On Empty Surfaces

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Excursus: History

Photographers have undertaken investigations in the objective realm and recorded in peopleless pictures the formative conditions of modern life. In systematic abstractions and stylized typologies, they depict abandoned houses and empty streets, parks and buildings that have fallen into disuse, lonely cityscapes of factories, machines or industrial monuments, as well as melancholic landscapes, vacant spaces or desolate wasteland. Already at the beginning of the twentieth century, Eugène Atget employed the fundamental possibilities of this pictorial language and bequeathed a comprehensive oeuvre of architectural and urban photographs of the old Paris. Even today the images possess a disquieting intensity and not only convey to us the appearance of Paris at the turn of the century, but also document an aspect of fundamental transformation in urban life. Along with ancient houses and street scenes, parks, squares and bridges, Atget also shows the first traces of advertisements in the city. Written mostly by hand upon signs and on the walls of houses are prizes, products and the names of shop owners. The coming century will multiply this hesitant form of advertising in public spaces in an unforeseen manner and will cover over the urban space with a pictorial and symbolic language which embodies, in an outstanding and uncompromising manner, the imperatives of consumption and entertainment as the essential motor of modern capitalism. Already quite early on in the twentieth century, cities became the signboards of a general illustration of consumer behavior in mass industrial society. All the way into the nineteen-twenties, Atget documents the iconography of public pictures and messages. But it was not only photography which registered and worked with these images. Parallel to the silent, scene-of-the-crime photography by this Frenchman, other artists developed a vocabulary of modern, formal-aesthetic social criticism which was solidly based on the dynamic language of design evident in posters as well as in newspaper announcements and pictures, and which also had a decisive influence on their aesthetic. The proponents of these artistic forms were able, to a much greater extent than was possible for Atget, to represent and to interpret the underlying assumptions of urban culture. In spite of their diversity, both Constructivism and Dadaism developed a vocabulary of attack and appeal in which they cut and collaged the messages and images of advertisements as well as distorting their meaning and, to some extent, using them for caustic ideological criticism. The city, its daily activities and the concomitant advertising images became both the point of departure and the

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material of art: Tempo, technology and aesthetics were immediately reflected in the pictures and actions of the artists. The Dadaists depicted modern man in the state of a permanent fever pitch of movement, aggression and a chaotic play of instincts which, except for destruction and alienation, did not have much else to offer. The Constructivists also spoke about dynamism, but they indicated another direction for those involved in this new life: namely the revolutionizing of all the social relationships which had been valid up to then, the integration of aesthetics into all areas of daily life. Pictures and technical constructions played a central role in both artistic tendencies: Urban structure is repeatedly brought to the fore in its role as the conveyor of a linguistic and pictorial message. Surrealism stands on an equal footing alongside the aggressive and intelligent statements of the Dadaists and the somewhat missionary-like appeals of the Constructivisits. The repertoire of the Surrealists included, to summarize their program succinctly, the interpretation of daily activities and objects of everyday use in terms of their metaphysical significance, the uncovering of concealed structures, and the broad challenge issued by dreams and instinctual drives to the organization of social life and its apparent securities. The artists were fascinated by silence, uncanniness and objects' supposed life of their own. Not without reason did they name Eugène Atget as one of their forebears. In his photography, they discovered the fundamental forms of their own concepts: Ambiguity lies hidden in everyday life, and the significance of objects extends beyond the range of their users and owners. Three aspects crystallize for us out of this complex structure of Atget's photography and the artistic procedure of the early avant-garde: Atget's capacity for structuring and formalizing through pictures a confusing urban space; the fact that an aesthetic of the trivial advertising image served as the point of departure for artistic forms of the avant-garde; and the interpretation of the seemingly incidental as something that is substantial and significant.

