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The following text has been written by HEIDI BRUNNSCHWEILER and was taken from the booklet accompanying the exhibition « NACHTSTÜCKE, of repressed moments, of nights and the color black » curated by HEIDI BRUNNSCHWEILER at the GALERIE FÜR GEGENWARTSKUNST, E-WERK FREIBURG, from 16 February - 25 March 2018.

INTRODUCTION

Nachtstücke is the title of E.T.A. Hoffmann's famous cycle of narration from the years 1816/17 with stories about ominous and repressed sides of life. 100 years later Sigmund Freud developed the concept of the uncanny by reference to Hoffmann's story *Der Sandmann*.¹ As a central category of psychoanalysis, it is one of the most powerful concepts of the 20th century. It is used to describe individual and collective psychic processes and bring them to light.²

The innovation of this concept is to show connections where they were previously unrecognizable.³ For example, the American author Robert Samuel recently used Freud's uncanny to explain right-wing populism, narcissistic nationalism, and the rise of figures such as Donald Trump. He poses the thesis that these phenomena are so powerful because they act as objects of projection of suppressed existential fears.⁴

With the uncanny, Freud described paranoid anxiety and emotions of horror that emanate from things, people, or situations that are actually familiar, "heimisch," or "heimlich." As disfigured bearers of repressed feelings, they awaken distressing experiences or revive overcome "primitive" understandings of reality.⁵ The uncanny is provoked by things familiar to the psyche but alienated by the process of repression. The repressed is for Freud that recurring "Heimliche" that should have stayed hidden.⁶

In Hoffmann's story it is the doll Olympia which causes uncanny feelings in Nathanael, the protagonist. The doll appears threatening to him because of his uncertainty whether it is a

¹ Freud, Sigmund, *Das Unheimliche*, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1963, 1–14.

² Johannes Binotto, *Tat/Ort, das Unheimliche und sein Raum in der Kultur*, Zürich, Berlin: Diaphanes, 2015, 12.

³ Dito.

⁴ Robert Samuel, *Psychoanalyzing the Left and Right after Donald Trump: Conservatism, Liberalism, and Neoliberal Populisms*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, Macmillan, 2016, Position 65

⁵ Freud, Sigmund, 2.

⁶ Dito., 13.

human being, a piece of plastic or whether it belongs to a fantastic world. In Freud's interpretation, the doll becomes a symptom of Nathanael's repressed castration anxiety emanating from his overpowering father who threatens his identity.⁷

The exhibition *Nocturnes* places works of contemporary art at the center that explore dark and repressed events which have finally come to light. It is about the artistic engagement with collective memories of colonialism, of militant nationalism and with traumatic personal experience. Through a manifold interplay between image, sound and text, layers of history overlap, thus combining knowledge, emotion and reflection.

GALERIE I

Nadia Lichtig, *Ghosttrap*, 2007—ongoing

In her series ***Ghosttrap*** Nadia Lichtig deals with emotions of fear. By means of image, text and sound she explores traumatic experiences that are usually suppressed, but enter consciousness in distorted representations and unreliable narratives.

This three part work is based on interviews with anonymous individuals, each of whom recounts his or her memory of a traumatic experience. Lichtig translates their spoken words into photographs and texts, presenting these media in different spaces and at different times. The first two parts consist of the photographs and texts displayed in the exhibition space. The third consists of a performance, in which Nadia Lichtig plays a recording of the original interviews on an old pick-up. She then dons a pair of headphones that are plugged into the record player, and re-enacts the original interviews repeating the words she hears.

