

Tirdad Zolghadr

Mimesis

To be published in Peter Stoffel's *Scenes from Everyland*. Edition Fink, Verlag für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Zürich, 2008.

Scenes from Everyland, a book Peter Stoffel discovered on the Geneva flea market with the images carefully removed, has altered his trajectory in ways that would be hard to underestimate. The book, complete with its textual understatements and ocular blind spots, introduced such a plethora of questions regarding the apparent primacy of text over image, but also regarding the text as image, not to mention the image as text, or, as some would like to put it, the oblique scenographies of visual abstraction, that his work was irretrievably changed. And although I know it is problematic to return to matters of artistic intent, to the persona of the artist guiding the reception, but in Stoffel's case, I do happen to know it was the question of insight as blindness that was at stake here, as some of Stoffel's most beloved deconstructivist writers would have put it: the inherent blindness that occurs precisely at the moment of enlightenment. The mind of the cognitive viewer not elevated but, much rather, blinded by the flash of his own perception.

Deconstructivists are no longer as present on the scene as used to be, reappearing only every now and then in sentimental moments, in a "whatever happened to Andrew Ridgeley" sort of way, but those who know Stoffel's early work will see why this is pertinent. The movement's contributions were and still are significant, particularly to those who consider questions of illustration, elucidation, exemplification in terms markedly political. Not only in relation to the epistemic underpinnings of military conquests and courageous cultural

explorations, and other Euro-American pastimes 2007, but also along art-reflexive premises. In terms of, say, artists' relationships with their critics and curators, whose agenda ultimately consists in concocting the appropriate measure of opacity and transparency with respect to the work. Embedding and justifying, contextualizing and specifying the artistic specimen like a pygmy neck brace, or a rare tropical butterfly.

The celebrated zoologist Bernard Grzimek once pointed out that in order to protect something, you needed to show it. Whether the object was the pygmy neck brace, the rare tropical butterfly or the artist as rare pygmy butterfly, it is the scenography of relevance that is necessary, followed by the careful construction of an enduring environment that the object in question can call home, which is where the complications commence, where the textual blind spots and ocular understatements come in. Grzimek's dilemma (as explained by the artist Natascha Sadr Haghghian), unfolded when he founded his famous Frankfurt zoo. To house his animals adequately, Grzimek constructed enormous containers of thick, natural foliage replicating the animal's homegrown environment. Which of course rendered the animals less visible, at times downright invisible if truth be told. Nowhere else are prevailing regimes of spectacle, exploitation, adventurism, latency and exposure as beautifully crystallized as in Grzimek's zoo. Whatever happened to Andrew Ridgeley, the honest citizens of Frankfurt would angrily scream at the cages, their 15 Euro tickets clenched tightly in their hands.

All of which renders Frankfurt highly useful to think about intimidating issues such as military conquests and courageous cultural explorations. Much ink, deconstructivist and other, has been spilled over discussions of the thrust of channeled visibility and the colonial gaze which endure to this day. Indeed, the collusion of various factors

has made the 21st century— where the main prize in the Great Game is to make the Near East fit for free trade as we know it - particularly scopophilic in nature. Consider how, for example, reasonable oil policies, foreign investment plans, moderate tariffs, Rem Koolhaas, conceptual art, diplomatic know-how, three piece suits, cooperative intelligence agents and modest modes of internal repression can all successfully blend into one visual vernacular that soothes and reassures the newsgoing audience in Berlin, Geneva, Los Angeles. Innovations in cellphone technology and heightened visual appetites aside, what has made a difference with respect to, say, Viet Nam are the visual tropes of the forceful civilizational unveiling of the Orient. We needn't evoke the fascination of cellphone snuff movies of Arab prisoners bearing nothing but dog leashes and human shit. We can focus on the thick layers of secrecy that visibly shroud the women and the weapons.

