

Tanja Boukal. Political Correctness

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Until the lions have their own historian, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter. (African proverb, quoted by Eduardo Galeano)

Pictures tell (his)stories; pass down information that goes beyond the border of language; make visible, simulate and suggest realities; offer means for propaganda; and occasionally stimulate an intense occupation with a theme, polarize, polemicize, and provoke discussion ... the list can go on practically forever. The omnipresence of images, the enormous increase in their amount and distribution, and the associated excessive visual demands made of recipients, symbolized by the term *Bilderflut*, flood of images, has become firmly established in our present, media-oriented existence.¹ By definition, the term *Bilderflut* signifies a “wealth of images that is difficult or impossible for the mind to process,”² which demands our rapid perception. This is joined by the “speed” of our lives, which renders lingering and careful observation a luxury. Within this flood of images, it is mainly those pictures that appeal to our empathy; those of distance war zones and also immediate, current, local areas of crisis, that particularly occupy us, and which cause us to pose the question of the correct way to handle them.

Susan Sontag, in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*,³ pleads for a critical attitude with regard to the often questionable documentary claim of these images, which we subject them to, despite all of their manipulability and instrumentalization, and the need to ask about the images that are not published. She understands these unpublished images as a constant reminder; to uncover this manipulability and be shaken up and activated by their content.⁴ Everyday life has become impossible to imagine without (amateur)photos and videos as a socio-political means of communication. Information is concentrated in them; and with them, claims to truth are made and the formation of opinion pursued. In situations of political conflict, social media are attributed an

¹ The following publications, among others, offer orientation on the concept of the image in various disciplines and if necessary, general visual studies: *Was ist ein Bild?*, ed. Gottfried Boehm, Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 1994, 3rd edition, 2001; Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe einer Bildwissenschaft*. Munich, Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2001, 4th edition, 2011.

On the way of dealing with images, the imprint they leave on our culture, but also the pluralism of power that representativeness implies, see, among others: Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2010; W.J.T. Mitchell, *Das Leben der Bilder. Eine Theorie der visuellen Kultur*, Munich: C.H. Beck 2012; Mark A. Halawa, *Die Bilderfrage als Machtfrage. Perspektiven einer Kritik des Bildes*, Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos 2012 [Kaleidogramme volume 93].

² Duden online: <http://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Bilderflut> [October 23, 2013]

³ Cf. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2003.

⁴ “By flying low, artistically speaking, such pictures are thought to be less manipulative—all widely distributed images of suffering now stand under that suspicion—and less likely to arouse facile compassion or identification.” *Ibid.*, p. 24.

important role as information forums and platforms for mobilization, which supplement established media and are perceived as a threat, not only in anti-democratically governed societies.

Photos are active at both the conservative as well as the constructivist poles in the production of societies, and depending on their concrete embedment in historical, social, and political contexts, they contribute either to stabilization or destruction of societal formations and their ideological fragments.⁵

Simply the speed at which photographs and videos are uploaded onto networks such as Flickr, YouTube—or in a quasi-curated form, Tumblr—etc., and the amount, makes fabrication nearly impossible. Raised are aspirations of unbiased reporting that places various perspectives side-by-side as more or less equals, which is, however, no inevitable guarantee of an irrevocable claim to truth.⁶

In her work dealing with images of people as protagonists, Tanja Boukal uses an approach comparable with Susan Sontag's perspective on war photos. Through Boukal's focus on people who battle for the preservation of their dignity at the margins of society, or anonymous combatants in revolutionary actions, she consciously seeks identification figures whom the mass media is not necessarily interested in. Her work does not showcase stars and celebrated heroes, but instead, people whose actions, as a rule, remain in the background, people who often fight in the shadows for the improvement of their personal existence, and for social progress in general. Although the concept "political correctness" is not a direct component of the artist's method, Boukal finds reinforcement for her work in its positive meaning,⁷ that is, in directing her gaze toward those

⁵ Beate Fricke, Markus Klammer, Stefan Neuner, "Pikturale Horizonte der Gemeinschaftsproduktion. Zur Einleitung," in *Bilder und Gemeinschaften. Studien zur Konvergenz von Politik und Ästhetik in Kunst, Literatur und Theorie*, eds. Beate Fricke, Markus Klammer, Stefan Neuner, Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2011 [eikones, ed. by Nationaler Forschungsschwerpunkt Bildkritik an der Universität Basel], pp. 11–38, here pp. 15–16.

