

Eri Kassnel

lives and works in a little village near Augsburg/ Germany

An artist's statement

As humans we recognize ourselves by remembering. This is the evidence of existing in a chronological context, which forms identity. The loss of memory can lead to a serious identity crises. But memory hasn't to be true implicitly as scientific research learned us: to remember is a flexible process, which always adapts to an optimized learning for the future.

People collect proofs like photographs, documents and letters to verify their memories. I follow from this an existential doubt: Can I trust memory? Who

am I really? If I don't leave any traces, have I ever existed?

In this area of conflict I am interested in man's subjective sensations and his capability to remember, to forget, to associate and to create - consciously or not - his own Utopia.

My work ranges in transition of photography and video, of visual and sonic relevance. Especially the interface between the disciplines I am interested of: photography as a timebased medium - video as a static image - sound as a catalyzer of visual imagination.

Eri Kassnel



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An interview by **Dario Rutigliano**, curator
and **Barbara Scott**, curator

Artist Eri Kassnel's work ranges in transition of photography and video, of visual and sonic relevance to accomplish a multilayered investigation about the notion of memory and its relationship with collective imagery and perceptual processes. In Return to paradise that we'll be discussing in the following pages, she inquires into the dislocation between space and time to draw the viewers through an unconventional journey showing autonomous aesthetics and coherent unity. One of the most impressive aspects of Kassnel's work is her successful attempt to trigger the viewers' most limbic parameters to investigate about the act of remembering and its relationship with notion of identity: we are very pleased to introduce our readers to her stimulating and multifaceted artistic production.

Hello Eri and welcome to ARTiculAction: we would start this interview with a couple of questions about rich and multifaceted background. You have a solid training and you hold a diploma in conservation and restoration that you received from the University of the Arts in Bern: over these years you also attended a residence in Nyköping and you currently collaborate at the H2-Contemporary Art Centre: how do these experiences influence the way you conceive

and produce your works? And in particular, how does your cultural substratum inform the way you relate yourself to art making and to the aesthetic problem in general?

My approach to art-making is quite analytical. I didn't notice that for long and I always doubted if I could be a real artist. So I started to get literally in touch with art as a restorer. To feel the surface of a painting or a sculpture, to immerse in how it was made, was very exciting and deeply inspiring. I also participated in the discussion of sense and absurdity of restoring art – to reconstruct something which was affected by time or to clean away its history. In Nyköping/ Sweden I learned from my much valued teacher Peter Tångeberg to adopt a more reluctant attitude and to appreciate the aesthetics of time's marks. I think this attitude still affects my work, because I really believe that these marks fire the imagination and trigger the process of memory. As I looked deeply inside of the chemical aging process of materials I conclude there is no way and no need of preventing this process from an aesthetic point of view. For me an aged surface has an identity and tells stories about its past. This also means to accept physical and chemical corrosion and the vanishing in particular in order to appreciate identity and authenticity. At the end it is an



examination about the process of dying and its aesthetic shapes.

As a restorer I learned how to read the history of a surface consciously and in a cognitive way. The audience is also able to read these stories, but unconsciously and in an emotional way.

Indeed personal experience and cultural background play a central role in how I developed my attitude toward creative expression and my point of interest. Born 1973 in Timișoara in Romania as a member of the Banat Swabians, a German minority living in Romania for 250 years, I learned from my parents not to identify myself with the natives, but to believe that I am German and my real home country is Germany, which I never have seen before and which became an Utopian place in my fantasy. At that time Romania was a communist country behind the Iron Curtain and ruled by the dictator Nicolai Ceaușescu. So it was almost impossible to leave the country towards Germany or somewhere else to the West. After a policy of detente my family immigrated 1979 to Germany as many Swabian families did at that time.

