

Beatrix Ruf; Walead Beshty; Stefanie Kleefeld; Annette Kelm. In: Parkett, #87, Zurich, Spring 2010.

ANNETTE KELM





Twisting and Turning

BEATRIX RUF

The photograph UNTITLED (2005) is probably one of Annette Kelm's most frequently reproduced works. A rider dressed in clothing that could easily be encountered in an urban context is mounted on an unspectacular steed in a scene that is vaguely reminiscent of a Western. In an utterly inappropriate gesture, he is holding an open fan with his arm stretched back over the horse's hindquarters. The animal's tail is the only indication of movement in the static, immobile scene of horse and rider. They are pictured in a moderately well-kept park: the grass has been cut; the vegetation in the background is a mixture of natural growth and cultivated flora. A fan palm, looking slightly out of place, stands alone center right, half hidden behind horse and rider but still visible enough to underscore the resemblance between the rider's fan and the leaves of the tree. All the interpretations and readings of the picture's

BEATRIX RUF is the director of the Kunsthalle Zürich.

subject matter fall apart: clichéd roles, the discourse on culture versus nature, a critique of civilization, gender issues, or whatever else might come to mind.

UNTITLED (2007) shows a mechanical organ, representing the transition from acoustic to electronic music. Kelm photographed the Wurlitzer in a museum of musical instruments. The setting looks uninviting and slapdash; a few other isolated instruments can be made out in the background of this neutral, concrete space. The atmosphere is not exactly poetic or redolent of historic narrative. A Miró print has been scotch taped to the concrete column beside the Wurlitzer. One can see that the composition is based on an arrangement of loosely scattered lines in primary colors, closed off top and bottom with a semicircle and a line. Just as the fan in the cowboy's hand echoes the palm leaves, the Miró print echoes the salient formal element of the Wurlitzer: the semicircle in the center with the linear arrangement of the keys, featuring the same colors as those in the print. In addition, both the Miró composition and the keys of the Wurlitzer are set off against a white ground.

ARCHEOLOGY AND PHOTOGRAPHY (2008) seems to take a different direction but ultimately leads to a similar collapse in form and content. The classical arrangement of object photography—a picture of single items shot slightly from above against a specific background—simultaneously implies a kind of media analysis and self-reflection: two books on photography (*Archäologie und Photographie* and *Photography and Literature*) have been placed with two zucchinis against a flowered fabric. The convention of using monochromatic backgrounds with rounded horizon lines to eliminate corners and the distinction between wall and floor ordinarily undermines any sense of space, but here it has been restored by the patterned fabric. The organically shaped zucchinis enter into absurd and witty discourse with the academically suggestive books, while the little flowers on the fabric establish an insidious alliance with the stem ends of the vegetables, so deceptively similar in color and shape. As so often in Kelm's work, the photograph alludes to questions of pattern, of foreground and background, and of representation.

The six-part series of portraits UNTITLED (2007) shows a young woman against a neutral blue background that reveals neither place nor time of day. She is wearing a baseball cap and is wrapped up in a coat. As the series progresses she turns her head from left to right. She is always photographed head on in the same position; we learn nothing about her or her emotions; nor can we look at her directly since her eyes are barely visible under the visor of the cap. As in other series, we look at the pictures so long and so intently until the act of looking itself becomes the content.

Kelm's answers to concrete inquiries—the interests that motivate her, the stories and representations that she pursues—leave the questioner even more baffled. The narratives behind the pictures always begin with curiosity about a specific historical moment, a personal story, interest in aesthetic details, or historical facts that have been forgotten or no longer attract attention. The artist is interested in cultural processes of transition; in models of production and objects as they shift from high art to mass culture; in historically relevant developments in design, architecture, and technology; in the diverse ways in which objects and images change through the transport of styles and products in an age of global consumption; and, finally, in questions of the artificiality and ambiguity that govern cultural artifacts.

Whatever the case, her descriptions always end up supplying information on the technical execution of her pictures, which does not, however, mean that she shuns questions of content, narrative, and meaning. Neither can her work be reduced to the hackneyed artistic *bon mot* that these are, after all, pictures and not texts. On the contrary, she demonstrates that



there are a number of texts and many different strands of discursive approach to the subject matter of the emerging work. In other words, a precise set of tools for visual production allows for the interaction of substantial, formal, and technical elements, literally generating room for thought.

The tools of Kelm's trade are straightforward: her pictures are taken with large-, medium-, and small-format analog cameras and individually printed by hand. These seemingly trivial details testify to deliberate decisions made in conversation with the history of her medium as regards its position among the rank and file of the media canonized as "art" and the nature of photography as a medium that filters our images, an inherent trait that is given additional impetus by technological advances.

