

University for the Creative Arts
Research Project Portfolios

Beun

By Steffi Klenz



Project Details

Name of Researcher:	Steffi Klenz
Name of Output:	Beun
UCARO link/s:	https://research.uca.ac.uk/3355/
Output Type:	M – Exhibition; solo and group exhibitions of photographs and video artwork
Year and mode of dissemination:	<p>SOLO EXHIBITIONS 2017: Settings, Resettings, Repeat, Kehrer Gallery, Berlin (presentation of photographs) 2017: Stagings of a Room, London Gallery West (presentation of photographs and video artwork)</p> <p>GROUP EXHIBITIONS 2020: Beg Steal and Borrow, Bermondsey Project Space, London (presentation of photographs) 2017: The Data Battlefield, FotoMuseum Antwerp, Belgium (presentation of photographs) 2016: Room with a View, Kehrer Galerie, Berlin, Germany (presentation of photographs) 2015: International Juried Competition, LA Centre for Digital Arts, USA (presentation of photographs)</p> <p>PUBLIC SCREENING 2020: File Festival, SESI Art Gallery, Sao Paulo, Brazil (presentation of video artwork) 2019: Strangelove Time-Based Media Festival, Brewery Tap, Folkestone (presentation of video artwork)</p>

Project Details

Key Words:

Fine-art photography, digital technologies, architecture, spatial representation, reconsidering iconic photographs, documentary genre of photography

Funding:**IN-KIND FUNDING**

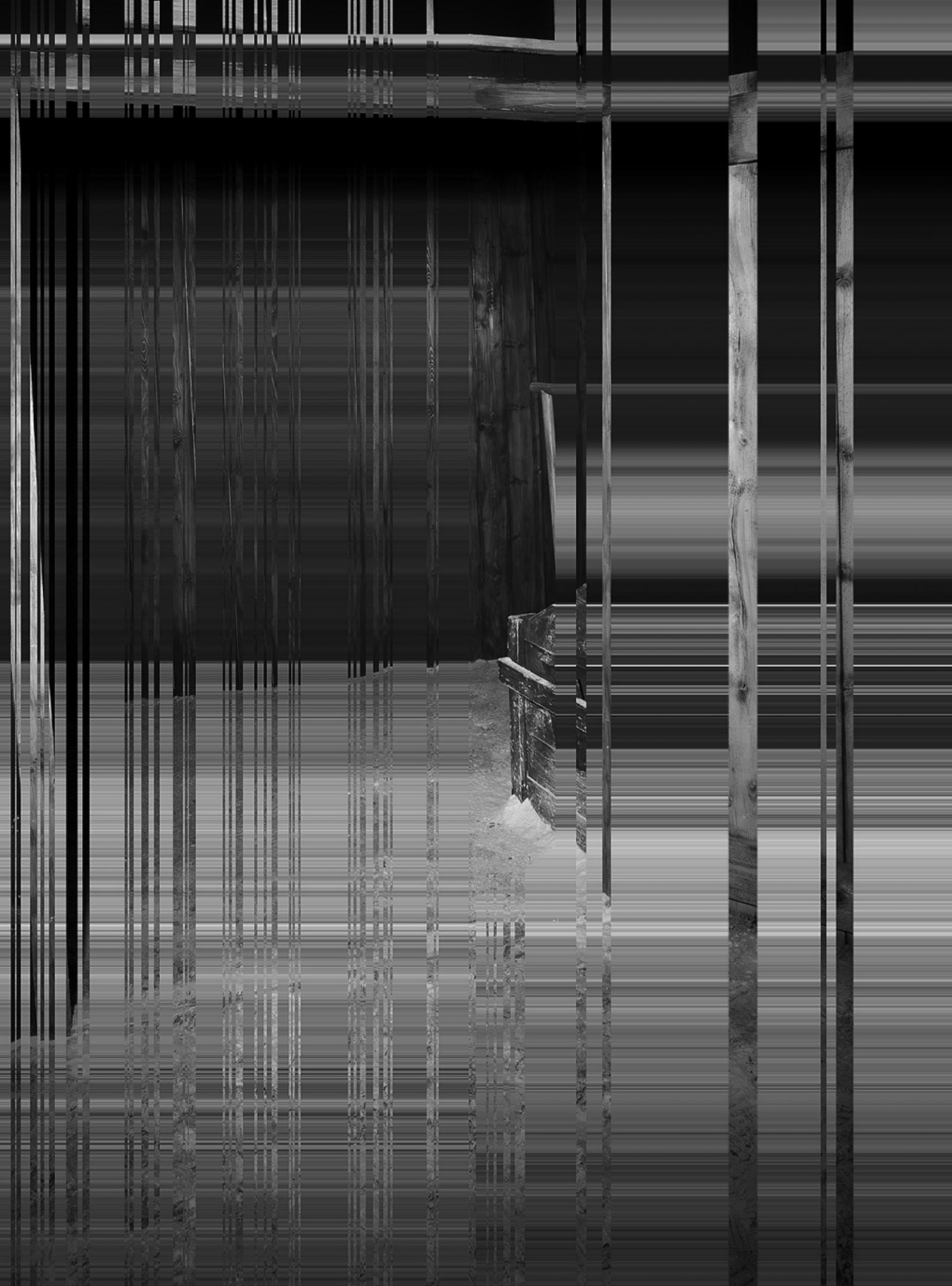
London Gallery West, transport of work, partial financing of framing of work, marketing costs, financing technical assistants in order to hang and light exhibition

