

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

SCRIPTS AND AFTERLIVES

Mladen Bizumic on Studio for Propositional Cinema at Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach



"Studio for Propositional Cinema: The Camera of Disaster," Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, 2022, installation view

In 1962, Chris Marker released "La Jetée," a short science-fiction film composed of still photographs telling the haunting story of a time traveler in a post-apocalyptic world. Sixty years later, the collective Studio for Propositional Cinema (SPC) reflects on the past, present, and possible future of analog photography in its recent exhibition "The Camera of Disaster" in Mönchengladbach. Mladen Bizumic reads the large-scale installation at Museum Abteiberg – which intertwines photography, site-specific interventions, found objects, and different kinds of text – in light of SPC's consistent challenging of both the cinematic and the museum apparatus. Referring to Vilém Flusser, Bizumic identifies the reimagination of "the camera as a magical tool."

Notice to the Reader

The images, texts, and objects contained here are intended to help facilitate the creation of photographic images in a such a future wherein these processes have been lost or eradicated. Please translate, reproduce, and distribute as necessary within the social and historical conditions in which they have found you.¹

This introductory note establishes the atmosphere for the exhibition "The Camera of Disaster" by Studio for Propositional Cinema (SPC). Conceived site-specifically for Hans Hollein's magnum opus, the Museum Abteiberg, the exhibition combines found objects with photographed ones,

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reframes a given space, and proposes an innovative relationship between the present and future of photography and its production.

SPC, an artist collective established in 2013 in Düsseldorf, has been consistently and rigorously demystifying the apparatus of the museum by providing us – art’s spectators – with a way of noticing the unnoticed (which is not the same as simply seeing what is hidden). What I mean by this is that we become aware of the museum’s perception-adjusting apparatus only when our reception of art is interrupted, when the thread of the museum experience is ruptured and its internal fabric revealed. In other words, the apparatus has been there all along, but we are now made aware of its existence.

While there is a long tradition of institutional-critical practices that have dealt with the museum apparatus, SPC occupies a distinctive position within the current art discourse. For SPC, the exhibition context – the venue and its architecture, as well as the city where it is located – is used to create a scripted work that stretches from the publication to the physical space of the museum, and vice versa. There exists an ongoing performative and provisional contest of attention values that creates a sense of something I would call a *lyrical dissonance* between a written script and its physical formats, including photographs, an exhibition trailer, street posters, and, particularly significant for “The Camera of Disaster,” museum installations.

Here, the point of departure from earlier projects is the script itself. In short, the script for “The Camera of Disaster” offers two case studies of the hidden trends of our time: first, a dystopia where the traditional knowledge of analog photography that uses chemical processes has been lost; and second, a narrative about “a band

of dreamers” who, in the distant future, would relearn the lost magic of photography. Staged between these two acts, the exhibition is formally divided into three sections – *The Lensgrinders*; *Manual: The Camera of Disaster*; and *The End* – that recall the aesthetics of historical museum displays, complete with dark-red ochre walls and vitrines containing fragments of photographic objects.

The sheer amount of text on display is a call to action, requiring the investment of a couple of hours of the spectators’ time in order to fully grasp it – time that pays off generously. There are memorable passages on the changing character of photography, such as: “The omnipresent surveillance network does not track us individually but categorizes us algorithmically, as objects under scrutiny; to evade detection, we must understand and play against its logics.”² Texts are screen-printed onto the framing glass to appear like subtitles for the gelatin silver prints of *The Lensgrinders* series. As for the photographs, the people to come are depicted in these images, roaming around a hybrid of science-fictional and postindustrial landscape that brings to mind Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1962).

The Lensgrinders photo installation is clearly configured with a site-specific intention: filling up the wall space in order to encircle the major section of the exhibition, *Manual: The Camera of Disaster*. This is a 26-chapter work conceived as an essay concerning photography’s past, present, and possible future. And this being a manual, the writing style is instructive and precise – though poetic, too. Just as important is the SPC authors’ ability to construct a believable atmosphere; the narrative is rooted in current political, socio-economic, and technological contexts while also unapologetically suggesting alternative futures.