As Karl Jaspers said, a German psychiatrist and philosopher "home is, where we understand and where we are understood", I didn't feel like coming home – I felt myself strange, and people treated me like a stranger. My constructed identity, which worked fine in Romania, suddenly broke down. Who was I? I couldn't relocate myself in Germany, but I also wasn't allowed to relocate myself in Romania! This discrepancy is not unique, but a kind of collective identity crises, which I observe in my fellow Swabians. The old photographs in our family album and my father's stories about his childhood in Romania became



the most important elements to identify myself with something. And again, a Utopian place of longing developed in my fantasy, which was located not in space but in time.

To understand this process and to treat the correlations is very important in my working. Memory is something very flexible, and our brain is a brilliant artist, who adapts to an optimized learning for the future. To remember is a creative act, which can be triggered subconsciously – by the way, very interesting for me was a scientific study, which came to the conclusion that it is even possible to convince our brain to remember something, which never happened. However, we have to trust memory, because it tells us who we are in a chronological context. To lose memory leads to an existential identity crises.

My engagement at the H2-Contemporary Art Centre in Augsburg was in the role of an observer and teacher, and not as an artist. I performed guiding tours for children and adults. It was a very interesting time for me to learn intensively about contemporary artist's ideas and concepts and to communicate them to an ordinary audience. As I come from a working class background, I came in touch with contemporary art quite late at school. I realized that there are different ways to see the world and all of them are right – that was exciting! This awareness I want to show and open up to others, who don't have access to art education.

You are a versatile artist: your approach ranges in transition of photography and video, of visual and sonic relevance to accomplish an organic investigation about the interface between such disci-

plines: the results convey together a coherent and consistent sense of unity. Before starting to elaborate about your production, we would suggest to our readers to visit <http://www.eri-kassnel.de> in order to get a synoptic view of your work: while walking our readers through your process, we would like to ask you if you have ever happened to realize that such cross disciplinary investigation about the interstitial space between photography and video is the only way to express and convey the idea you explore.

The presentation of a process in general is something very dynamic, which is predestined to visualize by serial images or moving images. But on the other hand, the process, I want to show, is diffuse and conflicting. So, it seems likely to use a contradictory design vocabulary, as well.

As I experimented for many years with photography – analogue and digital – I found something very interesting in capturing moving objects in static shots. I took pictures out of the moving car or I captured dancers by long time exposure. To find a formal language for my idea was a long way. For example in Letters from Utopia – a piece from 2012 with 53 envelopes, which represent a fictional correspondence between the present and the past – I separated the photo prints and joined them again by sewing it together. In the piece Home is somewhere else (2013) I filled an old family album with a huge amount of old photographs and my own images, which I manipulated in a way, so they look old. These are attempts to find a formal equivalent to my idea.

As a logical consequence I ended up on slide shows like Paradise lost or stop-motion





animations like *Postludium* or *Return to Paradise*. Here another important element could be included: the sound. Sounds and music are highly triggering components, as well. A crowing rooster, for example, evokes pictures in our heads of very broad range depending on the personal experience. But as humans our perception is mostly aimed at visual impulses. So, if the eye is distracted, a sonic impulse operates more subconsciously. Or in the other case, if we only have the sonic impulse, a story becomes more abstract and the visualisation happens in our imagination. Both effects are combined, if I create a sound installation first and add a slide show then – not to concretise, but to make it even more abstract, like I did in *Paradise lost*.

For this special edition of ARTiculAction we have selected Return to paradise an extremely interesting video that our readers have already started to get to know in the introductory pages of this article. What has at once captured our attention of your inquiry into the dislocation between space and time and the role of memory in the attempt to establish a channel of communication between past and present. While walking our readers through the genesis of Return to paradise, we would like you to elaborate about the role of memory in your process.

Beside paradise in the bible, there are many "paradises" in our mind, like childhood or home, which are located in time, not in space any more. The only way to return to these paradises is to remember. But the recalling process is exposed to different disruptions: Sometimes this process feels like searching for the right transmitter, but there are overlying fre-

frequencies or simply bad weather, which disturb the reception.

Sometimes it feels like trying to read an old data carrier, which lost more and more its information over the time. What remains is a vague picture, which is disrupted by static noise and requires a large amount of interpretation.

