Elena Brugnano: Early Photographs

Maria Brunner's photographic works from the 1990s are based on appropriated film scenes, often borrowed from famous movies such as Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*. Brunner adapts film stills by photographing and subsequently enlarging selected scenes on the CRT screen of a TV set using an analog camera. Her intervention also entails cutting out geometrical shapes from these film stills. Any cutout areas remain white.

In her black and white series *Der letzte Tango* (1996) and *Interieur* (1997), Brunner removes the round forms of the spherical lamps in the ballroom and triangles on an abstract carpet pattern. The cutout elements appear like overexposed geometric shapes that are decoratively distributed across the image space while effectively abstracting it. It is precisely this absence of the forms that affords them their particular presence within the image. The actual key elements of the scenes – the actors and their action – become insignificant. Brunner thus extracts the film stills from their context and leaves them to be examined on a purely aesthetic basis. Cinematic scenery, spatial design and their perception turn into an integral visual motif.

Brunner quite deliberately manipulates visual layers, perceptual principles and three-dimensional aspects with her film stills, both formally as well as in terms of content. The viewer involuntarily and automatically supplements the void spaces she creates within the photographs. This act of synthesis is based on the fact that we always aim to perceive things as a whole and try to complete partial connections and contexts. The technique of filmmaking is also based on this principle of perception: a sequence of different images with minimal deviation is combined into a seamless movement. Brunner uses this mechanism as a creative medium. In the series *Der letzte Tango* and *Pocket*, the viewer fills the empty two-dimensional areas with three-dimensional objects. In *Der letzte Tango*, we automatically add the round lamps – the light source within the image that Brunner has cut out of the photograph. At the same time, we perceive the blank space as a two-dimensional ornamentation that contrasts with the spatial depth of the ballroom. In *Pocket*, the missing billiard ball also represents its ultimate destination – a hole.

Brunner expands the photographic space further through her intervention, transferring the actual space into the image space. Brunner's play with spatial planes became even more apparent during the first presentation of the work *Der letzte Tango* where the same spherical lamps, which are missing from the photographs, were actually hung in the exhibition area.

Brunner's examination of the perception of cinematic images does not only take place on a formal level. The artist sees her photographs as some kind of 'snatches of memory' or 'mementoes'; with her work she tries to find out which film images remain in our memory, to what extent these images might shape us, and what emotions we associate with them. The photographs of the *DomHotel* series have been created with this context in mind. Here, too, is a series of appropriated film scenes – this time, however, not photographed, but reenacted. The film *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968) by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet provided the starting point for this group of works. The film was shot on the balcony of the Domhotel in Cologne, where Brunner also took her photographs of Cologne Cathedral.

Central themes of her later painting already manifest themselves in Brunner's early conceptual photographs: the creation and perception of flat surfaces as space and vice versa, as well as the possibilities of a representation of three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface. She repeatedly examines the opening of pictorial space into actual space in her work. The reference to her later painting is not only revealed in the attempt to define a space through objects, or by superimposing the pictorial planes and playing with perceptual principles, but also in the exploration of materiality. Photographing a moving image from a TV set and subsequently enlarging it results in a blurriness and coarseness that lends the photographs an almost painterly quality.

Elena Brugnano, Early Photography, in: *Maria Brunner*, Galerie Gisela Capitain and Galerie Elisabeth & Klaus Thoman (Ed.), Cologne 2017, Snoeck Verlagsgesellschaft MbH, p. 82—85.