

## **zone zero – between simulation and hyper-reality**

***Dr. Claudia Gabriele Philipp, 2003, curator for photography at Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg***

Systematically and successively Michael Najjar has developed his groups of works which now can be viewed as a synopsis in the Willy-Brandt-Haus revealing the rich productivity and deep imagination of their creator. When we look back at them as a whole we can distinguish the clear line of a flight of the mind which Michael Najjar first embarked on six years ago. This exhibition should be taken as a kind of intermediate landing stage or summing-up. As Vilém Flusser remarked "The myth of flight offers the chance to seize freedom, to understand, to comprehend and to change it."

The artist who lives in Berlin and studied at the Bildo-Akademie in the city has channelled his particular creative energy into an exploration of how digital technology is changing the ways we view and order the world around us – transforming our modes of perception which are now in the throes of a deeply disturbing crisis of authenticity as the footage of so-called "war reporting" from Iraq makes manifest. Najjar trains his sights on the interfaces between analogue and digital photography and reveals their interactions in all their bareness to our fascinated gaze.

Najjar's 1997 project ¡VIVA FIDEL! – a journey into absurdity was a provoking investigation of the claims documentary photography makes to represent the real world. By consciously and purposely fusing his analogue photographs with computer-generated techniques, he signalled his departure from the realm of classic documentary photography. A furious controversy about whether he had the right to do so was not slow to follow. As every avantgarde artist worth his salt does, Najjar had touched the proverbial raw nerve – the credibility of documentary photography which had long rung hollow. Let us not forget: each picture is a representation and not reality itself. As John Berger wrote "Each picture embodies a particular way of seeing, even a photographic image." Or in the words of Michael Najjar " Each photograph is always a transformation of reality and never identical with it."

His fascination with Cuba and the absurdities thrown up by the workings of its governing system coupled with his desire to reveal the surreal nature of the contradictions it genders led Najjar to a fundamental re-examination of the theoretical underpinnings of documentary photography. He posed the questions "How can the reality of Cuba be captured in a visual form? How can absurdity be photographed?"

The documentary-based work ¡VIVA FIDEL! embodies this media-critical reflection – one of Najjar’s most fundamental concerns – in the specific composition of each and every photograph. The permanent displacement of photographed reality by photographic reality and the permanent interchanges between the two that are expressed in a simplistic viewing lead at best to a sense of irritation in the viewer and at worst to non-understanding and aggression.

The emotionally and politically charged theme of Cuba provoked and produced highly particular shifts and displacements in reality levels. “[...] the interpretation of a picture always takes place in the mind of the viewer. The meaning of what we see is never that of what we see but rather of what it means to us.”

Najjar is rigorous and places the same exacting demands on the viewer as he does on himself. We have to examine our own capability for perception by defining the kind of relationship an image entertains with reality instead of being content with the role of the simple-minded viewer. Najjar derives great enjoyment from breaking taboos. “As far as documentary photography is concerned, it’s not the authenticity of the snapshot which is the decisive factor but rather the symbolic value of the message.” The only way to “not to lose one’s bearings in the complex and charged field between the two poles of the ‘true’ and the ‘real’” is to render transparent the workings of the photographic digital process itself.

The stance of photography grounded on authenticity – in the sense of being unremittingly honest about its own operations and processes – requires courage and open-mindedness from viewers and critics alike. *SAPERE AUDE* – dare to use your own judgement to break out of the mould of preconceived opinions into which you have slipped – was one of the driving maxims of the Enlightenment. This is no easy undertaking in our present visual-driven world in which the “*analphabetism of the eye*” (László Moholy-Nagy) is propagated and whose eleventh commandment in the words of Harald Dubau enjoins us “*thou shalt not make unto thee any false likeness of the world*”.

The cycle of pictures entitled *japanese style* was produced in 1999/2000 and also shows the influence of documentary photography. Here too the photographer is confronted by a culture whose own particular perceptual apparatus cannot be easily subsumed. Developments in current Japanese society show that the ‘rational’ is merely one system among many. As Michael Najjar comments “The permanent metamorphosis created by

the lack of a unifying principle and which seeks the substantial not in the substance of things but in their inter-relations gives the kernel of what we could understand by "japanese style". And this understanding paired with break-neck transformation to a virtual environment gives an idea or premonition of the way in which our cities and our lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century could be shaped."

These reflections are taken from a project-sketch for japanese style. Michael Najjar examines each stage of his development as an artist in a series of texts accompanying the work in hand which oscillate between media-critical analysis and wide-angled future vision. Obviously each individual project stands under the hallmark of a particular aesthetic format with differing forms of visual presentation.

