

KUNSTMUSEUM THUN

CHRISTIAN HELMLE. STRALAU 12.2. – 1.5.2022

ENGLISH

INTRODUCTION

The Kunstmuseum Thun is dedicating a comprehensive solo exhibition to the photographer Christian Helmle, giving visitors an insight into the multifaceted oeuvre of the Swiss artist. Helmle (born 1952 in Thun, where he lives and works) explores themes such as nature, architecture, people, structures and topographies in his works. The exhibition presents experimental photographs from the 1980s, landscape images, and photographs of architecture and people. Helmle's fields of interest are diverse. Often, he creates entire series as an artistic exploration of a certain theme. Thus, the exhibition resembles a journey through his artistic oeuvre, with the photographer spiriting viewers away from Switzerland to various European cities and settings and even to Cairo. Christian Helmle's works touch and inspire, while opening the eye to new ways of looking at things and stimulating reflection.

EXPERIMENTAL PHOTOGRAPHY (GALLERY A)

In the early 1980s, Christian Helmle experimented with light and fire. The works *Lichtspur I* (Light Trace, 1983), *Lichtspur II* (Light Trace, 1983) and *Lichtmensch* (Light Human, 1983) were created in the former mill on what is now Thun's Mühleplatz – once an industrial wasteland and today a lively cultural venue. Helmle, along with Reto Camenisch (b. 1958), Wilfried von Gunten (b. 1954), Hans Walter Graf (b. 1961), Paul Le Grand (b. 1949), Jakob Jenzer (b. 1953), Ruedi Guggisberg (b. 1951) and Peter Willen (b. 1941), was a member of the former artists' collective "Mühle", which ran a communal studio in the building until its demolition in 1989.

Helmle explores and sounds out photographic possibilities as well as the effect of the interplay of light, aperture and shutter speed. His experiments have become more geometric over time (see *Lichteck über Feuerkreis*, [Light Corner over Fire Circle], 1987), incorporating divergent materials such as stones and concrete and alternating between indoor and outdoor spaces. Soon he began to question perspective, toying with perception, illusion and reality. The work *Karrenfeld Quadrat* (Karrenfeld Square, 1991) appears like a picture within a picture, consisting of

a landscape and a white square. Distinctly visible, but not opaque, the square affords a view of the rocky ground, acting like a filter that has been placed on the photograph after the fact. Helmle plays with the viewer's perception here, creating an illusion that comes into view only when seen from the correct angle. In reality, the square is actually a trapezoid that the photographer has painted directly onto the karst with white paint. Viewed from a specific vantage point, the geometric shape straightens up, tilts into right angles, and finally appears to be a square.

LANDSCHAFTEN – MANMADE LANDSCAPES (GALLERIES B, C)

In his landscape paintings, Christian Helmle deals with our perception and understanding of nature. The natural environment that surrounds us has long since ceased to be pristine, but is instead the result of cultivation and progress, a manmade landscape that can be viewed subjectively and thus perceived in a completely different light.

Helmle is particularly interested in the structural and cultivated. The photographer opens our eyes to a completely different way of looking at landscape. The details he chooses sometimes look like graphically constructed compositions (see *Kleine Allmend* [Small Commons], 2005) or make the real image appear to be an abstract painting (see *Juchlibach*, 2003). In this way he creates images that serve as projection surfaces. The proportions become unclear and seem to veritably cancel out the ambivalence between nature and intervention. In *Belpberg* (2021), for example, Helmle allows an unreal world to emerge. In the viewer's imagination, the bricks become apartment blocks while foliage and trees summon a manufactured environment whose surreal oversizing seems to become meaningless within the overall composition. The pictures almost give the impression that a reversal of nature and intervention is taking place here. The natural landscape seems increasingly unreal. This impression also arises when viewing *Grande Dixence* (2012). Juxtaposed with the bare, grey concrete, the amorphous natural structures of the mountain seem almost like vegetation nestling against

the gigantic wall. Yet it is the dam wall that was in fact subsequently built and adapted to the natural features of the mountain.

MAKAN (GALLERY B)

In the series *Makan* (2000–03), Helmle captures with his camera snapshots of the ordinary and unspectacular. The analogue photographs show unconscious moments that are lent an independent existence only by virtue of their photographic image and in this way escape their transience.

The title comes from Arabic and means “place, spot, site”. It is an attempt to describe those spatial and temporal places that only appear in their unique form in the photographs. Initially, Helmle photographed cars and trains rushing past, or people passing by (see *Ez Zahra*, 2000). By using long exposure times, he achieves a mix of sharp and blurred areas that on the one hand suggest standstill and on the other movement. Gradually, natural elements such as the sun (see *Tozeur*, 2000), water (see *Staubbach*, 2001) and especially the wind (see *Leissingen*, 2001) attract the photographer’s gaze.

These are blurred moments of experience, split-second blinks of the eye. The pictures gain depth and seem almost three-dimensional. At the same time, the blurriness of the motifs lends the images something extremely abstract and painterly. Photographic accuracy is disrupted. Helmle explores the boundaries of the medium anew and shows us the invisible paintings created by nature.

