

Concretion, Suggestive Aesthetic Signs of the “Post-Nothing”

The artist Isa Genzken once said in an interview that she likes the medium of photography so much because it has a certain relation to reality and is universally intelligible. In principle, she argued, photography offers references to reality, to the present, which in turn was crucial for her in the development of her sculptures: although a sculpture can be crazy, it has to have a certain relation to reality.¹

When I see a group of Stefanie Seufert’s more recent direct exposures (“Tower”, 2015), which are formed by her approach to folding photographic paper in space into sculptures, this idea from Isa Genzken about the universal language comes to mind and the connection she makes to working on sculpture.² This may be confusing, since (most of) Stefanie Seufert’s photographs and that which she produces with or from them — sculptures, for example — initially seem like abstract (pictorial) compositions. In fact, however, the concept of abstraction does not really make sense in her work, since everything the artist does has a very immediate connection to the world and its phenomena. This immediate connection to the world takes concrete form in her analogue photographic works — and in essence the following text is about that.

In formal and aesthetic terms, the ensemble of sculptures “Tower” can be clearly connected to Genzken. It is a work that derived from her first works based on folding directly exposed paper (“Falter/Moth”, 2014). With the superficially simple-smart titles of this new group of works, “Ipanema/Marine Pearl”, “Dark Aubergine”, “Atlas Grey”, Stefanie Seufert (like Genzken) is linking to the immediate present and its extravagances that have become normal, which are revealed, for example, in advertising language with its suggestive way of pictorial language — keyword: “Dark Aubergine”. Only when reading it a second time do the references in these titles open up in a subtle way, for example, to a “modern” colour catalogue, by which a mainstream aesthetic of the present is communicated, one that is certainly vitally important for many people — when they are choosing colours for their kitchen cabinets, say, or the metal surfaces of their new cars).

Genzken had even her earliest sculptures generated on computers — which must have required an enormous effort and probably filled entire offices with enormous computers. By contrast, especially in this work, Stefanie Seufert’s physical effort is in the darkness of the colour lab. There large-format photographic paper is exposed, folded, exposed again, folded again, and so on, until a paper stele with several gradations of colour finds its stability in space. With their shiny surfaces, our perception of what the artist has placed before us here fluctuates somewhere between skyscraper, fender, and remnant of industrial production. No abstraction, but: concretion, suggestive. The whole fragility of this sculptural ensemble of photographic paper that was precisely *not* applied to another support, but rather clearly, in its purely paper existence, at risk of collapsing, suggests references in many directions: the creases and the surfaces that have not been smoothed out everywhere make it clear that we are dealing with manual production here. A production process that is clearly linked to the body and refers to it becomes visible. The picture cannot be larger than its producer or rather than the span of her arms; it simply could no longer be handled. In this approach to

the material, her work is similar to the photographs of the British artist Walead Beshty.³ At the same time, it reveals an insistence on the photographic reproducibility of *something*, even if it is only the reproduction of a word, keyword: “Atlas Grey”. Paper as a support and that which is emulsified on its surface suffices to depict; nothing has to be added to it. But — in a metaphorical reading — it becomes also clear: Seufert is concerned with the fragility of today’s economy of supply. Very fundamentally, in her works she tracks down the most nonsensical and strangest appendixes, which are matter-of-factly fed back into the recycling processes and there lead their precisely not unprofitable lives of their own. Rather, the aesthetic manifestations that on the contrary prevail as their own, even if only in the form of an idea of colour, keyword: “Marine Pearl”. Suddenly it is there and begins to circulate, tied to the communication of its discreet-fresh-shimmering properties, which seem to establish a style: for example, as *colour trend*, with which zeitgeist and attitudes about life can be awakened and sold.

The title of this book, *Wood Survives in the Form of Post-holes*, is in this context — and also in the context of Seufert’s other works — as crazed as it is informative. *Posthole* is a concept from archaeology: where nothing can be found other than a hole in the ground, there must once have been a volume; it was filled with material that decomposed: wood has turned to humus. “Posthole” is thus negative printing that provides information about what was once there but no longer exists and is thus something like a post-nothing. My first thought when I heard the word “posthole” was of Helen Chadwick’s “Piss Flowers” (1991–92), and this connection endures: the artist urinated in the snow and made casts of the holes where her warm bodily fluid melted the snow. This method of a negative printing produced twelve sculptures in all; above all, they tell a story about something that evaporates again at the moment it takes on substantive existence. Only the holes in the snow indicate that something has taken place: an artist’s performance, the excretion of her bodily fluids and their evaporation at the same moment. What resulted as a post-nothing, posthole. This post-nothing is the first thing communicated by the “Piss Flowers”. By means of casting, something is depicted that is at once universally essential and largely non-existent. And it produces a space for further speculation about the significance of what the artist did there and what she produced from it.