FotoMuseum Antwerp, transport of work, marketing costs, financing technical assistants in order to hang and light exhibition

Kehrer Gallery, transport of work, marketing costs, financing technical assistants in order to hang and light exhibition



Beun at The Data Battlefield group exhibition, FotoMuseum, Antwerp



Untitled from the series Beun

Synopsis

'Beun' consists of photographic images and a single-screen video artwork that appropriate and manipulate, through systems of repetition and obfuscation, Associated Press photographs of the empty interior of a hut in the concentration camp in Ohrdruf in former East-Germany.

In 'Beun', images of trauma, in particular of World War II concentration camps, are reconsidered using new digital technologies. Klenz approaches these iconic images as a complex form of cultural communication to be looked at critically and philosophically. The work embraces repetition as a technique of abstraction, using different digital software programs to transform or erase information in the image. This process results in the deformation of the image and creates several fragmented versions of the same image. The

effect of these uncanny fragmentations is to de-stabilise our understanding of this historically charged site. 'Beun' manipulates the viewer to hover over each photograph in an effort to visually combine the fragments it contains into a single image. The digital manipulations of the image question the slippages of our memory and evocatively reflect on the way we reconstruct our sense of the past. Subverting traditional photographic techniques, 'Beun' invites the viewer to investigate the new languages of photographic image-making that are emerging in the second digital revolution.

This portfolio of contextual information contains information on the research context, methods and contribution, details of the working process, multiple images from the final series and installation shots of 'Beun' in several exhibitions.



Untitled from the series Beun

Context

According to German philosopher Guenther Anders, Auschwitz and Hiroshima inaugurated an era in which humanity is incapable of representing what it has done or created. The impossibility of representing catastrophe is however, paradoxically enough, not related to the absence of documentation, in particular of visual documentation: documentary images of atrocity proliferate. Today, evidence of disputes, war and classified information come via the internet, social media and the television. In our current society sites of dispute and conflict are not censored in any form but rather made into media spectacles. According to Anders, the un-representable is primarily defined as the inability to take measure of disaster, not the inability to picture it.

Klenz is particularly interested in the iconic fame of documentary images, questioning their self-perpetuating nature. Anders considers that the free circulation of images does not result in a better understanding of their context and their historical trauma. Klenz questions whether the meaning of such images has become more unchallengeable the more we see them, rendering them silent of their circumstances. In 'Beun', she opens up a conversation about the contemporary socio-digital conditions of our current photographic culture in relation to environments of conflict and dispute.

The photographic series and video piece in 'Beun' challenge the directness of traditional photographic reportage as a

methodology to represent traumatic environments and events. Instead they engage with the shifting meanings of the word 'document', forging new visual paths through the documentary field that has been transformed over the last decade by radical technological advances.

It is difficult to think of photography without thinking of series—archives, sequences, photo-essays, photomontages and photocollages. While there is something singular about each photograph, photography is a medium of plurality due to its reproducibility and the way photographs are generally placed in relation to other photographic images.

