The Use of Photography as a Mode of Social and Historical Investigation

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The Use of Photography as a Mode of Social and Historical Investigation

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REFERENCES

American Readers at Home by Ludovic Balland, Zurich : Scheidegger & Spiess, 2018
Akram Zaatari: Against Photography, Barcelone : MACBA ; Düsseldorf : Kunstsammlung
 Nordrhein-Westfalen ; Séoul : National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, 2017
Wolfgang Tillmans : Jahresring 64 : Qu'est-ce qui est différent ?, Nîmes : Carré d'art ; Berlin :
 Sternberg Press, 2018

- 1 *American Readers at Home* by Ludovic Balland, *Against Photography* by Akram Zaatari and *Qu'est-ce qui est différent ?* by Wolfgang Tillmans all have in common the fact they consider photography as a decisive element in the construction of histories, while also integrating it into the narrative chain text is also part of. Akram Zaatari and Wolfgang Tillmans both include pre-existing photographs in their work, thus questioning the medium *per se*. This is a far cry from the unique, context-less photograph admired as if on an altar, following the probable desire of Roger Théron, the ex-editor-in-chief of *Paris Match*, a tabloid now controlled by Matra, a weapon manufacturer. Théron recommended that the magazine's photographers should go study the old masters at the Louvre. All three of the artists discussed here have in common the urgent need to take action in the present. Ludovic Balland and Wolfgang Tillmans lead their investigation in Western countries, where, in the past two or three years, authoritarian, nationalistic and discriminating political movements have rocketed. In a completely different context (Lebanon and its neighbouring countries), Akram Zaatari questions current affairs through old photographs. All three use photography as an instrument in the field of politics.

- 2 Akram Zaatari was born in 1966 in Sidon (Lebanon), and in 1997 he co-founded, along with Fouad Elkoury and Samer Mohdad, the Arab Image Foundation (AIF) in Beirut. What started out as an artist's dream has finally reached one of its goals: to compile photographic treasures and to have become a reference for the Arab world and beyond. Aiming to make up for the absence of institutions – or even of a valid visual history, which, according to Zaatari, had until then principally been summarised by foreigners – the three founders, who were soon joined by other artists such as Yto Barrada and Walid Raad, imagined a space whose aim is not only storage. It is also to constantly question history and historic material in order to be able to answer, at least partially, the questions of the present, by interviewing the owners of the old pictures they collected, and even the people depicted in the photographs.

- 3 *Against Photography*, the book published on the occasion of the eponymous exhibition, shown at the MACBA in Barcelona, the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Dusseldorf and at the Sharja Art Foundation is a beautifully designed object in its own right. Although Akram Zaatari's work often includes an element that reflects upon the medium in use, the chosen title turns out to be misleading. Of course, Zaatari is not going "against photography". Rather, he literally enters photography, into its very matter, for instance in his *Against Photography* series of 2017: twelve engravings made from plates reproducing a 3D scan of gelatin-coated negatives kept at the AIF. *Against Photography* seems to turn against the current Arab Image Foundation. Akram Zaatari recounts in the book how the AIF's success made him a lot less experimental, more rigid, leading him to follow classification recommendations that no longer had anything to do with his original intentions regarding the archive. The AIF was supposed to be turned towards artists, in order to formulate new histories, the history of the medium as well as the history of Lebanon and the Arab world. For example, the series *A Photographer's Shadow* of 2017 consists of blow-ups of a photographer's shadow, cast predominantly on family snapshots. Don't all handbooks for amateur photographers teach their reader to turn away from the sun to take pictures, writes Akram Zaatari? According to him, an archive is meaningful only if it is collected "in light of its social function".

- 4 The social function of photography is also one of the starting points for *Qu'est-ce qui est différent ?* by Wolfgang Tillmans, which was first published in German in 2017 and entirely translated into French for the summer 2018 exhibition at the Nîmes Carré d'art. The German journal *Jahresring* invited Tillmans to act as editor-in-chief for its 64th issue, in connection to his activism against Brexit and during the German federal elections of 2017. He had published a whole series of posters which stated *No man is an island, no country by itself*, or *Nicht wählen ist nicht neutral* on rather abstract backgrounds taken from his photographs. Already in 2005, he had created an installation with a promising title: *Truth Study Centre*. This group of works displayed on simple wooden tables is ongoing, and was a way for Tillmans to tackle head-on the tremendous lies that had started flourishing and which, for a present-day viewer, seem like the forerunners of current attacks on democracy (or what is left of it): fake news. In his introduction, Wolfgang Tillmans lists the "claims to absolute truth" he encounters in his everyday life, those "of Islamists, whose declarations I could read on the propaganda tracts plastered in the neighbourhood of my London studio or the declarations of the then-South-African minister of Health who questioned the responsibility of HIV in Aids. Or the allegation, which was soon after massively refuted,

that Saddam Hussein was connected to Al-Qaida and had access to weapons of mass destruction.”¹

