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The Sistine Madonna in Digital Deceleration — Creating Photographic Distance

A Gallery Discussion between Michael Hering, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Kupferstich-Kabinett, and Bernhard Maaz, Director of the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister and Kupferstich-Kabinett, on the Art Intervention of Katharina Gaenssler at the Occasion of the Celebratory Exhibition *The Sistine Madonna — Raphael's Iconic Painting Turns 500*.

BM —

- 1 It was exactly 500 years ago that Raphael painted the Sistine Madonna, one of the most famous paintings in history. Since the late eighteenth century — when it drew the attention of German Classical writers, such as Winckelmann, Goethe, Wieland and Forster, and then the Romantics — it became one of the most esteemed and revered paintings not only of the Dresden Gallery but in all of Europe. Keeping this in mind, not to mention the number of books written and the millions
- 2 of reproductions made, is not any new approach — whether in written or visual form — pointless and superfluous?

— MH

Without doubt any artistic engagement with the Sistine Madonna must be carefully considered otherwise there is considerable danger that merely another effigy is added to the countless clichés. The risk that an artistic appropriation might fail is great, especially if we recall Walter Benjamin's dictum that in the age of technical reproducibility a reproduction lacks a basic element of the original: its aura. In view of

the crisis of picture reproduction, which began at the beginning of the twentieth century with modern means of reproduction and has now intensified due to the deceptive possibility to turn virtual images into reality or to manipulate pictorial motifs in a shameless fashion, there may be an opportunity chance for contemporary art if it approaches an iconic picture of this dimension in a reflective manner while remaining paradoxically at a distance.

BM —

An artist may claim a reflective approach but not actually achieve this. My question is then: what is different about Katharina Gaenssler's work or — so as not to compare — what makes her work special? I think that reverence (a word that is related to the term aura) plays a central role — the awareness that an omnipresent major work of art history has a force of its own.

— MH

Without wishing to speak for her, I hardly think that Katharina Gaenssler approached the Sistine Madonna with reverence. Such a mental attitude would result in paralysis. Gaenssler's photographic intervention is an autonomous contemporary statement. Although she investigates the question of reproduction, it is not the central theme of her intervention in the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister. It is interesting, however, that our discussion confirms the fundamental problem in dealing with major works of art history: it is almost impossible to avoid some form of appropriation. This phenomenon is also present in the subtext of Gaenssler's photo collage, and the photographer takes a clear position. But before we investigate this aspect any further, I would like to take a step backwards and make a fundamental observation about the way the photographer works: Katharina Gaenssler's photography creates space! A simple but programmatic statement. Her photographic intervention in the Gemäldegalerie focuses on the suite of rooms in the western wing of the Gallery and the attraction that the central arrangement of rooms has on the visitor, which at its end culminates in the architectonic heightening of a single picture. In accordance with the prestigious site, the artist's photographic spatial design — made up of several thousand single images — will be woven into a Gobelin

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16 18 tapestry, as in Raphael's life time, by a Belgian Gobelin factory according to Katharina Gaenssler's instructions.

3 4 What interests the artist is tracking down such subtle spatial qualities and visualizing them in her photographic spatial collages in a way that the viewer experiences them anew. That the Sistine Madonna is at the centre of her work in Dresden can only be viewed as a chance to re-examine our view of this iconic painting.

BM —

Does this view — I come back to the idea of reverence, which can also be understood as respect — result in a deceleration leading to a step-by-step viewing process, a productive fragmentation? Decades ago David Hockney did this with his multipart-additive landscape photos, which he combined in a similar way into an entire picture or into a panorama. Is it possible that Katharina Gaenssler knows these works?

— MH

6 8 It is true that in Gaenssler's photographic spatial collage the Sistine Madonna is observed from the viewpoint of digital deceleration. It is less respect, however, than intellectual distance which determines this kind of photography. Using her digital camera the photographer systematically investigates — similar to a search for clues — every spatial detail from photo to photo so as to fathom the nature of the venue she has chosen for her work. Thereafter, in her studio, using a computer, the countless single images are assembled and hung elsewhere temporarily as a photographic spatial collage. It is in the distance to the source venue that Gaenssler creates a prismatically broken spatial perspective, which opens up a new spatial experience to the viewer.