Kelm makes single works as well as series on a single motif, the latter sharing recognizable features such as variations in composition or subject matter that changes through time. Significantly, this does not necessarily lead to more information, to a narrative, or, as in the series that Christopher Williams makes, to debate on the mechanics or conditions of the image itself. The formats are unspectacular and defined by the subject matter. For instance, the size of the BIG PRINTS (2007), based on textiles designed by Dorothy Draper, echoes the format of the fabric pattern, and in the 2008 series of model homes and prefab housing, we encounter the familiar format of architectural photography. Beginning with the Wolgaster wood industry and the German workshops in the early twentieth century, this modular architecture in folkloric style spread across the globe. The photographs show us the object and, at the same time, they make us aware of our own vantage point by underscoring the way we physically experience the buildings. The artist's portraits, still lifes, and objects also adhere to conventional formats, not only exploring but also blithely negating the theories underlying

the conceptual and aesthetic strategies often enlisted to justify the medium of photography as a fine art.

The reception of Kelm's oeuvre sparks associations, most especially the impetus to seek orientation among such practitioners as Bernd & Hilla Becher and the large format photography of, say, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, and Candida Höfer. We draw on anchors of interpretation secured in artistic approaches and the changing significance of the medium of photography within the fine arts. We follow every conceivable trail that leads to the widespread and manifold use of photography in the international context of the 1990s. We hope to find appropriation, staged photography, self-referentially critical representations, and a diversity of narrative, conceptual, and socially critical approaches. Kelm's use of photography is, of course, related to all of the above, while familiar elements and readings are subverted with a seemingly effortless ménage of definitive, precise gestures. Classification by means of aesthetic and conceptually defined recognition factors collapses just as much as the above-mentioned quest for content and narrative.

Kelm's photography seems to have been divested of these secondary considerations to make room for her main concerns: subjective imagery and technical production. Her works



emerge on the cusp between intense research and intuitive action; they are the result of a constant back and forth between seeing and composing, followed by rejection and further composition. It is a process that is similar to painting. Kelm deliberately works with techniques reduced to the basics of photography; she borrows from painting the ambition of using simple means to produce individual images and portraits derived from the subjective perception of reality. The resulting products of perception and reality do not obey a hierarchy because they have been liberated from such critical expectations as content, facticity, or homogenized statements.

This also applies to the presentations that Kelm “composes” for galleries and institutions. Her exhibitions show a combination of works made at different times; they consistently include her entire repertoire of motifs and cover a wide variety of classical forms of representation in photography: still life, portraiture, object photography, architectural and landscape photography. The picture of a horse’s back hoof in the snow (UNTITLED, 2001) may be juxtaposed with a record (TARGET RECORD, 2005) pictured against a background of colorfully striped fabric, its label showing a photograph by the artist; a parrot (TURNING INTO A PARROT, 2003) perched on a gloved hand, reminiscent of falconry, is pictured against a not quite adequate background of vegetation; fried eggs are seen next to hands holding coins out to the public in a reverse gesture of begging (UNTITLED, 2004); the artist, decked out in a false beard, is framed in the window of a slanted house (YOUR HOUSE IS MY CASTLE, 2005), located in the Bormarzo Garden of Monsters, which Vicino Orsini had installed near Rome in the sixteenth century. Or she combines different series like the palm trees photographed at night (I LOVE THE BABY GIANT PANDA, I’D WELCOME ONE TO MY VERANDA, 2003), the branches of an orange bush (UNTITLED, 2007), and a target full of bullet holes, photographed from the back (UNTITLED, 2006). The large format reproductions of textile patterns could become a link to the picture of the first electric guitar photographed against a fabric that looks as if it might be African (FRYING PAN, 2007). The guitar was made in Holland and sold in Paris. A glass of water with a branch of eucalyptus dipped into it is placed on a fabric with a Hawaiian pattern and blends into it so well that it almost becomes indistinguishable. The title charges this work with myriad associations: AFTER LUNCH, TRYING TO BUILD RAILWAY TIES (2005). Taking its cue from research on failed attempts to use eucalyptus wood for the first railroad tracks built in the United States, the picture weaves fabric, vegetation, and historical knowledge into an additional tale of longing.

The pictures are given new contexts and, hence, new meanings in every new installation; they become part of a larger overall picture, which, once again, does not reveal or, indeed, permit any clear-cut narrative or identifiable strategy. The disturbing effects of the individual pictures prevail: real and fictional, objective and emotional, present and absent, a collage of facts, stories, and history offering hints of what the pictures might possibly be and presenting a reality in which the simultaneity of many realities, contradictions, breaks, and ambiguities are the stuff of everyday life.