⁶ Cf. on this, among others, Sascha Lobo, "S.P.O.N. – Die Mensch-Maschine: Erdogan wird wissen, weshalb er Twitter fürchtet," in *Spiegel Online*, June 4, 2013, <http://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/web/tuerkische-revolte-die-entstehung-der-sozialen-netzwehr-a-903616.html> [August 27, 2013]. On the significance of social networks and media in the Arab Spring protest movement, see, among others: Asiem El Difraoui, *Die Rolle der neuen Medien im Arabischen Frühling*, published on November 3, 2011, <http://www.bpb.de/internationales/afrika/arabischer-fruehling/52420/die-rolle-der-neuen-medien?p=all> [October 2, 2013]. In general, the folder "Arabischer Frühling" on the website of the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung offers a comprehensive overview of the theme.

⁷ Cf. on this, among others: de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politische_Korrekttheit [October 11, 2013]; Hans Winkler, "Die politische Korrektheit ist politisch nicht korrekt," in *Die Presse*, print edition, June 9, 2008, diepresse.com/home/meinung/gastkommentar/389289/Die-politische-Korrekttheit-ist-politisch-nicht-korrekt [October 25, 2013]; *Political Correctness in der (inter)nationalen Politik. Zu Genese und Verbreitung eines Konzepts*, ed. Susanne Nies [OEI-Arbeitspapiere 36/2001], <http://www.oei.fu-berlin.de/politik/publikationen/AP36.pdf> [October 11, 2013]. Of interest here is mainly the article by Annette Lohmann, which discusses the paradox of "political correctness" on the basis of a controversy at the Brooklyn Museum in 2000 and 2001 (pp. 69–74). Based on the selected example, it becomes clear how differently the term is used by the parties opposed to it: what is transported here as politically correct by the artist, from

situations and people who are generally “overlooked.” Core themes in the artist’s work are hereby human dignity and the effort to demand a minimum of respect for one and all. In the transfer of local reports to international media, details are often lost. This occurs mainly for the benefit of an instrumentalizing visual language, and at the expense of those people who are, indeed, granted due importance in a local context. Although the origins of political correctness rest in the attempt to establish respectful, anti-discriminatory language—in a broader sense, also metaphorical language—the backside of the approach is that it curtails freedom of speech and the press, making it easier to exclude opinions that do not fit within a certain picture by labelling them as immoral.⁸

In the fine arts, political correctness found its first mouthpiece in the 67th Whitney Biennale in 1993. The exhibition curated by Elisabeth Sussman led the way by offering an overview of the political and socio-critical work of U.S.-American artists located beyond the white-male-artist-dominated art market.⁹ Particularly controversial was the integration of an amateur video by George Holliday. From his balcony in Los Angeles, Holliday filmed white police officers violently attacking Rodney King, an Afro-American, on March 3, 1991.¹⁰

These real life documents, although executed in the same media used by artists, are not meant to be offered as “art.” Rather, they are meant to suggest that the social realities of racism and sexism not only define art and cultural production, but are in turn defined by it, that our representations – even “beauty,” “pleasure,” and “painting”—participate in the construction of lived experience.¹¹

another perspective is perceived as provocative and exclusionary. The lack of a uniform definition of the term provides space for misunderstanding and breaking of taboos.

⁸ The consciously polarizing interpretation of “political correctness” given here highlights the impossible balancing act of finding a definition and formulation that is acceptable for everyone when there is a general tendency to accord one’s own opinion more weight, and more importance.

⁹ The exhibition was discussed very controversially. Although the view of art beyond the scheme of “white male painting” met with agreement, denounced among other things was that, first of all, painting takes on only a marginal role, and the success of women and minority artists seems to be tied closely to their own fate, which has been shaped by discrimination. There is a noteworthy difference between the rather positive-critical statements of the women critics and the consistently more negative ones of their men colleagues. What they all have in common is affiliation with the white, upper class. Cf. Roberta Smith, “At the Whitney, a Biennial with a social conscience,” in *The New York Times*, March 5, 1993, www.nytimes.com/1993/03/05/arts/at-the-whitney-a-biennial-with-a-social-conscience.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm [24.10.2013]; Matthias Mattuseck, “Kunst als Schauprozeß,” in *Der Spiegel*, April 12, 1993, pp. 228–232; Hilton Als, Laura Cottingham, “The Pleasure Principled. The 1993 Whitney Biennale,” in *Frieze 10*, May 1993, pp. 10–15, www.frieze.com/issue/print_article/the_pleasure_principled/ [October 24, 2013].