Katharina Gaenssler's work is unique in contemporary photography. In contrast to David Hockney, who since the 1980s has used multiple vantage points and emphasized individual motifs in his well-known, multipart photos, Gaenssler objectifies the procedure by treating every detail with a view to the entire space equally. And a similarity to Thomas Ruff's current series of *jpegs* only appears at first glance. He enlarges and compresses motifs from the Internet to create brilliant pictures on a gigantic scale that disintegrate into monochrome colour fields and thus become an *allegory of dispersion*.

For Gaenssler, on the other hand, the perfect individual picture is not at the core of her work. Her craftsmanship relies on state-of-the-art technology and aims at collecting detailed pictorial information by means of photography that translates a real place into a complex spatial experience. Photography is only a means to an end: the realization of her spatial art works.

BM ———

At the same time, however, the single images which she uses for the large installation of the Gobelin and that will appear in a large-format Artist's Book are strikingly detailed. They have a radical, irritating directness that shows the beauty of the painting as well as its minor flaws, the inexact execution by Raphael, the changes in the painting process, the overlapping painted surfaces, the deviation in colour of intended contours, etc. The almost microscopic details also show how differently the layers of paint age, how the craquelure is developing, where paint was applied heavily and where only thinly. This approach even helps the expert *reread* and rediscover the familiar piece: the masterpiece of a virgin is not virginal.

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It is also irritating that in isolation the detail photos have a huge impact; the individual photo appears monumental in its almost arbitrarily found form. Did Katharina Gaenssler ever talk about this ambivalence between the detail and the whole, the miniature and the panoramic view?

——— MH

What we initially experience with the detailed photos is our own astonishment as we experience ourselves seeing or — to be more exact — recognizing that our established memory of a picture appears to be apodictically conditioned by a reproduction of the image. The *precise view*, however, to which the detailed photos of Katharina Gaenssler allude and which justifies the most inconsequential pictorial information, opens up a view of the Sistine Madonna that reveals apparently unseen details, the enjoyment of which we feel we were deprived of when viewing the original, although they were always there! The artist does not experience her photos this way since she sees the individual miniature detail taking its proper place in her digital photographic

space. Not one of the many detail photos is more or less valuable to the artist, as they only make up a harmonious picture together. And yet the Artist's Book which is being created in parallel with the installation for the Dresden project is unique in the artist's career. In contrast to previous books it is the first to document only one *detail* of a photographic spatial collage — the Sistine Madonna — and the first to appear in the large format of the historical portfolios of Prints, Drawings and Photos in the Dresden Kupferstich-Kabinett. As in her realization of the digital spatial collage, the artist is responding to the dignity of her venue. But in terms of the starting point for the artist, one could also say: in Dresden everything is new!

BM —

Will the complexity of what is being created here be accessible to the gallery visitors? The visual impact that the photos have is indubitable, but the multiple conceptual layers of her work will probably not be easily ascertained. They range from the painting to the photography, from the individual photos to the series, from the series to the book, from the book to the Gobelin tapestry. Does Katharina Gaenssler want her work to be quickly grasped by the viewer? Or is it not more interesting to comprehend the intellectual aspects of her work step by step as part of a journey of discovery? How did that work with her other installations? And what information does the viewer have to obtain in the space *occupied* or rather enlivened by her work?

— MH

When artwork is released from the studio, it has to speak and stand for itself. The work of Katharina Gaenssler has no pedagogical strategy. Every viewer determines, according to his own knowledge and interest, to what extent he wishes to be engaged and drawn into the reception of this contemporary intervention. The visitor's perception and experience of space while walking through the suite of gallery rooms will lead, when at the end of the route he reaches the Gobelin, to the realization that the Sistine Madonna remains unapproachable: this is a very simple but existential discovery.

With the Artist's Book the viewer will have a similar experience. An aspect of modern art mentioned above — seriality — is the

open-ended principle of stringing along equal parts in contrast, for example, to a cycle. In this respect the photos of the Sistine Madonna in the Artist's Book are explicitly serial; a perusal of the book can begin anywhere. The eye moves freely from page to page without the wish necessarily arising to see the painting in its entirety. What one sees is so overwhelming that one loses sight of the picture as a whole. In contrast to the Gobelin, where the artist creates an absolute distance to the Sistine Madonna by duplicating the suite of gallery rooms, in her book she reverses this approach, taking close-up photos, which however, also achieve a special detachment to her motif, albeit by other means. No matter how close the detail photos of the Sistine Madonna are, Gaenssler maintains a remoteness by not exposing the picture as a whole.