So, my idea for *Return to Paradise* was to generate a kind of metaphor for the process of remembering to make it more understandable. Memory isn't always available; it isn't always complete and it doesn't even have to be true. We know that unconsciously. That's why we collect pictures and glue them into a photo album or store them on our computer – to have an aid to memory and to have an evidence of our own existence. I gather from this an existential fear: who am I, if I can't trust memory? And have I ever existed, if I leave no traces? I want to confuse, and I want to confront with this fear.

However, *Return to Paradise* is a slide show of static shots. The movement and dynamic appears by disrupting the pictures by different kinds of static noises – visually and acoustically. It is obvious that this is an illusion – of what? An illusion of paradise? Like memory makes us believe, that childhood was a paradise?

As you have remarked in the tagline of *Return to paradise*, the only way to get back to the "paradises" in our mind is to remember: we have particularly appreciated the way your hybrid approach accomplishes the difficult task of capturing non-sharpness, bringing to a new level of significance the elusive still ubiquitous relationship between experience and memory in consequence of the exposure to a variety of disruptions.



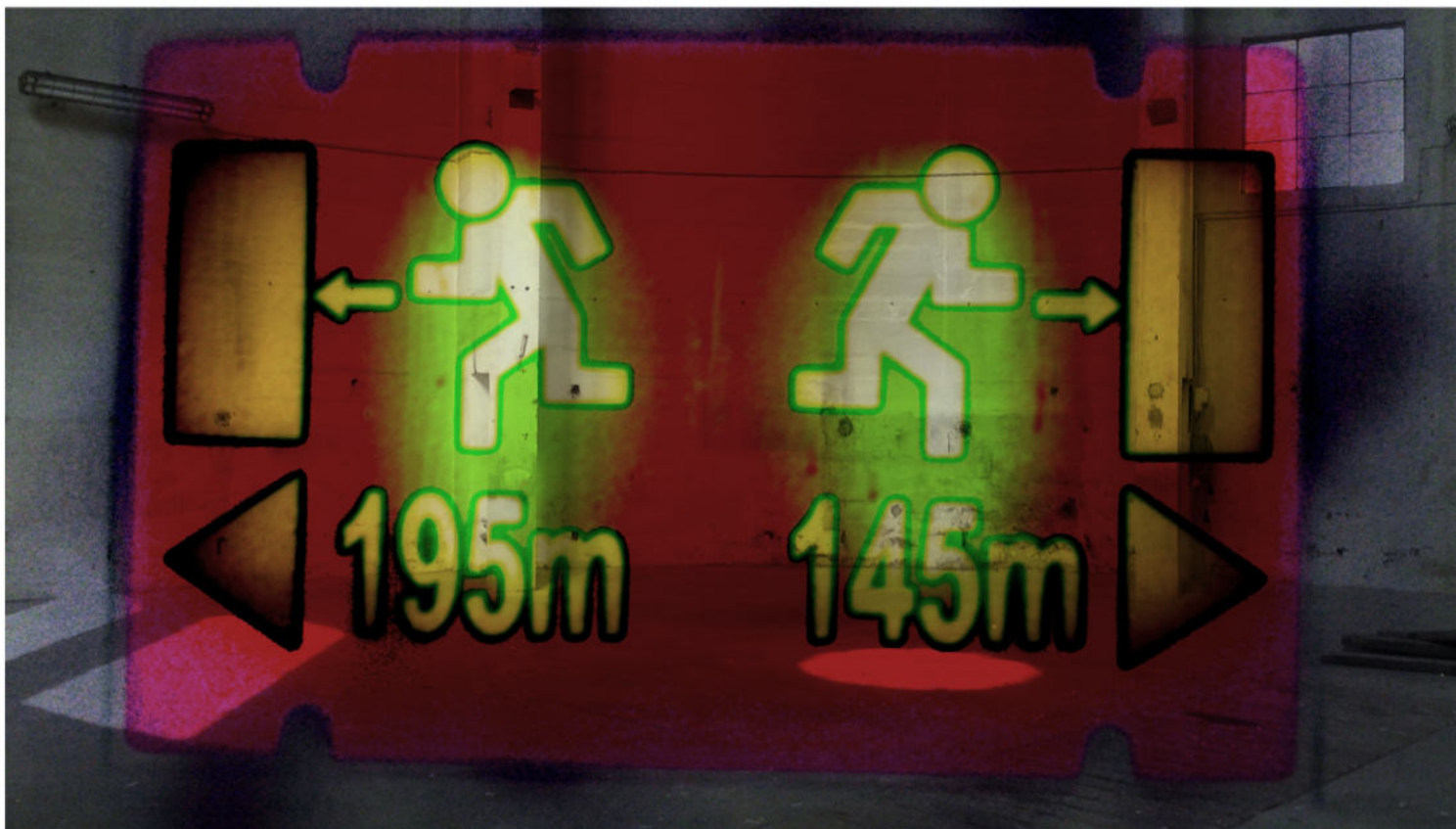
Postludium

What is the role of chance in your process? And how much improvisation is important for you?

Return to Paradise was accomplished in a time when I was travelling quite a lot

on highways, mostly as a co-driver. I used to have my photo camera with me to kill the time. But somehow I really got attracted by something that happened to me while shooting: It excited me like a hunter to react immediately

and to catch the motives with my camera while the car moved on speedily. The random places and the abstract and diffuse, but however very clear pictures seemed perfectly to visualize representative locations, which are no longer connected



Postludium

to a certain place, but a certain time.

As I would call myself a self-controlled and focused person, it became more and more a concept, to leave the control to the hazard and to improvise with the results.

Another interesting work from yours that has particularly impressed us and on which we would like to spend some words is entitled Postludium: a performative piece that you have defined an obituary for the former gas-

works area in Augsburg/Oberhausen. It has been deeply impacted on us for its non linear approach to narrative form. How have you developed the structure of Postludium?

