin's grandson in "The Stalin that Was Played by Me", and in 2008 she got the rare opportunity to film in a summer camp of Putin's youth movement for the film "Nashi". This time around, Cahen goes to Cadet School Number 9, a unique military academy in Moscow where girls aged 11 to 17 learn how to become the ideal Russian patriot and the ideal Russian woman. She does not interview anyone, but tells the story by placing as many as six different images on the screen at the same time. We see girls doing their hair, cooking, ironing, marching and learning to use weapons. The footage reveals various aspects of their personalities while simultaneously posing the question of how all those aspects can be seen independently of one another. As they sing the praises of the Great Russian nation, we cannot help but notice the contrast between military indoctrination and youthful innocence.

"Kitintale" is an ongoing project that Swiss-born Yann Gross has been conducting since 2008. Gross's intervention reaches far beyond the discovery and the documentation of a skater community in the suburbs of Kampala, Uganda. Through his presence, the artist, himself a skater, becomes a catalyst for the local skater movement, enabling significant infrastructural development, the building of the first African skate-park, skate contests and all the publicity that comes with it. Yann Gross's overwhelming effort and absolute devotion raises basic questions on the responsibility of the artist in community-based projects.

"Mexico 68/CU" are two closely linked projects by Heidrun Holzfeind created between 2006 and 2007. By connecting the two works, "CU", an architectural slide projection installation on the National University of Mexico (UNAM), and "Mexico 68", an interview series with participants and witnesses of the 1968 student movement in Mexico City that culminated massacre of students and demonstrators at Mexico City's central plaza and on university grounds, the artist reveals memories and meanings that haunt the seemingly dead walls and objects of the extraordinary modernist architecture of the university building.

Nate Larson and Marni Shindelman look at how communities share information and unwittingly further share information through the invisible digital networks that connect our lives today. Through the use of scanning technologies, Larson and Shindelman receive and record text messages sent through unprotected Bluetooth transmitted message texts that also reveal the sender's location. They go to the approximate location as noted by the embedded GPS co-ordinates and take a photograph from the perspective of the person writing the message. They then place the textual content underneath the photograph. This then transforms the often banal landscape, a bench or a street corner, for example, into the scene of an interior drama where we cannot see the protagonists but only the empty stage. The effect is uncanny and reveals the ways we communicate with one another in overlapping communities, intentional and otherwise.

Reflecting upon the inherent presence, the reminiscences of the socialist past in Eastern Europe, Lucia Nimcova has been conducting in-depth research in the town of her birth, Humenné, in Slovakia. "Unofficial" 2006-2008 is a complex project that comprises archival, amateur and self-taken photographs, video works, objects and installations. "Unofficial" is an empathic research in an environment that is closest, most familiar to the artist. It is a set of bittersweet critical statements

and reflections on the effects and long-term consequences of “Normalisation”, the ideological restoration program of social and political integration in Czechoslovakia following the Prague Spring of 1968.

The works we are presenting are visually compelling, provocative, and above all interesting and are displayed in the historical Grohman's Villa in the former manufacturing area of the city. They are displayed across a variety of media from traditional framed images to HD video presentations. They make use of archival materials, classic film-based media, and electronic transmissions as their source material. The return of the Villa as a site for art events is a central feature of this festival that analyses historical and contemporary happenings through the prism of photography and video by bringing past and present together in a place that once served as a center of artistic life in Lodz under the patronage of Ludwik Grohman and his descendants.

The Grohman family came to Lodz from Saxony in the 1840s and founded a cotton factory that became one of the leading companies in Lodz. Ludwik Grohman was its manager at the time and had the Villa at ul. Tylna 9/11 constructed. This Italian renaissance style building was designed by the most famous architect in Lodz – Hilary Majewski. and built in 1881. During this era and up to World War 2, factory managers were great art patrons in Lodz, and the Villa was the site of many artistic occasions including musical soirees and was visited by such luminaries as the poet-writer Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński and the renowned artist Witkacy. During the war and the aftermath, the family was evicted and much of their artworks seized. The Villa fell into disrepair.

Thanks to Fotofestiwal history and culture combine as they used to at the Grohman's Villa to share the best traditions of Lodz's artistic life with a new audience.

To summarize, what separates Fotofestiwal 2012 from other photography festivals is its commitment to the idea of community and context across all forms of artistic praxis. Artists using historical materials are no less relevant as those using contemporary technologies and sources for inspiration in the carrying out of their ideas. Above all, “Picturing the Difference” presents ideas in action that are both community or site-specific and which work with multi-layered forms of representation that go beyond the concept of photography as a passive medium.

“Picturing the Difference” features context-specific photographic works as well as the visual manifestations of complex processes of artistic creation. With this show, we promote alternative structures and strategies, collaboration, networking, context sensitive photographic projects to re-introduce the necessity of sustainability in art. “Picturing the Difference” shows how photographs may become tools of interpretation and intervention, means of making a difference.

**Curators:** Gergely László and Bill Kouwenhoven