We Still Love Life

Gesche Würfel

“Documents submitted to the Faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of the Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art”

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Approved by Jeff Whetstone

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Artist Statement

My visual arts practice is mainly photographic but also includes video and urban interventions. I combine a wide range of influences from my background as an artist, urban planner, and sociologist to having lived in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. I investigate the relationship we have with our environment in urban places and in cultural and natural landscapes. My photographs engage with the socio-political implications of spatial processes by exploring notions of class, gender, race, and geography. Even though most of my photographs do not show people directly, they talk about the traces that people have left behind using or passing through these spaces. I am particularly drawn to unusual, derelict, mundane, and often overlooked spaces as these offer a vast area of hidden (local) histories. By exploring these, I offer the viewer insights about spaces they may never visit or simply do not notice.

I draw my inspiration from the immediate places where I live. As I have lived in many different places and settings, from rural to suburban to urban in Germany, England, and the U.S., my projects are international but still very site-specific. My practice is research-based and usually has a strong theoretical foundation, which enables me to place my work not only in an art context but also beyond.

Through my background as urban planner and sociologist I explore places and structures by analyzing them for particular attributes, e.g. who lives and frequents particular places or buildings, who may be excluded, what interactions are visible or invisible but definable through traces, what kind of buildings, streets and other infrastructure, green spaces, or other features can be seen. Using my ‘photographer’s eyes’ I compose images, often with a strong leaning towards architectural photography, which is visible in the formal lines and analytical way that I use to frame my images.

I usually shoot film using medium or large format cameras. I am drawn to the slow way of working with film as opposed to digital. In the past, my urban projects were photographed in color as in my opinion the multi-faceted city life can be best brought out through color images. Since moving to North Carolina I have shifted to black and white as I feel that the heaviness of the historical yet contemporary topics is better conveyed in a range of grey tones than in color.

My art connects with numerous broader trends. Twentieth-century German photography has been very influential for me, particularly Bernd and Hilla Becher and their former students at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art with their analytical approach to space. I have always been fascinated by William Eggleston’s use of color and by the New Topographics’ methods of surveying man-made urban and suburban landscapes. In addition, I assisted the well-known architectural photographer Hélène Binet in London, and she inspired me to view spaces in new ways by focusing on the interplay of architectural concepts, light and shadows. Since having moved to North Carolina a new wave of artists has inspired my work, mainly due to a change in topics as I have started focusing on history, archives, and race. In particular Christian Boltanski, Anselm Kiefer, and Kara Walker are of interest to me in how they deal with history, the legacy of the Holocaust and slavery, and the way they work with and create archives.

One project that addresses the issues of class, gender, and geography is the series Go for Gold! (2006 – ongoing), a ten-year photography project that investigates the transformation of the East London landscape in preparation for, during, and after the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The overarching critique of the project is how the Olympics and
Paralympics have been transformed from a sports to an economic mega-event in which urban regeneration plays a major role.

Another project that addresses the larger issues of space, class, and geography is *Basement Sanctuaries*. *Basement Sanctuaries* explores how superintendents decorate the basements of apartment buildings in Northern Manhattan, NYC, by illuminating the process of migrant adaptation to the metropolis from an intimate perspective.

Since having moved to North Carolina last year, I have also built race analysis into my study of space and geography. *At the Hands of Persons Unknown* (2013-ongoing) consists of a series of photographs, a video, and a moving lamp. With this work I explore how trees have been silent witnesses to the lynchings of women in the American South during Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era. In most cases women were lynched along with their husbands, sons, or brothers. The project is inspired by the fact that my African-American husband and I would not have been able to have a relationship during that time period as miscegenation was not allowed. If detected, one of us or both may have been lynched.

In *Oppressive Architecture*, I explore the aftermath of connections between American slavery and German Nazism in the area of forced labor systems and what impacts they have left on the contemporary landscape and its inhabitants. The project is inspired by Stanley Elkins’ claim that the Nazi regime took inspiration from the plantation and slavery system from the pre-Civil War era to develop it for their own purposes through the construction of labor and concentration camps. In the past years, many of these architectural forms have been converted into museums or memorials. Except for some plantations, the places are no longer inhabited. It is of interest to me to explore how these two countries commemorate and reconcile their past by maintaining or demolishing these structures.

While photographing the architectural forms at each plantation, I collected plant species - the new inhabitants of these places - and photographed them in the lighting studio. This served as a way to dislocate the species from their original spaces – the same that happened to the former slaves that were forced to live and labor on these plantations. This series is called *Plantation Still Lifes*.