Excursus: Maurizio Montagna

If we take a leap into the present and turn our attention to the pictures of Maurizio Montagna, then those points of reference quickly become clear which are offered by his work. Montagna shows us billboards which have been robbed of their actual function and which, instead of conveying some sort of advertising message, simply represent themselves as a functional construction. The frequency with which this occurs and the varieties of this urban architectural form make it clear how much public space is occupied by instrumentalized messages. But not only is that space occupied by these fields, but both the optic field and consciousness of the viewer are ceaselessly stimulated and guided by innumerable demands. If for whatever reason the message is missing, still an emptiness remains. Those who have raised to the status of

inspiring images all these messages and images, symbolic codes and logos, depicted bodies and accessories, are possibly overcome by a depressive mood of downfall and meaninglessness, inasmuch as they have been deprived of the orientation offered by a variegated horizon of false promises. Maurizio Montagna, however, sees more where actually there is nothing. From a sociological point of view, he analyzes advertising in public spaces, establishes a precise typology of the media, and depicts the various forms and sites of their occurrence: in city centers, along highways, at parking places, on house façades and fences as billboards or writing. The work presents the entire architectural repertoire which has developed in contemporary advertising through word and image. By removing the actual function, the displays and billboards become independent forms, are transformed into sculptures and installations. What they are, and that which Maurizio Montagna shows, actually ought not to occupy our attention. Maurizio Montagna brings to light a hidden industrial aesthetic which achieves its fascination also because each of these media is different and has the appearance of being handmade. The billboards function as conveyors of illusory, virtual spaces which promise everything and deliver nothing. The real urban space is distorted by artificial images. If these images are removed, there remain artifacts which, in a reversed sense, call into question the organization of the city and its functions. The means to the end remains neutral and may be utilized in variable contexts. This is an essential trait which is characteristic of many media and technical apparatuses of the culture industry. The medium is not the message; the message is the message. The medium or multiplier is simply a catapult for the respective message: not incidental or innocent, but carrying a different weight than the contents. And it is exactly the same situation with the pictures of Maurizio Montagna. Cleansed of the ideology and suggestiveness of whatever the particular propaganda is, there remains a piece of technical and aesthetic cultural history, a search for archaeological traces in the realm of the designing and furnishing of public spaces. Soon these media will become outdated and will be disposed of. It is only a question of time until Montagna's billboards are replaced by mega-posters and ongoing digital animation on giant plasma screens. Here Montagna's work takes on a traditional task of photography: namely to record that which is passing, to offer a documentation of the past.

Excursus: History and Present

The Billbaord Liberation Front has been campaigning in the USA ever since the end of the nineteen-seventies for advertising-free cities and attacking the displays and billboards of commercial messages. The creative concept of this illegally active artists' group is to create a new message through alterations.

Maurizio Montagna anticipates these combative proponents of a suggestion-free city, but only for the period of time when the posters are being changed. This period of time cannot be long, because public presentation has its price, and advertisement at prominent sites costs a great deal of money. Only Maurizio Montagna allows himself the luxury of a poetic, surrealistic, formal or sociological analysis; with intuition and perseverance he continuously photographs new sites and moments. He thereby belongs to a tradition of photographers who have used the possibilities of documentary and manipulated photography to describe the themes of the city, advertisement, image and copy, suggestion, promise and desire. A few examples will be named here in order to sketch out the dynamic context of Montagna's work.

The American Walker Evans took pictures quite early on of billboards and advertising posters. He was thereby the first to combine traditional documentary approaches with the aesthetic of reproduced images of the early European avant-garde. With his literary culture and knowledge of Europe, Evans was aware of this interconnection but pursued another intention: namely of creating a contemporary depiction of American society through an analysis of the media of its self-representation, and of expressing the contrast between the fictions of advertising and the actual conditions of social life. Evans reflected upon his aesthetic procedure in a discriminating and precise manner. He summarized his work with the label of "documentary style" and thereby found a plausible formula for the autonomy of a non-staged photography.