- 5 In the *Truth Study Centre* installation, the artist juxtaposes photocopies of political articles that are either extremely clear analyses or reproductions of untrue information connected to absurd or humoristic elements; pictures of religious or mundane moments, as well as scientific astronomy illustrations. By demonstrating that there is a multitude of planets similar to Earth, the artist was even convinced that religious leaders would no longer be able to cling to an anthropocentric representation of God.
- 6 Sadly, Tillmans was not heard by the champions of monotheism, which is why he wanted to go one step further. With *Qu'est-ce qui est différent ?*, Wolfgang Tillmans is not only accusing, he is also trying to understand what has changed in recent years. Why are so many people in Europe willing to forget the social progress of the past forty years? Why are sexist, racist, and homophobic discourses gaining ground, to the extent they are now supported by governments? To create his book, the artist invited a neuropsychologist, a philosopher and a cultural studies specialist. He met and interviewed the former German minister of finance and current president of the Bundestag, the founder of the “Mobile Beratung gegen Rechtsextremismus [Mobile Committee Against Right-Wing Extremism], and a journalist-cum-political theory professor.
- 7 The essays, printed in condensed characters, are interspaced by picture inserts, the first series of which shows people looking up to the sky (a homage to Eugène Atget’s photograph of the sun eclipse). Next come photographic reproductions of press articles, pro-Brexit posters, propaganda bills showing two slim and slender bikini-clad women seen from the back, with the slogan “Burkas? Wir stehen auf Bikinis” [Burkas? We prefer bikinis], which were posted by the AFD (far-right party, “Alternative für Deutschland”). The photographs that made Tillmans famous, for example his still lifes of meal leftovers bathed in a beautiful light, are more and more rare. From time to time an ocean wave interrupts the reading rhythm. A black and white picture in the margins opens and closes the introduction over the course of four pages. On a blind wall in Kreuzberg-Berlin, a sentence, which when he shot it in 1990, Wolfgang Tillmans considered as a “somewhat outdated Marxist declaration”, reads: “The border does not run between peoples but between top and bottom”. In this sense, it is possible to share his hypothesis: “The populist revolution of 2016-2017 is less a movement initiated by the losers of globalisation than by their manipulation to conservative as well as capitalist ends.”² However, the brutal economic crisis that shook East Germany and all of Eastern Europe from 1990 onwards, followed by the 2008 recession and the politics of austerity that governments have been leading ever since, are not central to Tillman’s reflections. For example, his penchant for psychology – which is nevertheless very interesting – seems to come from his fear of stating the main reason for contemporary discontent impassioning labourers, employees and the lower middle class: the ultraliberal deregulation of stock exchanges and employment, the dismantling of the welfare state and its railroads, hospitals and schools, the criminalisation of the migrants that Europe in fact needs in the millions in order for its pension funds not to crash, and so on. Let us hope that this very interesting initiative will help Tillman’s reflections to rediscover the hyper-topicality of Karl Marx.
- 8 Recently, the exhibition *Zerrissene Gesellschaft: Ereignisse von langer Dauer* [Torn Society: Long-Term Events], curated by Anne König and Jan Wenzel³, had a starting point

similar to Wolfgang Tillmans: why the rise of the far-right across the globe and especially in Europe? This exhibition and the seminal journal that was published to accompany it use the same means as Wolfgang Tillmans: photography, drawing, text, graphic design. While pointing out the rarefaction of work these past twenty years, it also examines mass media through three essential positions: Jonathan Horowitz, Ferdinand Kriwet and especially Ludovic Balland in his most recent book, *American Readers at Home*, which he describes as a book in a newspaper and a newspaper in a book – its format is similar to certain small-dimension daily papers. As a whole the book is so strikingly consistent that it is not an exaggeration to call it an artwork. Ludovic Balland is behind the creation, the interviews, the colour photographs of urban landscapes, the black and white portraits, as well as the graphic design of this logbook. He travelled 13.000 kilometers, in an American pre-election *road-trip* (exactly like Robert Frank). Ludovic Balland spent the night of the 7th to the 8th of November in Washington, a night whose result came as a surprise to many. The reader might be just as surprised as his predominantly middle-class interviewees by the first question he asks them: “What event from yesterday, conveyed by the media, do you remember today?”. This bulky book, with its 548 pages and its wealth of textual and visual material, is a well of information for fighting the oblivion and amnesia produced by mass media. The book proudly resists shit-storms, be they produced by Fox News or the tweets of the current Ku Klux Klan fans of the White House administration. On this subject, Ludovic Balland is positive: the winner of the 2016 American presidential election was the media.

NOTES

1. *Wolfgang Tillmans : Jahresring 64: Qu'est-ce qui est différent ?*, Nîmes: Carré d'art; Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018, p. 10
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 11
 3. *Zerrissene Gesellschaft: Ereignisse von langer Dauer* (22 June-1st July 2018), f/stop 8. Festival für Fotografie: Leipzig. On this occasion, Spector Books published the journal *Zerrissene Gesellschaft* (ed. By Anne König, Jan Wenzel), 64 pages.
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AUTHORS

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Joerg Bader is the director of the Centre de la photographie in Geneva. He considers his work as an artist as a criticism expressed in plastic, written, radiophonic, editorial, and curatorial forms. He has published several essays, including “Armé d'une caméra” in *Chris Marker* (Actes Sud, 2018),

“Le Vernaculaire. L’archive. Les studios de photographie en Afrique de l’Ouest et en Afrique centrale” in *Studio-Africa* (October 2018), a journal he edits with Martine Frésia at the éditions Centre de la photographie Genève.