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003	EDITORIAL
009	ALEXA FÄRBER TRACES OF THE FUTURE: URBAN TRANSFORMATION AND THE PROMISSORY MULTIPLICITY OF PHOTOBOOKS
023	MARY N. WOODS THE CITY HAS MEMORY: IMAGES OF RUIN AND RECLAMATION IN BOMBAY/MUMBAI
037	LARD BUURMAN MEDIATED PHOTOGRAPHY
055	DAVIDE DERIU PORTRAITS OF PLACES: GABRIELE BASILICO AND THE SLOWNESS OF THE GAZE
073	NICHOLAS BOYARSKY THE EPHEMERAL IMAGINATION: THE POSTCARD AND CONSTRUCTION OF URBAN MEMORY
087	CLARE MELHUISH TRANSFORMING DOHA
105	BIRGIT SCHILLAK-HAMMERS PICTURES OF BERLIN: CONSTRUCTION AND CONSERVATION OF A 1920S METROPOLIS
119	ELA KAÇEL SELF-LOCALIZATION OF MIGRANTS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS IN CITIES VIA SELF-IMAGES
137	MARKUS LANZ BRASÍLIA. PHOTOGRAPHING AGAINST THE IMAGE
155	BETTINA LOCKEMANN EXPLORING THE URBAN SPACE: METHODS FOR VISUAL URBAN RESEARCH
173	ELISABETH NEUDÖRFL PHOTOGRAPHER'S DILEMMA: "GOOD" PHOTOGRAPHY VS. "GOOD" PLANNING
191	ROMAN BEZJAK MODERN LANGUAGE AND ITS MULTIPLE DIALECTS

Photographer's Dilemma: "Good" Photography vs. "Good" Planning

ELISABETH NEUDÖRFL

The normative assessments of "good" and "bad" diverge in terms of city planning and its photographic representation. This article explores the cavity between the photograph and the depicted world, suggesting that it should be viewed as a positive and productive quality of photography that although this might sound contradictory—can be used constructively in documentary practice.

Die normative Beurteilung in "gut" und "schlecht" geht in Bezug auf Stadtplanung und ihre fotografische Darstellung auseinander. In diesem Artikel wird die Lücke zwischen der Fotografie und der abgebildeten Welt untersucht. Es wird vorgeschlagen, sie als positive und produktive Qualität der Fotografie zu betrachten, die – obwohl dies widersprüchlich klingen mag – in der dokumentarischen Praxis konstruktiv eingesetzt werden kann.

Biography

Elisabeth Neudörfl is Professor of Documentary Photography at Folkwang University of the Arts in Essen, Germany. After undertaking vocational training as a photographer, she studied photography in Dortmund and Leipzig, and has held various teaching positions. She has published her work in a number of photobooks, most recently in *Im Krankenhaus* (in collaboration with Ludwig Kuffer and Andreas Langfeld) by Spector Books (2018). She has exhibited in solo and group shows internationally. In addition to private collections, her work is held in the collections of the Sprengel Museum Hannover and the Fotomuseum Winterthur. As urban settings prevail in my photographic work, I have been giving great consideration to the role that architecture and city planning play in it. As a result, I have developed a certain unease: I suspect that I take advantage of bad planning. I might even favor bad planning over good planning, considering it more inspiring. My dilemma as a photographer is that "good" photography—photographic work that I appreciate never depicts "good" planning. I'd apprehend that the latter leads to boring photographs. Here I will analyze this unease using some examples with a focus on the photographer's perspective. I will consider the concepts of position, control, and deconstruction.

I want to start by clarifying my documentary photography practice, since I am repeatedly confronted with misconceptions of documentary photography, not only in my role as a teacher, but more startlingly by colleagues and other professionals, such as museum curators. The greatest impediment to understanding documentary photography is the lingering idea of a strong bond between the photograph and the photographed subject or world. In this regard, photo history itself has precluded a better understanding of the operating modes of photography through the wide—and sometimes possibly misleading—reception of Roland Barthes and his essay "That-hasbeen" in *Camera Lucida*.¹ As a literary theorist and semiotician, Barthes examines photographs primarily as indexical signs. The semiotic readings of photography and the concept of the index are important notions to understand photographs, but their predominance may also impede understanding.

