Framing History
On Heinz Peter Knes, *Fotografische Arbeit*
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A.

Prozess (Process) is the rather prosaic title, photographer Heinz Peter Knes has given his installation of 54 small-format photographs. Unframed and arranged in loose, associative groups across one wall at Künstlerhaus Bremen, *Prozess* (2020) is one of four works presented in Knes' exhibition *Fotografische Arbeit* (Photographic Work). The dimensions of this wall correspond approximately to those of a wall in Knes' studio in Berlin, where, over a period of several weeks, the images were selected and combined.

Within the exhibition, *Prozess* assumes a superior status. Not only does it represent the only truly photographic work in *Fotografische Arbeit*, the work also fuses process and result. Despite its open form it represents, on the one hand, a self-contained "work" in the context of contemporary art: a finished work that can be exhibited. On the other hand, *Prozess* involves the actual work that such a "work" entails: the practice. *Fotografische Arbeit* is thus a continuous, incessant action, in other words: a process—even though this action is periodically interrupted, namely by works, and even though the photographic image itself extracts a moment in time, withdrawing it from the continuity of the world.

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I. Means to No End
An image as a motive,
less a fulfillment.
Conversely: means as meaning.

Prozess conceives photographic work as much more than the pressing of the shutter-release button—the moment, when, with a single click, an apparatus captures, freezes, and either photochemically or digitally locks the world into an image. Photographic work is the whole stretch, the entire infrastructure: starting with the spaces, where the work takes place—the wall of a former studio, the bricked-up view from the present one, the photo lab Pixelgrain, where the prints are processed—then the technical equipment: computer cables, tripods, adhesive tape, archive boxes, reflective foils and absorbing surfaces, a camera—and finally the actual act of photographing and the figure of the photographer, represented by four befriended photographers: Kristin Loschert, Annette Kelm, Simone Gilges and Heji Shin.

II. Decentralized Movement
Look off camera
Enter that space
And talk back

Prozess also depicts the social, intellectual-discursive, and not least the historical and political environment, where the photographic work (*this* photographic work) is situated, wherefrom it emerges and into which it is continuously re-inscribed: a panel discussion with befriended photographers and photo theorists on the necessity of a National Institute of Photography; a photo of film scholar Sergio Taborda, who wrote a text about the filmmaker duo Straub-Huillet for the magazine *have not*, which Knes edited together with Heji Shin and the artist Heike-Karin Föll; the angel wing on the gravestone of photographer Peter Hujar, who died in 1987 of AIDS; a memorial plaque in Berlin-Wilmersdorf for Walter Benjamin, who committed suicide fleeing from the National Socialists in 1940; a photo of the nine victims of the racist and right-wing extremist assassination at the Gebrüder Grimm National Monument in Hanau, an almost disintegrated piece of paper with a quote from Artaud, held up to the camera by French artist Jean-Luc Moulène, who carries it in his wallet instead of an identity card: "The grid is a terrible moment for sensitivity, for matter," it says in French. Photographic work is not only work on the image, but also on its contexts and thus inherently political. To capture the world in an image is to constantly negotiate its relationship to the world: "Which image? When? Why? What purpose? What outcome?" No image stands alone. No image is self-sufficient.

B.
And lastly, *Prozess* displays the work involved in the exhibition's three other works. Thus, these three works—also vaguely connected to each other—appear to be the result of one and the same process, the product of a single approach and procedure. There is a photograph of Joël Ameloot recording the text for *Hannah Arendt's Library* (2020), a slide show, which Knes adapted from an artist's book he realized in 2012 together with Amy Zion and Danh Vo. For it he photographed ephemera from Hannah Arendt's posthumous library at Bard University: pieces of paper and inlays, letters and dedications, notes and postcards—everything that was placed into these books, while they still belonged to a living person and was later removed when the private library turned estate and was made accessible to others.

Austerely and methodically, without revisions, Knes photographed these incidental, seemingly unimportant finds—items that had been sorted out, yet nevertheless tell us so much about the life, work, and network of arguably the most important political thinker of the 20th century, who was forced to flee the National Socialists to the USA, because of her Jewish

identity. In a quiet voice, Ameloot reads from the library signatures of the respective ephemera, the titles of all the books from which these finds were taken. Compared to this lateral system of references and the traces they leave of a life, the books themselves, and above all their content, play a moreover subordinate role. Texture instead of theory. Interwoven density, not probing depth. Description in the form of an image.

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3.
"Depth doesn't get you anywhere at all.
Depth is a separate dimension, it's just depth
—and there's nothing whatsoever to be seen in it."
Berthold Brecht

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C.

Prozess displays a dark photograph of Tilman Riemenschneider's statuette *Adam* (c. 1495/1505), which is in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Positioned slightly to one side and illuminated from below, the face is indiscernible in the photograph and almost seems to disappear into the background. This figure does not appear in the film *Riemenschneiderfilm* (2019), where Knes, together with Kristin Loschert, documents the sculptures of the famous Franconian carver Tilman Riemenschneider in museums and churches to the spherical music of David Meyer. Riemenschneider, along with Veit Stoß, was probably the most famous representative of woodcarving, a widespread form of sculpture in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, especially in southern Germany. And he was probably the first to not let his sculptures be painted or gilded, presenting them as they were, with their bare lime wood surfaces.