*Below Forest*: Whilst photographing in Germany last summer, I visited *Below Forest* that is located 1.5 hours north of Berlin. Shortly before the Red Army approached the concentration camp Sachsenhausen and its sub-camps, 33,000 prisoners were sent on the so-called death marches. They had to march 20-40km a day without any food or water. Who was not able to walk anymore or tried to steal food or water was shot dead. Between April 23-29, 1945, more than 16,000 prisoners camped in *Below Forest* before they were freed by the Allies. The video refers to the horrors of the concentration camp (black) and the unknown future (white) as either being death or freedom. The video references the importance of the forest in German culture. In particular during the Third Reich the forest was equated with harmony and therefore is in stark contrast to the way the forest is presented in the video and probably was experienced by the prisoners.
Gesche Würfel

Thesis talk
April 30, 2015
OVERVIEW

Urban Works
New Works - MFA
Outlook
URBAN WORKS

N 51°30.806 - W 000°00.066 (2008), 20" x 20", digital c-type print, from the series London - Luton
Shed 6 (2007), 20“ x 20“, digital c-type print, from the series Farewell from the Garden Paradise
ARTISTS - INSPIRATION

Bernd and Hilla Becher

*Consolidation Mine, Gelsenkirchen, Ruhr Region, Germany* (1974) 18 1/4 x 23 7/16”; gelatin silver print
Source: http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A8095&page_number=9&template_id=1&sort_order=1

*Framework Houses* (1959-73) 16 1/4 x 12”; gelatin silver prints
http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A8095&page_number=1&template_id=1&sort_order=1
Candida Höfer

*Kunstakademie Düsseldorf III* (2011) 70.9“ x 60“; C-Print

Thomas Struth

ARTISTS - INSPIRATION

New Topographics: Stephen Shore, Lewis Baltz

**Holden Street, North Adams, Massachusetts**
(1974) 12 x 15 1/8``; c- print
Source:

**Tract House no. 22** (1971) From the series *The Tract Houses*; 6`` x 9``; silver gelatin print
Source:
http://www.galeriezander.com/en/artist/lewis_baltz/works
ARTISTS - INSPIRATION

William Eggleston

Untitled (1999-2000); 30" x 24"; Iris print
Source: ARTSTOR

Untitled (1971) 12 1/4 x 18 3/4"; dye-transfer print
Source: http://artblart.com/tag/william-eggleston-peaches/
ARTISTS - INSPIRATION

Hélène Binet

Le Corbusier, Couvent Sainte-Marie de la Tourette, Eveux, France, 1953; Photographed 2007;
Source: Hélène Binet’s archive
GO FOR GOLD!

*Service Area 2 (2006), 20" x 20", c-type print*
GO FOR GOLD!

*Handball Arena 2* (2007), 20” x 20”, c-type print

*Handball Arena 5* (2012), 20” x 20”, c-type print
GO FOR GOLD!

*Fencing Arena 1* (2006), 20" x 20", c-type print

*Fencing Arena 4* (2012), 20" x 20", c-type print
BASEMENT SANCTUARIES

Published by Schilt Publishing, 2014
untitled 51 (tropics) (2013), 16“ x 16“, archival pigment print
BASEMENT SANCTUARIES

untitled 47 (mona lisa) (2012), 16” x 20”, archival pigment print
AT THE HANDS OF PERSONS UNKNOWN

untitled 1 (2013), 40" x 40", Archival Pigment Print
AT THE HANDS OF PERSONS UNKNOWN

untitled 2 (2013), 40” x 40“, Archival Pigment Print
AT THE HANDS OF PERSONS UNKNOWN

untitled 3 (2013), 40” x 40”, Archival Pigment Print
AT THE HANDS OF PERSONS UNKNOWN

untitled 4 (2013), 40“ x 40“, Archival Pigment Print
AT THE HANDS OF PERSONS UNKNOWN

*untitled 5* (2013), 40“ x 40“, Archival Pigment Print
AT THE HANDS OF PERSONS UNKNOWN

untitled 6 (2013), 40“ x 40“, Archival Pigment Print
AT THE HANDS OF PERSONS UNKNOWN

*untitled 7 (2013), 40“ x 40“, Archival Pigment Print*
untitled 8 (2015), 40“ x 40“, Archival Pigment Print
AT THE HANDS OF PERSONS UNKNOWN

At the Hands of Persons Unknown

Video Still At the Hands of Persons Unknown (2013-15), digital video, 2:16 min
AT THE HANDS OF PERSONS UNKNOWN

Maquette of Moving Lamp (2014); 7" diameter, 10" height; Pictorico, light bulb, aluminum foil, wood, wire
ARTISTS - INSPIRATION

Kara Walker

Darkytown Rebellion (2001) 180 x 396 inches; Cut paper & projection on wall; Installation view: American Primitive Brent Sikkema Gallery, New York, 2001 Source:

Fall From Grace, Miss Pipi’s Blue Tale, 2011, DVD Video (color, sound) 17 minutes Source:
ARTISTS - INSPIRATION

Ken Gonzalez Day

*Run Up* (2002) 40 x 50", c-type print
Source: http://www.kengonzalesday.com/projects/hangtrees/01.html

*Nightfall I* (2006) 60 x 74", c-type print
Source: http://www.kengonzalesday.com/projects/hangtrees/01.html
OPPRESSIVE ARCHITECTURE

*Slave Cabin (Stagville Plantation) (2013) 30" x 30"; Archival Pigment Print*

*Sonderlager of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp / Zone II of the Soviet special camp (Sachsenhausen Memorial and Museum) (2014) 30" x 30"; Archival Pigment Print*
OPPRESSIVE ARCHITECTURE

