

Wolfgang Ullrich
Reunion without déjà vu

For some years now, the more alert of our contemporaries have been looking at photographic pictures in a different way than was formerly done. It has always been possible to manipulate photographs, but hand-in-hand with digital technology a pervasive suspicion has made its appearance: Has that photograph been worked over after it was taken? Or even been produced from scratch on a monitor? With suspicious, dissecting, detective scrutiny, the surface of the pictures are inspected and the correctness of shadows or the surface appearance of the subjects examined. The more uniform this is, the more similar in cases of subjects that are actually dissimilar, the more likely the possibility that an image processing programme has been used. But the programmes are getting better all the time and in a couple of years even the most suspicious scrutiny will hardly be able to pride itself on success as by that time it will be possible to fake almost everything perfectly. Generalized suspicion will remain however and will not be allayed by protestations of any kind. The short era of classical photography, when pictures were real and could be regarded as authentic evidence, will have passed irrevocably ...

However, new forms of art can be ascribed to digital technology, its aesthetics and the inherent general mistrust. The works of Veronika Veit are a good example of this. Whoever sees photographs such as »Bureau« (2003, p. 40) will immediately open their inspection kitbag in order to discover how it was done. The first deduction shows that it is a digital collage. Aren't those simply electronic microscope pictures of viruses which have been cut out and copied into a photograph showing a desk with two computers? In the monitors one can see similar constellations: here in the computer which has been occupied by larger-than-life viruses with which the probable »instruments« of the photographic manipulation were engineered ... But whoever subjects them to the »shadow test« will be unable to find any negligence; even here, the surface structure of the viral monsters appears to be even more discriminating than in most pictures that are to be found in scientific or news magazines. Perhaps the photograph wasn't created by digital technology after all? Did the artist actually construct the viruses in the classical manner and glue them to the computer as well as scanning pictures of the installation and putting them on the monitors? The photograph does not permit the viewers to leave just like that, with answers; it plays with them and their undefined suspicions.

The photograph »Küche« (2003, p. 36) also appears to be a digital product. An open refrigerator is depicted, dripping in several places. But what kind of strange drips are these? They hang down like half-filled condoms, and when they hit the surface the splashes are as precise as those on photographs taken at a millionth of a second. Again we have the aesthetics of technical photographs that have suddenly impinged on an everyday interior. The bottles of what is presumably cleaning fluid standing in front of the refrigerator also radiate an artistic-technical flair, with no labels or brands in evidence. They are as perfect as shapes that were designed on a computer. But how can someone who on the one hand is so obviously at home with digital aesthetics be at the same time so finicky as to ensure that not a single shadow is missing or out of place?

That Veronika Veit indeed produces everything that looks digital by herself and then photographs it becomes apparent as soon as one sees her installations in an exhibition. Sometimes even the same elements are to be seen that are in the photographs, but the objects always have an air of being a computer animation. The folds in the blanket in »Schlafstörung« (2004, p. 72) are definitely naturalistic but not wrinkled enough to allow the viewer to believe in a real blanket. The same is true of the cloth in »Wasseranschluss« (2004, p. 60) or the clothes next to the »Dusche« (2004, p. 53). A little too sterile, a little too smooth to correspond to the original object.

Naturally, it is precisely in this fine difference that the strong attraction lies. Veronika Veit's installations, made carefully of plastics, dental plaster or metals, are astonishing – not due to the total mimicry of a Duane Hanson but because of the transposition of a monitor aesthetics into three dimensions. The clean and idealized world of computer games and also of many advertising spots has suddenly, for a few square metres, become reality and one is confronted with the almost platonic prototypes of a digital world of images. This is as if one were unexpectedly permitted to see the props from a famous film, or experience a scene in exactly the tints and atmosphere that one knows from Vermeer or Turner. Not déjà vu, but a strangely moving reunion.

In the same way that art has always picked up on and reproduced what is influencing the public at various periods, so the works of Veronika Veit supply a contemporary reflection of strong influences. In particular, they take into account that nowadays – in the media society – the primary experiences are essentially images and picture language; a clear line of demarcation between a »real«, a »transmitted« and a »fictional« world no longer exists. While numerous other artists work with available picture material, reorganizing it or transferring it to another medium, Veronika Veit bases her work on a particular – of course a digital – visual aesthetic which she uses in her installations, as well as in the photographs created in association with these, in a new way. She is therefore freer with her raw material than are those who try to recreate certain motifs and then sometimes forget

how vital it is for art to be more than a copy. They who overlook the fact that an artist has the opportunity, when working in an unorthodox, playful or bold way with the phenomena that determine the world around us, to give back some freedom.

On the other hand, what Oscar Wilde once said applies to Veronika Veit's work: ›Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment.‹¹

1 Oscar Wilde, Der Verfall der Lüge (1891). In: Wilde, Essays II. Frankfurt / Main, 1982, p. 22.

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