(Translation: Catherine Schelbert)



TOWARD A MINOR PHOTOGRAPHY:

Annette Kelms Discrete Cosmologies

WALEAD BESHTY

Each act of depiction is the taming of an unruly past, a condensation of conventions, histories, and processes into a singular surface that is subsequently apprehended in a flash. And herein lies the double bind of the depictive in art, for depiction is the most conservative of gestures—naturalized, instrumental, idiomatic—and simultaneously the most contentious artistic act. Its sheer ubiquity and legibility place it squarely at the intersection of art and daily life, the very terrain that, since it was identified by the avant-gardes, has represented art's greatest revolutionary potential. Since the turn of the twentieth century, no medium has embodied the conflict over the depictive like photography: as the most widely disseminated popular medium and the most conventionalized representational form, it has been the subject of both ritualized scrutiny and nostalgic re-entrenchment.

WALEAD BESHTY is an artist, writer, and Associate Professor in Art Center College of Design's Graduate Fine Art Department. He lives and works in Los Angeles.

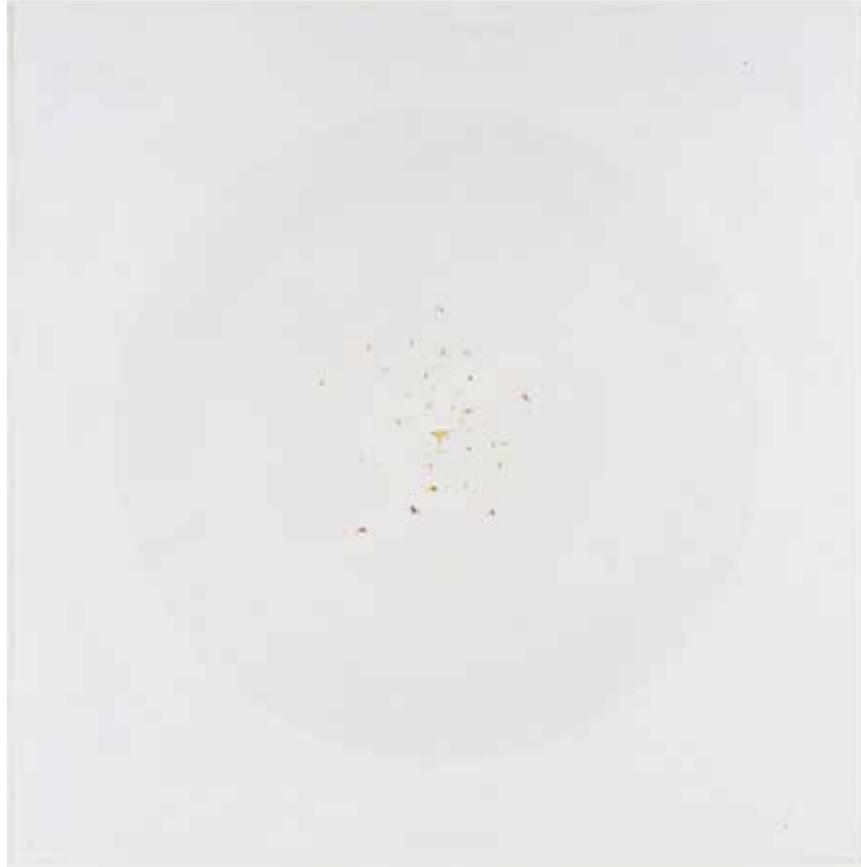
Yet it would be a mistake to claim that photography has been restrained by convention, rather, it has no identity outside of convention and no history that is not equally a history of convention. The identity of photography is situated within the inverse relationship between materiality and convention, and as its material solidity has receded, dispersed technologically (a process initiated soon after its invention), convention has come to define it fully. This condition is not unique among objects of theoretical discourse; it is a state shared by all media that are identified and isolated as a tradition. Yet the photographic has undergone an even more extreme alchemical transformation that encompasses both art and the public sphere, not simply becoming a discursive collection of conventions, for this is what it always was, but of its conventions becoming subsumed within those of depiction, becoming inextricable from and unidentifiable outside the language of the depictive. The best evidence of this is the commonplace understanding that reproductions of photographs on billboards, in

books, in magazines, on computer screens, and on gelatin silver paper are equally a part of the photographic episteme despite their vastly differentiated materiality and mode of distribution. In short, they are equivalent because they serve as nothing more than the depictive.