The Gobelin and the Artist's Book have been conceived in such a way that the offerings to the viewer of visual *appropriation* are playful and without expectations, and as a result the artistic integrity of the historical masterpiece is not at risk. That is what makes this contemporary photographic intervention exceptional: it does not reproduce the Sistine Madonna. The viewer's process of appropriation varies from project to project in Katharina Gaenssler's work and can only be described individually because the photographer reacts explicitly to the venue and takes it as a theme for her photographic spatial collage. In that respect the Dresden project is and will remain unique.

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We could conclude here and be pleased that the several days Katharina Gaenssler spent working at the Gemäldegalerie and the weeks thereafter in her studio have had such a powerful and multifaceted effect. But we must add a word of thanks: the artist's point of view, attitude and reflections have substantially expanded our knowledge and awareness of this major work, and her creative process with its modifications and experimental phases have shown that a good work of art takes time. This takes us back to Raphael and the speed of painting, a process of conception, reflection and execution. Slowness was an integral part of creating masterpieces. This subliminal perception of decelerated time or the decelerated perception of time, also the pondering pause

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16 18 Gobelin auf dem Webstuhl,
Flanders Tapestries, Belgium
17 Musterhängung Atelier

Gobelin being woven,
Flanders Tapestries, Belgium
Studio hanging, Gobelin sample

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and pausing to ponder are aspects of the Gobelin, the individual photos and the album-like photography book. We were also pleased to observe that the artist's craftsmanship was executed in a traditional, matter of course manner — as the basis for art, as high demands. We can be thankful that our knowledge of Raphael's profound painting has expanded and that we see how stimulating it is to engage with history and mankind's creative works.

But let us return to artwork as an artefact, an innovative product of mankind's history. The legendary Gobelins of Brussels and Burgundy decorated the walls of European courts, were taken on journeys, were hung up and taken down in manors and royal palaces. They portrayed legends and heroic deeds, had narrative and decorative elements and were luxury items of the time. As a result many of these Gobelins became worn out and frayed. But their use was indicative of a cultural proximity between the Gobelins and the viewer as well as a large variety of contexts and opportunities for viewing. Now the question arises whether Katharina Gaenssler's Gobelin is placeless and timeless in this sense or dependent on the place in the modern sense of *site specific*? In other words: would the Gobelin, which operates to such an extent within the local aura and architecture, function aesthetically and perceptually in the same specific way in another location or would it be perceived differently in new surroundings? That is a very relevant question for the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, which has over a dozen important Gobelins in its collection.

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This is a very interesting perceptual aspect that we could apply to the Sistine Madonna, since its position in the Picture Gallery largely determines Katharina Gaenssler's room-related photographic work. If the concept of *site specific* had not been used in the second half of the twentieth century specifically for works of art created for a singular place, the question would automatically arise as to whether the Sistine Madonna, which was painted in 1512 for the high altar of the Benedictine monastery church of San Sisto in Piacenza, and thus in its composition and subject matter clearly referential to this church as a specific place, was similarly connected to its location in the *site-specific*

sense of modern works. In twentieth century Dresden, in accordance with changing tastes, the picture was displayed well into the 1930s in a chapel-like, corner-wing cabinet of the Gemäldegalerie in an almost sacred staging. Finally, after 1955, the Sistine Madonna took its place in the central axis of the Gallery, a position that almost seems to have been made for it. Yet the question still remains open as to the best place and presentation of the painting.

Although the Gobelin tapestry was created for the sacrosanct wall of the Sistine Madonna in the Gemäldegalerie, another location would also be imaginable and would even be worth a try. In any case, it would present for discussion the particular spatial situation that the Sistine painting assumes in the Gallery and thus subtly address in another location the cult that has arisen around the painting. The Gobelin as a contemporary intervention would thus ultimately preserve its artistic target course.

BM ———

This book is a derivative (a word that has recently fallen into disrepute) but it is in fact derived from a unique work, the book of the sequence of images shown open during the presentation in front of the Gobelin. Similarly, the tapestry is a derivative of a photography series. This handy and hopefully easily and impressively perusable printed book that we are talking about is designed for the connoisseur or simply for a curious audience. It was created for art lovers, for those who enjoy rare optical impressions. It is different than the larger-scale, original book, which was created as a unique piece and based on the first large print-outs of the individual digital images. Why this singular, unwieldy, bulky Artist's Book with its portly dimensions? In the eighteenth century, portfolios of graphics collectors were intended for works to be taken out or displayed on a table to the attending connoisseurs in order to ignite conversations on art — for Goethe the true and ultimate goal of looking at art. Katharina Gaenssler's tome is also an atlas of images, additively compiled pictures and notes of the visible world, as we know it from Gerhard Richter's atlas project, for example. Would another form have been conceivable for this unique work? How mandatory was this form?

