

Discovery

A discussion with Sladjan Nedeljkovic

By Matthias Haldemann

Dear Sladjan,

In your video works, you closely examine the electronic mass media and also look into how we are informed by these media, i.e. where the border lies between fiction, or manipulation, and reality, how our view of the world is created, and who shapes it — through external domination.

At your upcoming solo exhibition at Kunsthaus Zug, you will not be showing any video works. You are currently preparing a new series, the **Constellations**, pieces that comprise many individual photographs. You have been working on the **Constellations** project for some time. How did this cycle of works come about?

Dear Matthias,

Already during my studies at Geneva University of Art and Design, I was interested in juxtaposing images. I collected pictures and put them up on the studio wall. It was a very eclectic mix of items: invitations, post-cards, newspaper images, my own photos, drawings, computer printouts, collages, etc. I was fascinated by the pictorial universe, but I didn't know how to make it into a work of art.

Only several years later, when I moved to Berlin, did I have the idea to create artworks by using many images. It was important to become acquainted with various artistic positions, such as those of Hans-Peter Feldmann, Gerhard Richter, Isa Genzken or Wolfgang Tillmans. Works by these artists gave me ideas about how such collections of images can be presented.

First of all, the way in which an image collection is presented differs fundamentally from your video works. The latter have a predetermined linear sequence that the viewer must follow. You frequently link the "moving images" to a voice or subtitles, like in cinema. All of these techniques are employed in a story-telling fashion. The viewer listens or reads along

and tries to make the textual and image-related subject matter correlate — an attempt that often fails. His or her expectations are not fulfilled.

By contrast, the multifaceted **Constellations** are much freer and more open. There is no prescribed direction in which they are to be surveyed. Rather the viewer's eye wanders around the large field of images, stops at one point, then jumps to another, or simply meanders across the work's entire surface. For you, what is the relation between "moving" and "still" images?

It's true that my videos are narrative. The text plays a key role, because it interacts with the images and soundtrack to lead the viewer through the "story." After having worked with video intensively for many years, during which time I discovered that certain repetitions occur, I decided to create photographic works. What resulted were pieces like **Untitled (Where the truth lies)**, **Untitled (Framework conditions)**, the **Constellations** cycle, and **Untitled (Covering)**.

In a way, film and video are more complex media than photography — they allow you to work with sound, image, text, and duration. Photographs capture "only" a specific moment. In **Constellations**, I place many images next to each other, thereby creating a kind of narrative structure: two or more juxtaposed images can generate a new image, new associations — a new "movie," if you like.

First and foremost, it is the striking frame that creates a common reference in the **Constellations**, because it surrounds all of the parts. But do the parts actually belong together? I think this is initially just an assertion. I ask myself: Which photos did you take yourself? Which did you gather and make part of your collection? Where are they originally from? The external context is missing, so that the photos to some extent take on a life of their own. But in effect we only become truly conscious of their image status because their content is obscured. Does the same not also apply to your videos, which include, among other things, television footage? It appears that you are consciously aiming to make the viewers

feel insecure, since they have no way of knowing where the images come from and who made them? Are you playing with the idea of the “unknown author”?

The stories that are told and alluded to in the videos are often fragmentary. This can trigger insecurity in viewers because they do not follow a conventional format. There are unexpected and surprising transitions, visual and audible interference, breaks, abrupt cuts ... There is friction between the images, sound, and text. These overlap, diverge, and converge. The textual statements often differ from what the images portray. I intentionally employed elements of insecurity and alienation to rouse viewers out of their passive role and get them to become more active. Viewers are invited to become a part of the action, fill in the blanks, and complete the implied picture.

That said, there are similarities between the video works and **Constellations**. There is insecurity and alienation in the **Constellations** as well — where there is no text that guides you through how to view one image or the whole collection. While there is a clear formal structure, there are also endless angles from which to approach the work.

What criteria do you use when looking for and collecting images? And how do you take your own pictures? Do you have a predetermined concept — which I assume you do not — or do you “collect” photographs with your camera during everyday life?