The photographs shown in japanese style - in colour and black and white in a range of sizes - have the same hyper-real intensity whether viewed close up or from a distance. Reality seems to spring from the picture and hit us - but we must treat our simplistic faith in the medium with circumspection. In our role as viewers we stand before a photograph. Yet the distance between the 'viewing subject' and the Other is one that we can never abolish. The artificiality of these life spaces created by human hand and brain alienates us from our own nature. Both machines and media are autonomous life-forms continually reproducing themselves - the myth of Prometheus placed in a post-modern context.

Najjar is above all concerned in his work with " ... questions of identity, shifts in our modes of perception caused by artificial image worlds, the transformation of urban living spaces through their fusion with media-driven life spaces, and the transformation of our bodies and consciousness through the infiltration of technology."

In his 1999/2000 eight-part work nexus project part I - winner of the *Large Format Inkjet Award 2000* - Najjar embarks on an exploration of the outward appearance of the human being in a critical evaluation of the "authenticity" of the medium of portrait photography as a whole.

Drawing on classical studio portraiture against a neutral background, he creates the CYBORGS - electronically modified hybrid beings. With their perfectly ordinary appearance and their unreal computer-generated eyes, these eight faces draw from us a critical response that alternates between fascination and threat. And these are precisely the forces with which we are confronted in real life.

Ultimately very few of us will be able to withstand the temptation to multiply the power of our own brains one hundred or one thousand fold.

The presentation of the heads as super-life-size monumental wall pictures only serves to increase the viewer's sense of irritation – as do the accompanying Cyborg biographies.

And if you feel yourself reminded of the film *Blade Runner* (USA 1982, directed by Ridley Scott, starring Harrison Ford) you're not far off the mark!

Najjar knows exactly what he is aiming for: "the portrait subjects are based on analogue photographic techniques transformed to hybrid photography by the creative intervention of digital technology in exactly the same way as the biologically 'correct' body is transformed into a hybrid being through its fusion with technological components."

The CYBEROTIC GIRLS in his spectacular vision end of sex. as we know it represent yet another transgression towards the presentation of a HYPER-REALITY that eludes representation. With great glee, Najjar deconstructed the *Mythos St. Pauli* for the 2002 group exhibition in the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg. His work shows the blending of two levels of the imagination – the fantastic and the virtual. "In the near future we will equip our brains with software. [...] the result of this development will be a new form of life: the cyborg, a hybrid being, part human, part machine."

The visionary gaze of the photographer announces the demise of St. Pauli as a real historically defined location. Increasingly pressurised by the range of sexual opportunities available on the Internet, this former hub of the sex trade will gradually lose its *raison d'être* and mutate into a lifeless ruin. Sex as a service industry in the traditional meaning of the term will vanish from public spaces and lodge exclusively in our minds – a logical development of our imaginative powers which heretofore have been mainly shaped by the visual sense.

Indeed the mind has long been the *de facto* theatre of operations – as all our infatuations with the visual so aptly demonstrates. In future sex fantasies can be directly downloaded and stored in the brain- Tele-tactile interfaces with external visual / audio / olfactory units will replace inter-personal human encounters as we know them (including the classic type of prostitution) whilst the sense of alienation which already exists will dissipate and dissolve in pure virtuality. In Najjar's pictures real and virtual worlds inter-penetrate each other to form a composite whole - giving a preview of the

(final) loss of distinction to come. We have arrived at a preliminary end of history, the tradition-rich venue of St. Pauli lies before us as a empty landscape of ruins.

In his cycle of works produced in 2001 and entitled *no memory access* Najjar strikes out in a different direction. He removes people from their surroundings and by exposing two photographs one over the other in a large-format flat screen projection causes them to disappear. This was the sense of the action on the outer façade of the Hamburger Kunsthalle during the 2. *Triennale der Photographie Hamburg 2002*. "The presence of a reality suddenly turns into an absence, and, inversely, an absent reality suddenly becomes present, only partial and in a simulative form. Where, now, does reality lie?"

What we perceive as reality is a function of our minds. The mind is the cradle of the image. As the ancient Greek poet Pindar remarked "Man is but the dream of a shadow." Nowadays we use machines to project our desires and longings, dreams and nightmares on the outside. They take on their own autonomous life and appear to us at a remove as strange and estranged worlds.