On the reception of the 1993 Whitney Biennale see, among others, a statement by the curator Elisabeth Sussman: blip.tv/whitneyorg/2012-biennial-curating-the-1993-biennial-5981267 [24 October 2013]; *Jerry Saltz on ‘93 in Art*, in *New York Magazine*, February 3, 2013, nymag.com/arts/art/features/jerry-saltz-1993-art [October 24, 2013].

¹⁰ www.rodnekingvideo.com.ar/ [November 1, 2013]. Holliday published the video and it was subsequently present in nearly all U.S. media. The police officers’ acquittal nearly one year later sparked riots in Los Angeles that left fifty dead and thousands injured.

¹¹ Hilton Als, Laura Cottingham, “The Pleasure Principled. The 1993 Whitney Biennale,” in *Frieze 10*, May 1993, pp. 10–15, www.frieze.com/issue/print_article/the_pleasure_principled/ [October 24, 2013]. With the reference to sexism, the

The video as quasi-byproduct, is thereby placed on equal footing alongside video works of a decidedly artistic intent, and set in dialogue with them.

In 1993, the integration of an amateur video presented a novelty, not only in an art context. In the meantime, publications by private users have become part of everyday life, and are received directly—also artistically. As in the case mentioned above, due to their media presence, many of these images have embedded themselves in our collective memory.¹²

In her work, Boukal, too, falls back on these extensive collections of photographs and videos found online, distributed in various media and social forums. The questions they raise apply not only to the treatment of visual material, but also the effect on viewers. Although the material published online is constantly accused and convicted of fabrication, it is generally received as documentation or reflection of reality. To what extent is the validity of these images challenged? What do they leave behind when they are replaced—or in the best case, supplemented—by the most recent photographs? Do individual images actually stay “stuck” or does memory combine the mass of visual impulses to a single overall image in each case? As reference to the technique of collage, Boukal develops photo montages that emerge in different ways in her work, whereby she carries out two different modes of processing: in one, she brings together elements of different photographs in digital and analog form in her *Rewind* series, and in another, the collage first forms in the mind of the beholder through the abundance of individual works presented as an installation in the *Unfinished* series .

The *Rewind* work group, which currently consists of three series, deals with the sites of historical events. In the context of her research trips, Boukal visited historically-significant locations and examined how much of their former meaning is still present and tangible; how these sites are being dealt with. She compiled her own extensive photographic documentation rooted in the present day, based on material from the archives, and ultimately linked the two in—in part, computer generated—photo montages. In doing so, she not only visualized how differently the handling of the once auratic sites can be, but also successfully presents a space-time continuum in which past and present merge, forming a suggestive outline for the future.

authors refer to a series of drawings of young, women rape victims that Nancy Spero included in an exhibition focusing on women artists at the Richard Anderson Gallery in New York that were previously published in the city's newspapers and were not produced explicitly as art.

¹² In Egypt, in particular, this occurred so intensely that the viewing of photos of the revolts on the Day of Rage was so internalized by many that they had the feeling of having been there themselves. (I thank the artist for the information about this situation).

The first part of the series, *Rewind: Pablo's Portrait* (2008), shows the residence of the Columbian drug baron Pablo Escobar. In the 1980s, "El Patron" headed the world's largest and most powerful drug cartel. Although he is responsible for the death of thousands—not only by means of the drugs he distributed, but also through the targeted contract murders of those he wanted to get rid of—he does not have a purely negative reputation. Escobar invested several million dollars in, among other things, the development of schools, parks, churches, and residential facilities for the poor in his hometown Medellín. After his execution, Hacienda Nápoles, which he had built, was left to decay. Boukal counters our awareness of her photographs as being current with antique-looking sepia tones. The decay of the building, obviously situated in the present day, and the old appearance of the photographs contradict one another. This effect is reinforced as soon as the beholder recognizes that the artist has breathed life back into the ruins in colorful details that should have been there—chronologically—before the decline. The fireproof enamel on which the photos are mounted, with its function as a protective coating against the corrosion of the carrying material, refers to the history of the Hacienda. Despite the deterioration of the building, Pablo Escobar's ambivalent fame remains unbroken.¹³

Kehlsteinhaus, the "Eagle's Nest" in Obersalzberg, a representative building given by the NSDAP to Adolf Hitler as a gift for his fiftieth birthday, ranks between the poles of a place for coming to terms with history and Nazi pilgrimage site. The former so-called *Führersperrgebiet* (restricted zone for the Führer) was first preserved as an excursion site before being appropriately rehabilitated by the opening of the current documentation center in 1999. *Rewind: Obersalzberg*, the second part of the series, links propaganda photos¹⁴ from the Nazi era with photos that the artist took in 2009 and reverses the color processing of the photographic elements as compared to *Pablo's Portrait*, that is, she represents them in their "correct" coloration, as it were. Hitler—taken from black-and-white archive photos—accompanied by his peers and radiating carefreeness, is inscribed in colorful present day tourist photos in the same way that his propaganda has become embossed in the building and remains tangible. The pictures from World War II are embedded in Europe's collective memory, like the photos of the Vietnam War in the U.S.'

