

frieze

Lisa Oppenheim

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'Artistic research' is hot. Artists talk about it more and more. Institutions such as the Kunstverein Göttingen are highlighting research methods in contemporary artistic practice in their programmatic outlines. This trend indicates we are living in a post-material era that has its conceptual and philosophical foundation in the 1960s and '70s. Artistic research today lays bare an interest not only in material and aesthetic concerns regarding picture making, but in the journey towards the image, bringing historical examples of mentalities and materials along in a 'light', breezy way. And it has become easy to 'research'. We have online access to enormous archives and we easily travel to buildings where history is stored, to dive into archives and collections and pluck out what we like. The question is, what does artistic research truly dig up? Do we get to see new images? New techniques? New ideas?

In her first solo exhibition in Germany, 'Everyone's Camera', New York artist Lisa Oppenheim continues to research the nature of the material, the bearer of images and the foundation of pictures. In her past work she has explored the filmic apparatus or the workings of language, but here her concern is the history of early experimental photography. As Oppenheim describes it, 'I want to come close to the surprise of the material and to the magic of the photographic process.' Her interest in natural phenomena is expressed in a new body of photographic work made in the past two years. Here, she uses historical negatives from scientific archives (early photographers were often scientists too) as well as artistic ones.

Negatives from the early days of landscape photography form the basis for *Passage of the moon over two hours, Arcachon, France, ca. 1870s/August 11, 2012* (2012). The work consists of three pictures of treetops by night, installed opposite each other in a niche of the Kunstverein. A metallic shine over each surface is a result of the nature of the silver gelatin print. The original photos come from negatives from the 1870s of anonymous origin, which were meant to show the moon's progress in the night sky in France. Here, playfully,

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By Renske Janssen



Passage of the Moon over two hours, Arcachon, France, ca. 1870s / August 11, 2012, 2012, silver gelatin print, 44 x 54 cm

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Oppenheim re-exposed the negatives to moonlight on her rooftop in Manhattan. The effect is one of looking at an artistic impression for a larger project to come. One version includes a beam of light that reminded me of an iconic Hollywood scene: E.T. in a basket of a child's bicycle, flying above the treetops.

Next to the entrance of the space, a series of 15 fairly small silver toned prints show several images of the moon overexposed by sunlight at different stages of the day. In gradations of intensity, the images of *Heliograms 1867/2011* (2011) are hung in such a way that the spaces between the framed pictures made me question if some had been removed. Oppenheim however revealed she did not want to hang them in a way that would suggest it was a strictly 'conceptual' series. She hung them scattered as if to say, in between the production process of pictures, there are phone calls, conversations, emails or just the regular stuff that comes in the day. 'There are no rules in art, we are human,' she explains.

The series 'Smoke' (2011–12), which includes the multi-panel silver gelatin print *Man holding large camera photographing a cataclysmic event, possibly a volcano erupting 1908/2012* (2012), depicts clouds of billowing smoke. Oppenheim used a match to briefly set light to the photographic paper causing solarization, a technique that was re-discovered by Lee Miller in the 1930 (after its initial discovery in 1857). The effect is caused by overexposure while developing the original negative. It makes light parts dark and dark parts light, giving a dramatic quality to the picture. Here I couldn't help but think how coincidence often plays a role in the creation of art. In a conversation with the artist she indeed remembered reading how Lee Miller had felt something running over her foot while developing her photographs in the darkroom. As she switched on the light she saw a mouse running away. So yes, it was a mouse that caused a special effect on the photographic paper. Several areas of deep shadow appeared white, and there are dark borderlines around the arms, heads and hands in Miller's portraits of women; now in the clouds of Oppenheim. In 'Smoke', Oppenheim made use of several archives of old travel photography as well as contemporary news sources on the Internet. The outburst of smoke, referring perhaps to the exploding magnesium used to light a subject in a photograph in the old days, can even come from volcanic eruptions or artificial explosions in the riots in London.

One can call it an ode to experiment and chance itself to return to early photographic techniques in our digital era. It is a means of production that has been largely lost.

Oppenheim explores the idea of manual labour in *Leisure Work* (2012) and *Fish scales, Véritable Hollandais* (2012), in which she placed printed fabric in layers onto photographic paper to create photograms. Oppenheim thereby links these early optical to manual lace-production at the turn of the century and mechanically produced textiles from the Netherlands that mimic handmade batiks of Indonesia (now marketed and sold as 'authentic' African fabric).

Oppenheim's technique suggests how history is indeed densely layered and the unravelling of it can be done through the simplicity of artistic craftsmanship.

In 'Everyone's Camera' it is as if Oppenheim questions our own time through history. Do we need (or does she need) new surprises? Should we innovate our culture and our selves by way of new or old techniques? How can we be re-surprised by the image: by the magic of the medium or by its unexpected newness of its appearance? Oppenheim weaves together the image and its storylines by naturally colliding two contemporary developments in artistic production today: the conceptual and the material.

Renske Janssen

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