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MEDIUMS OF HISTORY

“History decays into images, not into stories.”
Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project: 476

My project MEDIUMS OF HISTORY aims at creating a body of artworks that match Walter Benjamin’s “dialectical image”. Thus, in a practical rather than language-based way, this series of works attempts to excavate a central conception of Benjamin’s thought, which to a certain extent remains opaque, the indeterminate centre of his philosophy of history. I will try to show that certain imaging techniques or mediums can facilitate “dialectical images” whose complexity is not purely visual but is due to the process of their creation. Hence, the dialectical images created in the context of MEDIUMS OF HISTORY aim to reveal the complexity of history in the medium itself.

The Dialectical Image

The Arcades Project was Benjamin’s attempt to create a history of the nineteenth century based on the example of Paris. His approach was not to write this history, but to assemble it from textual excerpts he had collected from different sources. Inspired by the image montages of the surrealists, Benjamin described his method as “literary montage” and characterized it as follows: “I needn’t say anything. Merely show.” (Benjamin 1999: 860). We could say that he uses citations as if they were images, assembling them to “show” something. Accordingly, the category that stands at the centre of the Arcades Project is the dialectical image. What exactly then is a dialectical image? Benjamin writes:

[… ] image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For […] the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not temporal in nature but figural [bildlich]. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical […].  
(Benjamin 1999: 463)

He continues:
To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions – there the dialectical image appears. ... Hence, the object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself the dialectical image. The latter is identical with the historical object [...] (Benjamin 1999: 475)

In many ways, both quotes raise even more questions regarding the nature of the dialectical image. In his essay accompanying the Arcades Project, Rolf Tiedemann remarked that the central category ‘dialectical image’ “never achieved any terminological consistency” (Benjamin 1999: 942). What I want to retain here is the fact that Benjamin links his concept of history to the image, which is identified as the object that the materialist presentation of history constructs. If the dialectical image is the object of history, then it is the task of the historian to ‘construct’ this image. This formulation brings the historian close to the artist: at first glance, composing an image is something associated with the artist rather than the historian.

Yet, the dialectical image cannot be equated with the tangible image we contemplate, for instance, in a museum. It is not permanent but dynamic: “a constellation saturated with tensions”. Although it represents the standstill of dialectics it is ephemeral, something that “emerges in a flash” (Benjamin 1999: 473) and disappears just as quickly. These characteristics call to mind a vision or mental images, as they occur in dreams. Yet Benjamin was not after dreamlike visions but the “historical object”: “The dialectical image is the form of the historical object [...]” (Benjamin 1999: 474). As the object of history, the dialectical image is strongly rooted in the factual past.

Nevertheless, we have to keep in mind that for Benjamin history can only be thought from the point of view of the immediate present. He installs a new dialectics between past and present: Instead of conceiving the past as an invariable series of facts and the present as their logical outcome, Benjamin perceives the present as trapped in a dominant interpretation of the past, which needs to be read differently to liberate new, entirely different energies for the present. In this sense, the past contains an explosive substance that once liberated may blow up the present. Benjamin compares his concept of history to the Copernican revolution because he changes the place of the past in relation to the present. What we considered to be fixed and unchangeable begins to move; Benjamin decentres the past in the same way that Copernicus displaced the earth from the centre of sixteenth-century thought.
It is this conception of history that activates the dialectical tension within Benjamin’s “object of history”, which is never just a historical fact but dynamic in the sense that it interacts with the present: there is an exchange between the historical image and contemporary figures of thought that approach it. This dynamic exchange constitutes the dialectics of Benjamin’s object of history, that is, the dialectical image. Benjamin’s formulation that “the place where one encounters [dialectical images] is language” (Benjamin 1999: 462) outlines this ever-new confrontation of thinking with historical facts that marks the point where dialectical images originate. By crossing the image with an abstract concept or thought, Benjamin’s wording consciously intertwines the sensual and the intelligible. The concept of the dialectical image is paradigmatic for his strategy to repeal the clear division between the rational and the sensible sphere. MEDIUMS OF HISTORY takes this strategy literally and transfers a theoretical question concerning our grasp of history into the realm of the sensual, tackling it with the means of visual art. In other words I seek answers to the question whether dialectical images can be created within the mediums of art. These answers will first and foremost be presented in the form of art works, which are the primary form of expression in the field of arts-based research.