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Here a modest response is in order. The large-format Artist's Book, like the Gobelin, follows the tradition of the venue, or, similar to the tapestry, it presents a different form of detachment to the Sistine Madonna. The large-format picture atlas, if the images were placed together, would be precisely four times the size of the original painting. In its bound form, it only conveys the sensuous poetic quality of colour and colour sequences, which in the individual detail photographs appear as radical as the works of American Abstract Expressionists. We can regard this atlas as a document of pure painting that protects the Madonna since it is impossible to view the whole image. The Artist's Book in its stringency is the only feasible way for Katharina Gaenssler to do justice to her open-minded and factually accurate method of working. The large-format book fully exhausts what the artist has portrayed with her artistic attention to detail in the trade edition of the atlas on the Sistine Madonna: a never-ending kaleidoscope of colours.

BM ——

The sequence selected by Katharina Gaenssler is irritating: the artist does not arrange the sequence of pictures horizontally, as Europeans read a book, but goes along the surface in vertical sequences. One might assume that this was simply because she did not want to move the tripod, but only jacked it up and down. But the results of such a procedure could also be ordered in the old European reading style from left to right with lines moving towards the bottom. Why did she choose not to do so? Coincidence or principle – irritation as a metaphor for the other, for alienation and transformation?

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In the installations the artist takes her working process for granted; she no longer questions it. The photographic direction of reading in the vertical plane was discovered by chance during her first photography projects in the outdoors years ago. It must be kept in mind that a vertical sequence of scenes is much easier to photograph than on a horizontal plane, where one possibly documents endless surfaces of the monochromatic blue of the sky, which then later must be reassembled or seen together in the studio. In addition, this artistic process is the simplest way of *comprehending* a location, or of systematically studying

a space from top to bottom and from left to right. The situation is somewhat different, however, for the Artist's Book on the Sistine Madonna. As we observed, the book avoids getting too close, photographically, to the painting. A horizontal reading, however, would lead to numerous related duplicate images that, from the perspective of the artist, would lose some of their suspense and thus not be in line with the intention of the project. The initial unfamiliar vertical reading, which in the course of observation is combined with the horizontal, surprises the viewer with many unusual but nonetheless interesting juxtapositions. It draws attention to painterly detail and celebrates each individual image as an artistic sensation. By looking at the details one forgets the entirety of the Sistine Madonna painting and gains an artistic pleasure that, similar to a moving camera, evolves into a riot of colour.

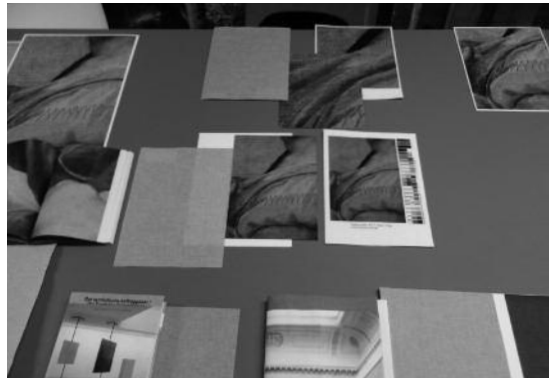
BM —

A riot of colour, a plethora of detail, irritation, revaluation are the keywords, and all this generates a different way of seeing a familiar work, a new look at the details of Raphael's Sistine Madonna and its great spiritual and formal contexts. The look at the Artist's Book is a sunken gazing at coloured paper and thus legitimately a form of personal immersion in the beauty of the Raphaelite painting, an unrelenting close-up. In contrast, viewing the Gobelin tapestry is an upright look, an airy view into the distance. In these two works, how we look at the works on paper and the paintings surprisingly complement each other. But it is not the viewing habits connected with paper or books on the table, on the one hand, and the decorative painting on the wall, on the other; in both forms there is a coming together — as a microcosm in the detailed image and a macrocosm in the picture hanging in the room. The longer we reflect on the two facets of this artistic juxtaposition, the more it reinforces the belief — despite the familiarity and popularity of Raphael's Sistine Madonna — that there are still countless other ways of using detachment to approach this work. And so we have a glimpse into what comprises a masterpiece: a work that challenges us to see it in new ways. So, in closing, our gratitude is not only for the great Renaissance master for his cultural legacy but also to the artist for her fearless questioning of this legacy.

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