

Agnes Matthias

Aspects of Difference: On the Photographic “Cliché” in the Oeuvre of Inga Kerber

Three photographs are hung side by side on a wall. Each shows the same scene: a bouquet of dahlias in a simple glass vase, with the picture field displaced slightly to the left. The scene looks as if we are seeing it from behind frosted glass: it is submerged in a delicate green light, so that the local colors of the flowers can barely be made out. This causes the flowers to stand out from their neutral background with greater clarity of outline. These three large-format prints initially appear identical, and yet they are not. The minor deviations—a color tone that is relatively dull in quality or a shade of green that shows a shift toward yellow—are enough to prompt a second, closer look at Inga Kerber’s three-pigment prints (*Cliché of a Flower Bouquet*) II. This reveals that the motif is in fact the same, but the picture field and the overall atmosphere of the prints differ. For this sequence, a hand-produced print measuring approximately 20 by 30 centimeters was scanned and printed out three times as a pigment print on a number of different types of paper at several times the size of the original image. In one case, two prints were created in the same location four days apart, whereas in another case, an intervening period of two years had elapsed. The same printing method was used for all the pictures, but the results, once the picture had been translated into a different output image size and into different materials, are never the same. These artworks take as their paradigm the issue of the repetition inherent in reproduction, simultaneously using an element of difference to negate the principle of repetition. This central to the photographic work produced by Inga Kerber from 2009 onwards under the heading “Clichés.”

This term, included in the titles of all of her pictures, is used in a deliberately ambiguous way. In French, the word is understood as a photographic negative, but also a positive or a copy in the sense of a printed form. In German, the word “cliché” is associated with stereotypes and with standardized, fixed thoughts. The first of these definitions is practical and technological, while the other has a more social or psychological aspect, and both definitions play a role in the artist’s conceptual approach. She begins by seemingly affirming the cliché, and then goes on to deconstruct it on the visual level. To achieve this, she makes use of an extensive archive of analog photographs in various different formats; these were taken using a number of different cameras, including a Polaroid camera. The earliest photographs in this archive date from the year 1989, and it is constantly being enlarged. It is the classical, historical system of art genres (in a slightly modified form) that provides the

organizational principle for this archive. The photographs are painstakingly sorted into different categories—landscapes, animal studies, portraits, figure studies—all in different envelopes and boxes. Inga Kerber moves with her subjects consciously within these narrow boundaries as a method of subverting seemingly fixed categories that define our perception and thus questioning them. The motifs have been photographed not once, but a number of times, with the camera angles varying only slightly from picture to picture. The off-center picture fields and out-of-focus regions and the factors of underexposure and overexposure in these photographs frequently give them the character of amateur efforts. The quality of the prints contributes to their “normal” impression; they could have been processed at a drugstore. Pictures like these can be found in countless photo albums, documenting holidays and family occasions. Inga Kerber’s photographs also have a biographical dimension; this aspect, however, becomes obscured in the next phase of the working process. Some of these photographs—a photograph of a cat, perhaps, or of a friend or an icon—are archived and left unused for years, prior to being rediscovered during a review of the archive. Having been fed into the classification system, with their original, immediate meaning neutralized by the passage of time, they are no longer a part of the individual and private sphere. They merge and flow together into typical or stereotypical categories of situations and configurations - portrait, landscape and still life - which can be used for the starting point for a kind of revision process.

Towards this end, the photographs are subjected to a transformation of their technological and material nature, which takes them from the analog to the digital realm. The small-format pictures are scanned, but the resulting files are not computer-edited. Traces of wear such as scratches, creases, dust, or fuzz are retained as part of the image file’s data.¹ Output of these files takes place via a printer that uses pigment-based (not light-sensitive) ink. The size of these pigment prints depends upon the maximum intake width for the paper used, and they therefore always have a length of 90, 107 or 150 centimeters along one side. Just as the artist subjects herself to the demands of the apparatus, she also frequently leaves the color design to the technological device by using the scanner’s own color design profile. This means that the color space of a print may vary depending on the type of printer used; if it happens that the printouts have similar color tones, then this is not the result of deliberate control; it is intentional coincidence.

¹ A comparable approach that encompasses a second level of information superimposed on the actual picture can be seen in the photographic work of Stefan Krauth. He re-photographs digital images on the screen, so that their true nature is altered by reflected light, by dirt and by deliberately disruptive features, such as cigarette smoke.

