The Sea Remembers
Visual Journeys to Landscapes Recalled

Introduction by Prof. Klaus Honnef held during the exhibition opening on April 4, 2018
at the Kommunale Galerie Berlin in collaboration with PhotoWerkBerlin

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Technically speaking, photography is a variant of the process of visual reproduction that first emerged with the *camera obscura*, but in any case, before the digital process asserted itself for the capture of photographic images.

And yet, the more involved I become with the photographic image format (slides), the greater my impression that the *laterna magica* (the *camera obscura*'s younger sibling, as it were, projecting rather than capturing) has exerted at least as much influence on modern visual perception as the *camera obscura*. In reality, the *camera obscura*, known already in Antiquity, and the *laterna magica* are just two of many vision machines – from panorama to diorama, stereoscope to kaleidoscope, film to TV and the internet – that brought about and then sustained a revolution in visual perception. In his seminal book *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*[1] Jonathan Crary introduced a radical shift in perspective from image – still the most important subject of observation and art criticism – to observer, complete with their specific perceptions; indeed, he made it the focal point of his considerations.

The Sea Remembers. Visual Journeys to Landscapes Recalled is the telling title of the exhibition we are opening today. It offers me a welcome opportunity to pick up that particular thread once again. Rosemarie Zens, its originator, is the author behind most of the photographs and texts featured at the exhibition. But she has also created them not least to recall a memory for us, as observers of her photographs, and for herself, a memory which she explicitly does not have, and cannot have. What we see in the photographs does play into the mental field commonly referred to as memory, but in this instance, it is not its vivid expression. Rather, a possible and, if anything, probable link for the elementary prerequisites of memories does establish itself in the ensemble of individual photographs and texts. To be specific: thanks to her mother's handwritten notes jotted down on paper after the Fall of the Wall in 1989, Rosemarie Zens was able to embark on a journey into her own past – namely to the place of her birth, in what was once German heartland but is today located in Poland. A place her mother and siblings left behind in March 1945, at the last minute as it were, on a final trek to the West. Rosemarie Zens was just six months old at the time. Her memory of

her place of birth and of fleeing the advancing Red Army is second-hand, so to speak, sustained solely from her mother's notes and, perhaps predating those, her mother's stories. Not even the photographic images she found in a box full of memorabilia (of the kind everyone of our generation possessed) provide sufficient material to jog her memory with facts. Firstly, they tell her nothing about their flight and, secondly, they fall well within the norms of what people back then usually photographed when it came to capturing memories: portraits, houses, genre scenes.

These photographs, cropped differently for the book and the exhibition, provide a thrilling contrast with the photographs Rosemarie Zens herself took when she set off on her journey to the east: stylistically, and in terms of format, colour, intent, motif, and habitus. While the early photographs are infused with the attribute that Roland Barthes termed 'that-has-been', the same can only be said of the traveller's photographs to the extent that they authentically testify to her presence in certain places in Poland only through a now definitively absent presence at the time.

Just as in the book *Camera Lucida* Barthes himself shifts his theoretical reflections on photography from the level of the perfect tense ('has been') to the level of the future perfect ('will have been') by deliberately putting a photograph of his mother – who, at the time the photograph was taken, was not yet his mother, but would one day become his mother – in the focal point of his explorations of his own memories and his photographic reflections, ultimately doing more [author's emphasis] than merely recognising her, the same holds true of Rosemarie Zens' photographs. He describes the effect as a 'sudden awakening, outside of likeness'.[2]

Joining in alongside the 'has-been' is a future as yet unrealised, one which by the time he was viewing the photograph after his mother's death had been realised, i.e. a pluperfect. Rosemarie Zens' photograph and text installation here at the Kommunale Galerie Berlin operates on this imaginary horizon with all its lacunae, imaginations, and memories. 'What do the images look like that stem from very early impressions, from memories that spring forth from deep oblivion? Why do I avoid certain places or look beyond them while I pause at others and seek to capture them?'[3] asks Rosemarie in the wonderful book that accompanies her project, her journey back into her own memory. Do images that had embedded themselves in the unconscious at the time re-surface once again? Do they become indirectly evident in her photographic images? In the form of 'That's how it will have been', which in German always evokes a possibility: that's how it could have been. And is that not precisely the reason why photography is the image medium that has turned image viewers into image authors, initially just potentially, but then in actuality, thanks to advanced technology? Image

authors who are not just in a position to determine their image of themselves, but also to produce it; in fact, don't they already do so on an ever-greater scale?