By the late seventies, this peculiar circumstance made photography a wholly polarized artistic field. The practitioners and critics who noticed the tide changing diligently lined up on one side or the other of the ideological divide, arguing either for the re-deployment of the instrumental force of the photographic to counter-institutional ends—a belief that the dominant language of the depictive might be redeemed—or for a deconstruction of its naturalized conventions, as though negation was not simply a

perverse form of preservation. Anachronistic as they may seem today, these polarities continued well into the following decade, and by now, the urgency once ascribed to photography in the discussion of the politics of art has waned, swept under the rug with other unfinished business. In the wake of this stalemate, the production of photographs in art appears to have suffered from a curious bout of self-inflicted amnesia: rather than being instrumental, it parodies the instrumental, abandoning any aspiration to a revolutionary project for the pictorialism of a pre-modern Beaux Arts, retroactively inserting itself into the tradition of the autonomous art object, or the taxonomies of the archival document, and blindly into its thoroughly disassembled instrumentality. Its contingent conventions, its elasticity of distribution





and reception, have become concretized, inert, and stagnant, accepting the mute museum wall as its foregone conclusion, or, as George Baker surmised in his 2003 essay “Photography’s Expanded Field,” “Critical consensus would have it that the problem today is not that just about anything image-based can now be called photographic, but rather that photography itself has been foreclosed, cashiered, abandoned—outmoded technologically and displaced aesthetically.”¹¹⁾

Thus we have a photographic discourse, theoretical or otherwise, that has become a moody precipitate of its headier days—a hermetic, over-crowded, over-theorized, and stifling field comprised of tired idioms, and a discourse-driven example of what Theodor Adorno termed “late style,” which he likened to an aged piece of fruit whose surface is “furrowed, even ravaged,” showing “more traces of history than of growth.”¹²⁾ As Adorno wrote, late style “leaves

only fragments behind, and communicates itself, like a cipher, only through the blank spaces from which it has disengaged itself... its tears and fissures, witnesses to... finite powerlessness.”¹³⁾ It is where “conventions find expression as the naked representation of themselves,” producing “‘expressionless’, distanced works” that turn “emptiness outward.”¹⁴⁾

Emerging in the early 2000s, Annette Kelm came to photography within its late moment, yet her work neither fit neatly into any of its entrenched modalities, nor did it propose a radical break with tradition. Instead, her unassuming images seem to curl up in the heart of the conflict, adapting photography’s dominant tongue—its propensity for symbolism and historiography, its pictorial and taxonomic proclivities—to provisional ends. Her deadpan, frontal image of a fallen sequoia, MIL ARRUGAS (a thousand wrinkles, 2005), with its undulating root system

splayed out like an open wound and compressed against the picture’s surface, offers an iconographic key to Kelm’s oeuvre. MIL ARRUGAS was made on a trip to the same forest where Alfred Hitchcock, in his film *Vertigo* (1958), represented the conflation of time and space through a dismembered section of redwood. It was here that Hitchcock’s protagonist, the hard-nosed former detective-turned-private eye, Scottie (James Stewart), fell victim to schizophrenic time, with his muse, Judy (Kim Novak)—masquerading as the psychically tortured “Madeleine”—pointing to one of the tree’s annual rings and declaring it the moment of her death. For Scottie, his grip on reality loosened by his love for the imposter, this was the moment when the fragile barrier between past and present evaporated, and the beginning of his phantasmagoric descent into madness.

Reflecting on this scene some twenty years later in *Sans Soleil* (1983), Chris Marker mused on Hitchcock’s anti-hero as a portrait of the archetypical filmmaker, an archeologist of images intoxicated by the fragments of the past and unable to resist falling victim to temporal aphasia. We follow Marker following Scottie’s trail, just as Scottie followed his elusive object of desire, and along with Marker, we see time and space, present and past, reality and fantasy conflated in the synthetic temporality of cinematic time, Scottie’s delirium representing Marker’s filmic journey *en abyme*. The dizzying spiral encompassing *Vertigo*’s opening credits served as Marker’s ideogrammatic key, his narrator commenting: “time cover[ed] a field ever wider as it moved away, a cyclone whose present moment contains motionless, *the eye*,” or the “I,” the seeing subject, ensnared within its vortex.

In MIL ARRUGAS Kelm stalks the eye and time to the mythical grounds of their conflation—the roots of the sequoia becoming the striations of an iris, giving us time again rendered as a static field. Yet, unlike the tidy geometry of Hitchcock’s spiral, or the smooth cylindrical section that Scottie and Madeleine/Judy are seen standing before, Kelm’s image is unruly: the dark center of the upended tree ensnared in the interlocking tendrils of its root system. Kelm delivers us an invaginated arrow of time (akin to Georges Bataille’s pineal eye, whose conical form

echoes the tip of an arrow, and the piercing vision of the phalocentric camera) that is here split and inverted it into an undulating pucker, an upended phallus revealing a darkened void enveloped in folds that retreat from its center like the rays of a sunburst in negative. Time is no longer depicted as the orderly sedimentations of the past, but as an interwoven knotted field that defies neat dissection and has literally been uprooted, arrested in a state of decay. Most telling, we are given a monocular double of the camera lens in the arrested spiral of the wounded tree as an eye that stares back like a clenched fist.

