

SOPHIE THUN

Merge Layers

featuring the Archive of Zenta Dzividzinska

13.01. -
26.02.2022

Sophie! What are you up to? Are you working on something?

In previous exhibitions of Sophie Thun, we would encounter a true to scale photograph of the exhibition space itself. In this mirroring of the space, the artist would be standing, with a firm step, a serious gaze, and the camera's remote shutter in her hand. Here in *Merge Layers* the room is centered by two panels, that show images Thun produced in her exhibitions at *Secession* in Vienna in spring 2020 and at *Kim? Contemporary Art Centre* in Riga this summer. The exhibition *Merge Layers* is a superimposition of these previous projects, in which Thun continuously overwrites her works and merges the layers of their past and present.

In Riga, Thun worked with the archive of the artist Zenta Dzividzinska (1944–2011). Dzividzinska, or short ZDZ, worked as a graphic designer to sustain her living and took photographs in her spare time. Throughout her life, and especially in her youth in the 1960s, ZDZ's photographs were hardly taken seriously as works of art but were considered a mere leisure activity. The photographs depict friends and family as well as the artist herself. Sometimes they are clearly posing in a scene and other times they are just eating together in the garden. They are caught up by their daily activities and appear as self-contained individuals, seemingly unbothered by the presence of the camera.

Over the summer Thun processed ZDZ's photographic archive together with the archivist Līga Goldberga. In the exhibition space, Thun set up a darkroom and exposed the negatives. Later, she arranged the prints and test strips on panels in order to view them, which she is showing here on the left-hand side. In this situation in Riga Thun acted as a photo lab technician for the deceased artist, an occupation she regularly engages with to sustain her own living. While carrying out the production of the prints, Thun had to imagine ZDZ's will, without being certain of her personal and artistic intentions. There was no clear boundary between a task that is performed on behalf of another and an activity that is grounded in one's own free will. One could also say that Thun was helping ZDZ and that the two women are working together.

Thun is interested in the confines of the action of one's work. She grew up in socialist-oriented Poland and knows the stories of the Polish avant garde from the 1960s on. Many of these artists understood to act within set limits, to make use of given means and to create space for their own artistic practice with a kind of reflected pragmatism. They often carried out commissions by state agencies to support themselves, while pursuing their own artistic practices in the private realms of their spare time. In a contemporary consideration of those working

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conditions, the concern for a distinction between the private and the public sphere remains pressing.

For her exhibition at *Secession*, Thun produced photograms of all her personal belongings that were smaller than an 8 x 10" negative. She set up her dark room in the upstairs *Kabinett* and worked there for the duration of the exhibition's seven weeks, while the institution was closed to the public. Visitors were able to watch the artist at work via the live stream of a webcam, almost as if they were peeking through a keyhole. The closure of the institution was necessitated by the outbreak of the pandemic. Thun made use of this restraint to set up her darkroom, where it is always technically necessary for her to work uninterrupted. Had a visitor opened the door unannounced and light had entered the space, the whole exposure process would have been disturbed. The panel on the right wall here shows some of the photograms produced at *Secession*. Their arrangement is a form of self-representation, as the selection of the depicted objects can be read as a story about somebody, about the artist.

Thun's photographic works usually refer to her own body. Her hands, that hold the negatives while exposing them, consistently form the frame to her photographs. Their white imprints mark her as the author and indicate the mechanical process of producing the prints. Moreover, the artist poses for herself in most of the photographs. Her own body is always immediately available to her as a material for artistic production. She can control the relations of her proper movements and react to any sensations directly. In contrast, the question arises as to what can be demanded of the body of a stranger, particularly when it is exposed to the gaze of the camera.

We do meet the artist again in *Merge Layers*, in a picture on the back wall of the gallery. Now she is not standing with a firm step in the exhibition space, but lying in bed, the remote shutter in one fist and the darkslide of her large-format camera in the other hand.

Sophie, I'm going to sleep now! Are you going to call me again tomorrow?

Ursula Pokorny

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