So far, I have raised lots of questions and expected you to embrace a number of projections on my part, and all sorts of speculation. But I beg your kind indulgence as I continue along these lines because there are too many ostensible and premature answers and barely any other valid questions. And because, as I was jotting down keywords for my presentation, I still had no ready answers to hand and already suspected I would not find any, at least not any valid ones.

So, allow me to speculate further, ever aware that the word 'speculation' itself derives from the Latin *speculari*, i.e. to observe, to look into the distance from an elevated position, and that I am impinging upon Rosemarie Zens' second or third field of expertise, namely psychology.

I have attested to the authenticity of the artist's photographs only in the sense that they document her presence in places where she was once present, a presence that later became an absence, and that decades later she captured, i.e. photographed, those places. However, they can also lay claim to authenticity in a completely different sense, in the sense that, contrary to my assertion, they at least give the appearance of memory, at least as a possibility. A theory posited by Portuguese neuroscientist António Damásio gave me the idea. Damásio is of the view that all human emotions are stored through images, in other words that they have a visual background and are interconnected with lots of other things. An affectionate relationship with one's mother – an intersubjective relationship – is enough to produce such images in the brain without the emergent human being even aware of the process. In Rosemarie Zens' case her mother's notes certainly emphasise the intense psycho-physiological relationship between mother and infant.

Even if you were to glance just casually or distractedly at the daughter's photographs, taken decades after the events had occurred, you could not help but be moved by the depth of their emotionality, by these silent landscapes that nonetheless speak quietly and incredibly forcefully. Images that stand out so demonstratively from the usual travel or tourist photographs, indeed skewering them formally. But also, by most of the variations on artistic landscape photography. Resonating here is something indescribable. All of a sudden, the phrase of Rosemarie Zens' I quoted earlier springs to mind: 'Why do I avoid certain places or look beyond them while I pause at others and seek to capture them?'[4]

Has that which the tiny human being perceived unconsciously suddenly become visible in a way that cannot (yet) be proven or verified empirically? I don't have an answer to that – and it makes the speculation all the more enticing.

There is much back-and-forth in the ensemble of landscapes photographed by Rosemarie Zens. Sometimes our gaze is disrupted; vast expanses of sea grass in the foreground merely hint at what shimmers in the distance; sometimes that same gaze is obstructed by a house in the fog behind a wild-growing meadow; at others it is reflected back by a mirroring pond squirming with tadpoles; then it opens up again. Heaven and earth converge in a photograph's distant background and horizontal centre; or the viewer's gaze glides across a snow-covered field dotted with straw bales, off into infinity. Photographs with an extremely high horizon line and expansive foreground do predominate however.

Autumn and winter seem to be the preferred seasons for the ensemble. Snow and fog conjure up a melancholy mood, and a slightly sinister one. A beautiful, moving, fascinating melancholy, and tranquillity. The photographs evoke a very distinctive mood. In the words of the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl, there is however an 'intuition of order and law prevailing over chaos, of harmony over dissonance, of stillness over movement […] Its elements are peace, and calm, and vision.'[5] Walter Benjamin would later distil his concept of 'aura'[6] from Riegl's concept of mood.

In Rosemarie Zens' photographic landscapes, what lies beneath subliminally resurfaces occasionally in visible reflexes: a human apparition beyond the latticework of sea grass – but is it a fisherman in a boat or a hallucination? There is a hint of menace, not to say horror, afoot. There is the predatory fox lurking in the band of snow in front of the dense bushes; the timbers in the frozen copse that seem like human bones suddenly exposed to the light; the wan moon… what is it that threatens the soil? Time and time again, what we term 'history' has soaked that soil with blood. It should be part of the collective memory. Only once do we encounter a human being, a farmer or a shepherd with a stick, a miniscule figure on the horizon line, with a cow, on the very left of the picture. Shadows draw across the meadow, the skies blue-grey; on the right, a shrub or a treetop, far away. Seldom do tracks guide the viewer's gaze into the depths of the landscape where the snow is packed hard by footsteps or wheel tracks; the gaze is far more likely to be guided upwards, by the vertical. It winds its way from the bottom right of the image plane in a slow shortening to the middle right, then right up to the top; on either side the frozen ground with its sparse cover of green vegetation and small outcrops – all rather unspectacular.

Among the magisterial landscapes in muted colours and the solitary picture of flowers are photographs from the family album: a young woman laughing, her mother presumably; a young boy in front of water, a building with a thatched roof projecting; a child and a woman, the head cropped; three young women down on the beach – some of the photographs cropped in the style of the *Neues Sehen* movement. They provide the chronological contrast, and create tension alone through the difference in visual approach.