The transference of the original photograph into a pigment print via scanning gives it a fundamentally different appearance, sometimes with a melancholy character. The color values change, becoming darker and more monochrome, and the contrasts become weaker. The chalk-primed paper absorbs the ink, making the pictures look soft and slightly blurred, detail is lost. This painterly effect is reminiscent of what pictorialism, a movement that came to prominence in Europe and the U.S. around 1900, strove to achieve. The unfocused quality resulting from the use of so-called luxury printing techniques such as gum bichromate print or bromoil print became a stylistic tool; it was used to elevate photography to the status of art.² In the case of “pictorialism,” the intention was to disguise the mechanical origins of the images. Kerber’s “clichés” are different: she exposes the technological production processes for what they are. Having long since been returned to the archives, the original photographs are, at this point in time, obscured by the pictures generated from them, with only the construction of these generated pictures left to indicate that they are derivative images and not the original pictures. An installment from the “landscape” category—created in 2009, it is one of Kerber’s first *Clichés*—serves to demonstrate this: (*Cliché of a Landscape*) I shows an overcast sky in washed-out colors. Each of the three images differs slightly in terms of picture field. In two of the photographs, a small section of road can be seen at the picture’s lower edge; these photographs were taken through the windshield of a car driving down a highway. All three prints are bordered by a continuous dark edge strip: this is the inner lining of the scanner’s covering lid, which has itself been scanned during the scanning process. Instead of being removed during the editing process, this edge has been intentionally left in place, as an indicator of the way in which the picture was manufactured. The distance of the photograph copy from the covering lid during the scan—manifested by this black edge—suggests a sense of space, which is converted back into a two-dimensional form in the resulting pigment print. The creases and fuzz on the original photograph that were scanned in along with the picture create a *trompe l’œil* effect in the large paper sheet output medium, which all the same is marked by its own distinct “object” character. Inga Kerber prepares her prints for presentation by securing them to the wall using steel pins and nails; the small holes this creates in the corners of the pictures correspond with the reproduced traces of wear in the original photographs.

The relationship between the original picture and its iterations is therefore a complex one: to use the term “reproduction” to describe the pictures that result from this process is to miss their essential aspect. Rather, what is happening here is that the reproduction process

² On pictorial photography, see Enno Kaufhold, *Bilder des Übergangs. Zur Mediengeschichte von Fotografie und Malerei in Deutschland um 1900* (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 1986).

itself is being made visible to us, with the serialization process adding yet another level of meaning.³ In developing her “clichés”, Inga Kerber uses at least three photographs, sometimes three or even five. She makes a number of reproductions of the originals. In the case of *(Cliché of a Flower Bouquet) II*, a single individual image was used, but Kerber often uses two or even three slightly different photographs of the same scene to create one of her series. It is, therefore, not merely the photograph that is duplicated, but the photograph’s subject itself. In this way, Inga Kerber stresses the ubiquitous character of these motif worlds both from art history and from the everyday, simultaneously questioning it.⁴ In the hanging of these three, four, or five pictures, placed adjacent to one another or on top of one another, in a vertical or in a horizontal format, combined with various perspectives and framings, color shifts, and different papers used in different production techniques, the very difference is revealed that questions their homogeneity. At issue is a focusing of attention, the training of the gaze, that, upon recognizing the principle of deviation, is challenged to discover the variations within what seems so similar, as in a “search image.” This is a process motivated by form and content, which can be compared to the method of deconstructing a text, as developed by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Derrida’s neologism *différance*, which contains within it the dual senses of “differentiating” and of “deferring”, draws our attention to the possibility of different interpretations existing simultaneously.⁵ By working with visual difference within a fixed category such as “still life with flowers” and “portrait”, Inga Kerber subtly subverts the conventional reception patterns attached to categories of this type: “alike” is not “alike,” and no clear reading is provided. It quality of endless reproducibility inherent in the cliché in its various meanings, especially virulent in the field of photography, is not only counteracted by the differences in angle, in picture field and in manner of execution, but also in that each *Cliché* is a unique piece.

This does not exclude the possibility of an original photograph being used more than once, but the result would be entirely different.

The impulse to discover this differential concept in viewing the pictures is based on the specific aesthetic of the images. The artwork *(Cliché of a Palm Tree) I* from 2009 consists of

³ In her series *Pflanzen und Tiere* (“Plants and Animals”), Claudia Angelmaier investigates a similar theme via photographic reproductions of art. She created this artwork series by arranging publications featuring reproductions of artworks to form tableaux, with the variations in terms of coloration posing questions as to the character of the originals.

⁴ The theme “twins” has recently been incorporated into the system of categories, thereby creating an additional thematic shift within the duplication system.

⁵ See Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

three pigment prints—using two different original photographs—with the crown of a palm tree as their motif, photographed from below against a deep blue sky. The theme here is a touristic one. And yet, the “plant”—this is the category in which this photograph was classified—transforms in the enlargement of the scan, which is accompanied by a loss of internal detail, into a study that can be examined according to formal aesthetic parameters, whose bizarre silhouette and its dark coloration, which is restricted to black and blue, leaves the sphere of the figurative and familiar behind.

Classification as a principle that is simultaneously questioned as such is continued as a book beyond the individual series.⁶ On the one hand, the *Catalogue raisonnée* enables comparisons between the individual categories. On the other hand—and this very much in the spirit of Derrida—the attempt of finishing a work with the goal of completeness, following the logic of the academic book genre, is taken to absurd lengths two years after the completion of studies.⁷ At the same time, however, the book also continues the media transformation. Transferring the scanned images to offset print for reproduction in the book means approaching an approximation of their execution in pigment print, at the same time knowing that the results must be qualitatively different due to the difference in printing technique. The play with “difference” continues on a second order—as in this publication.

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⁶ Inga Kerber, *Catalogue raisonnée (Clichés)* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2013).

⁷ The “deference” element in Derrida’s construct of *différance* is intended to suggest the impossibility of ever reaching a conclusion to the opening up of meaning in the reading of a text.