Like Marker’s narrator, Kelm scavenges the historical and material world for totems, repeatedly revisiting the image of the eye and of time, symbols for which the technological image has always had almost religious deference. In her untitled series of targets, we are presented with a sequence of ocular forms marred by the literal piercing of arrows that inject pulsations of color through its blank surface. Again a flat field—an orderly terrain—is shot through with incidences that appear like an unnamed constellation: In her sequence of images that comprise the piece UNTITLED (2007)—a depiction of a woman flattened against a blue background with her eyes in deep shadow seemingly glancing back and forth—the camera’s eye is transformed into a lurking, unseen stalker, yet the photographs are clearly staged, the forebodingly distanced precision of the lens performed rather than enacted. Another series, BACKSTAGE (2004), which shows an eye cropped tight, bracketed by false eyelashes, darting about as though trapped inside the frame, evokes the infamous scene in *Un chien andalou* (1929) where the empirical gaze of the camera literally dissects its object with the single slash of a razorblade, an instance of the symbolic and the depictive, the metaphoric and metonymic, consummated in one horrific gesture.

Yet, the violent taxonomies of the anonymous camera are never fully exploited by Kelm. The eye is never cut, the examination is left incomplete, and the sequence never resolves. The typological and serial turn from a monotonous drum roll into a circumstantial cadence. It is this quality of provisionality, what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari called the “minor”—“that which a minority constructs within a

major language”—that Kelm here deploys.⁵⁾ No series lasts more than a few iterations, and their subjects—from a seated women, to a man at a thinly orchestrated Italian restaurant, to a palm tree blowing in the wind—could not be confused for the subject matter of the taxonomer, or the allegorical detritus of a social realist, yet the tools of their trades persist. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, “Minor languages are characterized not by overload and poverty in relation to a standard or major language, but by a sobriety and variation that are like a minor treatment of a major language... deterritorializing the major language.”⁶⁾ The minor language is comprised of sliding meanings and innuendo that operates within the “cramped space” of the mother tongue, it never attempts to assert an oppositional language, it does not seek to “acquire the majority,”⁷⁾ but rather it insinuates itself within totalizing structures, turning them to the service of the transitory and contingent.

Channeling Walter Benjamin, Eduardo Cadava wrote, “The history of photography can be said to begin with an interpretation of the stars.”⁸⁾ In Kelm’s hands, photographs, like stars, are polysemic figures; they slyly shift meanings, slipping easily into a multitude of provisional patterns, allowing both symbolic inference and empiricist speculation to coexist. Her photographs embrace loose formal associations, tenuous historical linkages, and personal remembrances. The photograph AFTER LUNCH, TRYING TO BUILD RAILWAY TIES (2005) is exemplary in this respect. The vaguely Hawaiian motif of the fabric backdrop seen in the image evokes the anthropological uses of photography as much as it does the trope of botanical specimen documentation. Yet the mass-produced fabric never achieves the appearance of anthropological authenticity, instead it is a perversion that parallels the absurd prevalence of the Eucalyptus tree in Southern California, which is seen here demurely displayed in a common drinking glass. Native to Australia and imported in the early nineteenth century to the West Coast of the United States, it wasn’t until the late 1860s that the Eucalyptus was planted on a grand scale to support the massive need for wood in the railroad and ship building industries. The fast-growing trees came to dominate the landscape, forcing out the native oaks, yet the Eu-

calyptus was a poor building material, wet and sappy, with a spiraling grain, and it had a natural tendency to curl as it dried, slowly tearing apart any structure it was used to build. In Kelm’s image, these historical connections assume the character of the incidental: the plant clipping and cheap fabric infuse the larger narrative with a sense of whimsy while the lunch encounter is imbued with poetic significance.