The gaswork area in Augsburg/ Oberhausen is an electricity industry area from the middle of the 19th century. Until 1915 it supplied the population in Augsburg with gas electricity and then it was used as a headquarters by the municipal energy supplier for 40 years. For decades it was forgotten, but lately the interest about this area has come back. Postludium, which means "after play", is an obituary for this location, which soon will be rebuilt for a new purpose.

In the end of 2015 I visited the area, which normally isn't accessible for the public, for the first. I immediately got attracted by the atmosphere of the metal chambers of the gasometers with their impressive height, the strange acoustic and the obvious time marks. It looked like something very unique, which has to be conserved somehow. I took the chance to save the buildings in my own way – by taking pictures of it. In my eyes the empty rooms had a strong identity, filled up with memories and unspoken stories. Probably there was some triggering effect, as well, as I grew up in a surrounding with industrial character. So, I wanted to show the "ghosts" of the past somehow.

Postludium I developed as a composition of three stand-alone parts: Firstly, the static shots of the interior of the chambers.

Secondly, a stop-motion animation of a ghost-like dance, performed by the much appreciated dancer, Alessandra La Bella, who has a strong narrative expression in her contemporary dance. The shooting took place in a completely different context three years before.

For me this discrepancy makes the concept even more plausible. Thirdly, the sound, which is an autonomous art piece, created by the sound artist Gerald Fiebig and the musician Christian Z. Müller. By chance I discovered that my colleague, Gerald, recorded in exactly the same disc-type gasometer the piece "Echoes of Industry", which was produced for Radio Vltava (Czech Republic). Fiebig's approach is to show "the fading of once visible things into a state where they are half present, half remembered" – a perfect completion to the concept of Postludium.

The theme of memory and its relationship with the notion of identity is particularly in your work and we could not do without mentioning Paradise lost: the way you accomplished an insightful investigation about the act of remembering as a social process induces the viewers to a process of deconstruction of perceptual reality to recontextualize it into collective imagery. This process accomplishes the difficult task of constructing aesthetics from experience, working on both subconscious and conscious level. So we would take this occasion to ask you if in your opinion personal experience is absolutely indispensable as part of the creative process? Do you think that a creative process could be disconnected from direct experience?