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As I exit the main exhibition room, which evokes a gigantic camera obscura with the light ceiling as its lens, I approach the section called *The End* – which is, in fact, doubled. Its first wall features a cyanotype-printed text; the other, a single aluminum frame with silk-screened text made of glass and mirror. Trying to restore my visual focus, I survey my reflection in the mirror. And then it strikes me: I have just been “framed” to perceive my own perception.

The context for “The Camera of Disaster” is not rooted in the past but in the abysmal reality of our present: climate emergency, corporate-governmental control, and lack of different visions all offer little hope for either social change or subjective liberation. SPC has defined “cataclysm as the common context” in regard to previous site-specific texts for site-specific projects.³ Here, the disappearing craft of chemical photography is a scenario easy to imagine. In 2022, chemical photography is a type of zombie, simultaneously alive and dead. Indeed, the chemistry of analog photography as we know it cannot exist without the manufacturing plants that make it possible.

In this era of digital images, “The Camera of Disaster” demonstrates a poetic type of criticality via the rematerialization of the photographic process. A magnificent arrangement of glass vitrines displays lenses, photosensitive relics, minerals, potassium dichromate, gum arabic, oxidized copper scraps, lopezite, lapis lazuli, and more, all of which are necessary in chemical-based photography. For an exhibition informed by the aesthetics of the analog, “The Camera of Disaster,” surprisingly, projects no sensation of nostalgia: the script points to a time ahead. And this brings us finally to the importance of Vilém Flusser’s media investigations for “The Camera of Disaster.”

Flusser’s treatise *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983) asserts that photography acts as the postindustrial world’s primary language. He claims this visual universe seduces and nullifies our critical minds; we follow the action with no understanding of the algorithms behind the appearance of “technical images.” We, the users, are being used. So, according to Flusser, the role of the future photographer is to work against the camera in order to discover its experimental potential. In other words, by creating unpredictable results, Flusser invites photographers to release themselves from the image and thus to locate something outside the code.⁴

SPC’s intention is, I would claim, Flusserian: to reimagine the camera as a magical tool and to discover its unruly potentialities. In the current era of algorithmic images, individual positions are made redundant, and power rests with the military-corporate-governmental conglomerates. SPC poses one of the most urgent questions in contemporary art: How are we to use lens-based tools democratically? That is, without using others and without being used? The answer is explored primarily as conceptual speculation and secondarily as material manifestation. The critical potential of the exhibition lies in its ability to communicate – literally, spatially, and photographically – ambiguous topics regarding the fickle future in a crystal clear manner.

“The Camera of Disaster” is a hyperaware museum-play. It is, also, a dystopian drama rooted in specific political and architectural contexts, acknowledging the museum setting and, in architect Hans Hollein’s words, “a spectrum of multi-layered situations that are revealed in relation to the work of art, and to which the work of art responds.”⁵ There is a tension between the

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installation and the museum architecture that is permanently and in every respect at play here. On the one hand, the project is certainly site-specific (its effect would be entirely different were it to be shown elsewhere); on the other, the project's meaning is intended to expand beyond the walls of the museum via printed matter and the online exhibition trailer that serves as a score for the unknown tomorrow.

I sign off by concluding that Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* has been transformed into something equally farsighted, ambitious, and resourceful: *Towards a Photography of Philosophy*.

"Studio for Propositional Cinema: The Camera of Disaster," Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, April 3–September 25, 2022.

Notes

- 1 Studio for Propositional Cinema, "Notice to the Reader," text work on display at "Studio for Propositional Cinema: The Camera of Disaster," Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, April 3–September 25, 2022.

- 2 Studio for Propositional Cinema, *The Lensgrinders* series included in the exhibition "The Camera of Disaster," Studio for Propositional Cinema at the Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, April 3–September 25, 2022.
- 3 Studio for Propositional Cinema, *Myths and Manifestos* (Munich: Kunstverein München and Walther König, 2021), vii.
- 4 See Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion, 2000), 80. The book was originally published as *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* (Göttingen: European Photography, 1983).
- 5 Quote taken from the page "Hans Hollein" on the Museum Abteiberg website, <https://museum-abteiberg.de/architecture/hans-hollein-en/hans-hollein/?lang=en>.