When we think about photography in this context, the post-hole is rather promising: as offbeat as the concept might sound, the artist could not find a better substitute for the concept of the *trace*, which in the meanwhile has become so deadly boring for photographers. Because it alludes to this old term (the “trace”), but can be so much more beyond its coolness factor. Since *Wood Survives in the Form of Postholes* not only reveals Seufert’s photographic methods, for which the photographic process of reversing the analogue pictorial work from the negative image to the positive print still *has to* remain crucial. For example, for her sometimes — especially in the photograms that make up a big part of her work — literal penetration of the objects she regards as worthy of photographing. Concretion. *Wood Survives in the Form of Postholes* indicates, moreover, Seufert’s searching approach to the world of things that surrounds us: Let’s call it a release of aesthetic signs that — like postholes — are always somehow there and constantly surround us, but that produce no visibility of their own, but, on the contrary, seem to lead an existence of their own. The photograms of stacking potato chips (“Prin-

gles”, 2013), whose negatives the artist printed larger-than-life, would be one example of this. As a kind of *all-over*, these and infinitely many other aesthetic signs cover our present and at that same time drown in it. Carefully and unerring, Stefanie Seufert reaches for precisely those “Objects and Items”⁴ of our world of things, investigates their structures and substances, and develops in a kind of equally precise and free reproduction a photographic image in its own right. And gives them, as their own aesthetic phenomena, a pictorial space. Photography as Stefanie Seufert practices it — if we consider the large-format images of “Pringles” and “Tacos” — is comparable to the mechanical drafting tool of the pantograph: a precision instrument for translating drawings into a smaller or larger scale. Stefanie Seufert scales with her photograms in this way as well when she enlarges these photographs to the oversized and hence provides a *simultaneously* exact and abstract depiction of her directly exposed objects. The result is an archaeology of the present: seeing and studying things enlarged. Tied to the medium of photography, which claims universality, and that can, as Seufert shows, stand up to all critique of representation despite that promise.

One might think that these works are a kind of swansong to the crude, superfluous “Objects and Items” of our world of things and consumerism, about revealing the micro-physics of the power of commodities and their aesthetic lure and details and disavowing their stimulating effect. This aspect certainly resonates in her works, but it is addressed more explicitly by her fellow artist Stefan Panhans, and when viewing multiple exposures of a blank price tag that promises a clearance sale, “repeat” (2015), it becomes tangible as well.

But Seufert is more interested in constantly seeking out the special qualities inherent in things: the equally strange/abstract and emblematic that is their own. “repeat” already tells us about that, but “racing” (2015) is another example. It is the cropped photograph of a rally course. Particularly because of its format, it has such a signet-like effect that not only does an infinite space for racing fantasies emerge, or the image of a promising design unfold, but also — far beyond that — the photographic image asserts itself as an abstract composition by means of pure illustration (greater concretion would be impossible). It brings to mind the painter Günter Fruhtrunk and his design for the Aldi shopping bag. A few years ago, it was rediscovered and celebrated that the artist had designed the bag. Except that Stefanie Seufert reverses the process with “repeat” and “racing”: whereas the function of the industrially produced consumer article destroyed the claim to be art that Fruhtrunk may have attributed to his design, in “repeat” and “racing” Stefanie Seufert makes such a claim for her universally intelligible signs in the first place.

Yet the artist remains capable of critique in her work, which thanks to her sometimes open/offbeat and sometimes controlled/cool aesthetic is simply also a lot of fun to look at. Take her photographs of cheap goods, for example. As late as 2014, in her four-part series “a bouquet of colours”, Stefanie Seufert objectively depicted Pop-like, largely meaningless dog toys from all sides and/or mirror-reversed. The photographs referred to nothing other than a play of forms and colours — and to the almost infinite loop that constantly drives the consumer goods industry, with its inscribed logic of an economy of desire, in the process penetrating ever-new niches and taking aim at all aspects of life, even that of a dog, who now looks much cuter with a single colourful accessory. “a bouquet of colours” — leaving aside the

question whether the title contains an allusion to the famous photograph by Christopher Williams (“Bouquet for Bas Jan Ader and Christopher D’Arcangelo”, 1991) — is a precursor to “Farbstücke” (Colour Pieces, 2015). Unlike Annette Kelm, who in her “Big Prints” (2007) photographed the expansively patterned, opulent decorative fabrics of the style-defining American interior designer Dorothy Draper, Stefanie Seufert chooses to patchwork rugs that can be found in any one-euro shop. The visual strategies that the two artists employ here are comparable: the pictorial space is reinterpreted as extreme planarity; the object of the depiction is made to coincide in one-to-one reproductions. The pictorial space is therefore resolved into a plane, while at the same time just soberly presenting the object. It is a logical, radicalised objectivity with which Annette Kelm managed to undermine completely the logics of photographic representation.⁵ Stefanie Seufert adopts this method. Unlike in Annette Kelm’s work, however, here the manufacturers in low-wage countries who weave carpets from the last usable remnants of fabric and provide the models for Seufert’s “Farbstücke” remain anonymous. The artist is not necessarily openly criticising the politics of exploitation by which the product only makes it into a cheap shop, but is rather emphasising with her “Farbstücke” placed side by side that the production of even every single patchwork rug is tied to (manual) piecework, each with unique and individual aesthetic decisions — and attributes to them the warranted character of unique objects. A distinction that Dorothy Draper’s balls of fabric by the yard could never have achieved, but it is an argument that naturally holds no water in the cheap goods sector.