David Claerbout proceeds in a similar way in his video *Vietnam 1967, near Duc Pho (Reconstruction after Hiromishi Mine)* (2001) [Abb. xxx]. By inscribing the black-and-white photographs of a military

¹³ The grounds have meanwhile been turned into an amusement park. To date, the Villa has not yet been renovated. www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1225724/The-Pablo-Escobar-theme-park-Former-home-Colombian-drug-lord-turned-bizarre-tourist-attraction.html [2 October 2013].

¹⁴ Among others, an article on Adolf Hitler and his residence in Obersalzberg in the British home and living magazine *House & Garden* from November 1938 portrays an image of the "private" side of the Führer far removed from any political critique.

transport gunned down by “friendly fire” into a marginally animated video image of the current landscape, he breaks through the chronological process of historicizing and concentrates the events within a brief moment.¹⁵ In her *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967–1972) [ill. xx] series, Martha Rosler also uses collage as a means of criticizing the treatment of war photos in media such as newspapers and television. In her montages, Rosler openly denounces the fact that these media enable direct news coverage of all sorts of political events, but the threshold into the trusted home is not, or cannot be truly crossed. In news magazines, such as *Life Magazine*, in particular, photographs documenting the horrors of the Vietnam War were used on a par with photographs of living spaces of America’s high society within the framework of the advertisements and articles in a single issue. However, the series’ title, *House Beautiful*, refers to the eponymous U.S.-American home and living magazine. In her collages, which bring together these opposing magazine sections, Rosler obliterates the distance between “here” and “there” and no longer permits any differentiating localization.¹⁶ The news coverage on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq led the artist to draw obvious comparisons with the Vietnam War and express them in an additional series, which again criticizes the political manipulability of the U.S.-Americans at the hands of the media.¹⁷ [ill.xxx]

Similar to Martha Rosler, Tanja Boukal also understands her works as interim results of an extensive thought process with regard to the critique of the un-reflected use of media images in everyday life. For both, the selection of a suitable material for each work is of great importance. Because of the different themes, this leads to a great diversity in production methods, which complicates classification of the work.¹⁸ For example, for *Rewind: Obersalzberg* Boukal chose stones that she had gathered on site, and transferred her photo collages directly onto their surfaces. With that, what occurs is not only a further attempt to translate the inscribing of history in a site, but even more, Boukal brings the *Führersperrgebiet* directly into the space where the series is presented.

In the third part of the *Rewind* series, Tanja Boukal takes the “inscribing of history in a site,” almost literally. In her most recent work—*Rewind: Revolution* (2013)—she turns to Tahrir Square in Cairo and illustrates the extent to which this central scene of the Egyptian revolution has changed within a

¹⁵ Cf. Ralf Beil, “Der Krieg jenseits von Wikileaks und Tagesschau. Vorwort und Dank,” in *Serious Games. Krieg | Medien | Kunst*, eds. Ralf Beil, Antje Ehmann, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag 2011, p. 8; Gabriele Mackert, “David Claerbout,” in *Attack! Kunst und Krieg in den Zeiten der Medien*, Vienna: Steidl, Kunsthalle Wien 2003, p. 82.

¹⁶ Cf. Laura Cottingham, *The War is Always Home: Martha Rosler*, New York 1991.

www.martharosler.net/reviews/cottingham.html [6 September 2013]; *Martha Rosler. Positionen in der Lebenswelt*, ed. Sabine Breitwieser, Vienna: Generali Foundation / Cologne: Walter König 1999, here, especially pp. 28–47, pp. 151–186, pp. 355–357, p. 358 (with a reference to the installation working with similar elements *B-52 in Baby’s Tears* from 1972); Paco Barragán, “Face to Face. Interview with Martha Rosler,” in *Artpulse Magazine*, 2011, artpulsemagazine.com/interview-with-martha-rosler [25 October 2013].