How do I collect pictures? I have no clearly defined rules. I mostly react intuitively to photos, cutting them out of newspapers because I find the story that accompanies them interesting, or because a picture has certain formal qualities, etc. Often I file away an image and rediscover it some time later.

My picture-taking technique is that of a “flâneur”. I love spontaneity, randomness, surprises, discoveries. From a great number of photos, I glean a few useful ones — if I’m lucky. There are some works, such as the video **Transformers** (2004), where the setting was planned from begin-

ning to end: the decoration, the table, the posters on the walls, the protagonists' outfits, etc. Good photos are sometimes shot unintentionally. You don't see whether a photo is good or not until the moment it gets printed out or displayed on a screen. I am much more interested in photographs that already exist than in creating new ones.

Does this mean that **Constellations** is about the border between images that are your own, and those that are not? While this line is blurred, the outer frame is a fixed, unmovable border; it clearly separates the art from the reality that surrounds it. The frame turns the plethora of images into an object.

Artists such as Tillmans, who work with similar pictorial constellations, choose not to use a frame and instead place photos directly on the wall. Your works are different. Can you say something about "borders"?

The border between my own pictures and those that I take from other sources has been intentionally obscured. It is not clear where the realm of the personal begins and the public domain ends, or vice versa.

Since I work with "cheap" materials (photocopies, cut-out images from newspapers, etc.), I thought it was important to enhance the "composition" with an open frame. The frame performs several functions. It creates a pictorial group and separates the artworks from one another. In that respect, each **Constellation** is an independent work that is limited by its border. The provisional effect achieved by using pins for hanging up pictures indicates that the **Constellations** are mutable. Since I do not pin images on all corners, the images gain a third dimension. The paper changes shape, it becomes wavy and curls up. The frame enhances this three-dimensional effect. After lots of experimenting, I arrived at a solution for presentation that satisfies me and does the work justice: the open frame.

I like the term "open frame," also as a metaphor for your **Constellations**. They really do appear to be open and to have a border at the same time. The borders are so large that a kind of open space is created within

for the individual pictures. Their interrelationship seems to be both predetermined and open at the same time.

As you say, pinning up the images has a provisional and everyday feeling to it, because their position can be changed. The work, which is actually finished, remains open. The meaning of the piece is not definitive, but rather one of many possible “constellations.” Do you believe images are fleeting and capable of motion?

It is our head that is capable of motion. Francis Picabia once said: “Our heads are round so that thoughts can change direction.” Images can move, they are elastic and manipulable. They can be rotated and distorted. They grow feet and begin to wander about. And all of a sudden you discover them in totally unexpected places. I see parallels between **Constellations** and the videos, in which of course a great number of images are put together to create a film. The individual image does not appear to be that important. What is important is the role it plays in relation to the whole. I think that the fleeting and ephemeral have always been present in my work. This is the case in the drawings, the videos, and the photographic pieces. I’ve got to remain open and on the move — and stay on the ball, as it were.

Despite all of the temporality and predetermined indeterminateness, is there not also often an underlying theme to **Constellations**? I do not mean that they simply illustrate a topic. Rather, a theme functions as a basis for your work and pictorial research. For example, in 2008 you participated in a group exhibition in Berlin that was held at Platz der Vereinten Nationen and dealt with it as a central location in former East Berlin. Does the relationship between West and East play a role in your work?

The first **Constellations** were freely assembled, and the images were pinned up very close to one another. Later, I had the idea of also “composing” thematic **Constellations**. The Platz der Vereinten Nationen exhibition in Berlin, for which several artists were invited to examine this public space and the transformations it has undergone, is a good example.

le. For the Kunsthaus Zug exhibition I have prepared several thematic **Constellations**, i.e. works that relate to specific individuals, places or spaces.

I was aware of the cultural differences between East and West at a relatively early age, because I experienced these myself. I was born in Yugoslavia, which was a socialist state at the time. At the age of twelve I moved to Switzerland, which has been my home since then. Already as a child I saw that people live differently in these two countries, with different customs and traditions. This realization led to me question things early on that for many are self-evident.