Mythic conflations between the grand and the mundane are not uncommon in Kelm’s vision. The same sensitivities draw her to the Los Angelino cowboy who enacts his personal fantasy in a neighborhood park, regally trotting amongst power lines and playing children, as they did to Albert Frey’s sci-fi inflected restaurant-cum-spaceship, which sits in disrepair, peppered with graffiti as a rotting Futurism moored on the edge of an equally dead, man-made sea. But the elliptical conflation of past and present, history and image, is perhaps nowhere better on display than in Kelm’s HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL (I AND II) (2005). Both images depict Frank Lloyd Wright’s Ennis-Brown house, whose structure has been slowly disintegrating into the hill on which it is perched. The culmination of Wright’s pre-Columbian “textile block” houses, the Ennis-Brown, unlike its antecedents, went so far as to emulate pre-Columbian engineering, employing a high sand content concrete drawn directly from its grounds. While this decision literalized a very modern materialist interdependence of architecture and site, it also made the house particularly susceptible to erosion. The resulting piece of modern architecture, which was inspired by the timeless aura of ruins, has quickly become a ruin itself. A favorite of the Hollywood picture industry, the Ennis-Brown has served as the backdrop for several films (including the B-movie Kelm’s titles her photographs after), but its most famous role was in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982), a noir-ish imagination of a future populated by discursive fragments, simulations, and false figures: in short, the future presented as a ruin of the past, a material reality crushed under the weight of its images, that ironically foretold the fate of Wright’s structure.

It would be a mistake to assume that Kelm’s is a photography that proposes to remember for us: neither does it simulate or prescribe a historical narra-

tive, nor does it linger in the hermetic realm of the personal. Instead, it resides in the precarious position between worlds, between the personal and the public, the fleeting and the eternal, holding within each picture the potential for memory without prescription. It is this photography—not constructed to undermine totalizing or divisive potentials, but a provisional photography, grafted onto history’s interior, a photography of minor proportions—that grows like a parasite within the dormant body of its host and, as such, outlives its confines, drawing new life from its dead flesh.



- 1) George Baker, “Photography’s Expanded Field,” *October*, vol. 114, Fall 2005, p. 122.
- 2) Theodor W. Adorno, “Late Style in Beethoven,” in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, tr. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), p. 564.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 566.
- 4) *Ibid.*, pp. 566–67.
- 5) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, tr. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 16.
- 6) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. Bernard Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 104.
- 7) *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- 8) Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 26.

STEFANIE KLEEFELD

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There's not much to it, really: a background indirectly lit by two lamps, and a third used to illuminate the object. Then press the release and that's it. As Annette Kelm notes in her conversation with Jens Asthoff, that's about as simple as it gets.¹⁾ Kelm is talking about her work ANONYMOUS, LILAC CLOCK BAG BUFFALO EXCHANGE (2007)—a four-part photo series in which each image shows a round, lilac handbag with a clock face sewn into it. Photographed head on against a white background, the only discernible difference between the images is the fact that, in each, the hands of the clock have moved forward another minute.

Much of Kelm's photography displays the same sense of detachment. In the neutral style of studio photography, the subject matter is generally captured without shadows in a kind of non-space, or in such extreme close-up that the context is negated. It is as though Kelm's project is an archaeology of things, architectures, and landscapes in which the objects in her pictures refer primarily to themselves: nothing is revealed and nothing inferred beyond the subject matter itself. This approach of adding nothing or of presenting motifs in isolation bears witness to Kelm's confidence in her subject matter's ability to speak for

STEFANIE KLEEFELD is an art historian and critic living in Berlin. She is editor of *Texte zur Kunst*.

itself. She merely has to present it in the right light. As Susan Sontag once put it, "The photographer's ardor for a subject... is, above all, an affirmation of the subject's thereness, its rightness."²⁾

With the patience of a saint and no fear of boring herself or the viewer, Kelm presents her subject matter either in individual photographs or in series, varying the framing of the motif or capturing it at slightly different times, but never altering the camera angle. In this way, the viewer becomes part of Kelm's undertaking—her precise observations from behind the camera, her painstaking explorations—and is (potentially) able to grasp her discoveries.

Taking pictures is a form of appropriation. As Merleau-Ponty points out, however, every viewpoint excludes another one. Herein lies the impossibility of grasping any phenomenon in its entirety. Thus, the failure of that desire to appropriate something is inscribed in each and every photograph. Kelm's series take this desire to appropriate to new extremes (one photograph does not seem to suffice) and simultaneously address the failure of that undertaking. As Dirk von Lowtzow puts it, "Through repetition motifs succumb to their yearning for similarity, effortlessly detaching themselves from the original as from an all-powerful father figure."³⁾ So it is not in the photographs themselves, but in the empty spaces—the shifts and the subtle discrepancies between indivi-



dual shots—that we find meaning and make associations that go beyond what is depicted.

But of what nature are the objects that appear in Kelm's work? In her photographs, she often focuses on the unspectacular and the everyday, such as an acorn in *FIRST PICTURE FOR A SHOW* (2007). Yet in addition to these relatively banal items, a number of culturally significant motifs can also be found, like the early-twentieth century prefabricated housing. These can hardly be described as blank pages, for they harbor compelling associations that emerge from the context. In other words, there are two types of motif in Kelm's work: those that are already regarded as significant within the canon of cultural history, and those that Kelm renders significant by dint of selecting them.