¹⁷ Cf. Gregg Cook, “Of War and Remembrance. Martha Rosler’s Montages Conjure Vietnam and Iraq,” in *The Boston Globe*, November 11, 2007, quoted in: *Serious Games. Krieg | Medien | Kunst* (see note 15), pp. 146–147.

¹⁸ Cf. Benjamin Buchloh, “Gespräch mit Martha Rosler,” in *Martha Rosler. Positionen in der Lebenswelt* (see note 16), p. 62.

two-year period. The two pictorial levels, which merge first in the eyes of the beholders, are clearly separated from one another in terms of material: the artist engraved portraits of individuals, taken from press photos from the Day of Rage, January 25, 2011, into Plexiglas. She mounted these with spacers as foreground onto prints of her own photographs, produced in a Diasec process, and taken on the anniversary of the Day of Rage in 2012 and 2013 at the same scene from the same angle as the original press photos from 2011. Therefore, the two elements unite to form a new whole: the relevant historical moment has passed, the revolution, however, remains omnipresent. The street's function as a stage is ongoing.

The *Unfinished* series, which began in 2011, realized in a satin-stitch-oriented embroidery technique and currently comprising seventy-five photos, is reminiscent of a collage in the remotest sense¹⁹. Thematically it is tied to the previously mentioned third part of the *Rewind* series. Both draw from the same fund of pictorial material on the Egyptian revolution as an important movement in the context of the Arab Spring. The seemingly endless collection of official press photos that Boukal gathered, the amateur photos and video (still)s distributed via social media, as well as her own photographs merge to form a nearly seamless compendium of events on and around Tahrir Square since 2011. Parallel to that, the artist also engaged in intense, on-site research, conducted interviews with participants, and through their help she was able to be present, indirectly, at the center of action.

The work focuses on the role of women in the Egyptian revolution: women were among the first to occupy Tahrir Square in Cairo. They protested there side-by-side with men for the first time, and spent the night there together with them in tents. This alone makes clear all that was suddenly possible and conceivable. In contrast to that, politics is now again trying to limit women's rights and their presence in public.²⁰ They are currently openly opposing that for the first time and are also condemning the aggressors among their own ranks.

While the photos in the *Die im Dunkeln sieht man nicht* series present women activists [see ill. p. xxx] who are rarely or not at all present in (Western) media, but are known, in part by name, and celebrated within their relevant circles, here it is primarily anonymous people who have achieved international renown through their active participation and media presence. Individual women, such as "the woman in the blue bra,"²¹ whose identity could not be determined, became icons through

¹⁹ Satin stitch is also known as brick stich when stepped shades of yarn are used.

²⁰ Women were decisively involved in numerous revolutions, such as the French revolution. They were, however, largely excluded from public life in the patriarchal-oriented constitution resulting from this.

²¹ Numerous media reported on the incident on December 17, 2011, cf. among others, Julia Gerlach and Michael Thumann: "Die Revolution frisst ihre Frauen," in *Die Zeit*, print edition, February 2, 2012, online edition February 7, 2012, <http://www.zeit.de/2012/06/DOS-Aegypten/komplettansicht> [November 4, 2013].

intense dissemination, in this case of video material about the physical violence that she suffered at the hands of the police.

Boukal isolates individual women from the colorful context as “unfinished,” incomplete outlines. This reveals a view of the white picture ground—a white cotton cloth. In many cultures, the color white has an important symbolic function. In Christianity, for example, it stands for innocence, purity, light, and truth. In the Arab world it is the color of luck and happiness. In *El Tres de Mayo (The Third of May, 1808)* by Francisco de Goya y Lucientes²² [ill. xxx], one of the revolutionaries opposing Spain’s subjugation at the hands of Napoleonic France is highlighted as a martyr in a white shirt. Also many of the women in Boukal’s series of works embody certain martyr-like roles when they fight for the rights of women, among other things, and are punished for that with sexual violence. The graphic accentuation represents, on the one hand, the “unfinished revolution,” and on the other, the new self-awareness of Egyptian women, who are represented here—with and without headdress—as equals in terms of their ideology.

The material that Boukal chooses in this context contributes to enhancing the meaning by means of its inherent history: embroidery is considered an extremely private medium, especially in the twentieth century—commensurate works by Tracey Emin come to mind; or the late work by Louise Bourgeois. This technique became an organ for political agitation mainly in the context of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1960s and 1970s.²³ With the slogan, “The personal is political,” the movement’s protagonists pointed to the influence and power that politics has over private life. The feminist artists of this era were active participants in the political movement and understood

²² Goya was a precise and extremely critical observer of political developments of his era in Spain. With the folder *Los Desastres de la Guerra (The Horrors of the War)*, produced from 1810 to 1820, but first published in 1863, thirty-five years after his death, he delivered an unvarnished and critical commentary on the atrocities that the Napoleonic soldiers had carried out against the Spanish population in the course of crushing the uprising against French control.

