

Surviving in Postholes

What happens when photographic practice imbues all objects that it references with the greatest possible *equality*? How might we interpret the traces that these multifarious objects inscribe into the photographic surface? Can these traces still be identified in terms of their differences and autonomy? Or, through photography itself, do they become integrated in a new regime that allows what was previously differentiated to now be compared—as “the contradictory mode of a speech that speaks and keeps silent at the same time, that both knows and does not know what it is saying”?¹

Stefanie Seufert confronts us with a very fundamental sense of uncertainty when we try to identify her pictures in order to ascribe (our) meaning to them.

At first glance, many of her works appear to deal with abstract photography, yet the titles referencing Pringles and tacos or those associated with moths also clearly indicate that the image—even at this threshold of perceptibility—remains tied to a state of objectness. Photograms, multiple exposures, disruption of the light spectrum by unexposed slides shifted towards each other, exposure/folding/exposure, multistage enlargements, and countless other techniques give rise to utterly seductive constellations of form that appear to indicate an interest in the aesthetic potential of this treatment.

Yet here we are dealing with an issue of aesthetics or form, presuming a treatment of production processes in space which ensure that this form is at one’s command. However, most of Stefanie Seufert’s work is created in the darkroom under conditions that elude her control for the most part. In a best case scenario, they permit an *approximation* of an idea by repeating the techniques—so repetition that conceives an image in a further image, thinking ahead and back. Through construction and coincidence, transparency and hermetics, concrete visibility and open meaning, the images are associated with whatever is shown, and also with whatever is the vehicle of showing them.

It is against this backdrop that the methodologies bring that which is ultimately caught as an image into a state of immediacy that is uncertain and open yet also downright radical—or obsessive—an immediacy that approximates the objectness and the things themselves, into a state of concreteness that in turn stands in contradiction to any kind of aesthetics. Divested of all—narrative, representative—moments, photography remains as an inexorable machine for recording this tangible realm, actually inscribing itself in the record.

So, at this juncture, does the differentiation between image and object become irrelevant when one moves into another? When one melds with the other, when one disappears into the other? Does it even make sense to ask what the subjects of the images are when nothing remains but traces which substantiate a new objectness, that of the photographic itself? “The image is a thing that is not the thing: it distinguishes itself from it, essentially.”² But how does an image relate to itself as thing? This is the moment of differentiation, but also of tangency, through which Stefanie Seufert questions the identity of the image, questions the act of identifying-with-itself as an image. Yet this questioning does not play out through alienation or through any kind of image dissolution—quite the contrary: through the greatest possible reification of the image, whereby it remains to be seen as to whether this is even actually an intervention to begin with, or

rather a treatment, an action, that evokes the images. Even photographs of architectural structures, birds, a monument, or lemons call to mind this precarious correlation again and again: that nothing appears or lends itself to representation in a *simple* way and that, even if this may seem to be the case, complex processes are actually at work, aiming to create what actually only amounts to an *idea* of vision or perception. For in Stefanie Seufert’s work the gaze enters the picture much later. It does not conceive the image, does not precede it, nor does it even usually literally recognize it; perhaps it will correct it, offer commentary, and interpret it during the process of image production itself.

Thus Stefanie Seufert plainly shows us what must come together and simultaneously disappear, what gets lost, so to speak, in order for an image to emerge—how these moments of emergence and disappearance remain inscribed in any and every representation, and how they constitute that which can be seen *as* an image and not primarily *in* an image. Exposure, which assumes a central role in her work and which inscribes everything in front of the image—or, better, *above* the image—also establishes, at the same time, a gap between representation and image, claims for itself this gap and thereby becomes *notiaceable as image*.

Large-format photo paper, which can be newly folded and exposed in the darkroom again and again, ultimately transcends the boundary between sculpture and architecture. Layered and superimposed traces of various photographic processes engender a specific materiality, which Seufert elaborates in her series and now is also extending into space. Fragile, strangely monumental, and curiously self-alienated, they issue from a folding of the image that is now occupying space, embracing and enveloping space, but also suggesting the idea of an (interior) space of the images themselves. This is a space that conceals something, that is both real and absent at the same time, like the rendering of an object that is no longer present. A trace, a memory, perhaps even a figment of imagination, a fleeting touch, yet always a differentiation. Indeed, these sculptural images or pictorial sculptures, which envelop something that transcends photography while simultaneously being rooted in it, are in this way subjected to precisely the same mechanisms as the image that do nothing other than show things while actually hardly showing anything—a (visual) language that both knows and does not know what it is saying.

An equality of things and images in appearance and disappearance, posited at a threshold between appearance and disappearance, through which images and things are separated from one another (through which the image is ultimately separated from itself) yet still remain interrelated along this boundary—revolving around and replacing each other, detaching and merging. However, in the case of Stefanie Seufert, confusion does not reign. In her work, equality actually refrains from engendering indistinguishability or bewilderment—when that which was previously differentiated (a bird, a process, architecture, exposure, the gaze) is now compared, when it engages in a special tangency through photography, then the images and things may not remain unchanged or untouched, but they certainly do not mutually dissolve. Perhaps Stefanie Seufert is showing us that photography is both an art of differentiation and of tangency, through which the photographic image has always transcended itself, just as it has remained firmly anchored in its concreteness as image.

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- 1 Jacques Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious* (Malden, MA, and Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), p. 33.
- 2 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 2.