In her 1986 text "Who Is Speaking Thus? Some Questions About Documentary Photography," Abigail Solomon-Godeau reasons that "documentary photography" is not an ontological concept but a historical one, and that we cannot gather its meaning from the term itself.² I would like to advocate that we should actually look at photography in the same way we look at other media, such as literature and theatre. The documented places, people, settings, or events must be created in a particular way so that they can be perceived as revealing a truth about the real world. The correspondent construction within a photographic work is the key to understanding documentary photography. "Documentary" must be compiled: it does not come about automatically merely because of the index quality of the photograph. The index quality of photographs can therefore be understood as an additional trait.

When photographing, my position in relation to my subject and consequently the vantage point are dependent on my physicality. Seeing my subject, I have to find my position and change it accordingly until I see the subject in the viewfinder in the way I need it for my photograph. In a very literal sense, I position myself (with my camera) in relation to my subject.³

^{1.} Barthes 1982: 77. Cf. Lockemann 2013: 83–4. Lockemann elaborates on the difference between a semiotic and phenomenological approach to photographic imagery.

^{2.} Cf. Solomon-Godeau 1991: 169.

^{3.} Cf. Didi-Huberman 2009. Didi-Huberman has convincingly argued about the connection between the physical or geographical position of the author and her position in the sense of attitude or stance.

Position: Super Pussy Bangkok

Let me explain how I find my position with the example of *Super Pussy Bangkok* (Figs. 1-3).⁴ This book consists of thirty-tree photographs, all taken in the districts of Bangkok, that cater to Western male sex tourists. On the back cover of the book, a short text reads:

"In Thailand, transactions involving prostitution have an estimated volume of 25 billion dollars per year and generate 10% of the Gross Domestic Product (Germany: 0.38%). Prostitution is illegal in Thailand. Parts of the sex industry in Thailand explicitly address clients from the USA, Great Britain, and Germany. The respective bars in Bangkok are to be found in the streets of Patpong, Nana Tai, and Cowboy. Patpong 1, which runs parallel to Patpong 2, and Cowboy are about 200 meters long each."⁵

The title of the book and the logotype on the cover are taken from one of the photographs. I chose the title and the cover design in order to raise expectations that are then foiled by the content. This may be the first hint of conflicting aspects in this work.

Before traveling to Thailand, thinking about the concept of a photographic work in Bangkok, I was very reluctant to consider Western sex tourism. During my research, however, it was always present, not so much as an attribute of Thailand but as part of Western tourism within Thailand. I knew that when dealing with sex tourism I had to accept I was on the tourists' side. I wanted to articulate my foreign position, so I decided to keep the distance and to look from the outside. I eliminated a lot of the sensations that sex tourists have: it is hot and humid, it is illuminated by night, it is crowded, it is noisy, and it smells—not least, it is in color. I employed the characteristics of the place: it appears very different at different times of the day. And I employed the characteristics of photography: it reduces perception to sheer visibility, it reduces this visibility to a very limited frame, and it generates a cavity between the photographs and the world that they show. John Szarkowski addresses the problem of the invisibility of this cavity in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue The Photographer's Eye: "The subject and the picture were not the same thing, although they would afterwards seem so." ⁶ In his 1981 essay "Gegen einen naiven Begriff der Dokumentarfotografie" (Against a naïve concept of documentary photography), Reinhard Matz argues that the difference between the photograph and the world makes (documentary) photography worth engaging with in the first place.7

The shape of the book is an essential quality of the work. The pictures are cut in the middle and perforated; the book is too big to look at comfortably. It is a bit flimsy—all in all inconvenient. It is obvious that the photographs show nothing of what is mentioned in the text on the back. Instead, the viewer sees a lot that the tourist usually does not see: the façades behind the neon signs, the wiring, the air-conditioning units, etc. Since distractions through the other senses are turned off, the viewer can focus on what is really there to see.

It seems as if these buildings have originally not been built to house entertainment businesses but have been transformed over time. In the present use—changes that

- 4. Neudörfl 2006.
- 5. Ibid.: rear.

- 6. Szarkowski 1966: n.p.
- 7. Cf. Matz 2000 [1981]: 97, 101.

have been made include decoration, additions, bricked-up windows—we can read the phenomena of a market. This market is illegal, and it generates an immense turnover. It involves a clear hierarchy in the options the various players have, and this hierarchy is barely acknowledged. I am also involved in this hierarchy, and I take advantage of it. My options are manifold: first and foremost, I can leave the place whenever I like.