**Anachronistic Mediums**

My assumption is that certain mediums incorporate an essential trait of the dialectical image, namely the concomitance of past and present. This presumption seizes a suggestion formulated in Georges Didi-Huberman’s examination of the imprint in the history of art “La ressemblance par contact: Archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l’empreinte”. Regarding its elementary constitution, he writes that one has to simultaneously address both “pure past” and “definite present”: “this is the first condition for thinking the imprint. Let’s call it an anachronistic point of view”:

This point of view does not imply a negation of history, on the contrary. But we have to accept that there is no history of the imprint. There is no history of a concrete process that has been known for ages […]; there is no history of the theoretical paradigm that has served as an example to so many abstract models of thought, especially where such fundamental concepts as the sign, the trace, the image, the similarity or the genealogy were at stake; there is no history of the process – neither concrete nor theoretical – by which the formal and operational decisions of numerous artists, especially of the 20th century, were defined.” (Didi-Huberman 1997: 16 [my translation here and in the following])
This “anachronistic point of view” does not serve to replace history but to “generate it at a point hitherto unknown to her” (Didi-Huberman 1997: 17). This returns us to Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image, which Didi-Huberman characterises as an extraordinary hypothesis about the anachronism of artworks that are not yet ‘legible’ for history: “image[s] where the past and the present alternately realign, convert and criticise each other to form what Benjamin called a constellation, a dialectical configuration of heterogeneous time” (Didi-Huberman 1997: 17).

**Mediums of History**

Taking a footprint as an example, we can comprehend Didi-Huberman’s view that the imprint is anachronistic, out-of-time, and belongs to no specific historical epoch. At the same time, each imprint bears testimony to the moment of contact to which it owes its existence and hence a relation to a precise moment of the past. Furthermore, when we examine it, the imprint has a relation to the now, the present. For example, if we were to touch the imprints of hands left twelve thousand years ago by our ancestors in the cave of Niaux we touch the past, that is, we experience a past touch in the present, right now. Considering this, I follow Didi-Huberman when he writes that the “artist who makes use of a method of impression always establishes a complexity of time, that needs to be considered anew each time” (Didi-Huberman 1997: 17). It is this complexity of time, incorporated in the medium of the imprint, that MEDIUMS OF HISTORY takes as a starting point. Didi-Huberman’s expression “complexity of time” hints at Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image characterised as “that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation”. My research explores this connection between the medium of the imprint and the dialectical image. As the dialectical image equals what the materialist presentation of history constructs and the medium of the imprint is assigned the same features as this dialectical image, I allow myself to speak of the MEDIUM OF HISTORY.

The plural used in the title is motivated by the idea that while the imprint as such is anachronistic, the know-how to produce it is not. Over the course of history many different techniques to manufacture imprints have been developed so that there are a variety of methods available for my artistic research.

Art deals with mediums not merely in a theoretical way but first and foremost in a practical way related to actual production. For MEDIUMS OF HISTORY it is the primary objective to employ
them to produce artefacts of process-related complexity. By way of explaining my artistic practice, I describe two examples involving two mediums of ressemblance par contact in what follows.

ACHROMATIC HISTORY

One ‘imaging technique’ I employ is the silhouette left by an object on a sun-bleached surface. To do so, I acquired antiquarian issues of the Life magazine. From the magazine pages I chose photographs of events widely circulated during their time, from the landing on the moon in 1969, to the abduction of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games etc. Before exposing the photo spreads to sunlight I placed everyday objects, such as keys, scissors, coins etc., onto them. The objects were arranged to emphasize certain details by covering them, so that after bleaching they retain their initial colour while the part around it had faded.

ACHROMATIC HISTORY interweaves several layers of time. The first layer is the time of the photographed event and the printing of the magazine page shortly afterwards. As the magazine’s former status as the leading mainstream medium has since been lost – first to TV and successively to the World Wide Web – not only the photographs of historical events but also the magazine appears as a historical medium. Both the historical photographs and the medium in which they appear thus represent the past in a concrete way.

This past is overwritten with additional layers of time. The contours of the objects, which are easily recognised as they belong to our everyday lives, indicate the next layer: Everyone carries a key in their pocket or uses scissors to cut their hair. The choice of objects thus refers to our lived present, to things that we use every day. Hence ACHROMATIC HISTORY integrates past and present into one and the same surface.