'Beun' questions such preconceived ideas that a body of images more or less always results in a photographic series and rather explores seriality through the fragmented image and repetition. 'Beun' plays with modes of the fragmented image suggesting that navigating through a traumatic building or site such as a concentration camp results in navigating through Klenz's photographic images. 'Beun' encourages the viewer to study each individual image in order to combine all the fragments into one image. Each image is both a space of presence and absence: the detail revealed in one image is concealed in another. 'Beun' proposes a form of montage that reveals the aesthetic potential of each image and of its phantoms that haunt our consciences, embracing abstraction and fragmentation through repetition.

Context

A historical event is a complex of fragmentary and often contradictory representations—archival, fictional, psychical and so on. For Henri Bergson, the image is a process in which memory is invested with the experiential force of present perception. Like Bergson, 'Beun' reminds the viewer that no single visualisation offers a transparent interpretation of a historical event and both the hybrid technological 'form' and the historical 'content' are rethought and opened up.

The process of digitally corrupting the image file reveals another research interest for Klenz. The digital pixels of lines and erased information become blanks in the photographic record, suggesting that the photographic image pictures a void and articulates a sense of loss. Exploring Kaja Silvermann's reconceptualization of the photographic medium, Klenz shares Silvermann's interest in imagery's fugitive status. According to Silvermann, a photograph can remain active after it has been technically finished, describing this effect in her term 'innate anima', a potential that exists in the photographic emulsion itself, forever prone to additional catalysts. At the core of this philosophical suggestion lies an insistence on the inherent instability of the photographic image as a 'fixed' representation which forms an intrinsic element to understanding the work of 'Beun'.

Key Texts:

Anders, G. (1956) *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1 & 2. Munich: C.H. Beck ('The Outdatedness of the Human Species')

Bergson, H. (1991 [1896]) *Matter and Memory*. Zone Books.

Kholeif, O. (ed.) (2013) *You are Here: Art After the Internet*. Manchester: Cornerhouse.

Rexer, L. (2013) *The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography*. New York: Aperture.

Silverman, K. (1988) *The Acoustic Mirror: the female voice in psychoanalysis and cinema*. Indiana University Press

Steyerl, H. (2012) *The Wretched of the Screen*. Sternberg Press.

Weizman, E. (2017) *Violence at the Threshold of Detectability*. Zone Books.



Untitled from the series Beun

Research Questions and Aims

Research questions:

What is the role of photography in the new era of un-representable disaster?

How can we describe traumatic events without veering into sensationalism?

How do we provide information without succumbing to over-hyped curiosity or 'conflict porn'?

Have iconic photographic images of historical trauma become symbolic place holders for a comprehension that has gone missing? Has the strong visual force and the iconic status of such images overwhelmed or distracted us from a deeper understanding?

Research aims:

The work aims to challenge predominant models of architectural and documentary photography through a reconfiguration of the photographic image. Both the photographic series as well as the video investigate the nature and the limits of the relationship between history and photographic representation in the era of the second digital revolution.

Research Methods and Process

For both the photographic images and the video piece Klenz culled the original archive images from the private photography collection 'Ordinary Light' owned by collector Brad Feuerhelm.

- The original archive image was translated into technical architectural drawings.
- A life-size model was built in the studio following the same spatial arrangements and dimensions of the original archive image, and in conscious relation to the work of photographers Thomas Demand and James Casebere, who both construct architectural models with the sole intention of reproducing them as photographs.
- Two set builders, one set dresser and one lighting specialist were used to re-create the original archive image as an exact architectural replica.
- The re-created environment was photographed with a digital Hassleblad medium-format camera, creating a high-resolution digital image file.

- The sole purpose of building the architectural set in the studio was to take a high-resolution digital image enabling the viewer to study the minute details of the scene.

Using the digital image Klenz worked with a software engineer, researching digital techniques such as data-bending and software algorithms. These were then used by the software engineer to alter the visual codes of the photographic file. By applying different algorithms to the same digital image file, 10 different images re-emerged as the same, yet-not-quite-the-same, photograph. This process resulted in the deformation and digital corruption of the image creating several fragmented versions, causing the original image to become ruptured, deformed and disfigured into digital code.

