

**Laudatory speech by Hans-Michael Koetzle  
to the exhibition LADENTISCHE by Anja Schlamann on 6.10.2024**

Architects look differently ...  
... ladies and gentlemen ...

Architects look differently. Female architects too, of course. He or she not only sees the façade, but senses what lies behind it. He or she sees not only the whole, but also the detail. Recognizes harmony in the built idea. Or the opposite. Knows about the possibilities of modern construction as well as the legal restrictions. Discovers construction where the average citizen only recognizes a stone or glass or metal ensemble. And where the gaze falls on historical or everyday architecture: in this case, too, what has been built, erected or somehow put in place is not simply perceived, but x-rayed more or less intensively. At least beyond a cursory  
beyond a cursory inspection of its constructive logic and aesthetic radiance.

Anja Schlamann studied architecture. She has worked in this profession for many years, in various places and in different functions, before devoting herself entirely to photography in 2001. It is actually not unusual for architects to take photographs. One could start the series with Erich Mendelsohn, whose 1926 book *Amerika. Bilderbuch eines Architekten*, published in 1926, is unquestionably one of the most beautiful, successful and influential photo books ever. What's more, the title alone underlines the fact that this is not a classic photographer taking pictures, but a career changer with architectural baggage.

And another one comes to mind. Klaus Kinold, the recently deceased Egon Eiermann student, who switched sides soon after completing his architecture studies to devote himself entirely to photography. For decades, he documented the building creations of renowned architects, from Karljosef Schattner to Herman Hertzberger, from Heinz Bienefeld to James Stirling, and communicated his image results to a wide audience, primarily through magazines and relevant books.

And that is where the difference lies. Anja Schlamann does not work on commission, not in the service of more or less renowned architects. Anja Schlamann positions herself as an independent artist. And at first glance, one could say that she does not even photograph architecture, which of course is not true. On the contrary, each of her cycles benefits in one way or another, in obvious or tricky ways, from a gaze that constantly perceives the world anew as something built, constructed, ordered, created and translates it into carefully constructed images. translated into carefully constructed images.

Anja Schlamann, born in 1967 in Coesfeld in the Münsterland region, is no stranger to art. She has exhibited time and again, including in the Cologne-Düsseldorf area, presenting her work in a variety of ways and regularly providing surprises in terms of content and choice of subject matter. Because if Anja Schlamann can be said to have something, or rather must be said to have something, then it is a literally boundless curiosity that leads to ever new, sometimes overlapping and temporally overlapping projects.

Perhaps the most common here in Cologne: Her cycle “UnterBrücken”, in which all sorts of things come together: imagination and the joy of discovery, stamina on a swaying boat and technical ability, conceptual thinking and last but not least: the ability to handle computers. I could go on endlessly in describing this series, which is reminiscent of Theo

van Doesburg or Piet Mondrian in terms of its artistic results, mentioning, for example, that each of the seven motifs at the end is composed of up to 150 photographs. Or: that the seven Cologne bridges in their special green are only a pretext or starting point for a general reflection on seeing, our way of perception or, in particular, the dialog between form and color, texture and monochrome in the spirit of an art that oscillates between abstract and concrete.

But that would be going too far and would also be misleading. For Anja Schlamann's focus of interest is the human being. Not in the manner of a belated "Photographie humaniste" as practiced by photographing flâneurs from Robert Doisneau to Édouard Boubat from the 1930s onwards. But rather in the sense of a conceptual photography that thinks in cycles and comparatively, that combines precise, almost scientific seeing with empathy and, moreover, regularly defines itself as a long-term project. There is, of course, a link to the humanist photography of the period between the world wars, to the photography of the flâneurs: Anja Schlamann also regularly conceives of the world as a theater, her surroundings as a stage on which all kinds of dramas or farces play out. Or simply an unexcited everyday life, which Anja Schlamann - she likes to call herself a "waiting observer" - follows with alert eyes - and a camera, of course.