In my images, I use existing structures to point to the social problems in this quarter, basic elements in a global distortion. Architecture might be more or less randomly present in my photographs. I utilize the architectural reification to refer to social deficits that reflect back to my own society. For my photographic agenda, I need places that are not determined, keep their potential, enable me to imagine something different, and do not confine my agency. This is, of course, not the antipode to good planning. But for photographers, good or bad planning is often just not relevant, and sometimes bad planning offers more photographic options. The aesthetics of the photographs are clearly distinct from the aesthetics of the place.

Control: E.D.S.A.

I try to place the utmost control in my own work against the extensive contingency of the real world. My example here is *E.D.S.A.* (Figs. 4–6).⁸ This book has 288 pages and contains 232 images.

Epifanio Delos Santos Avenue, or E.D.S.A. for short, is a ten-lane circumferential road in Metro Manila, with Line 3 of the Manila Metro Rail Transit System on the median strip. It is the most congested street in Metro Manila. In 2007, when I was photographing in the Philippines, crime rates were high, corruption was pervasive, the rule of law was weak, and the political actors were not the democratic institutions but the economically powerful. In the light of the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte that began in 2016, at the least jeopardizing democracy and human rights, we are talking about a historical situation.

E.D.S.A. awakened my interest because it not only presents a wide range of social aspects, but also refers to the possibility of a street becoming a political space. The demonstrations against President Marcos in 1986 that led to the democratization of the country took place on E.D.S.A. and are called the "E.D.S.A. Revolution." My work is not about the historical event but about the street itself. Even in a segregated society like the Philippines, the street is used differently by all social groups (although they do not necessarily meet there).

Standing on the street, I strongly felt the limitations of the rectangle of my pictures, and I was challenged by the chaotic motion of cars, buses, bicycles, *jeepneys*, pedestrians, and trains. Again, photographic means eliminated a lot of sensual perception most importantly, movement. Although this work has filmic characteristics, I think it is very important that it operates photographically with the still image. A first step toward controlling the contingency of the street is to fix the frame at the moment of exposure. I might not be able to control all the different objects in the viewfinder, but as soon as I have released the shutter, the picture is controlled in the sense that it is fixed.

8. Neudörfl 2010.

I took several photos immediately after each other, panning the camera along the street or along the roadside, every frame more or less being the result of the last one, with only a few adjustments. Thus, I lost a certain amount of control around my frame too.

To gain back control, I edited the photographs carefully. Not only did I select rigorously, but I also chose a very strict layout for the book—very different from a wall presentation. I was able to set a rhythm and even influence the rate of page turning. I photographed several vertical formats from one spot that added up to a panorama. I arranged the singular photographs over double pages so that the panoramas unfurl over various pages. The book constructs a quasi-filmic experience for the viewer as one turns the pages. After turning the page, the previous spread is no longer visible, yet the previous spread lies like a layer under the new spread in the perception of the viewer. While turning the pages, time passes. The viewer freely chooses the speed of page turning. I assumed one would need more time than that which passed between taking one picture and the next—hence, perception is slowed down. Every sequence starts on a right-hand page, and every photograph is shown on a right-hand page first and then repeated on the next left-hand page, in precisely the same physical place, as it were, on one sheet of paper (*recto* and *verso*), separated only by the fiber of the paper. The viewer's advancement through the book is only half as fast as it could have been.

With this kind of control, I can organize the world in my photographs; I can tidy it up or establish chaos, without really changing it. This is perhaps what is fundamentally different from city planning. Again, it is the difference between the image and the subject—the world—that I exploit.

Architectural structures, as a backdrop and through their appearance, serve to reveal certain aspects of a society. On E.D.S.A., I experienced the street as a very hostile place. Only those who could not afford to protect themselves from its effects (for example, by being in a car) were exposed to it. This notion was mirrored in the planning of the malls along the street (Figs. 4–5) that seemed strictly oriented toward the interior and presented bare walls to the outside. Judging the quality of the planning would yield extremely different results depending on my role within this setting. Although those bare walls contribute greatly to my photographic intentions, I would despise them as a resident.