I have endeavoured to give an idea of Rosemarie Zens' photograph and text installation, yet mentioned the texts only in passing. But together with the photographic aspect, they provide the second invisible frame for the artistic project.

You are of course at liberty, ladies and gentlemen, to take what I have said as a projection in words of my own personal view, a subjective albeit unconscious displacement of my own inner psychological frame of mind towards the objects of contemplation we are sharing today. As a vision that I project onto Rosemarie Zens' photographs based on my own disposition; that I am describing something which they may well not be conveying at all. Especially if I admit to you that my relationship towards these images might be coloured somewhat by the fact that my own mother also fled with her three children in the twilight days of the Nazi regime, even if it was earlier on than Rosemarie Zens' mother, i.e. after Stalingrad, the turning point in the Second World War. She did so from the even more distant eastern Prussian town of Tilsit, now a Russian enclave by the name of Sovetsk, and at risk to her own life since fleeing was prohibited and punishable with the death penalty. But it was in greater comfort, on board a scheduled train operated by the *Reichsbahn*. I was five and a half years older than Rosemarie Zens when we fled. I too have no recollection whatsoever, although I do recall Tilsit, and the inside of our house, and the impact of the war on the civilian population in the West. But unlike Rosemarie Zens I have felt no compulsion to revisit eastern Prussia. I was simply born there, of parents of Rhenish origin, because my father was transferred from Aachen to Tilsit as a Prussian civil servant, for disciplinary reasons. Nazi humour… Having said that, I have often travelled east professionally, to the Soviet Union and then Russia; and last year, to Latvia and Estonia. Partly by chance, partly not. So, I am projecting one or two things into these stunning pictures. And there's no doubt that I am moved by them. Any observer will approach them with a different disposition, and mine of course includes my professional experience and knowledge of images. For instance, the fact that, in his astounding film *Shoa*, Claude Lanzmann extensively visualises the landscape that both conceals and exposes the unimaginable crimes committed in German concentration camps. It is our task (and our duty) to recall them into our memory, even if we are too young to have committed the crimes or condoned them. We, the observers, bear the responsibility for that!

Over the past 150 to 180 years the changes in the world around us that occurred in the wake of the Industrial Revolution have been reflected in a profound change in human perception. Vision machines were and are the keep-fit equipment for our eyes and brains, turning passive observers of images into active participants in the world of images and, in the meantime, their originators, too. But when it comes to art's social dimension we still carry on as if we were un-emancipated, as if there was a disparity between image and viewer – and

no doubt there is one, given that many of us shy away from the effort of acquiring the competence to communicate at eye level with the images, at the level of dialogue. But let's return to this tremendous exhibition: to fill the spaces between the exhibits, to share the memory that Rosemarie Zens has elaborated by travelling to the place of her birth, and to complement it with our own memories. When the circle closes, we emerge from an understanding of art that is still mired deep in the 19th century, from which it draws its reference criteria. There is a second project by Rosemarie Zens, entitled *As the Eye Wanders*[7], which does point towards a long-overdue 'observer-based theory'. Grouping together a series of different images under quite succinct references, it calls upon us, as observers, simply to associate freely. She merely provides the framework: it is for us to fill it.

Notes:

[1] Jonathan Crary. *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, MIT Press 1992, and Norman Bryson. *Vision and Painting*, Palgrave Macmillan 1983.
[2] Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard, Vintage 2000, p 109.
[3] Rosemarie Zens. *The Sea Remembers, Landscape and History, Landschaft und Geschichte*, Heidelberg 2014, *sine pagina*
[4] Rosemarie Zens. *The Sea Remembers* (see Note 3), *sine pagina*
[5] Alois Riegl quoted from: Hans-Georg von Arburg: *'Ein sonderbares Gespinst von Raum und Zeit'. Zur theoretischen Konstitution und Funktion von 'Stimmung' um 1900 bei Alois Riegl und Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, in: Stimmung. Ästhetische Kategorie und künstlerische Praxis, Kerstin Thomas (ed.), Munich 2010, p 13
[6] Walter Benjamin. *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* [The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction], in: Walter Benjamin. *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. Three Studies on Art Sociology, edition surhkamp, editor: Günter Busch, Frankfurt am Main, 4th edition, 1970, pp 7–63
[7] Rosemarie Zens. *As the Eye Wanders*, 2017