

Reflection II. (Third version)

Astrid Klein: Shock treatment.

Note: The pictures presented to us by the media leave us unmoved, though the things they are trying to show us may be horrid. This may be due to the truly gigantic redundancy with which those pictures inundate us every day: they have become habitual and common, and habit is a cover which covers up all information. Still: there is a deeper reason for our indifference with regard to the media pictures. They are "documentary" ones, they attempt to be objective. Now we cannot in fact concretely experience objective data. Everything we do experience in fact is a phenomenon charged with intentions. This is why Astrid Klein manipulates the media pictures, in order to pluck them out from their redundancy and objectivity, and to charge them with her own intentions. Her photo work aims at shocking us out from our indifference, and at having us truly experience the things meant by those pictures.

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A single picture may suffice to illustrate the problem here suggested: It has the revealing title: "Against all expectations no correct visions" (1984). The animal shown there is such as Astrid Klein had experienced a photographed animal, (and it is such as we experience everything within our "Lebenswelt", our concretely lived through world). It is neither an objective (representative), nor is it a subjective, (imagined), picture, but it is a picture of a concrete phenomenon, of an experience charged with representation, imagination, emotion, desire and intellect. This may be formulated thus: We do not perceive objects, but impressions of supposedly extant objects somewhere out there. Those impressions are processed in the brain to form representations, emotions, concepts and values, and it is precisely this processing which has us suppose that all those mental processes refer to some object out there. (By the way: something very similar may be said with regard to the camera: it does not take in objects but rays which it processes, according to a program, to form an image which we take to refer to some object out there). Astrid Klein manipulates such images in order to lift them into the "Lebenswelt", into the realm of concrete experiences.

In so doing, she poses the correct photographic question. She no longer asks whether there are objective photos, such as ones which represent the world. She asks instead whether there is such a thing as an objective world. And she gives the correct answer. As long as the world is taken, naively, to be objective, one will attempt to make pictures which render it objectively. And it is only after having admitted that the world is phenomenal, one can attempt to set a concrete experience into a picture. Astrid Klein attempts such pictures by manipulating media pictures. And, indeed: her pictures are shocking.

The motive which inspires her photo work is not epistemological: she does not attempt to withdraw the cover of habit from our eyes, in order to

have the concrete phenomena of our living experience speak to us. Her motive is ethico-political: she attempts to withdraw the cover of indifference from the media pictures, in order to have us experience the horror of the events which the media pictures try to show. She does so in order to lead us toward a concrete commitment. She is motivated by a pedagogical Eros, and this is why she manipulates media pictures in order to make something quite different out of them, namely pictures which show concrete reality. She thus performs a step back from the level on which technical pictures are made, and she enters a new level where those pictures are no longer media but become the material out of which pictures of the real may be made. Thus she has crossed a limitation of photographing toward a new kind of picture production.

The ethico-political motivation which addresses us through her pictures manifests itself esthetically: they shock us and they tell us, (as supposedly all works of art do): "you must change your life", (du musst dein Leben ändern, Rilke). But, even if we are indeed moved while looking at those pictures, we must not allow our critical distance to be suppressed. Those are pictures in which pictures have been manipulated and forced to show some concrete experience. Which means that truth, ("a-letheia"=revelation, discovery), has been tricked into appearing. But the phenomena cannot be forced to show themselves. He who wants to discover them, to reveal them, must permit them to speak for themselves, ("zu Worte kommen lassen", Husserl). He who wants to achieve a "phenomenological vision" must try to bracket out not only the objective world but himself as well. Astrid Klein does show us experiences which we can live through, but those experiences have been filtered by her own living climate (by her own feelings of terror, of being cornered), and this is why they appear convulsed and contorted. Now it may be true that Astrid Klein's living experience is adequate to the present situation, but it is still true that not every concrete experience is necessarily so shockingly terrible as it is shown to be in those pictures. And it is precisely because Astrid Klein is presenting us with one among several possible living existential climates, that her pictures may be taken as expressions of a presently predominant existential situation. If one tries to have an overview of her photo work, one is reminded of Schiller's "Veiled image at Sais": "Weh dem, der zu der Wahrheit kommt mit Schuld, sie wird ihm nimmermehr erfreulich sein", (Woe to him who gets at truth with guilt, it will not ever please him).