

Biennale

The Lives and Loves of Images

29/02–26/04/2020

**Museum Weltkulturen D5
der Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen, Mannheim**

Reconsidering Icons

We are all acutely aware of the phenomenon of the iconic image. Newspapers and news websites regularly describe photographs as 'iconic'. And if a photograph does become well known, news outlets are quick to capitalize by running secondary stories about their fame, which only serves to extend the image's reach and cultural domination. It is an echo chamber of the image, and a hall of mirrors.

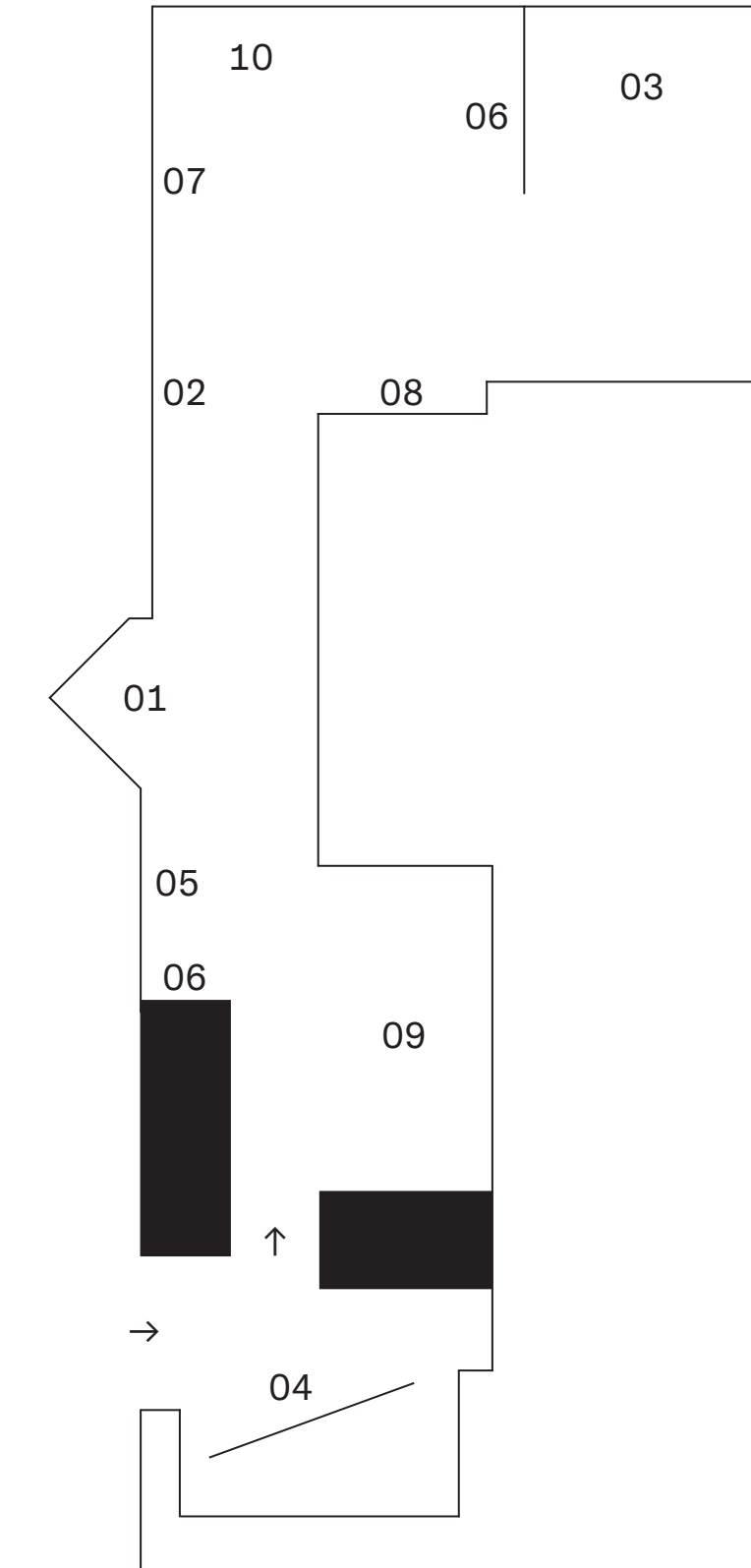
Of the billions of images in the world, just a few have become iconic. *Reconsidering Icons* contains no iconic images, and yet it is full of them. It draws together

various projects from recent years that use strategies of remaking, revising and redefining. Some projects return to the site where iconic images were made. Some reconstruct them. Some track them across their various media manifestations. Some use new technologies such as virtual reality and 3D modelling, to return us to images made in earlier epochs of photography. Whatever the strategy, the iconic image is approached as a complex form of cultural commons to be looked at critically, philosophically and playfully. If iconic images belong to the public imagination, we must have an imaginative relation to them.