I do think however that the relationship between East and West does not directly play a role in my work. I see myself as a global citizen, and I feel at home in both the East and the West.

And yet Berlin is a suitable place for a global citizen who walks the line between East and West. Can you say something about the individual themes of the new **Constellations** that you created for the Zug exhibition? Do they have titles?

The **Constellations** will have titles, yes. The works will be formally and thematically composed. I do not want to give too much away right now, because the works are still being created. Much can change by July 2010.

You collect lots of pictorial material and use many photos in your **Constellations**. This reminds me of the flood of images that is characteristic of our age. We are hardly able to concentrate on individual images, and it's easy to lose the overarching perspective. Your **Constellations**, too, place excessive demands on the viewer with the sheer number of photos. Should the viewer therefore become just as much of a "flaneur" in looking at them as you do when taking pictures in public spaces?

I leave viewers the freedom to choose how to look at **Constellations**. These works are conceived in such a way that they cannot be taken in and

consumed immediately. In this respect, they offer a certain amount of resistance. I very well understand that this may be demanding too much of some viewers.

With the digital industry and the Internet, it has become very easy to produce and distribute images. These technological developments have contributed substantially to what is termed the flood of images. The Internet is a kind of 24/7 online archive. There's nothing you couldn't find there.

As an artist, are you less focused on producing images — after all, there are more than enough of these already — than on creating possible relations between, or constellations from, images? It would then be the viewer's principal task to compare them, to find out what similarities may exist? Often we perceive or sense these similarities more than we actually recognize them. Is it your aim to sound out such correlations between the familiar and the foreign, whereby the viewer should also create his or her own connections? The viewer would thereby become both active and "productive". Do you believe that viewing has a creative potential?

Absolutely. To reflect upon and update images that already exist, and to create new interrelationships between them, is a great challenge.

It's a good thing that you bring up the terms "perceive" and "sense". I've found that some visitors to the exhibition truly want to understand the **Constellations**. But it's an illusion that everything can be understood. Art is not all about recognizing, but also about suspecting, sensing, uncertainty, doubt, failure, getting your bearings, and so on. It's about experimenting, taking risks, making mistakes and learning from them, etc. Pure reason and a clear mind will not serve you so well. The **Constellations** have certain moods and vibes ... Communication also takes place on an emotional level. Not only is it desirable that exhibition-goers become active and productive viewers, but this is the precondition for actually taking in the **Constellations**. I alluded earlier to the fact that some of the works need to be enhanced by the viewers.

When I listen to you talk in this way about **Constellations**, I automatically see a connection with a certain attitude towards life, of always being ready to confront the unexpected, of constantly being able to reorient yourself, and remaining open and on the move. This in turn makes me think of your biography, the fact that you moved from Yugoslavia to Zug as a child, and later as an artist to Geneva and London, and most recently to Berlin, where you live with your wife who is Japanese. Your life comprises a number of antithetical “constellations”. Would you go so far as to use the term “discovery”? In a double sense, i.e. discovering new things, as well as uncovering and putting in plain view things that lie below the surface?

On the one hand, moves and migration are always accompanied by breaks and insecurity. You need to get your bearings in a new environment, re-position yourself, learn a new language. But on the other hand a move can also free you and have a positive influence on creative processes. Why do people emigrate? Some are forced to, on account of persecution and war. Others leave willingly, because they hope for a better life in a new place or because they felt constrained where they used to live. In **Minima Moralia**, Theodor W. Adorno writes: “It is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home.” If you are in exile and view the whole world as a foreign land, then this opens up a new and original perspective on things. It is also destabilizing, which can in turn have a positive effect on artistic work. I believe that art becomes interesting when you leave your trusted terrain and are no longer sure what something is, if it is even art. In **Constellations**, there is the surface, those are the pictures. Yet beneath the surface lie the texts, which are however not visible. There is always a connection between the biography and the work.

