

THE HALF-TRUTH, 50 TIMES PER SECOND
by Frauke Ellsel

In a church persons of different generations stand next to each other, a woman holds a child in a baptise suit in her arms. All of them look in the same direction and smile. It is the moment of the family party, when the original cause, the act of christening, is already over and a second ritual event takes place: A photographer takes photographs of the members of the group, takes one picture after the other. In the six-minute-video Frozen Moments (2002) Stefan Demming has cut up fragments of this scene in a way that we as spectators almost watch a permanent photo flash storm. The group of images called The Half-Truth (2003/4) has its origins in the same material. Some of the stills of the video as well as extremely zoomed-in pieces have become paper images again. A number of persons are shown as larger-than-life portraits. The prints are crossed by horizontal white lines. As if standing behind a venetian blind they snatch out of our view. From some distance the contours of the different persons can be discerned.

However, the closer one approaches, the less one recognizes. Like in Op Art the depicted objects start to flicker and can hardly be focused. Although the stills form the moving medium video were fixed on the static base of a paper print, something like an incertitude of sight comes up, a motion that Stefan Demming calls "Verschwindigkeit" (merging the German word Verschwinden: disappearance/vanishing and Geschwindigkeit: velocity/speed). The stills show everything the photographer standing in "normal" light is flashing at, in a bright light which in its enlargement can be recognized as a striped image. These stripes emerge from the specific quality of the medium video.

The video images are constituted as half images 50 times per second. Even and uneven lines alternate. A flash is so fast (faster than the fiftieth part of a second), that it only enlightens one of the half images of the video, which turns into a bright or even white image. In the film Le Petit Soldat (1960) by Jean-Luc Godard the hero Bruno, a photographer, says while taking photos of Veronica: "If you take pictures of a face (...) you also take pictures of the soul behind".

Veronica, however, feels as if she was interrogated by the police during the whole photo session. Bruno replies: "It's a little bit like that. Photography, that's the truth and cinema, that's 24 times the truth per second".

This comment which Godard chooses to criticize the truth photographs and film images can contain is taken up in Demming's video stills and transferred onto the horizon of digital image production: 50 times the half-truth per second. Not only the ability to show "true" reality is doubted, the emphasis is also shifted to the materiality of digital recording. Due to the different technical conditions applied in stills, the images have a special character. Two non-simultaneous moments become visible in one image. Some of the figures are thus caught behind a veil which gives them an air of creepy ghosts.

The photographer in charge of recording the act of christening in images and thus saving it from the transitoriness of the moment, is standing in front of this veil. The fact that he is seen from behind, the typical poses but most of all the lury blaze of the flashlight that enlightens the whole space in front of him, give him a special role.

He is our substitute as a spectator in the video and the prints. Like in the photographs of e.g. Thomas Struth in which we can see a photo of somebody watching an original painting, the different levels of the viewer and the viewed, image space and real space, original and reproduction, as well as a shift of medium - in one case from painting to photography, in another from analogous to digital film recording - are emphasized.

However, in this case, the substitute is not a passive observer but an active "picture taker" - he is thus even more an avatar of the artist himself, who here captures the situation as well. By the shift of perspective from the photographer in the image to the picture taker Stefan Demming the photographic object changes, too: Demming is taking pictures of the photographer taking photographs. "To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge", says Susan Sontag.

In the prints it is not only the visible world that Stefan Demming appropriates by researching and seeking knowledge. The Half-Truth takes the act of photographing itself as a matter of research. By the translation of photography into the digital video format and finally back to the prints with the semblance of analogous photography it is somehow achieved to make the invisible visible. The "ritual character of photography" (Pierre Bourdieu), that means its social function on the one and the technical conditions of the recording process on the other hand, becomes visually perceivable by the combination of different media.

1 Sontag, Susan, On Photography, 1977