As I try to connect to the audience's experiences, I would say, it absolutely is indispensable for my creative process. In Paradise lost I emphasize how important it is, to share memories. We see and understand ourselves better through the eyes of others.



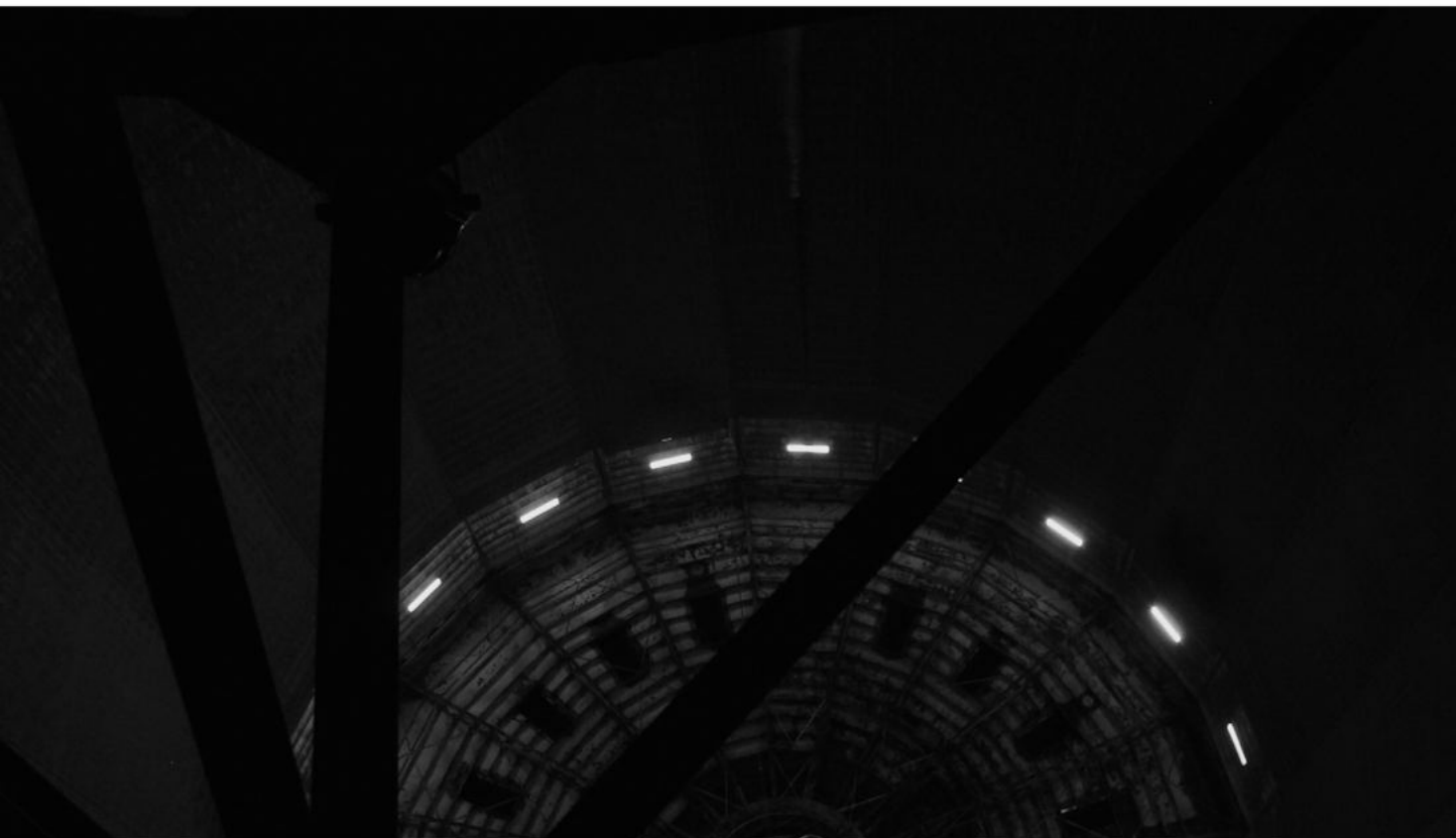
Postludium

It is a part of a social process, which forms identity; especially if we for any reason can't remember ourselves. We compare our memories, we supplement and correct them. Sometimes we even have to replace them, because they

turn out to be false. So, the creative process is a running communication between the inside and the outside.