BERG – MOUNTAIN (GALLERY C)

Mountains have always been a source of great fascination. Formed millions of years ago, they convey a sense of permanence. The mighty rock formations create a world entirely of their own, which is beautiful but at the same time unpredictable and life-threatening.

The *Berg* series (2003–14) is based on postcards from the 1930s to 1950s. The historical black-and-white photographs show the mountain as a metaphor of the sublime and were taken mostly with a large-format camera, which promised a greater richness of detail. The term “sublime” was once reserved for the divine. But when confronted with gigantic mountain ranges, one cannot help but try to approximate the breathtaking beauty and wonder of nature with this word.

Helmle investigates this aesthetic, setting off in search of the essence of the mountain. The power that each massif exudes is at the centre of his approach. Each peak is unique in its formation and appearance. The photographer is not interested in depicting a mountain landscape but rather in the singular characteristics of a particular mountain. The photographs thus appear like portraits, the use of black-and-white prints serving to emphasise the intrinsic qualities of the pictured peak. The sky and vegetation serve almost as props highlighting the distinctiveness of the motif all the more. The richness in detail of the rock makes an almost abstract impression.

The series is almost like a bow to nature’s refinement, but at the same time it also pays homage to the precise photography of the first half of the twentieth century.

OVERVIEW





Abhörstation Teufelsberg, 200

WEISSE ELEFANTEN – WHITE ELEPHANTS (GALLERY C)

The urge to find and explore special places seems typical of Helmle. So it is hardly surprising that the photographer also has a great affinity for the mystical, the mysterious and the ruinous. Inspired by an article in a French magazine, he documents in the series *Weisse Elefanten* (White Elephants, 1999–2005) monumental buildings in Europe that have become obsolete or meaningless due to political or economic developments. Some eke out an existence as scarcely functional relics, while others had already been superseded in their intended purpose before their completion. The term “white elephants” originates from the post-colonial era and originally referred to factories and buildings in Africa that were financed by international institutions but were barely used after completion. There are also many such buildings in Europe, sometimes referred to as “cathedrals of the desert”.

Contemplating the gigantic buildings in Helmle’s photographs, the terms seem extremely apt. They have something melancholy about them, an almost ghostly air that makes them appear like witnesses to failed visions. Some are more well-known because of their former function and are now considered attractions. One example is the listening station on Berlin’s Teufelsberg (see *Abhörstation Teufelsberg* [Teufelsberg Listening Station], 2005), which was built by the Americans during the Cold War to intercept the Soviet Union’s military radio traffic. Even though this site is today a tourist attraction, it is still subject to decline as a building that has outlived its purpose. Many such structures, largely forgotten, look like surreal foreign bodies that have lost their significance and their connection to their surroundings.

BAUTEN DER MODERNE – MODERNIST BUILDINGS (GALLERY D)

For years, Christian Helmle has been buying old postcards in second-hand shops, which serve him as a source of inspiration when looking at landscapes or architecture. He has a special interest in the architecture of the 1920s to 1960s, among other things. According to Helmle, the feelings of respect for and pride in the so-called “modernism” reflected in the buildings are evident in the photographs of that time. Numerous architects of the period, such as Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe – to name but a few – are still widely known today.

Helmle is convinced that architecture can only be viewed objectively after a certain amount of time has passed. So he captures these modernist buildings in timeless black-and-white photographs that draw the viewer’s attention to the straight forms and lines and bring the respective architectural features into focus.

The Shell-Haus in Berlin (see *Shell-Haus, Berlin*, 2014), which was built in 1930 for the Shell oil empire, stands out in particular for its characteristic façade. Reminiscent of a single wave movement, it seems to pick up on the dynamics of the water in the adjacent Landwehr Canal.

Some of the buildings pictured in Helmle’s work series have fallen into oblivion, others have become icons, for example the Tour Bel-Air in Lausanne (see *Tour Bel-Air, Lausanne*, 2017), which was built from 1929 to 1931 according to the design of the Swiss architect Alphonse Laverrière and is considered Switzerland’s first high-rise building.

STADTMENSCH – CITY DWELLER (GALLERY D)

In the current series *Stadtmensch* (City Dweller, 2017–21), Christian Helmle combines architectural photography with reportage to paint a compelling contemporary picture of our urban surroundings. These photographs give the impression of fleeting memories of something once seen. The scenes look so familiar that we feel like we have been there ourselves. As if it were a matter of course, we follow Helmle through the urban space, along asphalted streets and paved squares, past glass façades and walls of stone and concrete. In addition to the modernist buildings that Helmle initially sought out for his new work series, he now increasingly documents contemporary structures as well, lending architecture a new function in his pictures. It is no longer the main subject but rather recedes into the background, forming a backdrop for a new motif: people.