Entrance (Sachsenhausen Memorial and Museum)(2014) 30" x 40"; Archival Pigment Print
OPPRESSIVE ARCHITECTURE

Platform 17 (Grunewald Station, Berlin) (2014) 30" x 30"; Archival Pigment Print

Prison (Ravensbrueck Memorial and Museum) (2014) 30" x 30"; Archival Pigment Print
OPPRESSIVE ARCHITECTURE

Dissecting Table (Sachsenhausen Memorial and Museum) (2014) 30” x 30”; Archival Pigment Print

Sink (The Nazi Forced Labor Documentation Center, Berlin) (2014) 30” x 30”; Archival Pigment Print
OPPRESSIVE ARCHITECTURE

*Execution Alley (Ravensbrueck Memorial and Museum)*
(2014) 30" x 30"; Archival Pigment Print

*Room (The Nazi Forced Labor Documentation Center, Berlin)*
(2014) 30" x 30"; Archival Pigment Print
OPPRESSIVE ARCHITECTURE

*Morgue (Sachsenhausen Memorial and Museum) (2014)*
30" x 30"; Archival Pigment Print

*Foundation of House Slave Cabin (Stagville Plantation) (2013)*
30" x 30"; Archival Pigment Print
OPPRESSIVE ARCHITECTURE

Big House (Bellamy Mansion) (2014) 30" x 40"; Archival Pigment Print
OPPRESSIVE ARCHITECTURE

Slave Quarters (Bellamy Mansion) (2014) 11" x 14"; Archival Pigment Print
Slave Cabin (Pine Hall Plantation) (2014) 11" x 14"; Archival Pigment Print
OPPRESSIVE ARCHITECTURE

Slave Cabin (Pine Hall Plantation) (2014) 11" x 14"; Archival Pigment Print
OPPRESSIVE ARCHITECTURE

Slave Cabin (McCollum Farm) (2014) 11" x 14"; Archival Pigment Print
OPPRESSIVE ARCHITECTURE

Slave Cabin (Paul Green Cabin, North Carolina Botanical Garden) (2014) 11” x 14”; Archival Pigment Print
OPPRESSIVE ARCHITECTURE

Installation view of *Oppressive Architecture, We Still Love Life*, Allcott Gallery, UNC-CH, 2015
PLANTATION STILL LIFES

*Walnut (Stagville Plantation) (2014) 8" x 8"; Archival Pigment Print*

*Magnolia (Bellamy Mansion) (2014) 8" x 8"; Archival Pigment Print*
PLANTATION STILL LIFES

Pine (Orton Plantation) (2014) 8" x 8"; Archival Pigment Print

Tobacco (McCollum Farm) (2014) 8" x 8"; Archival Pigment Print
PLANTATION STILL LIFES

*Sage (Pine Hall Plantation) (2014) 8" x 8"; Archival Pigment Print*

*Osage Orange (Stagville Plantation) (2014) 8" x 8"; Archival Pigment Print*
BELOW FOREST

Video Still, Below Forest (2015), Digital Projection, 20:48 min
BELOW FOREST

Installation view, Below Forest (2015), Digital projection, 20:48 min

We Still Love Life, Allcott Gallery, UNC-CH, 2015
ARTISTS - INSPIRATION

Christian Boltanski

Théâtre d’ombres, 1984, Installation
Source: http://www.armoryonpark.org/index.php/photo_gallery/slideshow/boltanski/

Reliquaire (1990), photographs, lamps, tin biscuit boxes
Source: ARTSTOR
ARTISTS - INSPIRATION

Anselm Kiefer

*Lot's Wife* (1989), 350cm x 410cm; oil paint, ash, stucco, chalk, linseed oil, polymere emulsion, salt and applied elements (e.g., copper heating coil), on canvas, attached to lead foil, on plywood panels
Source: ARTSTOR

*Sulamite* (1945-1983), 114 3/16 x 145 11/16"; oil, emulsion, shellac, acrylic,
Source: ARTSTOR
ARTISTS - INSPIRATION

Ori Gersht

Will You Dance For Me 1/8 (2011) Dual channel HD video projection with sound 13 minutes 45 seconds duration
Dimensions variable
Source: http://crggallery.com/artists/ori-gersht/

The Forest (2005) Single channel HD video projection with sound 13 minutes; installation shot at CRG Galler
Source: http://crggallery.com/exhibitions/ori-gersht-the-forest/
Hargraves Plantation Diorama (2015) 20" x 10" x 10"; archival pigment print, foamboard
HARGRAVES PLANTATION

Detail: Hargraves Plantation Diorama (2015) 20" x 10" x 10"; archival pigment print, foamboard
OUTLOOK

Book *Oppressive Architecture*
- photograph more plantations and concentration camps
- photograph slave ships and the Reichsbahn

Moving Lamp

Legacies of Slavery
- How visible in the urban fabric?
- U.S. prison system
- Native American reservations