



## Exile - Photographs by Antoine Wagner



Written by Claus Friebe - Tuesday, 12 May 2015 08:40

The Ethnic Museum in Hamburg is dedicated to a central social issue: the exile. The starting point for the exhibition of the same name, with photographs by New York-based photographer Antoine Wagner, was the view of one's own family history.

The great-great-granddad by Richard Wagner went to the Swiss Engadine to search for the wanderings through the mountainous landscape that the composer had undertaken during his exile between 1849 and 1858. Both Wagners were inspired in this place, the older one to his compositions, for example the ring, the other for a photo project and a resulting book.

The challenge of the exhibition at the Rothenbaumchaussee in Hamburg is not just a clarification of the term "exile" and the related questions as to which kind of migration is exile at all. The challenge is the reception. The audience will be able to perceive multimedial in order to fully immerse into the depths of this exhibition. The individual image does not reveal itself completely in itself in the content light, but only from the complete context. The perception of all offered technical resources leads to an understanding and a thematic discussion. If the visitor does not, he remains arrested in the fragmentary. He can delight in aesthetics, in the atmospheres of the images, but the meaningfulness grows only in the combinability of the pictorial and tonal means.



Multimedial means: there are two picture types, the landscape and the portrait, there are texts and there is spoken text as well as sound. All the listed media are equivalent partners within this exhibition - therefore an installation should be considered, because it is a space-encompassing, content-related and situation-related work of art.

"The reception of a picture is, in its supposed directness, unconsciously still adhering to the gesture of the documentary and thus the real, the authentic." (Michael Grisko in "Unsharp Pictures" in the book of the same name by Ulla Hahn.) The search for "Reality fairness" is understandable precisely in the case of a topic such as exile, but for artists - and apart from Antoine Wagner, all portraits are not a requirement. If the world was already seen 180 years ago with the eye of painting, the photography of this eye has been replaced by a believable realistic image, and finally, by means of digitization, has been so far away from truthfulness as the painting it was then. The rhetoric of the images is only as credible as we would like to believe.

Of course, the opposite of alleged directness with Antoine Wagner is so wanted, since since the origins of photography, the medium has always been an artistic expression, in addition to documentary holding. Thus, the photographer forces the viewer to question the long decoded motif through his solitaire, which has been singled out from the world. Is it really what I see? The elucidation of whether the landscape in the photos is really the Engadine is given only sparingly. It can also be a photographed model, a digital light-world montage, a photographed detail of a postcard. The location is determined by the artist's assertion, by the titles and his own historical connections, and by the confrontation with today's conditions.

It is true that the historical references to the great-grandfather Richard Wagner and his exile in Switzerland are due to the addition of contemporary portraits, as well as the textual and linguistic communication with as well as the individual destinies, the installation becomes an "Archiv der Gegenwart". Because the temporal space between Richard Wagner in the Swiss exile and the portraitists is latent. The direct, concrete and present experience, that is, the experience of exiles and migrants, is always immediately transformed in the context of Antoine Wagner to remember and / or to reflect oneself. The responsibility of this installation with us is not only with the artist, but also with us viewers. We have to take a good part of the offered communication and keep it up. This exhibition stimulates reflection and discussion. It is neither the l'art pour l'art expression of a system-immortal artistic discourse, nor of a purely sociocultural or ethnological argument. It is simply more essential: it is societal-relevant, borne by artistic means of expression. And because the individual workpieces of this exhibition convey reality and abstraction, they form a great intellectual space.

## ANTOINE WAGNER

What forms of abstraction can be seen in this exhibition? The triangle is called "Landscape - Portrait - Text / Sound".

The word landscape is used mainly in two meanings: on the one hand, geography refers to an area which is distinguished by natural sciences from other areas and on the other hand it is used as a culturally shaped, subjective perception of a region in its aesthetic whole - Thus, a philosophical-cultural-scientific concept of landscape.

In general, however, there is no uniform definition of what is landscape, which is why the term can also be described as a "compositional" because of its aesthetic, territorial, social, political, economic, and ethnological references, whose "semantic court" Thousand-year, Central European ideas, literary and art history. The latter is of particular interest here.

Landscape is anchored in this cultural connotation as a stopping point for one's own existence. We know that German exiles who for religious reasons left their southern German homeland in the Black Forest in the mid-nineteenth century, for this reason, settled in the US state of Vermont because the landscape looked like in the homeland or Schleswig-Holsteiner emigrated to Wisconsin . For just those reasons. The landscape creates trust, the space creates reliability and bonding.

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A widespread perception holds landscape simply for a piece of nature. "Simple" nature, however, has never been "landscape". Not even in art history. Motif selection, composition and arrangement of nature elements always made landscape paintings into subjective collages. Today, the digital image processing element fuses together, and even images of places in the world are created that have been computed completely or largely on the computer without any template. The latter is at Antoine Wagner is not the case:

His landscapes are attached in addition to a purely aesthetic documentary-like photography at its historical context, which is family history to see as the nucleus. The artist, however, manages to give the images a comprehensible validity for all of us. Knowing that this alpine Swiss landscape inspiration source has served his great-grandfather Richard is the first abstraction, because we get away from the picture space and to a sound space.

However, there are other forms of pictorial abstraction. In very many pictures is hardly or little landscape to be seen, rather a veiled, cloud-shrouded reality. There are weather, haze, liquid in different aggregate states from running water over clouds to snow and ice. The room is not always open to the eyes, we just start to guess and guess. We look against the light in silhouettes and with the light on rock faces.

Antoine Wagner portrays these portraits, which he recently took up in Hamburg and Berlin, in dialogue with each other, as if there was an actual relationship between location and person. But it does not really exist, it is freely constructed.

The portrait - in fact one would have to speak of breast pictures or busts - shows images of identity. The term is therefore appropriate because Antoine uses Wagner, because his French language area uses the "photo d'identité" for the German "passport". Wagner asked the screened protagonists to choose clothes and facial expressions as they would for passports. Most of them are uncut, neutral, fashionably reserved. The result - and here the photographer has opted for a highly effective and intelligent solution - is not a facial photo, but a portrait of a portrait of the Renaissance painting, which leaves real space and space as if the photographer were using it. Of the Golden Section had also sought the ideal proportioning. The empty space can be interpreted symbolically as the emptiness in exile, both as an external space, which is to be filled afresh, in a foreign country, and possibly in another cultural linguistic space, but also as an inner exile in which Hard confrontation with oneself, which always entails the task of one's own self. This makes this dialogue so immensely powerful. The hanging is loosened, in a shift of the landscape landscape portrait landscape portrait, etc., into a sequence of portrait next to portrait, which in turn calls the already mentioned Renaissance in the first series and portraits of painters such as Jan van Eyck, Giovanni Bellini, Sandro Botticelli, Lorenzo Lotto, or busts from Donatello.

A locating of the countries of origin and regions, the individualisation of the particular person is given by the texts and explanations. This in turn results in a new triangle of different origins - over a historically connotated mountain landscape - to the here and now and the new common place of being. The images of the landscape, the images of the portrayed are thus always projection surfaces of fates, chances, freedom and possibilities per se, but they also contain in themselves doubts, skepticism, insecurity and ultimately failure.