

EQUALITY

Leopold Museum Vienna

Curated by Stephanie Damianitsch

2017

KODAK (Vest Pocket Autographic 1915), 2014

shredded c-prints

73,5 x 52 cm x 3 cm

ALBUM (Ikea Mirror Scan), 2017

digital archival c-print

204 cm x 124 cm

ALBUM (Security Glass Scan), 2017

digital archival c-print

100 cm x 130 cm

KODAK (Four Dimensional Community), 2001 (printed 2016)

c-print on matt & gloss Kodak Endura paper, original kodak 160 vc negative 17
x 6

222 cm x 80 cm

KODAK (Double Shell), 2004 (printed 2017)

c-print on matt, gloss & metallic kodak endura paper, original kodak 160 vc
negative 6 x 7

146 cm x 182 cm

SONTAG (Skin to Skin), 2017

gelatine silver print

61 cm x 91 cm

SONTAG (Outside of the Inside), 2017

gelatine silver print

121 cm x 81 cm

SONTAG (Outsourcing of Intimacy), 2017

gelatine silver print

73 cm x 106 cm

Photography for Mladen Bizumic is not a neutral medium that guarantees the
objective rendering of reality but rather a specific form of mediality that he

analyzes in its respective historic context and its materiality. His works are based on the awareness that through the media and materiality of the images it produces, photography influences society's orders of perception and determines the structure of experienced reality, but at the same time also holds up a mirror to the power and interest-driven politics of the social system. On the immanent level, this awareness leads to the phenomenon, typical of his works, that he treats photography as "both material and concept." Analog photography is thus not only the artistic medium with which Bizumic primarily works: its history as well as the dispositifs of perception associated with it determine both his handling of the material and the content level of his works. Their necessarily relational reading reveals his multilayered, conceptual approach to the medium of photography. Through this, the artist firmly fixes his works in the very area of tension that photography defines in its growing obsolescence as an analog document on the one hand and the increasingly dominant, perception-occupying position of the digital image on the other, and acts as its interpreter. In recent years, Mladen Bizumic has addressed the media-historical situation regarding the transition from analog to digital photography above all through the conceptual treatment of the corporate history of Kodak – a company that dominated the photography market for decades before filing for bankruptcy in 2012 because it had reacted too late to the rapid move toward digital photography. It seems a historical irony that in the mid-1970s, at the pinnacle of the company's success, the Kodak engineer Steven J. Sasson invented a digital camera. However, because of fear it would threaten Kodak's immensely profitable photographic film business, the executive board decided not to market the camera. It is this decisive, ambivalent moment in Kodak's corporate history that Bizumic takes up in his investigation of the social implications of the transition from analog to digital photography and the orders of perceptions this influenced. In his 2015 installation *Kodak. Reorganization Plan*, for example, he reconstructed the corporate history of Kodak with his typical method of intermeshing concept, content and the handling of material, and analyzed its

reciprocal relationship with the current visual culture by conceptually affirming the materiality of analog photography.

This is particularly evident in the 2014 work KODAK (Vest Pocket Autographic 1915), which refers to the Vest Pocket Kodak cameras – one of the greatest market successes in the company’s history – whose ease of use, small size and affordability made photography accessible to the mass market. With the invention of its Vest Pocket camera, Kodak triggered the advent of mass photography, on which digitisation technologies were able to build – which in turn is what ultimately drove the company into bankruptcy. This ambivalent media-historical phenomenon is evoked by the artist, however, primarily through his characteristic handling of the photographic material. KODAK (Vest Pocket Autographic 1915) consists of shredded analog photographs of the very camera model referred to in the title. While documents are usually shredded in order to destroy them for all time, Bizumic utilizes this process to create a work that – undermining the conventional understanding of photographic representation – makes reference both to the downfall of the Kodak company and to the obsolescence of analog photography solely through the cultural connoting of the treatment of the material. At the same time the artist uses the specific materiality of the work, based on the strategy of fragmentation, to also evoke characteristics of the digital image that has replaced analog photography. The shredded analog photographs remind one of the digital logic of perception, as they resemble the way that pictures are made up of a vast number of pixels. In this way, Bizumic deconstructs the conventional depictive function of photography, placing the focus instead on its material qualities, which themselves are understood as nodal points of visual culture. Through the perception generated by the handling of the material, the Vest Pocket Kodak camera has the appearance of a “ruin”; it is through this very phenomenon, however, that it develops its allegorical potential and refers to the societal and media-historical processes associated with it. The art critic Craig Owens

