

MARKÉTA OTHOVÁ

Crystals of Time

The movement inscribed into Markéta Othová's works evokes an instinctive descent through the history of photography. Her point of departure has turned out to be the 1990s "archival turn": beginning in 1994, the artist started to mine an extensive archive of her own snapshots, made primarily during trips abroad, putting together photographic installations of such a nature that the significance of the particular pictures was specified only by the syntax of the whole. Towards the end of the decade, Othová then shifted to the technique of temporal series, recorded sequentially – which put her close to the use of photography as we know it from 1970s Conceptual Art. And in her latest works, she is more focused than ever on the composition of particular images, now shot (in clear contrast to her previous cycles) exclusively in the lab environment of a photographer's studio – so that, in her trajectory through the history of photography, she has now arrived at the experiments of the photographic avant-garde from the 1920s and 1930s: similar to the avant-garde's representatives, Othová is also questioning the very nature of the photographic medium and the stability of the visual world.

An example of Othová's early work is *Paris-Texas* from 1998, an installation composed of two images made in 1995 and 1996, respectively. Two cine-film shots, perfectly inconspicuous at first sight, are blown up to 110 cm x 160 cm format in the installation and affixed by pins right to the wall. Format unity, austere tonality, and the manner of installation – strictly maintained right into the middle of the following decade – allowed Othová to meld shots taken in quite different places and times. In the case of *Paris-Texas*, these capture, firstly, a floral still life and, secondly, a glimpse of a group of children at a parking lot. Fusing the two incongruous shots, one interior and one exterior, with the title produces the impression of a trip, a ride – an impression further strengthened by the reference to Wim Wenders's film in the title. Just like the German director in his American picture, the Czech artist, too, evinces a distinct state of perception and awareness, one we experience in an alien environment. However, they also indirectly both refer to the shared characteristic of the photographic as well as the cinematographic camera as a general equivalent to all means of transport, for they both transport us in place and time. And finally, *Paris-Texas* links – in a manner quite typical for Othová – the choice of topic with the choice of shooting method: objects are captured in great detail and framed apart from the surrounding world, so that their symbolic quality comes to the fore (as is the case with the flowers and the remote control in the first picture), whereas human beings are always shot from a distance and in larger constellations (as is the case with the children's group in the second picture).

A peak of this tendency can be seen in Othová's cycle *Pardon?* from 2005, commissioned by the Photographers' Gallery in London. Most of the nine photographs that comprise the installation were shot from a passing car. The passivity of the photographer as the one who only records a pre-existing view is brought to a critical point both by the mobility of the camera, drawn away from the subject together with the author, and by the frame doubled by the car window. This is also clearly discernible in the two photographs where lonesome trees, bent by gusts of wind, almost sway out of view. On the other hand, a broader view and a balanced composition are used for groups of firmly standing arboreal pairs and threesomes. Then, three distinct pictures come forth from within a group of similar images, among them a shot of a group of people in discussion, where (as in the shots of isolated and grouped trees) the work stresses how the younger female figure differs from her company of

two older couples: although they are all sitting at the same table, the younger woman is set off by her distinct social status. Suggesting that the piece be viewed as a hidden self-portrait is both the fact that this picture was shot at an art fair and, more importantly, the physical similarity between the woman in the picture and Markéta Othová. At the end, the clue to the significance of the entire piece is, once again, the title, as well as the photograph of the semi-transparent, amorphous crystal of a lamp from Adolf Loos's Villa Müller in Prague: an incarnation of the terminal reduction of meaning.