Selecting everyday motifs is rooted in the Surrealist maxim of paying attention to the peripheral, which, in Surrealism at least, was motivated by the moral premise of breaking down the hierarchical distinction between, say, beautiful and ugly or significant and trivial. Such parity is not, however, restricted to the artist's choice of motifs; it also applies to the way they are presented in photographs. For instance, Julian Göthe in *JULIAN, ITALIAN RESTAURANT* (2008) is photographed in the same way as any other motif in Kelm's serial works. All three photographs in the series are in the same format, while

the motif in each photograph differs only minimally from the others—not in terms of angle, framing, or composition, but only as regards the subtle changes in Göthe's hands and eyes. In this respect, Kelm's portrait photographs are always to be read as object photographs, just as, conversely, her object photographs can be read as portraiture.

The strategy of according equal value to the subject matter of the pictures (in both choice and presentation) is also a hallmark of those photographs by Kelm in which several objects are juxtaposed and arranged against specially selected backgrounds. These works differ from those mentioned earlier, though not because of their painstakingly detailed composition. For, as Kelm herself has noted, there is no such thing as a neutral pictorial space.⁴⁾ Even those photographs that do not look orchestrated, like the images of prefabricated buildings, are to be taken as arrangements rather than as pure documentation. The difference between the two forms of photography lies in the fact that in these photographs the objects are combined or placed in relation to one another, which lend her works a mannerist air despite their stringency. (However, the ornamental fabrics in Kelm's evocative backgrounds are also to be regarded as part of the subject matter.) Given the combination of several objects combined in one photograph, the question that arises is not so much

why she uses a certain motif—especially in pictures featuring just one object—but why she has created a certain arrangement.

Faced with a juxtaposition of things that do not ordinarily belong together, some of Kelm's compositions are initially bewildering and grotesque. The objects in the pictures refer to themselves and their own history but, simultaneously, this self-referential aspect is undermined by the fact that they appear in combination. It is in both this discrepancy as well as the repetition that a subtle interaction—what Jessica Morgan terms “a subtle and yet acutely devised game of visual and verbal associations”⁵⁾—comes into play, where the familiar becomes unfamiliar, and where the viewer's thoughts merge with the meaning inscribed in the objects.

This is true of *ARCHEOLOGY AND PHOTOGRAPHY* (2007), a work in which two upright books and two white zucchinis are presented against a backdrop of green floral fabric. The combination is bizarre: neither books and vegetables, nor background and objects, go together. But, of course, as Beatrix Ruf

astutely notes, the stems of the zucchinis do correlate to some extent with the forms and colors of the plants on the fabric.⁶⁾ What is striking is the fact that Kelm has taken objects at once random (the zucchinis) and at the same time significant, descriptive, and charged (the photo books), and has put these two categories together. Both the choice of these objects and the fact that the book, *Archäologie und Photographie*, is combined with a zucchini suggest that the photographs are to be read as a commentary on her own work. Such attempts at interpretation, however, invariably venture onto thin ice—for as soon as a possible interpretation has been proposed, it becomes clear that it is only one of many. That open-ended aspect of her work is entirely intentional.

This intentionality is evident in *Untitled* (2007), a series that shows four pictures of the same orange tree. Since neither the title of the photograph nor the green background tell us anything about the context, the viewer sees only what is to be seen: one motif that has been photographed from four different angles. Further study reveals that the orange tree be-



longs to Kelm's parents, who received it as a gift in 1975—the year the artist was born.⁷⁾ This piece of information is in itself not crucial to an understanding of the work. One can, for instance, access the work in terms of its ornamental appearance generated by the lack of shadow that makes the leaves and the fruit of the tree merge with the flat green background. Kelm has pushed this convergence of foreground and background, the blurring of boundaries between various pictorial levels, to new extremes in her photographs of Dorothy Draper's textile designs (2007). Since the background in these shots of the fabrics is, in itself, the photographed object, foreground and background become one: by eschewing the material portrayal of the object (e.g. the folds of the fabric), Kelm renders the photographic picture space as decorative surface while, at the same time, showing the object to be photographed. The photographs of the orange tree could also be regarded as examples of the serial nature of her work: the portrayal of the tree from different angles and differently cropped, and the resulting approximation of the photographic me-

dium to the media of film and sculpture. The biographical aspect is merely an added layer of meaning.

