

Unter dem Pflaster
Flo Maak & Sara-Lena Maierhofer in Conversation

Sara-Lena Maierhofer: **We both work as artists in the expanded field of photography. While I experiment with analog processes, you use digital techniques and often choose installation as a form of presentation. In our joint exhibition *Unter dem Pflaster* you show photographs as well as photographic sculptures and I show photograms. Would you describe your images as documentary?**

Flo Maak: When I think of documentary photography, I think of stories about specific places, people, or events that are told through a sequence of images and often an accompanying text. That's not how I work. But what connects me with documentary photographers is an interest in the material world versus the staging of an idea. Despite justified and necessary doubts, the photograph of a given situation is a hint: This existed exactly like this - indeed only from a certain point of view and for a short moment, but it is (was) part of our environment. If what I have photographed in this moment, for example, documents a tender encounter, shows vulnerability or even seems quite unreal, then the image is evidence that such a thing is possible in our world. Therein lies the magic of this kind of imagery for me. In my presentations, however, I always try to add another element in the form of an object, a text or a photographic experiment, also to refer to what is not immediately visible. **I find your series *Futures* exciting in this respect, because in it you recall events that many have already forgotten. Why did you choose dinosaurs as the frame for these images of financial scandals?**

Maierhofer: Dinosaurs are usually large animals. Scary and overpowering. "Too big to fail" (TBTF) and yet they are extinct. TBTF also characterizes financial institutions that, due to their size as well as interconnectedness with the financial system, are supported by the state when insolvency threatens. The dinosaurs are composed of images of these financial institutions and stand for an economic system that can only exist in a state of growth and thus contradict the finite resources of this earth. Both motifs, from the past and the present, raise the question of the possible end of a system that has long been considered the most perfect form of social and economic organization. **How do the past and the present come together in your photographs?**

Maak: In my ongoing work *Ground Truthing*, I am interested in the contrast between geological time, in which landscape and life-giving processes are often described in time spans of many thousands to hundreds of millions of years, and the dramatic changes in the environment caused by the human exploitation of resources and economic practices in just a few decades. The challenge for most of us is that geological developments are usually not immediately tangible, and in the case of the climatic and geomorphological changes of the recent past, it is not clear at what breathtaking earth-historical speed they are taking place. Volcanic processes are one of the few exceptions. In Iceland, where most of the photographs shown here were taken, the formation of new land and life from hot lava can be observed. From still steaming cooling lava, to lichens as the first organisms to colonize the rocks and slowly transform them into fertile soil, to mosses, to bushes and young tree shoots, developmental steps thousands of years apart in time can be observed there due to the volcanic activity that has been going on for a long time in

spatial proximity. For my photographs, I have primarily sought motifs in which traces of human activity from the recent past come together with manifestations of processes in deep-time. In my photographic sculptures, inspired by dioramas and other displays in natural history museums, I have developed the theme further. There, through postcards, stones, texts and images, volcanic landscapes as a result of deep-time processes meet historical documents from the beginning of the last century. **In your *Futures* an even more recent past is thematized with the financial scandals, which were documented in colorful, high-resolution images. But you chose black and white photograms as the medium for this work. Why?**

Maierhofer: The photograms are reduced in color and form; in their simplicity they are reminiscent of children's drawings. Simple outlines that describe a complex system. In addition, there is an aesthetic of the past. In the photograms, as in our exhibition, different time levels meet: a centuries-old process that uses digital images from the web to depict a species that became extinct 65 million years ago. In your images, contemporary human traces overlay prehistoric stones. And our exhibition title refers to the student slogan of the Paris riots of May 1968. When the first barricades were erected with paving stones, the demonstrators discovered that they were lying on a bed of sand. "Sous les pavés, la plage" was less a call to violence than a demand to imagine a different world. It also refers to a time of unfulfilled promises, a legacy of failure. Many of the issues that were protested at the time have not disappeared, but have continued to intensify. **The title of the exhibition refers to social protests and political demands. Do you see your artistic work as political?**