Photography is a medium of memory, shaped by the transitory nature of the passing moment and informed by the knowledge of death as the French philosopher Roland Barthes noted in his last essay "Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography": "For in a society DEATH must be locatable in some place, if no longer (or only very sparsely) in the religious sphere then at some place else; perhaps in this photo which brings DEATH to the forefront by seeking to keep a hold on life. [...] LIFE / DEATH: the paradigm is limited to a simple click of the shutter, one which separates the initial pose from the developed print."

When CNN chief executive Chris Cramer enthusiastically describes the "real" journalism of the Iraq war – where large numbers of women reporters put themselves in the firing line - as "the first attempt at a television of history", he at once draws attention to (at least) two flaws in his argument – namely, a simplistic understanding of the technological possibilities underpinning authentic representation of historical processes, *and* a fixation on the lethal nature of the events where real human dimension is subsumed and hidden behind the machinery of the news reporting system.

The social transformation of a society obsessed with facts – from a feminist standpoint one should say 'disinformation society' – has resulted in a disturbingly uncritical faith in

the power of images. This is indeed one of the reasons why the wound opened on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September still refuses to heal.

Walter Benjamin's dictum is more pertinent now than ever: "In the naked, openly manifest fabric woven by the factual, elements of primary causes will never be seen, and only a double vision can lay their rhythms manifest. It ... comprises their prehistory and their subsequent history." This dictum is central to the art of Michael Najjar which takes the role of perception as the key theme underpinning the entire creative process.

The narratives woven by Michael Najjar speak of the disappearance of the real and its re-emergence in pictorial form. The advent of digitalisation has also caused the disappearance of the body of the technical image. The loss of the site of its placement has made it immaterial, giving it a mere virtual life.

As Michael Najjar comments "de-realization, immateriality and dematerialisation" are the quintessential aspects of digitalised technology. "We have not merely landed in a simulation of reality, but crucially, in a simulation of memory and remembrance."

Digitalized technology accords a further dimension to the relationship between space and time. Digital photography is now devoid of a "real" location. Its immaterial nature means that its setting can be anywhere – or no where. On the new time scale we find ourselves in "Utopia" – the ancient Greek expression literally means "in no place".

The extreme speeds of computer processing and the permanent availability of networks of mass data allow virtuality to elude the traditional frames of time and space as we know them. "Our historical understanding of space and time must be fundamentally re-examined." Michael Najjar diagnoses a "crisis of linearity."

The core concern of no memory access and its logical sequel memory reload is the experience that given their particular biological make-up, human beings are only capable of analogue perception. We are prisoners of our own bodies. Despite all mechanical panoplies the question still remains how can we show acceleration and its reverse in visual terms? True to his line of investigation, Michael Najjar opts for the paradoxes of the single picture. The tranquillity and precision of the artist's view is our only chance to truly satisfy our visual sense. The principle of slowness takes on its own dynamic in a public setting.

The ravenous appetite of the eye which continually demands new material has led to an ever more rapid consumption of images. Film. TV and video take up desperate counter-

positions to the immobile images of photography – desperate in the sense of a search for life forms in a world dominated by cliché and repressive norms. As Paul Virilio said “The image has assumed primacy over what it is supposed to represent.” It is not by chance that Najjar works with the fixed image, giving it fresh meaning in the accelerated motionlessness of the moving media, film, TV and video.

We now near our end. ZONE ZERO – ONE and ZERO as a digital principle – GROUND ZERO. Zone zero can be reached by creativity or destruction. A productive new start is dialectic in nature. The old is transmuted in the new. The digital image always contains a slice of reality in spite of – or precisely because of – the “agony of the real”, to use Jean Baudrillard’s evocative phrase.

Simulation and hyper-reality now dislodge non-referential copies – simulacra, likenesses, figments, graven images. Najjar forsakes the paths of “staged photography” to venture in the realm of SIMULATED HYPER-REALITY with a kind of quantum leap through the world of the digital. Reflected computer technology gives rise to a broader understanding of the medium through the visual form of HYBRIDPHOTOGRAPHY. “Hybrid” is a term we know from biology; we are dealing with mongrel breeds, cross-breeds, hermaphrodite productions whose origins could be equally natural or artificial. “Photography has arrived at zone zero from whence it can strike out in any number of directions. The infinite possibilities for transformation and association of the most disparate image sources and contexts catapult the medium onto a new plane of existence – hybrid photography. The interweaving of realistic elements with fictive realities and fictions is a common reoccurring feature of hybrid photography. Obviously such pictures can no longer be viewed in a linear manner. They generate alternative settings which elude categorization on a linear space-time axis. Thus we are no longer dealing with the portrayal of reality but rather with the reality of the picture itself.”

