

On the Practice of Photography in the Work of Stefan Krauth

Blurriness as an artistic means to achieve ecstasy and rapture has a long tradition.

Leonardo was already using such soft-focus effects to give his portraits of women a luster that makes them seem mysterious. So-called *sfumato* creates a unity of space that seems very immediate, even though it is actually achieved through blurriness.

In the 1920s the cameraman William Daniels lent Greta Garbo's beauty its unique, delicately hazy presence simply by stretching gauze over the lens of the camera.

Here again a means of creating distance seems like a medium of proximity.

The gaze is veiled, as if one's glasses were fogged by the excited breathing of the desirous male. Daniels directed the gaze at the Hollywood diva by shading her image toward the edges and thus producing a kind of tunnel vision that permits no attention other than that devoted to Garbo's magic.

Stefan Krauth pushes his motifs away into a comparable distance whose remoteness produces an emotional proximity. It has a psychological effect. The blurry motif loses its concrete reference to an object. It is no longer a depiction of a specific place or a specific person. With this rapture, the image takes on emblematic features and is put on a pedestal like a film icon. It becomes a depiction of a basic emotional state, a certain state of mind. Blending functions here not just visually as blurriness but also emotionally, as dividing lines blur and produce an emotional unity between the observer and the observed. The colors seem more powerful; bright areas cause zones to stand out or become a fantastic aura that imitates sunsets or moonlight; small, white blots sweep across the image like snowflakes, stardust, or traces of wear.

Stefan Krauth finds his motifs on his travels. From the large numbers of photographs he takes, just a few are selected and put through further processing. The sheer abundance of the accumulated photographs is also an expression of the naivety with which the camera is pointed at every conceivable or random motif today, in the face of the arbitrariness of digital photography. Their significance is thus often limited only to a momentary recollection. The motif is experienced as worthy of a glance simply because it is possible to record it; the image thus recorded is immediately examined on the display. Then it disappears forever in diverse storage capacities, perhaps one day satisfying its owner's need for order when it is placed in the appropriate folder. Its later availability remains an option that almost never becomes

a must for us wholesale photographers. On his journeys Krauth pursues a desire that leads him to the prototypical sites of wanderlust, such as Vietnam as an example of the exotic or the American West with its myths. The desire for these places is not only lived out de facto by traveling but also takes place in the way Krauth works out these desires from the motifs of his photographs. For example, a very prosaic view of an industrial site can become a magical place.

The approach with which he burdens his images is not exactly gentle. Image files are photographed from the screen multiple times. With each new photograph, interference between the motif and the camera lens emerges: reflections of light caused by daylight falling on the surface of the screen or by deliberately placed lamps as well as deposits of dust or even cigarette smoke. Each time they take the motif a little further from the original gaze, which nevertheless shines through stubbornly until the »end« – the exhibited image.

In the classical idea, each of the effects mentioned here would signify a degradation of the image. Who would like to see his or her vacation photographs on an old dusty monitor, which is not only sometimes dusted so badly that the streaks of dirt stand out on the surface but also decreases in light intensity as it moves toward the edges? If you look carefully, you will recognize these traces in Krauth's photographs. Even the dots of the screen are clearly visible.

The surfaces of the works exhibited are, however, as smooth as one expects from photographs. All the traces that that could be thought to harm the gaze at the motif happen in the photograph. Like the motif itself, its processing is something past sublated in the perfection of the print. In this re-formation it obtains its story, which has, however, found a provisional conclusion in the exhibited print.

The conditions of the poor screen, dust, light, and space are, in a sense, used by Krauth like the computer graphics tools provided by software developers. They also differ in essential points. They do not occur on the digital level but rather possess their own physical presence.

The fact that dust is virtually a sculptural material was known to Marcel Duchamp as well. He had lost sight of his own *Large Glass*, so it was simply gathering dust in his studio. His colleague Man Ray spotted it and photographed this neglected »icon of art history« in 1920 with dust bunnies dancing on it. Under the title *Élevage de poussière* (Dust breeding), Duchamp appropriated this photograph as his own work. The interplay of relief-like drawing, a thin layer of dust, and the fluffs of dust randomly

distributed on it has no author but finds one in its viewer. The artist's gaze clinging to it is documented in the photograph and a title lends it a new meaning, making it into a work.

Krauth too employs aspects of chance, factors that cannot be completely controlled such as the precipitation of dust, its granularity, or even the gradations of color in daylight and differences in the way it falls on the screen. Experiences with using such means lead to a certain mastery of the inherent laws of »artistic materials«. Krauth makes the decision whether a form of processing proves to be successful in the sense of the visual narrative on the screen when considering whether the image is considered worthy of printing.

That is followed by appropriation through naming. Krauth's photographs have poetic titles, which not infrequently suggest great myths: *The Vanished City, Grave of a Famous Pirate or The Island*. With them the closes off access to the motif. It has become all image and celebrates its own myth.

If we assume the motif has a kind of abstract autonomy in the face of every observation, of every access to it, and of every meaning with which it can be charged, then the superimposition of the image with the needs of its viewer is in a sense of form of dirtying that defiles and obscures the image. Conversely, at the same time it reveals its emotional potency.

The image is there to fulfill the desires of its viewer; this dependency both elevates and degrades it. It becomes a mirror of the soul that makes it possible to diver under its surface and find oneself there, merged with the image. Stefan Krauth thus opens up an extreme range; his artistic means emphasize the surface of photography and in the process create images that primarily speak to the emotional states of their viewers.

Holger Birkholz (2012)