The photographer Hiroshi Sugimonto already began during the middle of the nineteen-seventies with his series of Theater Interiors. He continued to formulate this work into the nineteen-nineties and expanded it with the Drive-In Theaters. At the center of things stand empty movie screens. Both film and audience are missing. What remains is a projection surface which shines and blinds at once, which promises both depth and superficiality in equal measure and which, above all, casts a lonely light into the dark space. Any imaginary film whatsoever can be projected onto these screens. Just as with Maurizio Montagna's billboards, in Sugimoto's artistic world the classical cinemas and drive-ins can be interpreted, alongside the area of contents, simply as disappearing relics.

At the end of the nineteen-nineties, Max Regenberg took pictures of mega-posters under the title "Power is nothing without control." The photographs followed the dictates of contemporary documentary

photography: large-format negatives, a restrained and highly exact coloration, and a pictorial structure which transformed the urban space, the architectural details and the actual subject, namely the mega-poster, into a precise and strict image. The series demonstrates quite clearly how massive are the attacks through which the imposed contents are supposed to be catapulted into the life of the viewer. At the same time it becomes evident how these enormous images have in the meantime come to be viewed as a matter of course. That which Max Regenburg exaggerates, Maurizio Montagna causes to disappear—without any form of digital intervention such as appears in the works of Caroline Hake.

In her work *Decollage* from 1997, Caroline Hake replaced the advertising posters on ten billboards in Berlin-Mitte with apparent views through to the architectural structures lying beyond them. What could be seen was no longer the respective advertisement, but instead an image created out of sections of the surroundings and presenting the viewers with the illusion of looking through the billboard onto hidden building-gaps, walls or expanses of green. The appearance of authenticity, the view onto *real* reality, is just as distorted and controlled as before. In *Decollage*, however, the urban space which has been cleansed of the instrumental advertising pictures is covered over with images to the same degree. In the work *Chamäleon*, Hake likewise fed transparent views into the program of LED announcements. Thus for the duration of an advertising message, the screens became transparent and hence unusable.

Document, Critique and Autonomy with Maurizio Montagna

 Photography has always had a relation to the visible world; it condenses or shortens against the backdrop of reality. Through his choice of subject, Maurizio Montagna generates a strange contradictoriness. On the one hand, he offers us the described typology of an urban phenomenon. On the other hand, he abandons us to perplexity, because he does not actually show anything: no empty symbol, in fact no symbol at all. He points towards a blind spot in the visual overload of the present. The status of images, their diversity in the sense of the motif and motivation of making pictures, is open to discussion. When in advertising the compulsion to assure the reappearance of the constantly new is cultivated and each picture exists in clear competition with other pictures which it must trump and outrival, in order to compel the attention of the consumer, then the images of Maurizio Montagna follow a quite divergent and subtle logic. In contrast to advertising, which at breakneck speed must find constantly new forms for the ceaselessly unchanging, this photographer manifests a highly concentrated and finely differentiated selection and composition of images. But not only does the precise variation of standpoint, pictorial structure and tempo distinguish his

billboards from the aggressive noisemaking of advertising images, but the pictorial contents behave in a diametrically opposed manner. In the tradition of classic documentary photography, Maurizio Montagna reflects upon photography, its concepts and expressive possibilities. What is certain is that advertising has in the meantime made use of every level, every strategy, and all pictorial contents. It is neither possible nor desirable to achieve a simple separation between manipulative garbage and high art, because everything is now freely available and may be used. Hence there cannot exist an uninfluenced, pure standpoint. Nonetheless, what is crucial is the motivation which precedes a picture or which can at least be attributed to the producer. Maurizio Montagna speaks about the poetry of urbanity and everyday life, and at the same time he manages to deliver a cool, level-headed analysis. The billboards depict the infrastructure of advertising architecture and provide information about the needs of an excessively commercially oriented society. Montagna succeeds in combining into one work both critique and autonomy. By seeming to show nothing, he shows and says a great deal.

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Translated from the German by George Frederick Takis