Curated by David Company

**für aktuelle
Fotografie**

Biennale



Forum Internationale Photographie (FIP) & ZEPHYR – Raum für Fotografie
in den Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen, Ausstellung im Museum Weltkulturen

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Broomberg & Chanarin

- 01 *Woe from Wit*, 2019
Virtual reality
In collaboration with Brian O'Doherty and
Guy de Lancey
Developed by Pablo Dornhege
Sound design by Shervin Saremi
- 02 *Afterlife*, 2009
17 collages, glass, lead,
C-Prints, 40,7 × 50,8 cm each
Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London

The work *Woe from Wit* by the artist duo Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin makes use of virtual reality technology. The starting point is the photographic material of the photographer Burhan Ozbilici, who documented the murder of the Russian ambassador Andrej Karlov by his own bodyguard, on December 19, 2017 in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ankara. The crime occurred at the opening of a photography exhibition. The assassin shouted to the ambassador shortly before the fatal shots: "Don't forget Syria, don't forget Aleppo." On this day, the museum became the scene of an act of political terror. In that same year the photographic documentation of the incident was awarded the World Press Photo Award. With the help of a VR-Headset, the room of the museum, in which the murder took place, can be walked through virtually and the events of the crime can thus be spatially recreated. The simulation is accompanied by the voice of the narrator Brian O'Doherty, author of the groundbreaking book *Inside the White Cube*, which deals with the conventional, white museum space. According to O'Doherty, none of the laws that govern our daily lives, such as gravity, morality, the body, functions, geographical space or chronological time, apply in this space. These words take on a whole new meaning against the background of the crime. Viewing *Woe from Wit* is a whole-body-experience, which disarranges one's sense of space. Borders of perception become blurred, as do the borders between the many areas that are addressed here: the museum space, world politics, terrorist violence, reporting and photographic distribution channels.

The work *Afterlife* deals with a photograph taken in Iran on August 6, 1979 by Jahangir Razmi. The picture, taken just a few months after the revolution, shows an execution scene in which 11 Kurdish prisoners were blindfolded and killed by a firing squad. It shows the decisive moment of the shooting and was published in all newspapers and magazines around the world immediately after the event. One year later it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. The author of the picture remained anonymous for a long time. Broomberg & Chanarin tracked down Razmi and, based on the conversation and the unnoticed images from the film, created a series of collages that iconoclastically dissected the image into individual parts. They simultaneously destroy the versatile view of the event and multiply the perspectives on it.

David Claerbout

- 03 *KING (after Alfred Wertheimer's 1956 picture of a young man named Elvis Presley)*, 2015–16
Single channel video projection, black and white,
silent,
HD-Animation, 10 min.

David Claerbout's projection of a computer-generated 3D-environment explores a photograph of the young Elvis

Presley shot by Alfred Wertheimer in 1956. The image shows the pop icon together with friends and family in a private room. The photo was taken at a time when the singer was just at the brink of stardom. For the computer model, Claerbout took skin pieces from hundreds of photographs of the singer and put them back together again. The virtual camera guides the viewer through the intimate 3D-animated scene, which hereby appears frighteningly real, yet coincidentally strangely remote. In this way, viewers seem to come very close to the body of the world-famous singer, but at the same time the encounter remains superficial. These new image technologies, which were hardly conceivable at the time the photograph was taken, lead us to an old image and allow us to look back on a past time, an atmosphere, which will not return.

Cortis & Sonderegger

- 04 *Making of "Tiananmen"* (by Stuart Franklin, 1989), 2013
Installation / Wallpaper
- 05 *Making of "Behind the Gare St. Lazare"* (by Henri Cartier-Bresson, 1932), 2016
C-Print, 180 × 120 cm
- 06 *Making of "Barschel in Bathtub"* (by Sebastian Knauer, 1987), 2020
C-Print, 180 × 120 cm
- Making of "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima"* (by Joe Rosenthal, 1945), 2015
C-Print, 105 × 70 cm
- Making of "Five Soldiers Silhouette at the Battle of Broodseinde"* (by Ernest Brooks, 1917), 2013
C-Print, 105 × 70 cm
- Making of "Guerrillero Heroico"* (by Alberto Korda, 1960), 2016
C-Print, 105 × 70 cm
- Making of "La cour du domaine du Gras"* (by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, 1826), 2012
C-Print, 70 × 105 cm
- 07 *Making of "Death of a Loyalist Militiaman", Córdoba Front, Spain* (by Robert Capa, 1936), 2016
C-Print, 180 × 120 cm
Collection Freunde der Fotostiftung Schweiz,
Winterthur

For their long-term project *Icons*, the Zurich-based artist duo Jojakim Cortis and Adrian Sonderegger have been recreating icons of photographic history, which have inscribed themselves in our collective visual memory, since 2012. They rebuild the images as three-dimensional models and then photograph them in their studio. The studio setting as well as the traces and materials of the working process, such as cardboard, sand, glue, or cotton wool, can still be seen in these "making of" photographs and form the interfaces between the three-dimensional studio space and the illusory image surface of the re-enacted photographs. For the detailed reconstructions, they make use of examples from the beginnings of photography to the present, including Robert Capa's falling soldier in the Spanish Civil War or the iconic image of a man at the Gare Saint-Lazare by the famous French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. These are photographs that are among the most important and probably most discussed images in the history of photography in recent decades. For example, the two artists reproduce