And aren’t the spaces between also important — that which is open and invisible? The displayed images can also be linked in our minds to existing internal images that we project into such spaces. Seeing is thereby connected to memory and imagination. Some of the things you show,

although they seem familiar, are hard to accurately categorize. It's like an old, vague memory that pops up from where it was forgotten — which then generates associations for other new images. To me, this stimulates emotional and sensual "thinking" in the form of images. Or, in other words, an open, nonverbal dialogue between external images, which are not my own, and my own internal images. In this process, the flood of images transforms into a quietly flowing river that branches off here and there. Can you identify with this "picture"?

That is a nice projection. It is a river that flows through space and time and that has no borders ... The interstices, the gaps between the parts, the varying distance between the visual artifacts and the empty space are just as important as the images; they are factors that help constitute the works. Another significant aspect of the works is the supporting medium, i.e. paper. I sound out everything related to printing technique, image reproduction, and image transfer. The questions that arise are: How large or small do I print out a photograph? On what kind of paper? How do I adjust the contrast, brightness, and colors? What happens if the technology fails, if the computer goes out of control? What happens if all the images suddenly turn yellow or green? I make use of such "accidents" and include them in the **Constellations**. Many of the images that I use are black and white. Black and white has a special aesthetic, a bit unreal, because everything in the world is in color.

Our ability to make associations, and the pictorial memory that every viewer brings to the work, are the basis for reading and decoding images and their meaning. I consider every **Constellation** to be an attempt to "compose" an atlas of memory.

For some time, I intensively studied the works of the French filmmaker Chris Marker. In his movie **Sans Soleil**, Marker poses a rhetorical question: "How did people use to remember, back when there were no photographs or films?"

By using black and white, old and new are united on a common pla-

ne and appear to be equally old, or even better: remembered. We can therefore not only project internal images onto the empty spaces of your **Constellations**. The external images that you have arranged appear to be remembered images, the present appears to lie in the past and becomes unimaginable without the past. The new takes on the guise of being a modification of the old, and the present appears to be part of history? This would be a radical view, in opposition to the present-day "addiction" to new and unused images. Do you consider the present to be a memory?

The complex liaison between the past, the present, and the future exists. Whether we want to or not, we are a part of history. We cannot disconnect ourselves from the time in which we live or from our past or our memories.

"The past is not dead; it is not even past." Everything that we hear, see, learn or experience forms us. It is through these spectacles that we look at the future. But what do we see? Our power of imagination, our thinking and actions are closely tied to what we experience. The passing of time distances us from events, opens up space for reflection and enables us to create connections between things.

So when external and internal images overlap, is the border between collective and individual pictorial memory, between the artists who produce and the viewers who associate and interpret, wiped away?

Well, I would say that the border vanishes as if it were obscured by fog. It is still there somewhere, but the fog keeps us from seeing it clearly. In this domain, you need to take slow steps and approach the work carefully and little by little. The viewers are invited to think up their own story.

The comparison of images, which you ask viewers to do in the **Constellations**, has its own history, not only with regard to contemporary art since the 1960s, but stretching way back to the modern art era and art history as an academic discipline at the beginning of the 20th century. As concerns methodology, art history is also based on the comparison of

images, particularly on photographic reproductions of works. At the same time, the combination of unrelated images became an artistic practice, as the book **The Blue Rider** by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc illustrates, where El Greco's **John the Baptist** is juxtaposed to the **Eiffel Tower** by De-launay. The art historian Aby Warburg, in turn, attempted to prove how the legacy of antiquity remains strong in Western culture all the way up to the Renaissance by comparing totally diverse photographs and reproductions that he arranged on boards. His **Mnemosyne Project** uses discontinuous sequences of images, and the space in between in particular liberates the expressive qualities of the contrasted pictures. Warburg's arrangements have also been described as "constellations." You have dedicated one **Constellation** to Aby Warburg. What do you find interesting about him?