Deconstruction: Gladbeck

In describing the deconstructive qualities of my work, I do not wish to conceal the constructive ones that I outlined earlier. I see my work as *constructive* in a Brechtian sense. According to Brecht, photography demands construction to produce meaning at all.⁹ However, deconstruction is not only a necessity in order to be able to construct again; it is also an essential strategy in the working process. Sometimes it is even the core characteristic of a specific work.

The work *Gladbeck* (2013) deals with a historical event: Gladbeck is a town in northern Ruhr that grew rapidly after the opening of the first coal mine at the end of the nineteenthcentury. In 1988, Gladbeck was the starting point of a major media event: a failed bank robbery resulted in hostage taking, police malfunctions, and a ruthless media.

ELISABETH NEUDÖRFL

On August 16, 1988, at around eight o'clock in the morning, locals Hans-Jürgen Rösner and Dieter Degowski entered a branch of Deutsche Bank in a neighborhood shopping center. A witness called the police. Police officers drove their patrol cars directly into the sight lines of Rösner and Degowski, who reacted by taking hostages. Fourteen hours later, they left the site with two hostages in a car provided by the police, all observed and reported on by the media. They drove for more than two days, hundreds of kilometers through the federal republic, going into the Netherlands and back out again, without sleep and with a lot of stimulants and alcohol, chased by the media and police. Degowski shot and killed a child in a bus they had hijacked en route; a police car collided with a van, killing a police officer. While Degowski pointed his gun at a hostage, journalists interviewed Rösner. One hostage was killed during their arrests.

The whole story drew my interest because the significance of the event seemed to be blatantly disproportionate to the significance of the town of Gladbeck. Rösner and Degowski were locals to the extent that they had hardly ever left the region before. There was a warrant in place for Rösner since he had not come back from prison leave two years earlier; he had already spent a significant part of his adult life as a convict. The branch of Deutsche Bank they finally chose for their robbery attempt was within a 600-meter radius of Rösner's girlfriend's apartment, where he had gone into hiding, and of his childhood home. His ex-wife at that time lived in the high-rise that is part of the shopping center complex.¹⁰

There was a small nucleus (Gladbeck), and there was a local crime committed by local criminals in their local surroundings. Then, in a perfect storm, the events spread over half the country, involving politicians in several states and national media. My deconstructive strategy was to fold all that back into the shopping center in Gladbeck and reverse the direction of the movement.

I photographed the shopping center while walking to the vacant store where the Deutsche Bank branch once was. It goes without saying that the place conveys no information whatsoever about the historical events, nor do my photographs. This is again where architecture comes into play. The shopping center structure was built under the expectation that there would be development of the town. We can relate the history of the structure to its condition in the summer of 2013.

A short text entitled "16 August 2013" tells the story of how I experienced the events back in 1988. It mentions a stand-up display in front of a butcher's shop that is visible in the 1988 TV footage; it is almost invisible in the shadows of one of my pictures. The text describes the path through the building and around it; it mentions Rösner and Degowski, and the three sites I photographed and how close they are to each other:

^{9.} In his essay "Little History of Photography" (1931), Walter Benjamin quotes Bertolt Brecht's statement that a "photographic" copy of reality does not make it possible to mediate any knowledge about reality and that construction is necessary to produce insight. Brecht writes: "less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG tells us next to nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations—the factory, say—means that they are no longer explicit. So something must in fact be built up, something artificial, posed." Benjamin 1979 [1931]: 255, original emphasis. Cf. Der Spiegel 1989.

^{10.}

the shopping center (Figs. 7, 8), the street where Rösner lived at the time, and the street of his childhood home (Fig. 9).

At the shopping center, I started photographing on the street. I walked to the entrance of the former bank around the building clockwise, which meant that the building was to my right. For the gallery hang (Fig. 10), I arranged the photos from left to right. Consequently, the second photograph hangs to the right of the first one, but the vantage point of the second photograph is more to the left. The continuity between the photographs is reversed. It is obvious that the photographs build a sequence, but it is not obvious exactly how (Figs. 7, 8). The fragments do not merge into a coherent whole.