I confront the audience with my personal

perception, which actually is a discussion between two parties: the audience and me. In Paradise lost I add a third party: my father shares his memory as a German child in Romania during the Second World War. The audience is now



Postludium

confronted with my perception about my father's memories, which makes the creative process even more sophisticated and abstract.

It's no doubt that interdisciplinary col-

laborations as the ones you have established over these years are today ever growing forces in Contemporary Art and that the most exciting things happen when creative minds from different fields of practice meet and collaborate on a

project... could you tell us something about this effective synergy? By the way, Peter Tabor once stated that "collaboration is working together with another to create something as a synthesis of two practices, that alone one could not":

what's your point about this? Can you explain how your work demonstrates communication between several artists?

There are many reasons for collaboration, but the most important one is that my ideas are based on the exchange of different kinds of experiences in order to develop new ideas and skills. For me it is very important not to remain standing, but to move on somehow, and the impulse often comes from the outside.

As I showed in the case of Postludium, collaboration can be a synergy of parallel investigations. To consolidate them makes the idea even more powerful. In particular my collaboration with Gerald Fiebig opened up new fields of working, for both of us. Our first common project was Utopia lives next door. We discovered by chance that we investigated in the same field and in a similar way about our past: he recorded his grandmother's memories about her childhood in Vienna, the same did I with my father's memories about his childhood in Timișoara. As we realized that there is a joint connection between the two towns, which is located in history, we had the idea to create a Utopian place, where the East meets the West, where the past meets the present. The soundscape composition with fieldrecordings of both towns and interviews of our relatives was broadcast in the Austrian Radio Ö1 Kunstradio – Radiokunst on the 27th of December 2015. That was a new field of activity for me.

While generating a slide show for the project, I encouraged Gerald to travel to Vienna to take some pictures for it, as I did in Timișoara. I guess he never planned before to get involved with photography.

Our next project will be an exhibition with a third colleague, Jakob Krattiger, in the Neue Galerie im Höhmannhaus in Augsburg. As Jakob created a photographic series of the transformation of a specific building in Augsburg, we developed a concept of site-specific and time-based dislocations.

Over these years your works have been internationally showcased and it has been recently featured at VideoGUD in Gävleborg and at the International Video Art House Festival in Madrid. One of the hallmarks of your work is the capability to create direct involvement with the viewers, who are urged to evolve from a condition of mere spectatorship. So before leaving this conversation we would like to pose a question about the nature of the relationship of your art with your audience. Do you consider the issue of audience reception as being a crucial component of your decision-making process, in terms of what type of language is used in a particular context?

Well, if I am in the middle of a creative process, I don't think too much about the audience. But while confronting the audience with my work I am really interested about the reflections – it fires my imagination, as well. For example in 2013 I participated in the X-border-art biennial in Rovaniemi/ Finland. There has been arranged a blog in the internet, where the visitors could write down their thoughts about the exposition objects. I really was astonished how close the notions to my own ideas were. People wrote about the Second World War or about old times in



Paradise lost

Russia without knowing anything about my concept – but in fact, the landscapes in this work were moving-car-images in today's Germany.

Thanks a lot for your time and for sharing your thoughts, Eri. Finally,

would you like to tell us readers something about your future projects? How do you see your work evolving?

There is happening something around us since the digital evolution. It has something to do with virtual reality, virtual

identity and virtual memory. I am very excited to explore these fields and the joint connections to existing reality.

An interview by Dario Rutigliano and Barbara Scott, Articulation Art Review, Special Issue Summer 2016
https://issuu.com/articulation/docs/articulation_art_review_-_speciais_9b7cf966544aa/24