The work specifications are listed in reading direction (from left to right).

the famous photograph of Uwe Barschel, former Prime Minister of Schleswig-Holstein, who was found dead in the bathtub after his resignation in 1987. This image is an expression of the controversial police investigations that accompanied the case. For the result of the investigations, which was based on the assumption that suicide was the cause of death, is still doubted to this day. As a result, the image of the deceased politician in the bathtub—photographed by Sebastian Knauer—is firmly anchored in the memory of many people and has thus become iconic. Cortis & Sondereggers almost perfect reproductions humorously reveal the pictorial illusion they themselves create, thus raising the question of the relationship between photographic truth and image manipulation. *Icons* is therefore an ironic reflection on the medium of photography.

Joan Fontcuberta

08 *Googlegram: Niépce*, 2005
C-Print, 120 × 160 cm

The view from a study in Le Gras, photographed in 1826 by the Frenchman Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, is the oldest surviving photograph taken with a camera. To this day, this first photographic testimony has been reproduced in all writings on the history of photography and has been received time and time again. In 2005 the artist Joan Fontcuberta took this iconic image as the starting point for his *Googlegram* series. By entering the English and German terms “Photo” and “Foto” into Google’s image search, he collected a large amount of image material. With the help of a photo mosaic software, Fontcuberta assembled the digital images—arranged according to colour value and density—in such a way that he obtained an identical replica of the image of Niépce with all the technical traces and features of early analogue photographic technology, such as strong film grain or blurring. Only on closer inspection one can see that the composition of the picture is a mosaic of a thousand small, juxtaposed images. Fontcuberta’s illusionist play is not only a homage to Niépce’s inventiveness and the unique character of early photographic techniques, but also a profound reflection of the photographic medium in the age of digital imaging.

Max Pinckers &
Dries Depoorter

09 *Trophy Camera v0.9*, 2017
Raspberry Pi Zero W, Full HD Cameramodule for RaspberryPi, 5000mAh Powerbank, Monochrome 128 × 32 SPI OLED graphic display, plastic casing, 115 × 85 × 191 mm camera

Trophy Camera v0.9 (Deep Learning-Based Image Recognition, World Press Photo Award: Photo of the Year 1955–2017), 2017
Installation

Collection Fotomuseum, Antwerp

Dries Depoorter’s and Max Pinckers’ *Trophy Camera v0.9* ironically asks, what defines a good photo. This specially developed artificially intelligent camera, without viewfinder, aperture or screen, is based on a specific algorithm trained on all previous winning photos of the World Press Photo Award, the most influential prize for photojournalism, from 1955 to the present. When the camera is triggered, the photo is saved and uploaded directly to the associated website. The Belgian artist Max Pinckers had the idea for such a camera at a time, when the necessary technology

was not yet available - until he met media artist Dries Depoorter. The result was a striking yellow device that only remotely resembles a camera. Visitors can operate the camera themselves and try to take a so-called winning photo. Inspiration is provided by images of the World Press Photo Award, which are also on display. With *Trophy Camera* Max Pinckers and Dries Depoorter reflect on the criteria by which the winning photos are selected. The work is an ironic commentary on contemporary image production and encourages a more reflective view of photographs in the press or other media. The camera bears the suffix “v0.9” since, according to Depoorter and Pinckers, it is still a prototype. The goal is to extend the trained algorithm in further development, beyond the World Press Photo Award images and towards photojournalism in general.

Max Pinckers &
Sam Weerdmeester

10 *Controversy*, 2017
LightJet-Print, 180 × 243 cm
Showcase

Another collaborative work, *Controversy*, by Max Pinckers and Sam Weerdmeester, deals with the polemics surrounding the ethical credibility of photojournalism. It takes up the discussion about Robert Capa’s photograph of the falling soldier in the Spanish Civil War and confronts it with a scientific approach. Capa took his iconic photograph during the Spanish Civil War in 1936, capturing the moment when a soldier was shot in the head, making it one of the first images of the war in action. The authenticity of this image has been questioned since its creation. A new scientific study, based on an orographic analysis, indicates that the photograph must have been taken in a different place than originally claimed. Consequently, Capa would have been far from the front line, as to why it is unlikely that the soldier was shot there. The suspicion that the photograph was staged by Capa therefore grew stronger. *Controversy* approaches this scientific repositioning in the form of a photomontage of the environment in which the soldier in Capa’s photograph is located. This photomontage was created with scanning equipment, which is normally used to reproduce paintings, due to its high resolution and accuracy. When applied to a landscape, however, some minimal and uncontrollable changes occur. For example, moving elements, such as grass and leaves, sometimes lose their shape during scanning.

Controversy is an aesthetic examination of one of the most controversial images in the history of photography and raises the question: does scientific exposure change anything about the iconic character of photography? Or does the relevance of the image exceed its authenticity?