And yet the architectural structures are indispensable for understanding the photographs and divining their message. Architecture and people form a dialogue, an ensemble, which is also recognisable in the way the series is presented. The “salon hanging” with many images sharing space on the wall allows visitors to draw connections between the divergent photographs. The photographer chooses the cities subjectively. Occasionally, familiar motifs such as the Messeplatz in Basel (see *Messeplatz, Basel*, 2019) or the Europaallee at Zurich’s main railway station (see *Bahnhof Zürich, Europaallee*, 2019) can be recognised. But Helmle is not interested in depicting individual cities. He wants instead to convey the complexity of city life. Thus, the pictures ultimately reveal the shared realities of the “city dweller” in various metropolises in Europe, and show the Swiss as well as Central European urban living space that he is familiar with.

TAXI (GALLERY F)

At the beginning of his career, Christian Helmle worked as a photojournalist and taxi driver. The photographs in the series *Taxi* (1981) show him as a chauffeur. The photographer has installed a camera on the dashboard of his taxi. The wide-angle lens captures the entire interior and gives the viewer a casual glimpse of what is happening. The shutter is released around seven seconds after pressing the self-timer. Thus, to a certain extent, the final image is always a chance construct, which results in the different characters of the passengers being captured in an authentic way. The shots are taken during the ride, while the passengers are paying or getting out. There is, for example, the young woman with crutches, the chatty man who knowingly raises his finger, the sceptical lady who prefers to check the amount on the taximeter again when paying, and the serious and silent man in uniform whom the photographer is presumably driving to the military compound.

The black-and-white prints are hand-coloured, making the details stand out even more. Those who know Thun

may recognise buildings or streets – they may spy the former branch of Schweizerische Kreditanstalt (Credit Suisse since 1997), visible in one picture through the rear window of the taxi, or remember the town celebrities the Valentini sisters, who owned the kiosk at the boat station. These are pictures of everyday life, which at the same time provide a humorous glimpse of the early days of the Thun photographer's artistic career.

FANS / MOULID (GALLERY E)

Christian Helmle is always drawn back to Egypt. The country and its people fascinate him. The images he captured at the religious Mouldid festivals in Cairo in 1993 and 1995 immerse the viewer in another world and make the photographer's enduring interest in Egyptian culture palpable. The black-and-white photographs show Sufis who, through dance, music and chanting, put themselves into a delirious state and in this way pay homage to a religious leader. Some of the men seem to be in a trance, their eyes closed, completely absorbed in their faith.

Helmle is right in the midst of the action. He moves agilely through the dynamic frenzy of dancing bodies. He also mingles with the crowds at numerous open-air concerts and festivals that the photographer from Thun documented from 1990 to 2003 in equally arresting images. But Helmle does not focus in on the obvious – the world-famous bands. He is interested in the people, the throngs of fans watching and listening. The pictures tell of euphoria and fascination, of friendship, freedom and the feeling of being understood, of identification and belonging. They are images of a generation whose devotion and longing are downright palpable.

The juxtaposition of the two groups of works illustrates the similarity in the emotions that may be expressed in religion and in fan communities. While believers worship a supernatural force, music bands ascend to the status of godlike idols cheered on by their fans. Helmle's photographs show us moments of joy. They are about encounter and hope, about the moment, the here and now.

BIOGRAPHY

Christian Helmle (b. 1952 in Thun, Switzerland) grew up in Thun. After studying ethnology for three semesters at the University of Bern from 1972 to 1973, he made several trips to Central America and Africa.

From 1977 to 1980, Helmle attended the photography class at the Ecole d'arts appliqués in Vevey. He has been a freelance photographer since 1982. Helmle has received numerous awards and grants, including the Swiss Federal Scholarship (1987), the Cairo Studio Fellowship (1993), the Tunis Work Fellowship (2000), the Berlin Studio Grant (2005) and the Photography Prize of the Canton of Bern (2006). His works are represented in important collections and have been shown in numerous exhibitions at home and abroad.

Selected publications on the work of Christian Helmle: *Selve* (self-published, Thun 2017); *Thunersee* (Jovis Verlag, Berlin 2016); *Waterpower* (Jovis Verlag, Berlin 2012); *Weisse Elefanten / White Elephants* (Jovis Verlag, Berlin, 2007); *Zum Beispiel Thun* (Ott Verlag, Thun 2003); *Karrenfeld* (report Verlag, Thun 2000).

The exhibition is accompanied by the publication: *Christian Helmle. Stralau*, Kunstmuseum Thun (ed.), with a foreword by Helen Hirsch and texts by Konrad Tobler and Alisa Klay, Kehrer Verlag Heidelberg, 2022. ISBN 978-3-96900-061-8

EVENTS (SELECTED)

Sunday, 27 February, 11:15 a.m., Studio visit with Christian Helmle

With Alisa Klay, research assistant

Address: Atelierhaus Thun, Uttigenstrasse 27, 3600 Thun,

Registration: kunstmuseum@thun.ch,

Cost: CHF 10 (CHF 8 reduced). The number of participants is limited to a maximum of 15.

Sunday, 20 March, 11:45 a.m., Tour in dialogue

With Christian Helmle and Christoph Kern, photographer and curator, admission price includes guided tour.

For further information and events, please visit our website kunstmuseumthun.ch

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