It would certainly be tempting to examine her cycles, which differ greatly in their approach and scope, ideas and technical implementation, in terms of their relationship to architecture and the built environment. However, ladies and gentlemen, with your stamina in mind, we should quickly turn our attention to what can be seen in the art rooms of the Michael Horbach Foundation from today until November 24. In rooms that were once horse stables, then housed an artist's studio and are now nothing less than a light-flooded, bright, wonderful loft, in which a

selected work by artist Anja Schlamann is being presented in what I think is a convincing way.

Anja Schlamann has entitled her series “Ladentische” (“Shop Tables”), which should initially be understood primarily as a parenthesis, as a headline for a cycle that the artist began, it is astonishing to say, back in 2004, 20 years ago, and which has probably still not reached its end.

“Counters”: Not every picture shows a table. And not every table has a store in the background. But that's not the point. It's about trade and change, about giving and taking across a counter, about barter and exchange in worlds and cultures to which shopping via QR code is as alien as the customer loyalty tool. Here, when in doubt, people are simply friendly. Bonus points are not collected.

Retail and change: that sounds like interaction, like movement. But it is precisely this, shall we say, narrative-journalistic approach that Schlamann has rejected in favor of a sober, factual, recording view. Schlamann himself speaks of an “ethnographic-sociological documentation”, which methodologically also means that it follows a clear grid in terms of point of view, perspective and detail. Chance seems to be ruled out, if one disregards the fact that the artist was probably also guided by chance in finding her small business owners. might have guided her.

Schlamann favors the straight, orthogonal view. The objects are centered, symmetry and ponderation are unmistakable. Even the protagonists, the sales clerks, sensitively placed in the picture, pause and thus lend the pictorial compositions an additional sense of calm and serenity. Of course there is humanity in Anja Schlamann's colorful images, but it is like a film still: the narrative pauses as a narrative, the narrative allows itself a little break.

“Shop counters”, to pick up on the title once again, store counters are offers. In the arrangement of the thoughtfully presented goods, these are recognizably small artefacts. Everyday works of art that do not need to attract attention with references to special offers, permanently low prices or any kind of bargain rhetoric. The careful way in which the fruit is piled up, the vegetables sorted, the tinned food stacked and the salads spread out is enough to delight the senses and the eyes.

Pyramids from a standing start.

Strangely enough, I never asked Anja Schlamann what actually made her take up the subject. But perhaps it was these vegetable sculptures, these carefully piled, stacked and arranged foods, these temporary edible architectures that captivated the trained architect's gaze and drew her into the project à la longue into the project.

As I said, Anja Schlamann has been photographing store counters for 20 years now. But that is by no means the only superlative in her work as an artist. In fact, Schlamann is not content with one country, one culture. She has explored the subject of store counters on no fewer than five continents, taking photographs in Spain, Morocco, Syria, Cuba, Tanzania, Sri Lanka, Bolivia and Peru. And not on the fly with a smartphone, as has become fashionable even among photo artists. Instead, he used the classic analog method and a tripod. This physical feat alone, together with the logistical and financial effort involved, deserves respect. But the results are correspondingly different.

In its beginnings, photography was not a medium of the moment, of surprise, of spontaneous reaction to the offers of a pulsating reality. Photography was - due to the technical circumstances - planned, premeditated, elaborated, constructed images of unprecedented concentration and depth. Which explains why so many photographs

from the early days still fascinate us today. These are not clips or tracks, but visual meditations: a great pause in the service of an art that was new at the time.

Anja Schlamann follows in these footsteps. Her technique is also due to the fact that the images are not captured, stolen or purloined. They are pictures full of respect for the people portrayed. Pictures in harmony with the people portrayed. Pictures in silent agreement, at eye level and thus free of post-colonial arrogance.

Anja Schlamann, as much as her work may be characterized by almost scientific meticulousness, is an artist, not a scientist. Her approach is encyclopedic. But she is not writing an encyclopedia. She follows a clear concept, but allows herself that pinch of empathy that turns a work into a work of art. Because remember: art always has to do with emotion, with participation.