²³ On the role of embroidery as a subversively employed medium, especially in a feminist sense, see, in particular, Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch. Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, New York: T.B. Tauris 2010 [first published 1984]. Although the book focuses on the development of embroidery as an artistic medium in Great Britain, Parker adds in references to international trends in important passages. Particularly worthy of mentioning here is the reference to the Craftivism movement founded by the British sociologist Betsy Greer, which focused on an opposition of a “masculine” war and “female” crafts—see craftivism.com [November 1, 2013]. In addition, it must also be emphasized that the English term “craft” can only be insufficiently translated into German as *Kunsth Handwerk* and that the standing of arts-and-crafts technologies is much greater and more positive in the Anglo-American world, as well as in Asian and African regions than in German-speaking areas.

A first overview of contemporary positions of embroidery in art was offered by the exhibition “Pricked: Extreme Embroidery,” which was at the New York Museum of Arts and Design in 2007/08—accompanied by a catalogue. For the trained embroiderer Tanja Boukal, this exhibition and the previous one, “Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting” (2007) were pivotal in sharpening her awareness of how to work in an artistic context using these techniques and materials. The first comprehensive German-language publication, which did not, however, refer exclusively to embroidery, was published in 2011, *Craftista! Handarbeit als Aktivismus*, ed. by Critical Crafting Circle – Elke Gaugele, Sonja Eismann, Verena Kuni, Elke Zobl, Mainz: Ventil-Verlag.

All publications mention that the feminization of working with textiles, in general, first became manifest through industrialization (although already beginning in the Renaissance, there was a tendency to categorize specific techniques as women’s amateur creation).

their work as a challenge to woman's position in society, and as opposition to repression and subordination.²⁴ Textile handwork was, however, not used for the first time as a subversive means of resistance during this era, but, for example, had already been implemented in the French Revolution by the Tricoteuses, or at the turn to the twentieth century in the context of the first women's rights movement.²⁵

As an assemblage, the stitched images in the *Unfinished* series produce a time-compacted and thereby collaged total picture, which obtains an ornamental character through the repetition of the same steadfast principle of colorfully condensed masses and individuals highlighted in black-and-white. Although the series is explicitly concerned with women, focus is not on individuals, but rather, their visibility. To the extent that histories—like in the introductory quote—are almost exclusively written by hunters, by winners; women remain underrepresented therein. With her series, Boukal underlines their key role in Egypt's hoped for development into a democracy. Already in 2011, political scientists had predicted an "unfinished" revolution; but the societal transformation was unstoppable. The dual perception of embroidery as a medium of resistance for women, and at the same time, a source of (social) constraint also mirrors Egyptian women's search for a new definition of their role within this societal transformation.²⁶

Die im Dunkeln sieht man nicht (2010–2013) is the second series in which Boukal grapples with women's visibility. In this case, she presents women who participated in revolutionary actions on the front lines and in armed violence. In armed conflicts, in particular, women are usually portrayed in stereotypical roles, such as victims, sufferers, or (medical) helpers. Yet, women actively participate throughout the world as combatants, bandits, guerillas, and suicide bombers. In the (Western) media they appear, if at all, on the margins of news coverage or are mentioned as a sensation. Boukal set off in search of their tracks and chose a total of ten women from different backgrounds whose "portraits with weapons" she found in media reports. Each of these women had a reason to take up arms, and the choice of personalities makes clear how radically women act when they are given the chance to do so. For them, there is much more at stake than the defense of an ideology. Comandante Maria from Columbia, Comandanta Ramona from Chiapas,²⁷ Dzhennet

²⁴ Cf. Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch* (see note 23), pp. XIV, XV.

²⁵ Cf. on this, among others Elke Gaugele, "Revolutionäre Strickerinnen, Textilaktivist_innen und die Militarisierung der Wolle. Handarbeit und Feminismus in der Moderne," in *Craftista!* (see note 23), pp. 15–28.

²⁶ Cf. Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch* (see note 23), p. XIX.

