

Maps of the Unseen

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In Sonja Feldmeier's oeuvre, 'Meter hinter dem Meeresspiegel' or meters behind sea level, is one of a series of works that play with iconographic elements from military and war reality. For years the artist has been collecting visual moments that she captures at home and on her travels using photo and video cameras. The ensuing collection of public and intimate snapshots, of photo reportage and film sequences, has taken on a life of its own. It seems to have at its disposal organic structures that allow it to reproduce itself and expand, making it appear to be a living creature that is nourished and cared for by the artist, but that is also exploited and at times neglected. The idea for 'Meter hinter dem Meeresspiegel' came about during the course of a dialogue that Sonja Feldmeier had with her picture archive over a long time. This dialogue was about power, the use of force and war and brought to light pictures of everyday dealings with the corresponding symbolic language: photos of youths in army clothes, of babies in carriers made of military fabric, ladies underwear with an armored-tank print. While in other works the artist makes room explicitly for warfare or the grotesque ways these picture elements are applied, at the center of 'Meter hinter dem Meeresspiegel' stands simply a kind of optical substratum of her engagement with this theme: namely, the camouflage pattern whose function it is to make soldiers, vehicles and artillery invisible.

By means of a production run – which in its multiple stages operates like a ritual – ten maps have been produced up to now: from the respective camouflage pattern of a specific army, the repetitive pattern is isolated and transposed onto the third dimension. The different colored elements are turned into valleys and hills, lakes and woods. With the help of three-dimensional clay models, which were derived from these patterns, Sonja Feldmeier has transformed the image details into large wall maps like those found in schoolrooms. To do this, the clay models are immersed in a dark liquid, centimeter by centimeter, whereby each step is photographically documented. The horizontal subdividing of the models that thereby appear are then translated into contour lines on large canvases, to which the artist then adds colorful topographic details.

Each of the maps is linked to an actual existing nation by means of two elements. Along with the noted link via the camouflage pattern, stands a name as a second element: for instance, China as an extensive and powerful Asian country of increasing economic and cultural

importance, whose topography and appearance, however, is not visible on the wall map that bears its name. Sonja Feldmeier has no interest in depicting China as you see it from an airplane or could see it on a satellite picture. Only the real element of a genuine China lies at the basis of the map, with whose help the Middle Kingdom disguised itself in war: the camouflage pattern of the Chinese people's army. At the end of this work process, each of the countries – understood as an economic and political conglomerate of forces, ideas of identity and a feeling of national belonging – has a new 'territory' at its disposal, whose appearance is owed solely to the military means of rendering it invisible.

The direct link between disguising and making visible, which stands at the beginning of the process – and that Sonja Feldmeier calls ambiguously 'repatriation' – is at times given a new meaning when additional information is brought into play. Specific knowledge of the history of camouflage patterns, thoughts of current warfare and historical awareness jumble the otherwise straightforward and immediate topography of the map painting. The information – for instance, that up to 1968 Israel and Palestine had both used the same camouflage pattern that they took over from the French, but gave it up (understandably) subsequent to the Six Day War – lends the fictive maps of these two countries a grotesque tinge. Behind this uneasiness that is called up in the viewer regarding the portrayal of this involuntary twin constellation, there is a certain intention. Like a passing personal commentary on the margin of world history, Sonja Feldmeier points to the common roots of these bitter opponents, whose histories seems to take place as mutual projections of each other. In their absurd relationship of dependency, more and more features of a forced and, at the same time, thoroughly impossible synchronic movement is seen to emerge, similar to the dogged attempt of two bodies to occupy the same place at the same time.

At this point the question arises: whether Sonja Feldmeier can be called a 'political artist'. As a rule she herself answers such questions positively, but shies away from any attempt to obtain a concrete statement. She does not think programmatically; she does not try to develop recipes for improving the world or try to take an objective view.

The borderline landscapes that she repeatedly presents in her work produce free zones where our customary ways of making sense and of understanding wane, and familiar objects can then be seen with other eyes. This enables us to find new accounts of things whose names are so exant that we don't think about them anymore. The fictive maps of 'Meter hinter dem

Meeresspiegel' are, on the one hand, the concrete product of an intentional, multi-staged distancing process; in their encounter with the viewer, on the other hand, they outline a plan of an individual visual process. This takes place again each time a map is looked at, and thus the process portrays the individual image of this occupation with a single person's perception of the world.

'Meter hinter dem Meeresspiegel' defines a fictional space, comparable to the myth of the sunken Atlantis, whose physical disappearance heralded its rebirth in fiction. The space is defined by pictures whose model character denies the viewer the possibility of an everyday, split-second interpretation and categorization, because what is visible does not really correspond to our anticipation. The pictures are intransigent; they have invisible pitfalls; they are disturbing and painful in a way that is difficult to grasp. And there where the artist succeeds in creating enough confusion through newly systemized essential points and contexts, the eye is in fact forced to become involved in a new way.

From the German by Jeanne Haunschild