Especially the photographs that Stefanie Seufert takes with captivating precision and that allude to object photography and studio photography as well as the still life and architectural photography (for example, in “Volkspark”, 2013, or in “Obi”, 2015) raise, through their presence strewn in this book, the question of how they relate to the experimental arrangements that the artist runs through with multiple exposures (and folds) of photographic paper in the colour lab, or how they relate in turn to the photograms, in which objects are exposed directly and in some cases enlarged into the monumental. Certainly it can be said in general that this intermeshing of different pictorial strategies breaks up visual rhetorics that were thought stable, above all those traditionally associated with the photography of objects and clear identification of the items/things or objects depicted. Although in many cases the object of the depiction is merely dryly presented, here observation does not succeed in penetrating directly to the core of the things and objects depicted. With her visual strategy as it is evident in her photographs of objects and architecture, the focus is not on exposing or aestheticising the real; rather, Stefanie Seufert is working constantly to cause uncertainty about the relationship of visibility and reality. If we now bear in mind that the more experimental works in particular explicitly express the fact that *more* comes together in the image than can be immediately seen — but at the same time that the medium of photography and its pictorial possibilities suffice to show this *more*, keywords: “Piss Flowers”, posthole, post-nothing, archaeology of the present — then we cannot help but read precisely Stefanie Seufert’s photographs of objects as autonomous aesthetic signs as well. At every point in Stefanie Seufert’s oeuvre, we find ourselves in an open experiment concerned with seeing the hybridity of signs in the world around us in the first place. The photographs of objects and architecture might in the

end confirm the status of photography in its claim to universality of legibility, but curiously at the same time it frees it from it, since they too are always about a hybrid zone of perception that opens up with them and alternates between the emblematic and the strange. Once again we are close to Isa Genzken, who, interestingly, places her photographs nearby her sculptures in nearly all her exhibitions. Photography here functions like a kind of a cross-check. That which finds an abstract form has to stand up to the photograph and its clearly identifiable objects and, if necessary, justify a dialogue of forms between them. That is also how the photographs of objects and architecture function in Stefanie Seufert's oeuvre: as a cross-check for the more experimental or, if you will, *freer* works. With the difference that in her work the images that test each other are identical in medium. They adopt different functions from each other—although both of them relate to the same referent, world, and its always both bizarre and signifying phenomena. These cross-checks that run through the work of Stefanie Seufert make a kind of *suggestive concretion* possible, which is a concept that isn't provoking a contradiction, however much the two words might cancel each other out. It is an autonomous depiction of universally available things that reveal an immediate proximity to the world around us. But they are revealed to be sovereign aesthetic signs with a claim to autonomy—self-commenting (counter) voices accompanying things and words whirring in space—in the post-nothing.. That is the photographic programme of Stefanie Seufert.

Maren Lübke-Tidow ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Aenean commodo ligula eget dolor. Aenean massa. Cum sociis natoque penatibus et magnis dis parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus. Donec quam felis, ultricies nec.

- 1 See Isa Genzken, in conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans, in: *Camera Austria International*, no. 81 (2003), pp. 7–18.
- 2 It is not my goal here to revive an (outdated, trans-cultural, and/or trans-historical) concept of universality in the sense of a naïve and positivist understanding of representation, as Allan Sekula already problematised it in 'The Traffic in Photographs'. Genzken is following here—I believe—an idea of photography as a medium that, thanks to its representational qualities, fundamentally permits an immediate (or also simple) entry into the image without ignoring the ends, each of which is inherently open and critical in many directions. On the contrary, precisely the interplay of sculpture and photography in Genzken's work and her method of bringing together and considering together the appropriated and self-produced emphasises concrete and critical-reflective readings of her photographic works that were proposed in the work itself. I take up the thread of this idea of the photographic and of its so-called universal intelligibility.
- 3 See Jens Asthoff, "Sensitive Material: How Walead Beshty Pushes the Boundaries of the Image", in: *Camera Austria International*, no. 115 (2011), pp. 35–47.
- 4 The title of an exhibition by Stefanie Seufert and Stefan Panhans at the Kerstin Engholm Galerie, Vienna, 18.3.-3.5.2013, curated by Maren Lübke-Tidow.
- 5 See the press release for the Annette Kelm exhibition at Camera Austria, Graz, 10.7.-13.9.2009, curated by Maren Lübke-Tidow.