²⁷ As Zapatist representative, Comandanta Ramona is the only one who hides her face here behind a ski mask. The mask stands for the women activists as projection screen "for multiple identifications beyond the immediate struggle of the Zapatists." Only the Zapatists understand themselves expressly as an organ for excluded women, forgotten indigenous people, pursued homosexuals, condemned youth, battered immigrants, etc., cf. also, Oliver Machart, Marion Hamm, "Prekäre Bilder – Bilder des Prekären. Anmerkungen zur Bildproduktion post-identitärer sozialer Bewegungen," in *Bilder und Gemeinschaften* (see note 5), pp. 377–398, here p. 378.

Abdurakhmanova from Chechen, Leila Khaled from Palestine, Phoolan Devi from India, Sarah Ginaite from Lithuania, Marina Ginestà Coloma from Spain, and Simone Segouin from France and two anonymous soldiers from Liberia and Myanmar were more than simply on equal footing with men as combatants. They also, in part, led women's groups or were the key figures in resistance movements. Often celebrated as heroes within their own groups and countries, in the Western world they are barely perceived, or derogatorily classified as terrorists.

Boukal transferred the portraits of these women into the satin stitch technique that she developed. Emerging from this are pictures that when viewed frontally, represent white and black vertical stripes, that is, an abstraction. The depiction becomes recognizable only when viewers move, that is, literally take on a different point of view. The visual effect is created based on the differing heights of the right or left (smooth or reverse) knitted stitches in combination with the switching of the black and white colors.²⁸

The feedback given on these works—and also the previously produced *Schöner Wohnen* (2007/08) and *All That Glitter and Gold* (2010) series²⁹—makes especially clear how important, on the one hand, the subliminal character of the material is, and on the other hand, the confusion triggered in viewers by the contrast between material and subject.³⁰ The discussion of content is often opened by discussing technique: both, though, are afflicted with prejudices which they address openly. And that precisely is the sticking point of the works: the more intense the theme, or the photos, the “cuddlier” the material. As an act of criticism, they hit the mark.

As wall objects, Boukal's works made from wool and yarn follow a tradition that has experienced new heydays since antiquity: wall coverings made of wool provided warmth and insulation and also had an educational function as tapestries. Historical events, biblical themes, the ideal image of the Garden of Eden, and socio-political education in the manner of the court were major themes of the tapestries. Nowadays, wool—in knitted and woven form—is associated mainly with a sense of security, a cozy home. Almost automatically, charming motifs come to mind, of a more floral,

²⁸ “Right stitch flat, left stitch raised. That makes it possible to control which color is visible. With a frontal view of the embroidered piece, the stitches look alike, but from an angle, only the raised stitches are visible. So if you want to make the light colors visible, then these colors have to appear with left stitches on the front side. In the following row, with the dark color, on the contrary, this part is stitched so that it appears on the right on the front side. So if you look at the work from the side, the light stitches are visible, the dark step back.” (Tanja Boukal)

²⁹ These two work groups thematize, for one, the homeless at Vienna's Karlsplatz, and for another, the inhumane situation of refugees who are confronted in the supposed paradise of Europe with deportation, prostitution, and xenophobia among other things.

³⁰ The confusion can be so intense that the artist is confronted with the question of whether she could possibly knit more “beautiful” motifs. A different material other than wool or yarn would hardly provoke such a question.

decorative sort, intended for women's domestic leisure.³¹ One of the first German artists who broke with this tradition was Rosemarie Trockel in the mid-1980s. She dissolved the technique of knitting from all practical functions and discovered a concise approach to needle and thread.³² Tanja Boukal also breaks from instilled ideas through the transfer of media images in arts-and-crafts techniques that recreate, in analogue form, the pixel-based structure of the digital models. In the *Am Seidenen Faden* series, in time-consuming handwork techniques she expresses the despair of the refugees who arrive in Europe by sea and find no end to their destitution there. In stitches using as many as 220 colors she copies the newspaper clipping that serves as her model, pixel for pixel. The white, cabinet-like frame suggests purity, sublimity, the perfect space in which the pictures of the refugees have a place, but the refugees themselves, don't. The restrictive treatment of refugees in "fortress Europe" remains unbroken, but apparently, this theme is also an irresolvable one, constantly taken up by the media, but not personally affecting the majority of Europeans. The "Paradise Europe" is and remains a dream for many, just as cordoned off as the ancient gardens originally designated by this name.³³ This leads us back to the late-medieval paradise gardens on the tapestries used as a base for the stitched *All That Glitter and Gold* images—a conceptual continuation of the stranded refugees' journey.

