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Photography between documentation and illusion

Last weekend, Fotomuseum Winterthur held its annual Plat(t)form for the third time, giving young photographers from all over Europe an opportunity to present their portfolios. A panel of curators, critics and academics nominated 130 photographers, 42 of whom were then invited to Winterthur. Six photographers at a time showed their works on tables for two hours, and, in a relaxed and animated atmosphere, answered questions put to them by the public and the six members of the jury, who subsequently selected eight of them for a special mention. The work on display covered the entire spectrum of photography, from conventional documentary photography to cool, detached object photography and bizarrely surreal compositions, giving an insight into what is currently happening in this medium.

It was particularly interesting to note how this young generation of photographers is dealing with the changing function and meaning of their medium. For many years, photography was predominantly an instrument for the affirmation and documentation of “reality” – a window on the world that most viewers simply accepted at face value. In today’s increasingly visual culture, however, with its digitally generated images and widespread awareness of the manipulative power of the image, photography is no longer the guardian of truth. It has to carve out a new role for itself. This was particularly evident in some the works in which photography was used to create ambiguous images hovering between reality and fiction. Swiss photographers Tayio Onorato and Nico Krebs presented a work about America, fittingly entitled *The Great Unreal*, in which they playfully deconstructed the myth of life “on the road”, often using installation techniques. French photographer Adrien Missika showed sci-fi landscapes in which it was almost impossible to tell whether they were views of models and dioramas or real landscapes – disturbingly beautiful scenes of a disappearing post-apocalyptic nature. The highly distinctive works by Swiss photographer Thomas Julier were remarkable for their bold reduction and precise composition, oscillating between abstraction, representation and illusion, whilst exploring the two-dimensional graphic qualities of photography.

These works, which assertively underline the illusory aspect of photography, made the difficulties faced by documentary photography all the more evident. By comparison, the portraits of unveiled women in Iran by British photographer Olivia Arthur seemed positively banal: technically perfect, uninspired visual shells that appeal to the better side of human nature by way of a photojournalistic stance whose unthinking naivety seems barely credible today. Dutch photographer Wytse van Keulen offered a more sophisticated, cerebral documentary approach: in her breviary-like book, she documented the lifeworld of a former dentist who had moved to the mountains of Spain to devote himself to the search for truth. Landscapes alternate with details of his home and grainy images cropped from photographs of his comfortable middle-class past. Dense and discreet, the book can be read both as a documentary compilation of evidence and as an essay on the legibility of superficial appearances. Swiss photographer Lukas Hoffmann explores the suburbs of Paris with quiet lyricism in images of deserted non-places whose sheer mundanity takes on a strange beauty when seen through the eye of this photographic flaneur; a subjective documentary of remarkable analytical restraint.

At the other end of the spectrum, there were works that explored the digital margins of photography. French photographer Perrine Gamot combined screenshots and internet images in a book that documents life in the virtual spaces of the computer world and seeks a photographic approach to the realities of this other realm. Swiss photographer Philipp Schaerer uses rendering software to create imaginary, almost abstract architectures in which the image-generating potential of computer technology is pushed to its limits. The sheer breadth of the spectrum represented at this recent Plat(t)form event clearly indicates that photography is currently going through an exciting phase, taking leave of unquestioned certainties and seeking new ways of redefining itself. There are bound to be some surprises in store.