My starting point for this work is a historical event, but my photographs show something different. I looked back to a specific point in the past and I included the perception of the situation back then and the perception of the situation in hindsight. In 1988, the place was just another neighborhood shopping center in an ordinary town. However, the Ruhr—and Gladbeck with it—had gone through a long, painful structural change that had started well before 1988. The building complex was erected at the beginning of the 1970s, when politicians were still reckoning on increasing numbers of inhabitants, although the highest number of inhabitants was recorded as early as 1960. The last pit in Gladbeck closed in 1971. Now, at the beginning of 2019, the high-rise has been vacant for almost fifteen years, and the demolition of the complex has been discussed ever since. The title and the text evoke the historical events for a German audience. Although the architecture seems to be merely a backdrop for the crime, I think it shows a lot more about the economic and social situation in the Federal Republic back in 1988 and now, about how social change is anticipated by politicians and the general public, and about how social realities should be and how they are. Again, I can use the failures of city planning to create a meaningful photographic work without interfering in the situation, whereas planners always aim at changing the situation itself.

Conclusion

So, what about the photographer's dilemma? Most obviously, my specific use of the city as a photographer is very different from its use by residents. This does not mean that I would not support the residents' agenda. My approach, however, is not to document their lives or their struggles. Instead, I use architecture to paraphrase a social or political situation. As a photographer, I value qualities of any city—including my own city and neighborhood—that I might not value as a resident. The photographer has the power to simply turn aggravating situations into a photograph and be satisfied with that. In this opposition between my photography and "good" planning, I start feeling uncomfortable when I imagine planners using my photographs in their research process. I worry that, following Barthes's reasoning, they might draw the wrong conclusions, relying on the index quality of photography and not taking the difference between the perception of reality and the perception of the photograph appropriately into consideration.

11. Cf. Matz 2000 [1981]: 97.

12. Jaar 2014.

180

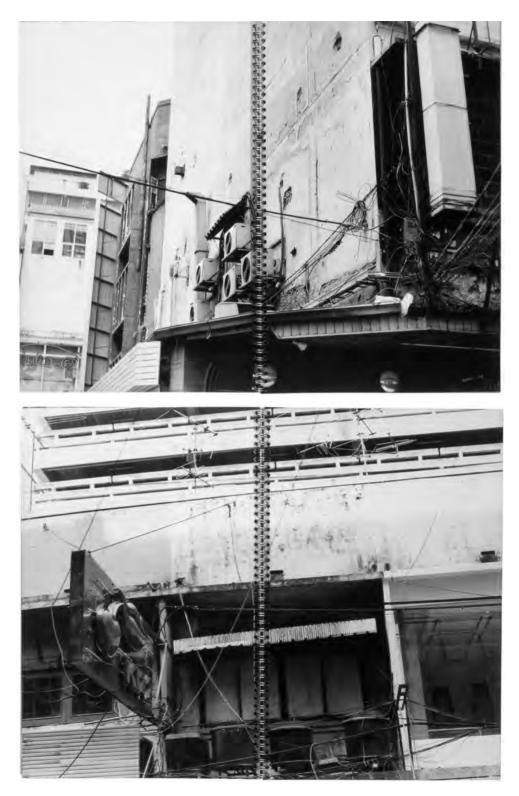
13. Cf. Westerbeck / Meyerowitz 1994.

I want to encourage viewers to appreciate the cavity between the photograph and the depicted world, to see it as a positive, productive quality of photography that—al-though this might sound contradictory—can be used constructively in the practice of documentary photography.¹¹

Finally, in English, the most common term to describe the act of exposure is to "take a photograph" (in German, it is to "make a photograph"). Although Ansel Adams rightly stated, "You don't take a photograph. You make it,"¹² I think the term "to take a photo" still has some truth in it. As a documentary photographer, I am, foremost, an observer. I cannot stay at home or in my studio: I have to go out; I move in the direction of the world. Yet, once I am in that world, I can let the world—the reflected light beams—come into my lens. The world then moves in my direction, and in this seesaw I find and take my position as a photographer. Maybe it is this position as an observer, pretending to be an "innocent bystander,"¹³ as it were, apparently conflictive with architectural and urban planning practices, that makes me feel uneasy.

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Figs. 1-3.

From Super Pussy Bangkok, Leipzig: Institut für Buchkunst, 2006. Photo: Elisabeth Neudörfl.





Figs. 4-6.

From E.D.S.A., Berlin: Wiens Verlag 2010. Photo: Elisabeth Neudörfl.











Figs. 7-9.

From Gladbeck, 2013. Photo: Elisabeth Neudörfl.





Fig. 10.

Gladbeck, exhibition view, Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin, 2013. Photo: Petra Graf.

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