The associative composition of photographic cycles was subsequently abandoned by Othová in favour of sequentially recorded series. These were anticipated in the *Her Life* cycle from 1998; the cinematographic effect was achieved here by a presentation of six identical pictures of a woman strolling along a street bathed in sunlight. Othová made the shot from a window of the functionalist Veletržní palác (Trade Fair Palace) in Prague, and the multiplied shot of the woman's movement, now frozen, was then placed into the vast vestibule of the same building. Similar was the genesis of one of Othová's first temporal series, called *Return*, from 2000. Here, too, we see a female figure, photographed through a window, as she walks her dog in the street. However, this time the series was created not by multiplying a single shot but rather by repeatedly pressing the shutter release while focusing the camera on a single object. The resulting series thus analyses temporal order into spatial order. In contrast to the tradition of art photography, which seeks to capture mutable reality in a decisive moment, Othová approximates the logic of cinematography that employs any moment whatsoever, an arbitrary moment. The centre of the work's gravity lies in the montage of the shots in which a woman walks along the street and then comes back. The distanced portrayal of what is happening terminates in the last photograph, where the woman is looking straight into the camera.

Even though the *Untitled* cycle of 2005 was made just as mechanically as *Return*, their respective orientation is different. In contrast to the twelve images of *Return*, there are only five shots here, each of which, however, represents a completed stage in the overall development. The first four images were taken from an almost identical position. First, a small girl lifts a bike from the ground; second, she is looking straight at a man who enters the image from the right; third, the man approaches her and the little girl stops trying to lift the bike; fourth, each protagonist leaves in another direction. From a broader viewpoint, presented by the fifth shot, we see the little girl turning to an older girl who is riding by. The series captures a clash of the child's "small world" with the "big world" of the adult. However, it does so only indirectly, as the final montage omits the clash itself, concealing it in the temporal and spatial gap between shots no. 3 and no. 4, only confronting us with the result of the encounter: each figure going their own way. Whereas the little girl goes where she wants, the man, who was in a rush at first, goes back slowly, as visible in image no. 4, with his hands in his pockets.

Untitled thematises the reversibility of montage and de-montage. Initially, continuous action has been decomposed into static shots; thereafter, it is recomposed into a phased sequence. However, the resulting series is inscribed with the dual power of de-montage: not only a source of knowledge, but also the cause of destruction of the decomposed thing or action. While it is certainly possible to decompose the entire situation and analyse it step-by-step, the essential recedes in an irretrievable fragmentariness. The mischievous ambivalence of de-montage is a privilege of the "small world" of the child, for it is capable both of reviving dead things in play and of destroying them to explore their parts. The "small world" of the child is not enclosed in the "big world" of the adult. It is not as if the girl's movements were enchained on the basis of any rational cuts that would link them in a natural way.¹ Her motion implies no physical reaction – it remains a purely optical situation. All it does is link up with the view of an adult woman who has recorded the girl's movements in her photographs. And from this adult woman's perspective, it captures not only the continually passing present of a child, but also the

¹ Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, London: The Athlone Press 1989, pp. 270–279.

cherished past of a childhood she lived through herself. Like a hidden self-portrait, the images from the "Untitled" cycle decompose into two simultaneous time currents that cannot be reduced to each other. Only through them can we be children and adults at the same time.

And a dialectical character of this kind need not be limited to a sequence of images; a single image may suffice. This is the case with the 2000 photograph *Something I Can't Remember* that captures the interior of the living space in a functionalist villa in Prague's Hodkovičky neighbourhood. Since the widow of the building's first owner, the film director Martin Frič, maintained the villa in its original state, Othová's 2000 photograph presents us with a view from 1935, the year the mansion was finished. It is only through the forgotten cover of the camera's lens that the present is embodied in the photograph. Cognitive scepticism, expressed by the title, is likewise referenced by the image's blind spot – a painting, hanging on the opposite wall, that is made invisible by a reflex. The blind spot constitutes the signifying focus of the image – as is also shown by the liminally cropped table at the lower image border. In the photograph, the empty space of the interior is captured as a still life in which things, assembled in a fixed composition, become immersed in their silent life. A thing I can't remember emerges in our view as a *déjà vu*, a memory of the present that embraces both of the constitutive features of time, so that the actual present is also always a virtual past. Thus, even this single image is of a dialectical nature, since it assembles mutually unconnected and inherently divergent times.²

