Increasing the Image Noise: Conversation between Philipp Goldbach and Katharina Täschner

KT: Philipp, you are trained as both an artist and an art historian, with the environment of the university playing an important role in several of your works. How did you come into possession of the slide collection from Cologne University's Institute of Art History, which is the basis for your work *Lossless Compression*?

PG: In 2013, after having studied at the University of Cologne alongside my artistic training at the Academy of Media Arts, I visited the university's Institute of Art History and noticed that numerous sections of the slide collection's cabinet system were standing in disarray in the corridors. It looked like something was going on. Upon inquiry, I was told that the slide collection had to be disposed of because space was needed for new offices, and there was also no longer any use for it in teaching. This was true: the materials had not been used since the end of my studies in 2005/06. And even then, only individual lecturers still relied on "their" stocks of the old medium. After my visit, I quickly expressed the wish to take over the slide collection, initially without knowing what I would do with it. I was electrified by the idea of preserving this incredible body of reproduced artworks: 200,000 35 mm slides, the canon of Western art history as it had been taught from the 1950s to the mid-2000s, neatly labeled in a wooden cabinet system, with the classic two-part sorting—alphabetically by artist name and by location. My request was quickly approved when the seriousness of my intention became clear. But when it came to fixing the date for the handover, the process came to a standstill. Apparently, my initiative had sparked off a heated debate within the institute whether it was actually legitimate to pass on the slide collection. The internal conflict about the value of the obsolete teaching material almost automatically gave my work its subject: that of an iconoclasm.

Since the handover coincided with the possibility of an exhibition at the Museum Wiesbaden, I was able to realize the work under the title *Sturm/Iconoclasm* in the same year. In the exhibition space, I poured all the slides out on the floor and then created a rectangular field with a narrow passage around it where you could walk along. After that, I only made two interventions: first, I removed the separating tabs that had been tipped out together with the slides; second, I turned the majority of the slides over so that the labeled side—with the information about the artist, the artwork, and the source from which the reproduction was taken—faced upwards. The contents of the slide collection were thus fully visible for the first time, but their system of organization had been destroyed.

Were you able to show the scattered slide collection in other places or was it a one-off presentation? Ultimately, the order of an archive can only be broken up for the first time once.

No, the floor work has only been presented once so far prior to the current exhibition at the MNAM, Centre Pompidou. It was the result of an action on-site, and all viewers were invited to reflect on it. As you rightly said, the irreversible dissolution of a system of order can only take place once, which is precisely what constitutes my artistic(ally motivated) iconoclasm. The underlying iconoclasm is the shift from analog to digital image media in connection with the impending disposal of the analog material. I wouldn't say that the work cannot be repeated, but if it were, it would have to be done with a different slide collection. Exhibiting the same slides again this way would certainly lead to a visually similar result, but the gesture of dismantling an archive within the museum is much more powerful to me than restaging the same gesture with an archive that has already been dissolved. On a psychological level, it was also very interesting to install the work. Alexander Klar, director of the museum at the time, and Jörg Daur, the curator of the exhibition, were both eager to participate. Everybody wanted to experience what it was like to throw the contents of a drawer onto the floor. Nevertheless, we were inhibited by the aura of the material: Is it acceptable to treat images in this way—even if they are "only" reproductions—especially considering the time and work of the many people who have meticulously maintained the slide collection for over sixty years? To start with, we still looked at individual slides, but the installation work soon became physically exhausting and the images were just recalcitrant material. The empty cabinet system with the drawers pulled out was then installed in the adjacent room as a sculptural block. In addition, the hall text included a dedication to the staff and support staff at the institute who had worked on the slide collection. I believe that the response to the exhibition was mostly positive, mainly due to the fact that the destructive act was not arbitrary but resulted in a composed image. After all, there are many memories attached to this material, as well as to the way they were projected in the seminars, which is rather different from the atmosphere produced by a digital projector.

Kommentiert [KA1]: Maybe better to suppress the reference to the Pompidou exhibition to avoid any misunderstanding?

How did you subsequently come up with the idea of arranging the slides as a mural?

When I was invited by the Kunstverein Ruhr in Essen to show the Cologne slides again, I decided not to repeat the same presentation—also because the spatial situation did not allow for a floor work. I therefore opted to oppose the destructive gesture with an incomplete attempt of reconstruction using the resources at my disposal: my own time and labor. Over several weeks, I took the slides in the evening, just as they were, in the moving boxes they had been shoveled into after the exhibition in Wiesbaden, and taped off stacks of them. I then inserted these stacks between L profiles, so that they filled the main wall of the exhibition room in a format of about 2.5 × 8 meters. The material from the Wiesbaden exhibition was

thus reassembled in a compressed form, but in a random arrangement. There was only one guiding principle for me, namely, that the black-taped slides should not create a visual focal point. The idea was to give the impression of uniform image noise, even if the result could only be partially predicted.

How important is it for you that in this arrangement the reproduced artworks are no longer visible as images, and that the slide frame stands out instead as a standardized *dispositif*?