If you talk about photography in Cologne, you can't avoid August Sander. For me, he is one of the great photographers, and what's more, I consider him to be the most important camera artist of all with his human work. Anyone who saw the major exhibition at the Centre Pompidou two years ago will probably agree.

It is not really surprising that Anja Schlamann names August Sander as an influence alongside Eugène Atget, the great Frenchman, or Bernd and Hilla Becher. However, it should be emphasized that it is not the comprehensive, encyclopedic approach, not the fact that Anja Schlamann systematically captures people upright, collected and mostly as full-length figures, that brings August Sander to mind. It is first and foremost the seriousness of the project without a time limit, the energy and participatory systematic approach that places Anja Schlamann's cycle alongside August Sander.

There is so much to discover in Anja Schlamann's pictures. After all, the shopkeepers captured by her camera, usually placed in the center, are framed or vignettted in an almost baroque way by all kinds of objects, things for sale or even a kind of almost archaic store architecture, light years away from our Aldi-Lidl-Penny-Norma-Kaufland world.

And now we are back to Atget, who saw in the streets of Paris around 1900 what everyone else saw but did not perceive. Atget saw and captured with his almost historical plate camera what seemed to be permanent and yet was doomed to disappear. Atget was therefore a seer in two ways. During his lifetime, many did not necessarily consider him crazy, but he was labeled an oddball. In the meantime, his Paris pictures and not least his photographs of stores and stores, displays and showcases are considered to be among the great artistic-documentary achievements in the history of photography.

Anja Schlamann also sees, looks closely, observes, decides to capture something for herself and probably also for posterity, to create memories in the long term. In doing so, she follows a decidedly documentary approach, which in the digital age, in the age of light-sensitive retouching, has come under general suspicion. Is it a coincidence that terms such as “fake news” or “alternative facts” have emerged in parallel with increasing digitalization?

At this point, I would like to refer you to a recently published book by Cologne photographer Bernd Arnold: “Die Welt der neuen Bilder”. Arnold conclusively explains that we are entering a new visual world with AI-supported image generation, which would honestly require a new terminology. After all, digital imaging is not photography if photography is understood as a medium that is linked to an existing reality. “The 'new photographer' does not manipulate,” writes Arnold, ” he designs, constructs and produces. Perhaps he no longer needs to go

to the scene of the event, but 'picks up' the 'telephone' and connects to an electronic image archive. There he finds - Arnold refers to the photo of a royal visit to Cologne - there he finds Lady Di, Prince Charles, the [Cologne] Cathedral and enough audience to produce his event completely synthetically. [...] The published end product does not seem to differ significantly from a conventional photograph, but one thing is lost: the certainty that this is how it was and nothing else.”

With Anja Schlamann and her cycle “Ladentheken” we once again enter the terrain of film-based photography. Which simply means: these store counters existed. These vegetables have existed. This fruit has existed. These people have existed, and when they pause and look sternly, they have looked sternly. “What photography endlessly reproduces,” says the French philosopher Roland Barthes, “has only taken place once.” But, and this is what photography means, it has taken place. One also speaks of the “indexical” character of photography, which traditionally refers to something that was. This is precisely what distinguishes conventional, film-based photography from painting, which is able to create from nothing. Digitally, we return to painting.

Anja Schlamann does not paint, she photographs. A camera for negative formats

6 x 9 is her regular companion, even on longer trips. She often spends months preparing, studying countries and cultures, people, customs and traditions. What guides Anja Schlamann is the unconditional will to translate a piece of reality into art. Whereby reality can also mean an inner one. In other words, all of Anja Schlamann's projects have something to do with herself, even if it doesn't look like it. “Ladentische” is her most ambitious project to date. A project that oscillates between portrait work and ethnological study, architectural photography and cultural studies, poem and explanation of the world. In any case, it is



one thing: a great journey to the small things that basically mean what is human in our world.

© Hans-Michael Koetzle | Kazmairstraße 81 | 80339 München | michael.koetzle@t-online.de