But rather than further pursue the many possible cross-equations here, across issues of self-fulfilling prophecies, of ethnic marketing, of travel as a means to spiritual self-renewal, let us observe these questions, for lack of space and time, by way of an example. There was a time when, as Peter Stoffel traveled, he never failed to take his paintbrush along, painting everywhere he could, on teapots, beer bottles, handbags, or cattle. When asked why he engaged in this, Stoffel claimed it was in the spirit of bringing souvenirs back home to his wife. The two of them had agreed, he explained, that due to her American citizenship it would be unsavory, tasteless, even reactionary for her to accompany him on his art-professional travels. It's hard enough to steer the reception of my work, he would grumble. Don't make it worse. Just imagine. Which is, of course, a good point; due to his own Swiss passport, Stoffel is, by contrast, blessed with the privilege – and the burden of responsibility – that comes with travel

beyond guilt and consequence.

And yet, sometimes I assumed it wasn't the question of national affiliation but his personal hobbies that were at stake. I'm telling you: the things you get away with as an artist. Many times, in third world locations that have not reached the civilizational stage of free trade as we know it, I have watched him sneak up to traffic wardens in the middle of the night, and gouge their windpipe with a small rock. Fucking cops man, he would never fail to exclaim, after these midnight shenanigans. In 2005, it so happens I invited Stoffel to Sharjah, where he was confronted with a cruel hearted curator who is known to steal, lie and humiliate anyone who threatened him in some way. This is the man you must murder next, I implored him. Where is your small pointy rock. But Stoffel would refuse, no matter how much the curator would test Stoffel's patience, no matter how he would censure and humiliate. Stoffel remained obstinate. He then explained to me: I was told on my travels in Belgium that to kill a priest is thricefold seven years of bad luck. Priests are the counterparts to the prophets. Institutional mouthpieces in mythical contrast to prophets. Prophets being artists, freethinkers and freelancers. Depending on how you look at it, I would sooner murder you. I refrained from making any more suggestions from that day on.

On another occasion, there was a hotel cleaner who wouldn't stop showing up near the rooms. Blocking the corridor, sneezing, coughing, slurping tea, hoping for tips, or some practice in English conversation. This is not what immaterial labor is supposed to be, Stoffel kept insisting. This is not it. Postfordism my ass. Dematerialization of the worker ha fucking ha. This was the moment when he swore revenge on the working class, setting aside the teapots, beer bottles, handbags, cattle, and specializing, for a little while, in

laying fake tarot cards which he crafted himself, claiming they were an old painterly tradition from his native Appenzell. Since they were painted rather beautifully, on hand crafted, paper thin sheets of finest birch wood, depicting motifs he would copy from Bruno Bischofberger adverts on the back covers of Art Forum, this was not difficult to pull off. The tarot cards were simply mesmerizing in their handmade authenticity.

So for the said cleaner in Cairo, for example, Stoffel predicted a slow death following the loss of his left arm on a nearby freeway. Or when it came to another local, a tall handsome woman who misframed his c-prints for a site specific biennial commission, Stoffel warned that he saw her in a vision. You have fallen to your knees in a hospital ward. You are screaming a high pitched scream, loud and mighty as the Foehn. These little pranks were always rendered beautifully, for Peter would never fail to involve traditional Appenzell elements involving cowbells and statuettes. However, since he is anything but cruel, Peter would “lift the veil” at a given time, revealing the fictitious nature of the prophecies by writing a revealing sentence at the bottom of a blank postcard, “Mr. Ali bewailing the loss of his left arm as it lies by the Nasser freeway”, and leave his new friends to figure out the fallacy of representation, but also the apparent primacy of text over image, or, as some would like to put it, the oblique scenographies of visual abstraction. If they don’t get it they don’t get it, he would add, sadly shaking his handsome head.

All of which changed, however, when he came upon the book *Scenes from Everyland*. It really required a book of considerable, persuasive brunt for Stoffel to be convinced to amend his ways. And surely enough, Stoffel has now irretrievably entered a phase which can be termed that of “mature” artistic work, consistent and lucid -

mountain landscapes, mainly - with his American wife by his side everywhere he goes. Sometimes life imitates art, I told him, thinking back to the olden days of his working travels. Oh no, he answered, sometimes life imitates life!