The third layer of time incorporated into the image corresponds to the time that acts as agent to the imaging technique which takes advantage of the susceptibility of the magazine print to light. As we know, the printed page must be exposed to sunlight for a sustained period of time to bleach it sufficiently for the object’s contours to show.
THE PENCIL OF NATURE

Another medium I explore is nature printing where the subject to be printed is directly used as printing block. An early example for this imaging technique is the imprint of a sage leaf in Leonardo da Vinci’s sketchbook Codex Atlanticus (ca. 1505). From the sixteenth century we know of several herbal books, which include nature prints of plants, and in the eighteenth century the botanist Johann Hieronymus Kniphof applied this medium on a large scale. However, it was only in the nineteenth century that the imprints of plants could be transferred to durable printing plates for higher print runs.

This is interesting insofar as the heyday of nature printing in the 1830s coincided with the first steps in the development of photography. Nature prints at the time were largely superior to early photographs, both from an aesthetic and a scientific point of view. Another point of contact exists: nature printing was primarily developed in botany and the very first photograms made by William Henry Fox Talbot in 1834 were of plants.

My series starts from these points of contact between early photography and nature printing: I identified the plants Talbot used for his photograms – such as maidenhair fern or festuca grass –, collected them, and will use them to produce a series of nature prints “after Talbot”.

The resulting series titled THE PENCIL OF NATURE revives nature printing as a medium that reached its prime when Talbot made his first attempts to preserve images found in nature but was quickly forgotten thereafter. Now, almost two centuries later, the medium pioneered by Talbot has long since replaced nature printing.

The complexity of time established here is twofold. Firstly, it concerns the different temporalities of two separate mediums. The elements chosen for THE PENCIL OF NATURE – the plants as well as the title of the nature print series – invoke (the infancy of) photography. But where the film inside a camera is usually exposed a fraction of a second only and developed within minutes, the process of nature printing – involving galvanoplasty – takes many hours. The second temporality

1 The Pencil of Nature, published 1844-1846 by Talbot, was the first photographically illustrated book ever published. Talbot inserted the following notice into his book: “The plates of the present work are impressed by the agency of Light alone, without any aid whatever from the artist’s pencil. They are sun-pictures themselves, and not, as some persons have imagined, engravings in imitation.” (1844: n. pag.). Note the metaphor of the images being “impressed” by the agency of light.
can be found in the reference to nature and its cycles: Each plant is imprinted in a certain phase of its life cycle, depending on the season when it was harvested for printing. This cyclical time, the time of nature, appears as ahistorical time to us, reminiscent of Benjamin’s “pre-history”. THE PENCIL OF NATURE series thus combines manifold references to the history of two different mediums with a subject that evokes the ahistorical, cyclical time of nature.

CLOSING REMARKS

ACHROMATIC HISTORY and PENCIL OF NATURE are two series of works that exemplify the method of my research. This method is characterized by a return to one of the core competencies of art, the exploration of different mediums in the name of the appropriation of the world. The renewed attention to mediums and their potential to reveal something previously inaccessible to us brings the initial kinship between art and science back into focus.2 Hence, it is no coincidence that the mediums I am interested in have been and are still used by scholars from different fields (nature printing as a medium of botany is one example). The desire to apprehend the world in all its facets motivates us to capture it in mediums that depend on immediate contact with their subject. In returning to these anachronistic mediums, it is not my intention to broach the issue of how we (used to) apprehend the world. Rather, the subject of MEDIUMS OF HISTORY is the way we apprehend history itself. The project approaches this question via the concept of the dialectical image – central to Benjamin’s philosophy of history – exploring mediums, which are apt to establish a complexity of time. Put differently, MEDIUMS OF HISTORY produces artefacts, which not only allow for but spark an exploration of the way we think history. My intention is to create an experience for the audience of these artworks that parallels the excitement the historian feels when s/he comes across an auspicious historical source.

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2 An example for “visual knowledge” brought about by a new medium is mentioned in the editorial of Kontaktbilder: The nature printing technique improved by Ettingshausen and Pokorny showed nerves, that lie hidden under a leave’s surface and are only visible in the imprints produced in the medium of nature printing (cf. Bredekamp and Dünkel 2010: 5).
Works Cited


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Project link

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