regarded allegory as a coherent impulse of contemporary art, its most important feature being that “throughout its history it has functioned in the gap between a present and a past” and thus possesses the “capacity to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear.”²

Mladen Bizumic addresses the subject of ephemerality and cultural loss of meaning – a theme present not only in the installation *Kodak Reorganization Plan* but also in projects as early as his 2012 *Hotel Jugoslavija* – in his current series of photographs as well, works that show places and objects that have lost their original function because of societal changes. His *KODAK (Double Shell)* from 2004/2017, for example, shows the remains of a hut from Norwegian whale hunters on a beach on New Zealand’s Stewart Island, thus referring to whale hunting as a once respected and lucrative business that began losing its social stature in the early 1930s, when the demand for the whale oil required for lamps rapidly decreased in the face of widespread electrification. The artist does not preserve this place but rather reveals it through his conceptual treatment of the photographic material as an allegory on the loss of function and obsolescence of analog photography. To this end, Bizumic designs his works by overlapping the last three available types of photo paper from the Kodak company, with matte, glossy and metallic finishes, and placing the negative shot with the discontinued VC 160 Kodak film in the center of the picture. By layering the images, and thus covering the depicted subject, he causes the representational function of the photograph to recede behind the exposed materiality. Through this the artist also lends transparency to the photographic process itself, demonstrating that every photograph is always a specific reproduction contingent on subjective decisions and production-related factors such as the availability of technical resources. The element of ephemerality is not only inherent to the depicted motifs and the materials used; it is also related to the production methods of the pictures. Analog photography thus becomes a symbol for the historicity of any social practice that, as Bizumic shows, stands

in a complex correlation with socio-political, economic and media-related transformations. Even when Mladen Bizumic uses the explicitly emphasised materiality, tactility and objectness of analog photography to reflect in the context of his studies of visual culture on the reasons for its loss of societal significance, he also regards these very qualities as highly valuable characteristics of the medium with respect to the digital image, which occupies space, time and perception in a completely different manner. Accordingly, Bizumic is also concerned with using his works to create alternative spaces of experience, which is evidenced not least by his incorporation of the exhibition architecture into the overall concept of his presentation. Bizumic thus creates openings in the walls at the Leopold Museum to provide glimpses of the areas behind them, employing them not only as a “visual medium” but also to expose the construction of the exhibition display. In this way the architecture is subjected to the same dialectic that is inherent to the photographs presented within it, pictures whose material foundation and production process are constantly stressed and placed in a reciprocal relationship to their image content by the artist. By means of this interplay, which dissolves the boundary between picture and object, Bizumic generates aesthetic spaces of experience that stand in deliberate contrast to the de-materialized data space of digital image culture, spaces that are geared toward the reorganization of current modes of perception. Analog photography may be steadily losing its practical value in society, but as Bizumic shows, as an artistic object it is becoming – not so much through its representational function as through its very materiality, its aesthetic presence in the here and now – what Roland Barthes called “punctum,” a sensory event that perhaps touches the viewer now more than ever.

Stephanie Damianitsch

1 Stephen Zepke, “Post-conceptual analogue: Mladen Bizumic’s Kodak Photographs,” in *Camera Austria International*, No. 133, March 2016, p. 36.

2 Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," in *October*, Vol. 12, Spring 1980, p. 68