Riemenschneider, who achieved some fame, fortune and also political influence during his lifetime, was the mayor of Würzburg in 1520/21. Upon his insistence, Würzburg joined the side of the rebellious peasants during the peasants' revolt. After the suppression of the revolt, however, Riemenschneider paid dearly for his boldness. He was arrested and tortured. Allegedly, at least according to some sources, both his hands were broken and from then on, he could no longer work. In the 1920s and 30s, Wilhelm Pinder, an art historian with close ties to National Socialism, saw Riemenschneider's sculptures as a paragon, if not the very emergence of what he considered to be typical German inwardness, the ostensibly pensive depth and inscrutability of the German soul. "That threshold experience between the epochs, which the Iberian people encountered as circumnavigators of the world, the German carried out in his own mind," wrote Pinder, appropriating Riemenschneider, who, at the dawn of the Renaissance, was retrospectively considered a "typical" German artist.

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III. History
Riemenschneider, Marx/Engels, Arendt, Hanau—
an unexpected German dimension

In *Riemenschneiderfilm*, Loschert and Knes, both born in Franconia, document the region where Riemenschneider was active and where a large part of his work can still be found today: his sculptures in wood and stone, his altars and tombstones, all in natural lighting, often quite dark. People walk through the frame, passing between the camera and the works, which stand where they have always stood for over five hundred years. The images show hands, faces, draperies, gestures, gazes from empty eyes. Slowly the camera moves down the body of a Christ stretched out in Mary's arms. Scanning surfaces. And over and over the same

faces, carved from the same templates by a whole army of craftsmen in Riemenschneider's workshop—smooth, unfocussed faces, covered by a skin of wishes and ideas, yet to try and penetrate deeper, to find something, underneath, behind the wood, behind the art, to discover something other than the contingency and randomness that comes to light, when mythical stories that feign false coherence, become fragile.

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4.

"What constitutes this depth?
Simply the musicality of the German soul,
that which we call its inwardness, its subjectivity,
the divorce of the speculative
from the socio-political element of human energy
and the complete predominance of the former over the latter."
Thomas Mann

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D.

And finally, *Prozess* also depicts a detail of a test strip featuring correction notes for the cover poster of the book *Der Weltrevolutionäre Prozess seit Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels bis in die Gegenwart* (2019) (The Revolutionary Process of the World from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to the Present). It is an excerpt, not readily decipherable, with annotations inscribed in the margin. In the book, Knes documents the 144 small-format photographs, which the photographer Arno Fischer and the documentarist Peter Voigt had etched into both sides of eight stainless steel steles. These steles are part of the Marx-Engels monument located in the center of Berlin. This monument, first opened in 1986, was conceived by the sculptor Ludwig Engelhardt as an ensemble work, meant to spatially represent the Marxist philosophy of history. Behind Engelhardt's figures at the center of the monument, a rough stone relief on which Werner Stötzer portrays the "Alte Welt" (Old World), as the title suggests, depicting the subjugation and lack of freedom of the people. At the other end, Margret Middell has sketched "Die Würde und Schönheit freier Menschen" (The Dignity and Beauty of Free People) in a bronze relief bearing the same title. Fischer and Voigt's contribution, which seems much more inconspicuous than the other contributions, due to its formal austerity and severity and therefore easy to overlook, sits right in the middle—between Engelhardt's well-known sculptures of Marx and Engels and Middell's radiant future. In accordance to their intermediate position, the images on the steles show the struggles of the working class on its way from the old world to the utopia of the new, inspired by the ideas of Marx and Engels.

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5.

"This is the proletarian Methuselah,
who has endured all the battles of his class,
and participated in all historical ways of life,
enslaved and triumphant,
on the machine, on the barricade,
laughing and bleeding,
declared dead and resurrected again and again
—and the personal images of his path.
now fixed to a wall,
in memory, in meditation."
Peter Voigt

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Fischer and Voigt spent years collecting the 144 photographs from various archives and using an elaborate principle, they distributed them over both sides of the steles. While the side facing the past features images of the "class per se," of an oppressed working class that has not yet discovered its own historical consciousness, the front side is adorned with future-oriented images of a "class for itself" that has realized its function and significance in history—a class that has seized the reins of action. What we see is a process—the immediate action, everyday life, the hardships but also the joys, the ups and the downs. The practice of a politically comprehended life.

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IV. Didactic and Dialectic
Complexity cannot be
dissolved into argument and counterargument.
Complexity can be increased
by changing the point of view,
and in a montage of the apparent simplicity
of directly pointing out the circumstances
in relation to the means
of their production and presentation.

Photography, as the documentation medium par excellence, has maintained a privileged relationship with history since its invention, and is only slightly younger than the ideas of Marx and Engels. Here it appears coupled to the *Weltgeist*, it too draws a trajectory from the past into the future, and accompanies all that happens on its way there. In contrast to Knes' book, where the images used by Fischer and Voigt are austerely photographed and individually documented, incorporating all their traces of time, such as weathering and vandalism, *Fotografische Arbeit* shows a different work, which bears the same title. In the form of a classical, didactic-seeming partition wall, a photo of the monument is presented along with an explanatory text and drawings, in which all the actual photos are replaced by areas that have been cross-hatched by hand. The steles' layout emerges, the structure of the photographs' arrangement. For this, Fischer and Voigt used a conceptual device: they translated Engels' quote "Es kommt alles darauf an, zu erreichen, dass die Arbeiterklasse als Klasse handelt." (It is essential to get the working class to act as a class.) into a punched paper tape. At the time, this was state-of-the-art technology. When Knes removes the photos, the code of the punched tape becomes clearly visible—a skeleton of technology, a dinosaur of data processing, recorded in his own hand and not by computer; a historically, socially and politically contingent means of presentation: structures that are subject to time. And unframed.