The video work followed the same method in regards to the construction of the replica. The architectural set was placed on a 180-degree revolving stage platform, which allowed a rotation around the space's own axis. Data-bending and software algorithms were similarly applied to the video file. The digital information in the video was additionally translated into audio information which provides the soundtrack of the video piece.



*The life-size model
built in the studio*



*The life-size model built
in the studio*



*The life-size model built
in the studio*



Untitled from the series Beun



Beun at 'Settings, Resettings, Repeat' solo exhibition, Kehrer Gallery, Berlin, Germany

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Research insights:

The use of digital techniques—data-bending and software algorithms—to destroy a documentary photograph is unique to the work 'Beun'. It creates a fragmented image, broken down in new ways. The fragmentation breaks down not just the image, but also the certainties of the documentary photograph and its claim on 'truth'.

Dissemination:

Some of Klenz's research enquiries embedded in 'Beun', such as the appropriation of archive photographs, were examined in the book *Beg, Steal & Borrow: Artists against Originality* by Robert Shore (Laurence King, 2017). The book investigates 'artistic borrowing' from a variety of perspectives and discusses the complex nature of appropriation as subject of great relevance and importance in the second digital revolution.

'Beun' and its elements of fragmentation and repetition were further discussed in an interview between Klenz and Robert Shore in *Elephant Magazine* (Issue 29, winter 2016, UK) one of the leading art magazines surveying the international contemporary art scene.

The video piece 'Beun' has been selected to be shown at the SESI Art Gallery in Sao Paulo as part of the 2020 File (Electronic Language International) Festival. File Festival shows a great diversity of national and international research and productions by international artists working in the field of art and technology. It is the biggest art & technology festival in Brazil, and it serves as a lead indicator of the plurality and innovation of the work created in the interactive art field.

Research Contribution and Recognition

Dissemination (cont):

In 2017, 'Beun' was featured in the Data Battlefield exhibition in Fotomuseum Antwerp, Belgium (<https://research.uca.ac.uk/4367/>). This exhibition asked the question: How can we describe traumatic events or classified sites without veering into sensationalism? David Birkin (UK, 1977), Harun Farocki (DE, 1944-2014), Forensic Architecture (IL) and Steffi Klenz (DE, 1979) exhibited works that examined our current photographic and filmic culture in relation to environments of conflict.

Follow-on activities:

Klenz's research into fragmentation in the video piece 'Beun' led to the White Noise commission located in White City, London. In 2016/2017 Klenz was one of 7 artists selected to create a new artwork responding to the BBC East Tower and its imminent demolition. The artwork is a single screen immersive video piece named 'The False Mirror' (2017). As part of the commission, Klenz was invited to take over the 9th floor of the BBC East Tower building to pay homage to the heritage of the BBC and the tower's revolutionary history of broadcasting. Klenz built a circular installation of mirror-shard fragments that was positioned inside the space and the video camera was positioned on a dolly track system that allowed it to move around the mirror installation. The mirror pieces were arranged in a circular formation creating a kaleidoscopic effect: reflections and refractions were filmed and everything within the mirrors reflected was bounced back to the camera itself.

'Beun' led to a further invitation to make a new art piece by the arts-commissioning organisation Strange Cargo. Based on Klenz's appropriation of archival material, a single-screen video piece, 'Blinded', was commissioned as part of the Cheriton Light Festival in 2018. 'Blinded' responded to the devastating refugee crisis by using press photographs of refugees seeking asylum in Europe, working with the inherently unstable and fugitive nature of the photographic image as a metaphor to describe some of the circumstances related to migrant and refugee conditions – of being in transition and having lost sight of the familiar.

Research Contribution and Recognition

Influence of research:

'Beun' is discussed in an interview between Professor Jean Wainwright and Steffi Klenz published in the peer-reviewed journal *Photography and Culture* in autumn 2020. The research outlines architectural photography as a tool for spatial knowledge and how Klenz challenges predominant models of architectural photography through a reconfiguration of the image (<https://research.uca.ac.uk/5599/>).