Paradoxically, this form of reduction was necessary for the reconstruction of an order in which the slides would be displayed in their entirety. It radically changed the character of the material for the viewer, with the visual and textual information now withdrawn, leading to an alienation of the image support. In Wiesbaden, the textual information was as important for the presentation as the image—the slides were not backlit, but one had the opportunity to pick them up from the floor and view them against the light. Most importantly, the labeling meant that they were still recognizable as objects from an art historical slide collection. All of that was missing now. Many digital natives could no longer identify the slides at all. And even those who were familiar with slides had difficulty placing them when they were reduced to a thin line. Most visitors associated them with a kind of white noise, a barcode that has unraveled, or a digital glitch. The withdrawal of the visual information is thus the prerequisite for perceiving the slides as a new kind of image. On the other hand, one's knowledge about the material and the previous state of the work now serves as a key to unlock and read the mural.

In this context, I would like to talk about the title *Lossless Compression*: ultimately, this raises the question of how compression is even conceivable without loss—be it a loss of quality, visibility, or even access. At the same time, the juxtaposition carries a subtle irony, as soon as one realizes the dimensions of the work …

There is definitely a certain humor in the disproportionality between the spatial volume of the work and what we associate with the term compression. This seems to be in contradiction. Nevertheless, the original information contained in the slide collection is completely stored within the mural in the smallest possible space. This aspect is literally expressed in the title and is not meant tongue-in-cheek. Materially and symbolically, the work represents a closed chapter in art history and the media history of analog photographic reproduction—at the cost of the visibility and access, though, that one might expect from an image collection. With digital image databases, on the contrary, we tend to believe that they are immaterial and have no physical weight. That's not true, of course: it's just that we don't usually see the server farms in which the data is being stored and therefore give little thought to the amount of space and energy they consume. Here, too, we can observe a withdrawal—of the hardware however, which, after all, is the all-important thing according to German media theorist Friedrich Kittler (1943–2011).

You've already mentioned the hermetic nature of the slide collection: What's your take on the connection between the process of canonization and the media conditions on which it is predicated? We have seen that the moment when the slide collections of university departments begin to become obsolete is also a moment in art history when questions about the kind of knowledge that is produced within the discipline start being asked with increasing urgency.

It is an interesting parallel that this change from analog to digital goes hand in hand with a … I won't say a revision but at least a fundamental opening up of the canon. There is certainly a latency that is determined by the medium: the source material for the slides was usually a printed publication that first had to have been available. It was then photographed, and the film was developed, framed, and labeled: only then did it enter the image inventory of the collection. With digital means, we can react much faster to current artistic developments, because the preliminary stage of publication is not necessary. So, because of the medium, the canon—especially with regards to recent art history—is more rigid than it needs to be. That also makes it all the more interesting for me to now return it to a museum, which is much more dynamic as an institution. Here, the narrative of art history, which is both sealed and locked in my work, is constantly being revisited and commented on in new ways. I find this tension particularly productive. It is precisely in the friction with other works that one can talk about the essential function and task of a museum—which is not to conserve dead material but to keep the social discourse about images alive, to energize them, rethink them, and update them. This can be a resonant space for that.

… or a look back to the future.

Absolutely. But first and foremost an assessment of the present. This shift in the media is taking place now and the materials are becoming available with a certain time lag. In that sense, you can only do the work now. Ultimately, it could be considered as a single photograph—a photograph with alternative means, in which the moment of capture is determined not by me but by a change in the media of reproduction and our image culture in general. The form and title of the work are an attempt to put these forward and backward views in direct contact with one another, within a media-archaeological perspective, so that they form interferences.

So far, you've worked primarily with analog archives. Could you also imagine working with digital image collections that are active and constantly expanding? Or is it the physical localization of the archive within an institution that is important to you?

The physical location played a role, as did the materiality and the fact that the archive or collection is no longer in use—because that gives me the greatest possible freedom for interventions in the material. Until now, the interventions I had in mind were at odds with the regular use of the archives. This is almost always a partial one, occurring in many places at once, and interrupted by me for the benefit of a more

global view. In the case of image databases, the question of location, materiality, and ownership becomes all the more pressing. As we know, digital data is stored in places that consume considerable space, material, and energy. The fire at Europe's largest cloud provider, OVH, in Strasbourg (2021) has made it clear that it is a matter of cost whether server farms have outsourced backup copies of data. In principle, all of this is appealing as a topic, but I have in mind something completely different: an old ghost wandering through the deserted database that you can unexpectedly encounter during your research.

Kommentiert [PG2]: The German word "Geist" has a double meaning: "ghost" but also "(human) mind/intellect".

Kommentiert [KA3R2]: Would you like to replace "ghost" with "Geist"? In French, I've suggested "esprit" which has the same double meaning.

Kommentiert [PG4R2]: How about "spirit" instead of "ghost" in English?
I didn't know that "esprit" also had the meaning of "ghost" in French. Great!