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Visual heterotopias

The work of Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs is embedded in a complex relationship between photography and sculpture. Oscillating between depiction of the physical world and imaginative constructions, it aims to interrogate our relationship to an environment predominantly perceived and experienced through pictures. *The Great Unreal* (2008) – one of the Swiss duo's most prominent projects –, already reveals through its title a critical stance on the possibility of an even remotely objective depiction of "reality". Several road trips undertaken between 2005 and 2008 in the American West lead them to interrogate a massively filmed and photographed landscape and reconstruct, through meticulously built composite images combining photographs and manufactured models, the use of incongruous props such as French fries or the manipulation of the materiality of the photograph itself, their own visual interpretation. The series proposes an original perspective on a visually saturated subject, but also addresses the process of image-making itself. Both its original viewpoint and the artists' reflexive position thus participate in the examination of our visual culture and the circulation of images, while critically engaging with the medium photography.

In this respect, the *Eurasia* project exhibited at the Kunsthalle Bremen could be understood as an antinomic endeavour. Resulting from Onorato and Krebs' 17'000 kilometre road trip from Zurich to Oulan Bator (Mongolia) in 2013, crossing Russia and numerous former Soviet republics (the Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan), the project can be interpreted as an attempt to escape the global visual database. The journey aimed at depicting a territory *without images*, an environment the occidental viewer is somehow intriguingly not accustomed to, while interrogating the artist's role in an era where more data (visual and other) is produced annually, than in the entire history of mankind. It transcends the comfort of accessing the known and the familiar, as much as a topic than as an artistic position, hence forcing new experiences.

The genesis of *Eurasia* interestingly appears through the comparison of several different iterations of the series realised between 2014 and 2016. Their confrontation both exposes an evident evolution in the produced images – a second trip to Mongolia has inflected the artists' relationship to the documented object –, but it also reveals a curatorial stance, the selection of images having clearly evolved throughout the process. In the Summer 2014, the two artists had exhibited a first version of the project, outcome of their initial trip to Mongolia, at the Statements section of the Art Basel Fair. Through twenty-nine black-and white images and one colour short film embedded in a sculpture made of golden mirrors and echoing through its shape the eight pointed

star symbolizing Turkmenistan, Onorato and Krebs revealed the contrast in the countries they visited, where symbols of hyper-capitalism and globalisation – skyscrapers with golden facades, post-communist architecture or purely decorative neon signs –, clashed with a sense of poverty and decay, in regions where agriculture and traditional rites still remain very present. The photographs taken with a large format camera occasionally contain the two artists' typical bricolages. Sometimes several layers of photography are merged into a diorama, tampering with the readability of the image. But most prints remain realistic, while preserving their very personal aesthetics. They recall the compositions of *The Great Unreal*, maintaining the skilful exploitation of the materiality of the silver-prints.

Although different in media and artistic expression, the project is reminiscent of a 1999 film realised by Philippe Parreno and Charles de Meaux on the Pamir mountains, a region at the junction of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, China and Kirghizstan. Mixing archive footage, fictional interviews of a Tajik botanist or journalist, electronic music and contemplative panoramas, *Le Pont du Trieur* – entirely “shot” in Paris – produces a mental image of an abstract region and “gives life to a territory through images”¹. Eluding sterile discussions about supposedly documentary forms, both the Swiss and the French duo endorse a critical stance on our apprehension of reality, suggesting the complexity and necessary incompleteness of representations of the world.

The exhibition shown at the Fotomuseum Winterthur in 2015 and the display designed for the Kunsthalle Bremen in 2016 signpost an important development in the series. Two features in particular reveal a significant development in the duo's perspective on Central Asia and on their artistic practice. A fairly important amount of the photographs re-enact the humorous bricolages, which could be found in *The Great Unreal*. The construction of complex visual spaces with photographic fragments, the depiction of incomprehensible sculptural objects or the use of common paraphernalia in an unmatching decor creates images from another visual realm. An old axe suddenly becomes a visually seductive sculpture in the midst of a landscape, producing an unresolvable image for the viewer.

But beside these visual differences, the final form of the project also reveals an interesting shift in Taiyo and Onorato's conceptual approach. During their travels, the two artists became interested in everyday objects they came across, for they said a lot about “needs and situations” of the inhabitants of these countries². This interest raised questions about the relevance and helpfulness of an ethnographic perspective, which led the duo to visit the Museum of Ethnology in Berlin-Dahlem, in order to consult the collection of artefacts originating from the regions they had explored. By photographing items of the museum's collection – handcrafted anthropomorphic sculptures or ancient tools – in front of their own photographs, they subsequently produced a multifaceted reconstruction of interconnections between Central Asia and Europe, and between the artists' subjectivity and a scientific field describing these remote regions.

A striking symptom of these relational interests is manifested in the enigmatic sculpture *Beton (Concrete)*. Its physicality and shape somehow remind the small artefacts used by the artists, while its vocabulary expressed by raw concrete blocks and golden screws, rather echoes the new brutalism and “turbo-capitalist” architecture typical of former communist countries. Quite con-

¹ Pascale Cassagnau, *Future Amnesia. Enquêtes sur un troisième cinéma*, Editions Isthme, Paris, 2007, p. 103.

² “Taiyo Onorato & Nico Krebs in conversation with Ingrid Schindlbeck. On objects and stories”, in *Taiyo and Nico Krebs. Eurasia*, magazine created for the exhibition of the Fotomuseum Winterthur, 2015, p. 29.

ceptual in undertaking, the sculpture is moulded from Styrofoam used as protection for consumer electronics, fabricated in Asia but found in a recycling bin in Berlin. The loop of interpretations Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs' *Eurasia* series produces is extended towards the very processes of fabrication, addressing key parameters of globalisation *and* artistic creation, complexifying the artists' reading. Ultimately, the series combines numerous interpretative levels, surprisingly enlightening the role of elements we commonly associate with reality itself (architecture, artefacts or landscapes), addressing forms which can be seen as their depiction (photography, film or montage) and interrogating the fields describing the world (the artistic subjectivity or scientific disciplines). Arguably, *Eurasia* challenges the very notion of reality and stresses the complexities of its experience.