Maak: I don't think my work has an immediate political impact, certainly not in the way that the courageous actions of the "Last Generation" or the protesters in Lützerath did. My goal is to make images that, as in the story you quoted of the beach under the pavement, change the way we look at familiar things, such as the ground we stand on, and awaken a desire for a way of life that does not exploit others and those to come of their livelihood, as is the case at the moment. Therefore, when photographing, I looked for situations and places that tell of (possible) transformation. Also, I have deliberately chosen rather close and ground-level perspectives that emphasize my own involvement, instead of claiming to overlook and control everything with a sweeping view from the hill. **Photography theory often discusses concepts such as (the decisive) moment, the past and momentariness, as well as likeness and authenticity. Some of these themes also emerge in the narratives of our works.**

Maierhofer: In our exhibition, different themes come together that at first glance don't touch much. In geology you think in terms of millions of years, in photography in seconds. But both have a special relationship to time, also in terms of how they depict it. Fossils are impressions or imprints of animals and plants that may no longer exist today. In *The Pencil of Nature*, Henry Talbot compares photography to tracks in the snow. The past is deposited in layers, in photograms the sediments of our present become visible. Photography, like capital, is without fixed appearance. A photographic image can be a screen, framed on the wall or ones and zeros in a file. Almost anything can be imaged,

edited, enlarged and reduced. Photographs change their appearance, a kind of shape-shifter, much like money: you can use it to turn a table into a cell phone, a house into a car, attention into a handbag. **The photograph can be just as many things and become, for example, a political poster, code, a memory in a private album, or a postcard passed through many hands. You are showing two sculptures based on such cards, can you tell us about them?**

Maak: A few months ago, I started looking for postcards of Etna on eBay. The first one I bought particularly fascinated me visually. It was written on in Russian and a friend translated the text for me. It begins with the sentence, "Yesterday we made the climb to the top of Etna and looked into this damned hole." Upon further research, she discovered that the recipient, a nobleman from Petersburg, had been presumed deceased since 1906. However, the card was not mailed to him from Taormina in eastern Sicily until 1908. I am mainly interested in cards that have been written on and postmarked. Postcards are cultural sediment, they often first accumulate in boxes and drawers, then eventually end up in flea markets or landfills. They show personal written messages that are very similar to each other, telling about the weather and food, people and sights, and in the case of Etna, about the climb to and view of the volcano. The mountain has changed through numerous eruptions and erosion since these cards were written. They are therefore snapshots of the life of the people and of the mountain. But they are also varying interpretations of this place; depending on the point of view from which they are made, the volcano appears graceful or threatening, for example, and so the experiences reported by the tourists also differ. I decided to enlarge the postcards in order to transform the historical testimonies into witnesses of time, who resignedly hold out and wait for them to become significant again. The idea for the *soft sculptures* came to me while experimenting with different materials and techniques of reproduction. I like how these soft objects surrender to gravity and spatial conditions.

The financial scandals that are the subject of your *Futures* series are mostly about virtual transactions. So it wasn't suitcases of gold or money that were being sent, but money transfers over networks that disguised the origin and destination of the money. These transactions were proven with documents, not with pictures. So what criteria did you use to select the photographs for your photograms?

Maierhofer: Speculative crashes or financial scandals and how they appear in the media are usually perceived as isolated events. But they are symptomatic of our economic system and not the exception but the rule. Those who live well despite social welfare, such as Florida-Rolf are often a bigger scandal than another name of a politician who is mentioned in the Paradise Papers or appears in connection with the Cum-Ex deals. By using the photogram footage from coverage of various financial scandals, such as from the Mannesmann trial, I try to capture their fleeting appearance. And you are right, the transactions of the financial markets are virtual and only visible to a few people even if their effects are felt by many. This simultaneous presence and absence also characterizes photography. Paul Nadar spoke of photography as a "materialization of the disembodied phantom." It can make visible something that we otherwise do not see. The plastic bags in my photograms are carried by invisible hands, with which, according to Adam Smith, the market regulates itself. They float like ghosts through the black pictorial space. While the

ghosts in the pictures reveal themselves at second glance as the plastic objects they are,
the invisible hands in the markets remain a fantasy.

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