

150/151

2020

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A gothic horror fan wearing professional movie makeup (rendering a zipper splitting his face into pristine cover and raw flesh), a cyber goth posing with a gas mask, a group of people scuffling across a city square, chained together—all of the above are indeed overstating harm to the point of being ridiculous. Maybe that's the real queer aspect of it.

Anna Voswinkel, born 1975, is a curator, writer, and designer based in Berlin (DE). She has been teaching photography for several years.



Nicholas Mueller: Lacuna Park. Essays and Other Adventures in Photography

SPBH Editions, London 2019

by Taco Hidde Bakker

A photograph as a midpoint between disclosure and concealment. It sounds like a statement of the obvious. After reading Nicholas Mueller's *Lacuna Park: Essays and Other Adventures in Photography*, almost in one go, I'm trying to read the conclusions (plural in the original) to the final contribution, "The Photograph Commands Indifference," as a key to understanding Mueller's essayistic and visual reflections on the values of the medium today and how to relate to it, both in the abstract (photography) and the concrete (the photograph). Here, I will attempt to recapitulate what I have just read (and seen), as if I'd already forgotten what was at stake in Mueller's meandering and at times elusive texts. Of course, like any medium, pho-

order to study literature. In *Die Tage in L.*, which is the publication of his master's thesis at the Institut für Literatur Johannes R. Becher (now the Deutsches Literaturinstitut Leipzig, DLL), he describes in eight chapters his everyday experience as a writer, committed socialist, and gay man in the GDR, mixing his own writing with citations from literature and pop culture.

Much like Schernikau, Dyes discloses her theory references in the appendix as an appealing reading list rather than a footnote register. The two most consistent references throughout the book are Ulrich Bröckling's *Das unternehmerische Selbst (The Entrepreneurial Self)* from 2007 and Sarah Schulman's *Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair* from 2016. Bröckling's analysis made clear how, over the last thirty years of the neoliberal paradigm in all fields of society, the romantic and bohemian ideal of self-realization had transformed into the pressure of self-optimization and self-marketing. This observation reverberates in Dyes's listings of her numerous business ideas and project applications, as well as in transcripts of interviews with her artist friends.

In lending the title of her book the term "harm," the writer and gay activist Sarah Schulman, based in New York, analyzes how the focus on abuse victimhood links personal vulnerability to political agency within contemporary liberal societies—in a problematic way. Schulman sees a risk when overstating harm serves to abdicate one's own responsibility in a situation, especially as the current cultural addiction to claiming abuse extends from interpersonal relationships to state violence. This is an interesting observation just now, as strict state measures due to the containment of a pandemic are perceived by a certain group of protesters only as a form of intrusion and coercion. By ignoring its own responsibility in the situation, an angry mob renders the state as the one and only dominator that keeps its people in bondage.

graphy is a midpoint, a membrane filtering and mirroring images in and of the world, and thus it is not easy to write *about*. It is not for nothing that Mueller chose the preposition *in* for the subtitle. And *in* photography for him means living through it as a practice, as a human being and family member, and as a maker and a writer trying to come to grips with the (often vernacular) practice of others.

Mueller is a promiscuous writer. The selection in *Lacuna Park*, from a decade of writing, ranges from what he considers a "failed essay" to so-called fictions he wrote for the work of others, short childhood reminiscences and descriptions of family members' relationships to photography, and a few deeper essayistic inquiries into the nature of photography today. The volume is richly illustrated: with Mueller's own work, images by the artists he writes fiction for, and images from the family archive, usually color slides from a handful of decades ago. For the most part, "illustrated" isn't the right term, as the reprinted

photographs and slides take up almost half of the book and constitute essayistic *arguments* of their own, although none of the image sequences go unaccompanied by text.

The starting points for Mueller seem pretty simple, yet the kind of questions for which his writing provides possible answers cannot be answered easily. What do we assume when we are looking at photographs? What do we want from photographs or from the experience of making, sharing, and looking at them? "We want to know the aliveness of the space between the learnable and the unknowable," writes Mueller in the aforementioned conclusions. A statement in the introduction is paradigmatic, where Mueller calls photography "a surface for feeling," understanding the medium as "a set of relations, and a way of engaging: with oneself, with the world, and with others." His writing is just the same, as Mueller constantly traverses the boundaries between the self, the world, and others. He is widely traveled and equally at home with photography and words, yet often at odds with the world, that is, the world of the social and political. The failed essay "Making Doubles," for example, was written around the election that elevated Donald Trump to the seat of president of the United States, certainly not a good time for people whose thinking and feeling do not conform with the pressures of hypercapitalist coercion (and Mueller doesn't refrain from sharing his disgust: "this terrible government"). The same goes for the whirlpool of texts and images that makes up social media, where boundaries between the public and the private have long since been erased. As a way to navigate through this schizophrenic situation, we unknowingly carry



Spreads from: Nicholas Mueller, *Lacuna Park, Essays and Other Adventures in Photography*, 2020, pp. 42–43, 112–113.



a double of ourselves with us, one that according to Mueller "must navigate (successfully) within the logic of socioeconomic forces, so that we can pretend that we have a purer self, one outside of the systems of dogma and power that surround and shape us." Coercion is a term that occurs frequently. Where does he see the pho-



Nicholas Mueller: *Lacuna Park. Essays and Other Adventures in Photography*.