For her photographs, she visits places by night, which seem interesting to her with regard to the light situation. From these sites, she takes photos with long exposure times (5 to 35 minutes) without additional lighting. In doing so, she cannot completely control the content of images. The light inscribes itself, so to speak, as an optically subconscious element in the photographs and reveals itself in its own form. In Lichtig's photographs, the viewer is often placed in the darkened foreground. She/he looks at a diffusely illuminated miniscene, which is difficult to see clearly because of the distance (***A billion of ants***). Or, as in the case of ***The dog and the snake*** or ***In the streets***, the direct view is blocked by a semi-transparent curtain of leaves or branches. The light sources in the background of the image sometimes appear as if they were looking back at the viewer. This results in an overlapping of the viewing directions of the picture: What is looking and what is being

⁷ Sigrid Schade, *Die Medien/Spiele der Puppe, Vom Mannequin zum Cyborg. Das Interesse aktueller Künstlerinnen und Künstler am Surrealismus*, 2004, 2. (http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themen/cyborg_bodies/puppen_koerper/)

looked at suddenly fuse and create uncanny effects as in **Walls and Bushes**.⁸ The visual barriers and the diffuse light prevent the viewer from grasping exactly what is happening in certain image zones. As a result, the images appear eerie and become projections of one's own fears.

Night photography has been part of the photographic canon since Edward Steichen's famous nocturnal nature shots of the 1890s. With their differentiated monochrome colour gradations and mysterious moods Lichtig's photographs stand in this tradition. For example, her image **Someone from another** shows a nocturnal pond landscape reminiscent of Steichen's *The Pond-Moonlight*, 1904. As with Steichen, reflections from the moon on the water provide the light source. However, Lichtig's photo differs from Steichen's because of the heightened viewpoint. This perspective is rather tied to the romantic landscape of a Caspar David Friedrich and his lonely wanderer.

Other images are reminiscent of **crime scene photographs** and suggest criminal acts: the picture with the dogs (**No voice**) in the brightly lit, deserted backyard of a petrol station evokes the uncanny feeling of looking at a murder scene with hidden corpses. Photos like **A billion of ants** could be a film set of a psycho-thriller: Here the gaze is directed to the impenetrable black veranda of an abandoned house. The strange bright side lighting raises the expectation of the sudden appearance of an uncanny figure.

GALERIE II

Nadia Lichtig, Ghosttrap, 2007—ongoing

Since 2007, the artist has been collecting accounts of people that tell of frightening experiences. When she travels to a new town or country, she asked random people: "Tell me about your fears."

Subsequently, the artist transcribes these oral accounts into rhythmic prose. In these transcriptions, she tries to capture the effects of anxiety, such as stuttering, repetition and hesitation, that enter spoken language. Finally, the texts are printed with fluorescent ink and exposed to light, so that they glow like messages from the subconscious.

The lyrics contain stereotypical evocations of fear. The speakers are afraid of insects, of forces of nature, of flying, of drowning or of narrow places. They fear they might be stabbed to death or fall victim to accidental violence. Others have general existential anxieties, are afraid of the future, the current economic or environmental situation. Or they are concerned with death. A majority of the speakers characterize their fears as phobic, purely psychological and not factually justified, and are thus aware of their irrationality. Others believe that they have inherited them from their ancestors or attribute them to childhood experiences. Many describe the feeling of fear as a dull shadow in their head. Lichtig's photos seem to reference this feeling through black areas and shadows. These accounts of fear are intuitive starting points for Lichtig's photographs.

⁸ Johannes Binotto, „Räume, Gänge, Kammern, Strassen. Das Unheimliche im Film,“ in, Nicola Mitterer, Hajnalka Nagy (Hg.), *Zwischen den Worten. Hinter der Welt. Wissenschaftliche und didaktische Annäherungen an das Unheimliche*, Innsbruck, Wien, Bozen: Studien Verlag, 2015, 157–172, 158.

They guide her search for places and sites. To give an example, let's turn to the text **A billion of ants** which speaks of the fear of ants. As a child, the narrator witnessed millions of ants throwing themselves at discarded food leftovers at the back of her house. Lichtig's photograph shows the back of a diffusely illuminated house which allows the viewers to associate freely. In the text **Someone from another**, the interviewee talks about the fear of being kidnapped by a crazy person and locked up in a hole in the earth. In the corresponding photo, the hole in the earth is visualized by the moonlit pond. In the exhibition, pictures and text are related to each other by the same titles. Through the loose correspondence between of text and image, the transitions between imagined and actual memory appear to be fluid and allow the viewer's own imagination to act.