

(Mis)Understanding Photography

ESSEN, GERMANY

Museum Folkwang



Kenneth Josephson, *New York State*, 1970, Silver gelatin print, 20 × 13 cm

Before entering *(Mis)Understanding Photography*, viewers were greeted by the words 'You do not take a photograph. You make it' in black typeface. At the end, they could take home a 2013 work of the same name by Alfredo Jaar – featuring a quote from Ansel Adams – in the form of a knee-high stack of free posters: a programmatic-seeming text rather than an image, a free poster in lieu of an auratic artwork. The quote's reference to the constructed nature of the photograph and the rejection of a narrowly conceived traditional concept of photography (one defined by genres such as landscape, portrait and documentary photography) underlie this exhibition compiled by Florian Ebner. This did not occur via didactic maxims, but rather through the announcement and enactment of an intricate game.

Ebner is the Head of the Photographic Collection at the Museum Folkwang and curator of the German pavilion for the 2015 Venice Biennale. In *(Mis)Understanding Photography*, rather than producing a predictable best-of-175-years-of-photography exhibition, he has selected historical and contemporary works and groups of works from more than 60 artists – and just as many photography manifestos – to focus on the misunderstandings bound up with the photographic medium. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s (as in the work of Hans-Peter Feldmann and Richard Prince, both represented here), exposing the possibilities of photography has been supplanted by a focus on its empty promises and shortcomings – up to the point where photography becomes an instrument of power and control. Arranged in loose clusters – 'recording and rendering visible', 'archaeologists of flea markets and archives', and 'mechanics of the image', to name a few – the exhibition tests the parameters of photography and asks how photography can be turned against itself. This can be achieved simply, as shown by a twelve-part photograph series by Adrian Sauer depicting the unboxing of Adobe Photoshop software (*Unboxing Photoshop*, 2011).

Rather than heroes and masters, the exhibition tells of doubters, dissidents and renegades. Ebner has invited every conceivable party crasher: conceptual artist Christopher Williams, photo booth artist Jan Wenzel, typologist Hans Eijkelboom and Sylvia Ballhause, whose photographs take photography itself as their theme. An entire subgenre of contemporary photography consists of reinterpretations of photographic icons: Aneta Greszykowska restages Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series from the years 1977–80 (*Untitled Film Stills*, 2006); Florian Freier uses Google Earth to digitally tinker with Andreas Gursky's monumental photographs (*The Eye of God – Recreating Andreas Gursky (Google Earth Remix)*, 2009); and the Cologne-based artist duo Ulrich Tillmann and Wolfgang Vollmer restage and photograph masterpieces of photography in *Meisterwerke der Fotokunst* (1985/2014). Ebner places particular focus on two artists: Wolfgang Tillmans has created an entire room of his work, the *Folkwang Raum (1987–2013)* (2014), in which varied materials and types of images sensitively balance one another. Tacita Dean's 16mm projection *Kodak* (2006) shows the dimly lit day at a Kodak factory in France shortly before Kodak stopped working with film: a requiem for a spent medium, in a spent medium.

The exhibition poses questions of authorship and of the relationship of image to object. Both issues are at play in Viktoria Binschok's installation *Globen/Globes* (2002). More than a decade ago, Binschok became interested in online auction sites, purchasing around two dozen globes from them. These globes were shown in an installation, still in their shipping cartons, alongside prints of the images of the products that their respective sellers had posted. The photographer poses here as a researcher, collector and non-photographer. 'Away with traditional photography, and put modern photography in the cellar where the printed books are!' Martin Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen demanded in their 1986 anti-photography manifesto. *Understanding Photography* does not go as far, but Ebner resuscitates photography from its artistic coma and confronts it with its practical side – a history shaped by inventors, entrepreneurs and hackers. How this takes place in the context of a museum – and that it takes place there at all – is the major achievement of this exhibition.

Translated by Jane Yager

—by Kito Nedo

Kito Nedo lives in Berlin where he works as a freelance journalist for several magazines and newspapers.

ABOUT THIS REVIEW

First published in
Issue 16, September -
November 2014

by Kito Nedo



Print this article

Share this article: [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#)

MORE ARTICLES FROM THIS ISSUE

Manifesta 10

Hinter dem Vorhang

Wie kommt's?

8. Berlin Biennale

Nadira Husain

Schrauben fürs Leben

View all

RSS FEEDS

Get the universal feed, or the magazine issues feed to be updated of the new articles in this section.