The complexity of every image is also explicitly thematised by the *Untitled* series of A4 cut-outs, made by Othová from her older photographs in the then-typical format (110 cm x 160 cm). The subject of the image – be it a parking lot, a landscape, a Chrysler, a drawing, a coffee-maker, or a woman in a park – is invariably focused at the centre of the photograph, whereas towards the frame the image becomes gradually neutralised so as to emphasise the manner in which it came into being. Besides the format and the strictly central focus, it is also the coarser grain of individual prints that testifies to the shared origin of these photographs. And its best evidence is their common temporal characteristics: "undated". As physical cut-outs from photographic prints, these images do not capture an external, temporally determined reality. Rather than an interpretation of the represented reality, they are a severance thereof. Thus, indirectly, they also capture the photographic process itself as a mere framing of an already given configuration. The very reality of a world that is not inherently united is endowed with the nature of a sign. In advance, things themselves are permeated by photography. However, for a photograph, being indexical does not mean being faithful – as is clear from the pieces where, in her descent through the history of photography, Othová has come close to the experimental and reductive tendencies of the first decades of the 20th century. This is the case in the cycle *Leçon de photographie* from 2007, composed of seven pictures that depict a white box against white background. The colour of the captured object is no different from its surroundings, so that one would expect it to remain invisible – and yet it turns out to be set off by the shading that outlines its silhouette. Thus, we end up seeing the object in the photograph only due to the difference injected into it by photography. This is also made explicit in the *Untitled* diptych with a floral still life from 2008. Here, Othová has captured one and the same bunch of flowers, first against a dark and then against a light background, with the object thus being captured as light-coloured in the first photograph and dark-coloured in the second. Combined in a single installation, we will tend to consider these two independent images merely as a positive and a negative. Yet the stability of the visual world is most forcefully disrupted in another *Untitled* diptych, this time from 2000. Through repainting, Othová has linked two perfectly distinct photographs in such a way that we consider them identical. Othová has achieved this effect by means of a geometrically reductive repaint that leaves only a small cut-out in the middle of the first image – a segment that appears to fit into the blind spot in the second picture's repaint.

² In dialectical image, cf. Walter Benjamin, „Zentralpark“, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I, no. 2, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1974; and Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps: Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images*, Paris: Minuit 2000, pp. 85–155.

A consequential result of understanding photography as continuity between a thing and its image is the *Mayday* series (2004–2007), consisting of eleven abstract compositions. From a centripetal movement that makes images from the surrounding world fall onto the surface of the film, via a thematisation of their flatness and symbolic nature, Othová arrives at the pure abstraction of concentric configurations of points. Whereas the centripetal movement embodies the perceptual image that is isolated from the outside world by means of framing, the centrifugal movement, which propels the points on the surfaces of the *Mayday* images towards the edges, constitutes an affective image, emerging from the inside. The contrast is enhanced by the use of different photographic formats, as these imply generically different reactions of the observer. The large format of the shots with objective content arouses a sensorimotor reaction, while the smaller format of the abstract compositions incites a purely optical response. Here, significance is construed not via the viewer's movement within the space of the installation, but rather via simple visual comprehension. All images in the *Mayday* series are mere variants of a single image. They confront us like a sequence of circular kaleidoscopic figures that transmute in a flash and yet maintain their symmetry, which refers to the invisible power of the inner order of optical machinery. It is only the invisible power of configuring that is able to create, for a moment, out of these fragmented snapshots, an inherently consistent constellation. "What we see in the crystal, is no longer the empirical progression of time as succession of presents, nor its indirect representation as interval or as whole; it is its direct presentation, its constitutive dividing in two into a present which is passing and a past which is preserved, the strict contemporaneity of the present with the past that it will be, of the past with the present that it has been. It is time itself which arises in the crystal, and which is constantly recommending its dividing in two without completing it, since the indiscernible exchange is always renewed and reproduced."³

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³ Gilles Deleuze, op. cit., p. 274. Reprinted with courtesy of Camera Austria, Graz, no. 106/2009, pp. 11–22.