Warburg was prescient in that he identified many things that would occupy future generations. What particularly fascinates me about his work is how he deals with all kinds of images and documents. In the **Mnemosyne Atlas**, the images were affixed to wooden boards covered with black cloth, without any text. These included reproductions of artworks, photos, advertising posters, stamps, newspaper cuttings, and press photos of current events. Warburg believed that a wide range of completely diverse documents required precise study and analysis. That is the origin of his statement: "God is in the detail."

And what does the **Constellation** that is dedicated to his constellations look like? I would love to hear some details.

I'll be happy to tell you. I've displayed some images taken from the material that I've collected on him. These include pictures taken of Warburg in North America when he visited the Hopi Indians. On another photo he is wearing a magnificent feather headdress while posing in the countryside. There is a reproduction of a painting by Botticelli. And there are a few blurred pictures taken of his **Mnemosyne Atlas**. It looks like constellations within a **Constellation**. It's kind of paying homage, with a wink ...

If I understand Warburg correctly, then he is also trying to prove that there are certain pictures in our collective memory that he believes re-manifest themselves throughout our cultural development; for example the image of the “headhuntsress.” Images thereby exercise their own power — but they can just as well become an instrument for exercising power. What do you think about images and power?

Images always stand for something. They are loaded with meaning and can trigger emotions in those who view them. They play a role in the relations and the status quo of power that should not be underestimated. According to Michel Foucault, relations of power, or “relations de pouvoir”, are various elements that act in an organization of power. If I understand his concept correctly and boil it down to its essential statement, then he says that power is not something that is centrally fixed; it does not lie with a particular entity, such as a government or the Pope. All of us are involved in various ways in this fabric of power. We are our own entity and as such have the power to make decisions or enjoy ourselves, and to laugh.

Images and information are spun, manipulated, and presented in a way that suits the people who disseminate them. Sometimes, disinformation is intentionally broadcast and lies are even told so that some people’s aims can be met. One example that I can think of off the top of my head is the Third Gulf War. The main reason for this “preemptive intervention” was the presumed possession of weapons of mass destruction by Iraq. Yet these were never found.

Several of my video works deal with the obscurement of the border between information and manipulation, or between documentation and fiction. In **Reports** (2004), viewers are presented fictitious reports from Ubekia, a country that does not even exist. With this work, I wanted to demonstrate how easy it is to invent stories and to spread false information, and to give an audience the runaround, so to speak.

And in **Constellations**, you hand us over to the power of the “anony-

mous” images that have been taken out of their original context?

Yes, just to keep everyone busy. There’s the expression that “pictures say more than a thousand words.” But do they really? The text-image relationship plays an important role in my videos and in my photographic work. What is the difference between the pictures in the **Constellations** and the pictures in the print media? In the latter, there is a textual by-line to every image that tells readers what that image represents, how to interpret it. The text therefore provides information, but it also controls the image. In **Constellations**, I “free” the images by removing the text. Through this liberating action the images become autonomous. They spread out across the board like a virus and mix up the familiar order of things. All of a sudden, everything communicates with everything else. Borders appear to dissolve. Once the images have been cut loose from their context, they embark on an intergalactic voyage. They become weightless and float through space. Welcome aboard! The next stop is discovery.

This booklet is published on the occasion of the exhibition

Sladjan Nedeljkovic - Discovery

July 4 to August 29, 2010

Kunsthhaus Zug

Concept: Sladjan Nedeljkovic and Matthias Haldemann

Organisation and administration: Renate Arpagaus and Doris Gysi

Mounting of the exhibition: Thomas Ruch and Florian Gasser

Generous financial support provided by:

Zuger Kulturstiftung Landis & Gyr / Siemens Building Technologies Division

Ernst Göhner Stiftung Zug

Fonds cantonal d'art contemporain, Genève

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Concept and design: Sladjan Nedeljkovic

Editorial Work and Copy Editing: Matthias Haldemann

Translation: Eric Hess

Printed by: Ina Press, Stargard Szczecinski, Poland, EU

© 2010 Sladjan Nedeljkovic, Kunsthhaus Zug and Revolver Publishing



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by VVV

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ISBN 978-3-86895-084-7