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tograph fit in at this juncture? There are no longer any copies. Our skin has become image, "a kind of virtual bait." Mueller is wary of the selfie, which in a rhetoric twist cannot not conform: "Contextualized as these images are within the indexing and identity-crafting structures of social media, there is no outside of conformity. We are either conforming forthrightly to one idea of self, or conforming to non-conformity."

The question of the analogue and the digital intercuts these discussions about conformity and coercion. Mueller, like myself, too old to be a millennial, still has a firm leg in the analogue world. But the distinction might be one of grade, not of essence. Still, the digital "revolution" multiplied the camera and the photograph such that the medium has become nothing less than near-ubiquitous background noise. No wonder theorizing it has become so hard. In another more theoretically minded essay, "The New Interval," an investigation of the space between a photographer's nose and holding up a digital camera in front of one's face, Mueller writes about the digital paradigm, in which a photo is already seen before it is taken, meaning that "the future is no longer a question of what the picture will be. *What we will be* in front of the picture is the new contingency of photography." (Italics in original.)

I found the other pieces of writing in the volume—fictional or more private—less intriguing than the three more theoretically invested adventures, despite them containing several abstruse and overwrought sentences. This somewhat uneven collection in many different registers—mostly revised texts previously published in books and magazines—is tied together through its careful layout, a feature that also obfuscates the miscellaneous origins of Mueller's adventures. Other versions, however, can be read on the artist's website, and "Making Doubles" can be seen and heard online as "a scripted slide show" adapted from this opening essay to *Lacuna Park*.

What is perhaps most at stake in photography in our co-isolationist selfie age is the assurance of one's existence, a way of dealing with the competing demands placed on us in complex technological, seemingly secular societies: the selfie as an offering to the god of techne, who gave us photography and expects a reward. "Our pictures are our currency," Mueller states in "Making Doubles," which reads like a storehouse of interesting ideas and thus can hardly be dubbed a failed essay, and "we return them like burnt offerings."

Taco Hidde Bakker works as a writer, translator, teacher, and sparring partner for artists. His first essay collection, *The Photograph That Took the Place of a Mountain*, was published by Fw:Books in 2018.

Lele Saveri: Hong Kong Barricades

Humboldt Books, Milan 2019

by Jochen Becker

This little book glides elegantly through the ranks of law enforcement and then nimbly stands in their way. It shows many small, mainly black-and-white photographs of street architectures that could be called huts, barricades, or armor, fashioned from spaced bars, pallets, party tents, street rubbish, plastic sheeting, boulders, garbage cans, banners, cardboard boxes, tape, umbrellas, or bamboo sticks. No cars in sight. The street



Spread from: Lele Saveri, *Hong Kong Barricades*, 2019, pp. 20–21.

trappings, originally designed to channel traffic and pedestrians and now transformed into barricades to inhibit traffic flow, were piled up high or deep in a way that makes them hardly surmountable. These distancing constructs, at times rather absurd, are held together not only with standard cable ties, but also through the social cleverness of the protesters. If Thomas Hirschhorn should ever wish to educate himself further on basic materials, he should read this book. Yet the book does not deal with art in public space, nor does it raise cultural discussion platforms of Berlin-based Raumlabor (spatial laboratory). In Hong Kong, a civil war has been waged for six years now against its overpowering neighbor, the People's Republic of China, represented by the executive authority of the former crown colony of Hong Kong. Early on, the autonomous zones of the "Umbrella Revolution" were called "Occupy Central" and alluded to the Arab Spring, which had crept into the banking district of the Cantonese metropolis.

The Italian photographer Lele Saveri, who is based in New York, was actually in China for a month back in October 2014 in order to give classes on producing self-published books. On his way from Hong Kong International Airport into town, he already noticed these ad-hoc structures dotting the main traffic routes, delaying entry for hours on end. He immediately stepped out and spent days and nights strolling with his camera through a city engrossed in turmoil. Discussing, photographing, marching: "I was obsessed." He used his time there to explore this urban spirit of inventiveness focused on resistance. A suit-wearer walks past with an irritated look, and the police is visible in but a few pictures. The images, streets, and objects were mainly dedicated to protest. Here, people are usually seen wearing some kind of armor, as if positioned between a battle of knights and gas warfare, with the citizens and the barricades seeming to coalesce: the city, as a sphere of the built and the lived, serves to obstruct. Lele Saveri displays very few moments of exhaustion or composure amid an enormous self-devised rollercoaster of protest.

The graphic designer Francesca Biagiotti has arranged the photographs, which were captured with a keen eye for youth subcultures, on the book pages with a well-honed sense of rhythm. The umbrella revolts of 2014 were subdued, with the involved persons criminalized and chased into exile. Joshua Wong, one of the few prominent faces of the movement, wrote in his short contribution to the book that the uprising in Hong Kong was also intended as a tunnel to China, the aim being to kindle anti-authoritarian currents there: "We are all suffering under the rule of Xi Jinping." Propelled by the young people and supported by their families and universities, this movement, which had meanwhile been quelled, has now been forming anew during the past year. Everyone knows that it is the decisive battle. The courage and, increasingly, the fury of desperation show a metropolis rebelling against the repressive nation-state, as if the Paris Commune were being staged again almost 150 years later, along the lines of: we are now representing ourselves.

The protest, which Lele Saveri was already able to closely observe in 2014, cleverly takes a stand against the "smart city" of data collectors and oppressors: alongside the San Francisco



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