Exclusions from a society do not stop at its own citizens when they—for whatever reason—no longer participate in economic life or are only marginally capable of doing so. Boukal became intensely involved with the homeless people that she photographed at Vienna's Karlsplatz for *Schöner Wohnen*; she spent a great deal of time with them, and in doing so gained insight into their everyday lives. Through rituals that allow them to create a certain amount of home in public space the people portrayed create the comfort and warmth suggested by the cashmere wool blankets that the photographs were worked into. They have already given up the struggle for a better life, come to terms with their situation, and now prefer an anonymous life outside of the "system."

*Revolutions happen because the humans need them to feel human. Otherwise they would not exist. Required are these moments in life in which you can no longer let yourself be debased and you go on the street to maintain your human dignity.*³⁴

³¹ On the "origins of femininity," see the first chapter in Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch* (see note 23), pp. 1–16. Elsbeth Wallnöfer deals with the categorization of arts-and-crafts as woman's activity, its historical roots, and a break with its naïve-domestic, or folksy character in "Juckende Strumpfhosen und andere außerhäusliche Gemütlichkeiten," in *Craftista!* (see note 23), pp. 43–48.

³² Ibid. p. 43. What differentiates Rosemarie Trockel from other artists working with textiles is mainly her status as one of the most highly-priced artists within an art market dominated by men.

³³ The Old Iranian root of the word "paradise" means "an area surrounded by walls."

³⁴ Michail Schischkin, "Der russisch-siamesische Zwilling," in *Du*, no. 838, July/August 2013, p. 16.

An active, albeit ultimately unproductive battle against the system is thematized in the fifty-six-part *That's What They Said* series. As is symptomatic of many protest movements in recent years, the civil disturbance in England in 2011 began with a peaceful demonstration by residents of London's Tottenham neighborhood. Subsequently, the demonstration escalated and set off further riots in other cities in Great Britain. As a reference to the controversial discussions by humanists and social scientists as to whether the riots were politically motivated, Boukal wrote political election slogans that British parties have used since the 1950s over photos of the riots published on Flickr. Economic relations within Great Britain and the effects on mainly the poorest groups within the population are themes in both the discussion and the slogans. By treating all of the slogans the same, regardless of their political alignment, Boukal highlighted politics' general ignorance of a crucial sector of the population that fought against its own social exclusion by means of the riots. The mass of photos, which amounts to a cry for help, are written over with the homogeneously designed election slogans.

In the installation *Revolution Will Not Be Televised*³⁵, Boukal counteracts the media's fleetingness by inscribing stitched still images of specific correspondents into analogue televisions. In contrast to today's devices, these television apparatuses seem antiquated. Their technology is outdated, in the same way that the news that they deliver often outdates itself minute-by-minute. A statement by the German-Egyptian journalist Karim El-Gawhary, in particular, points out, however, that despite the rapid pace of events, a revolution needs time—time to form, to stimulate change, and to introduce and reinforce the corresponding socio-political innovations, "I do not understand, did everyone think that they could call for freedom at the pizza shop and have it delivered for free?"

The threads on which the work of the artist Tanja Boukal are oriented are political events, social ruptures, confrontation with the role of one's own person in a complex social fabric shaped by history, traditions, culture, and media, and the ephemeral moment of the numerous photographic documentations of socio-political and revolutionary events in the mass media. The bracket is formed by a certain degree of luxury, which in the form of a lengthy confrontation with the images allows us to lead an open discourse between art and politics, permits tensions between intentionality and effect, and offers no hidden, harmonious answers.³⁶ Tanja Boukal prompts visitors to look more

³⁵ The title refers to the poem and song by the Afro-American musician and poet Gil Scott-Heron published in 1969/70, which—in the spirit of the U.S. civil rights movement calls the Afro-American population to wake up from the lethargy of drug and media consumption and actively fight against the racism embedded deep in society.

³⁶ Cf. Helmut Draxler, "Der Fluch der guten Tat. Autonomieanspruch und Ideologieverdacht in der politischen Kunst," in *Texte zur Kunst*, December 2010, 20th edition, no. 80 (special edition, 20 Jahre Texte zur Kunst, Politische Kunst?), G 10572, pp. 35–41.

closely, to work out the images and consequently embed them in memory. She clarifies that every individual's driving power alone makes change possible. In doing so, rather than formulate a melancholic critique, she presents characters who, through active intervention, can convert the potentiality of a change in the status quo into reality.³⁷

³⁷ Cf. Maria Muehle, "Politische Kunst als ästhetischer Realismus oder Leidenschaft des Realen?" in *Texte zur Kunst* (see note 36), pp. 67–75.