The few remarks we have made above can only touch on the complexity of the theme at hand. But they have been made in an attempt to articulate the levels of interplay between Michael Najjar’s perception of reality and the reality of the viewer. To repeat, we are no longer dealing with the portrayal of reality but much more with the reality of the picture itself. The underlying issues are the reality of the photographic subject, the emancipation of the image, and its liberty.

As Vilém Flusser, a leading theoretician of photography, defines the step that leads from constraint to possibility “Liberty is playing against the apparatus.”

<sup>1</sup> Vilém Flusser, Vögel, in: ders., Vogelflüge, München, Wien 2000, S. 25-31, S. 30.

<sup>2</sup> John Berger, unter Mitarbeit von Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, Richard Hollis, Sehen. Das Bild der Welt in der Bilderwelt. Deutsch von Axel Schenck, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1974, (RoRoRo Sachbuch 6868), [Ways of Seeing, London 1972], S. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Najjar, Die Wahrheit in der Krise? vom Einfluß digitaler Technologien auf die Reportagefotografie. Begleittext zum Fotoprojekt „iViva Fidel! – eine Reise in die Absurdität“, 1997 (Skript).

<sup>4</sup> lbd.

<sup>5</sup> lbd.

<sup>6</sup> lbd.

<sup>7</sup> lbd.

<sup>8</sup> lbd.

<sup>9</sup> lbd.

<sup>10</sup> lbd.

<sup>11</sup> „nicht der schrift-, sondern der fotografie-unkundige wird der analphabet der zukunft sein.“ László Moholy-Nagy, fotografie ist lichtgestaltung, in: bauhaus. Zeitschrift für Gestaltung, 2. Jg., Nr. 1, Dessau 1928, Reprint Nendeln/Liechtenstein 1976, S. 2-9, S. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Najjar, japanese style. begleittext, 1999/2000 (Skript).

<sup>13</sup> lbd.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Najjar, profil najjar, 2003 (Skript).

<sup>15</sup> Michael Najjar, nexus project part I. projektbeschreibung, 1999 (Skript).

<sup>16</sup> lbd.

<sup>17</sup> Vgl. Claudia Gabriele Philipp, Die Sehnsucht der Bilder, in: Mythos St. Pauli. Photographien 1967-2002, Claudia Gabriele Philipp (Hg.), unterstützt von André Lützen, Hamburg, Heidelberg 2002, S. 5-11.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Najjar, nexus project part II. projektbeschreibung, 2002 (Skript).

<sup>19</sup> Michael Najjar, ausstellung. no memory access, in: ders., cyber-shots, Hamburg 2001, S. 4-5, S. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes, Die helle Kammer. Bemerkungen zur Photographie, Frankfurt/Main 1985, [La chambre claire. Notes sur la photographie, Paris 1980], S. 103, Hervorhebungen im Original.

<sup>21</sup> Zit. nach Karlheinz Schmid, Mit Gewehr, ohne Gewähr. Neues Sehen: Kriegsbilder aus dem Irak, in: Kunstzeitung, Nr. 81, Mai 2003, S. 25.

<sup>22</sup> Walter, Benjamin, Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und Historiker [1937], in: ders., Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit. Drei Studien zur Kunstsoziologie, Frankfurt/Main 1973(6), (Edition Suhrkamp 28), S. 95-156, S. 147, Auslassung im Original.

<sup>23</sup> Vgl. Claudia Gabriele Philipp, Der Körper der Photographie, in: reality-check, 2. Triennale der Photographie Hamburg 2002, Triennale der Photographie Hamburg GmbH (Hg.), Hamburg 2002, S. 32-41.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Najjar, ausstellung. no memory access, in: ders., cyber-shots, Hamburg 2001, S. 4-5, S. 4.

<sup>25</sup> lbd.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Najjar, zone zero – zwischen simulation und hyperrealität, 2003 (Skript).

<sup>27</sup> Ibd.

<sup>28</sup> Zit. nach ibd.

<sup>29</sup> Ibd.

<sup>30</sup> Ibd.

<sup>31</sup> Vgl. Vilém Flusser, Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie, Göttingen 1983.

<sup>32</sup> Vilém Flusser, zit. nach: Gottfried Jäger, Vorwort des Herausgebers, in: Fotografie denken. Über Vilém Flusser's Philosophie der Medienmoderne, Gottfried Jäger (Hg.), Bielefeld 2001, S. 7-13, S. 8.