Given the deliberate openness of Kelm's work, there is never any one point at which everything has been said definitively, which means that the oddly insistent desire to find a way of reading it and to pinpoint the meaning of her work, is taken to absurdity. This openness has to be seen as an artistic strategy. As Beatrix Ruf astutely noted, “Annette Kelm is permanently switching levels of association and hence the paths one can take in a picture, and, as viewer, one constantly switches one's entry point: now the verbal predominates, now the conceptual, now the purely retinal; sometimes taste is involved, or aesthetic seduction...”⁸⁾ It's all there. But there is no resolution for what we see.

Kelm reinforces this openness in her work not only by means of compositional strategies, but also by choosing titles that do not actually name the motif, but trigger other connotations and, with that, con-



veal more than they reveal. The titles may be lyrical, as in *YOUR HOUSE IS MY CASTLE* (2005), or they may resort to the time-honored “Untitled.” Just as she removes objects from their original setting and combines them with other objects, Kelm does not insist on the object’s original context. At other times, however, she takes the opposite tack by precisely naming the objects on display. Take, for instance, her photographs of the first prefabricated houses: *ERSTES MUSTERHAUS*, *HELLERAU*, *DEUTSCHE WERKSTÄTTEN HELLERAU*, *ARCHITEKT ADELBERT NIEMEYER*, 1920 (2008). Without the title, these motifs would be impossible to categorize and since Kelm does not seek to create a hiatus of any kind in the pictures themselves, they might seem to be nothing but shots of beautiful houses. However, by using titles to define a series, she relates them to one another. It is within the context of this relationship that their similarities and, above all, their differences become evident. And so, as in all of Kelm’s series, the meaning lies between the individual photographs.

Using the titles of the works to decontextualize or contextualize them is indicative of one of the fundamental characteristics of the photographic image. After all, what a photograph shows is invariably dislodged from its original setting, so that every photograph harbors multiple meanings. Accordingly, the statement a photograph makes depends essentially on the context (titles, other works, etc.) in which it is placed. As Susan Sontag points out, the ‘reality’ of the world is not in its images, but in its functions. “Functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand.”⁹⁾

By insisting that a photograph reveals just as much as it conceals, Kelm’s work reflects on the medium itself. This concealment betrays that photographs are merely fragments that cannot even come close to capturing something in all its complexity, let alone providing an objective image of reality. For photography is necessarily the product of a meeting between object and photographer. In this respect, a photograph may bear witness to what is there, but at the same time, the viewpoint of the person taking the photograph is always inscribed upon the image. Accordingly, such categories as intuition and taste must

be regarded as constituent elements of photography. This fundamental characteristic of photography is addressed by Kelm in the obvious staging and aestheticizing of her subject matter.

These “media-reflective” aspects of Kelm’s work, however, are evident not only in her emphasis on exposing the fundamental characteristics of the medium. The artist’s attempt to bring photography closer to other media, such as film or sculpture, which Lowtzow has described as “defiance” of her own medium,¹⁰⁾ ultimately casts photography back to its own basic parameters (a photograph, after all, is just a photograph).

In short, Kelm’s work is a complex system of references in which the points of reference constantly contradict one another. Or, to put it another way: Annette Kelm’s works cannot be pinned down to any one particular motif, genre, format, or title. They oscillate between extremes. The medium itself, the fascination for archiving and staging, and the attraction exerted by objects, architectures, and individuals seem to be no more than a starting-point from which she can create her own distinctive photographic images. It is difficult to find words that might sum up this complex oeuvre, which in itself shows how conceptual and intuitive it really is. But Annette Kelm would not be Annette Kelm were it not for her remarkable ability to bring such seeming opposites together.

1) Annette Kelm in conversation with Jens Asthoff on 22 Feb 2008 in Kelm’s Berlin studio, “Annette Kelm,” in *Camera Austria*, No. 102, 2008, p. 13.

2) Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London/New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 77.

3) Dirk von Lowtzow, “This is Not a Photograph,” in *Annette Kelm* exh. cat. (London: Koenig Books/ Zurich: Kunsthalle Zürich/ Berlin: KW Institute for Contemporary Art/ Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2009), p. 67.

4) See note 1, p. 13.

5) Jessica Morgan, “Images and Objects—Photography and Sculptures,” in *Annette Kelm. Errors in English* (London: Koenig Books, 2006), p. 32.

6) Beatrix Ruf, “Susanne Pfeffer, Beatrix Ruf and Nicolaus Schaffhausen in Conversation” in *Annette Kelm*, see note 3, p. 64.

7) Jens Hoffmann, “Annette Kelm,” in *Artforum*, Vol. XLVI, No. 5, January 2008, p. 269.

8) See note 6, p. 64.

9) See note 2, p. 23.

10) See note 3, p. 67.