THE DATA BATTLEFIELD

The international group exhibition **The Data Battlefield** presents current artistic positions that engage with society's increasing desire to capture and disseminate images of conflict – nowadays a common phenomenon due to 24-hour repetitive news broadcasts, social media and Instagram. Sites of dispute and conflict are no longer consumed in any form but rather made into media spectacles. How, then, can we describe traumatic events or classified sites without veering into sensationalism? How do we provide information without succumbing to over-typed curiosity or "conflict porn"?

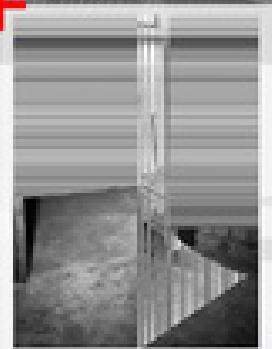
The Data Battlefield explores how four international lens-based artists engage with the various meanings of the word "document" and create new visual ways through a documentary field marked by the disappearance of its traditional models of representation.

The Data Battlefield presents David Birkin, Sara Farooki, Forensic Architecture and Shafi Kiani who use some of the latest technology in their work to open up unique conversations about the contemporary

socio-digital conditions of our current photographic and film culture in relation to environments of conflict and dispute.

Curated by Jean-Marc Mouton as part of the **Brickland Museum Takeover at Fotomuseum Antwerp**

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INFORMATION

Private View: Thursday
27th April 2007 from 7-9pm

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28 APRIL
- 4 JUNE





Untitled from the series Beun



Untitled from the series Beun



Untitled from the series Beun



Untitled from the series Beun



Untitled from the series Beun



Untitled from the series Beun

“There’s joy in repetition,” Prince sang, repeatedly, on “Joy in Repetition”. But as that other pop-culture icon, Sigmund Freud, pointed out, repetition is also a way of dealing with a very different state of being—trauma—a theme investigated in the work of East German-born, London-based photographic artist *Steffi Klenz*. *Words: Robert Shore.*

STEFFI KLENZ



He Only Feels the Black and White of It (Mörel Books, 2016) is a meditation on political separation which takes as its principal subject a hole in the Berlin Wall and the efforts made to repair it by border guards on 14 July 1973. It consists of a single news image, reproduced in around 100 black-and-white screenprinted variant states, and accompanied by fragments of text. Why did you choose that particular picture? I was selected as one of twenty-three photographic artists to participate in the book publication *Rights of Passage* for the 2015 Venice Biennale. The overarching themes were territory and boundaries and how those have changed significantly over the course of human history. I felt compelled to make work about the one border that had shaped my own family and myself

the most—the Berlin Wall. I found a 1973 Associated Press photograph that presents a section of the Berlin Wall as damaged. West German civilians had attacked it after hearing guns being fired at fleeing East Germans. The archive image pictures East German military guards and border policemen repairing the Wall. When I encountered the image, I was amazed by how loaded that opening in the wall was and I started to refer to it as a “murmur”. The more time I spent with the archive image, the more I came to realize that it defined me more than I had anticipated.

What did you do to it to produce the variant states shown in the book? Over the last few years I have been very interested in exploring themes of repetition in relation to the photographic notion of seriality. For the

book, I used the 1973 archive photograph to make multiple screenprinted images. I am particularly interested to explore the moment when a photographic image fails to communicate as an index so I produced screenprints that effectively are not complete. Each print is different from the next and the reader can see the “complete” image only in its fragmented parts.

Where did you find the source image for your series *Beun* (2014–15), and what made you want to reconfigure it? I was invited by Brad Feuerhelm to work with his private photographic archive based in London. The body of work began with an Associated Press image of the concentration camp in Ohrdruf in former East Germany, which I culled from his collection. When I encountered

the image, I was amazed how ordinary the actual architectural space of the concentration camp was. I kept asking myself: How can a “wooden shed” be loaded with such significance? Really, the archive image found me. On the one hand, my own family history is tragically shaped by the events of World War II and, on the other hand, I felt compelled, as if I were expected to respond to such an image due to my German historical guilt, to be a “good German”.

In fact, you didn’t simply manipulate an original. You made an elaborate recreation of the scene and photographed that. Why? I kept thinking that “everybody knows” this type of image and for me this became an important part of the work. The camp is no longer there and I will never be able to



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