

Anita Witek: Unforeseeable Occurrences

'The force of the image has less to do with the fact that one sees something in it than with the fact that one is seen there in it. The image sees more than it is seen. The image looks at us'.^[1]

These words by Jacques Derrida speak to the reciprocal relationship that exists between the image and its viewer. At the moment of us perceiving something, of looking at an image, summoned almost immediately and without prompt is a host of associations, connotations and memories that cluster in and around our vision. To continue Derrida's thinking, we could say that images themselves are haunted; they are charged with the fragments of our individual pasts and histories of perception. Embedded within the double-bind of the image, where the gaze quickly becomes reflexive, is an element of familiarity or *déjà vu*, and it is this sense that artist Anita Witek continuously confuses within her photographic work. Traversing both two and three-dimensional spaces, Witek's images shift our attention to realms beyond the familiar and in between the fields of recognition that we unconsciously seek when looking at images. Continuously drawing upon an extensive archive of printed matter – matter that others would discard - she starts with material whose temporal root is in the past, but then reforms it within the present. In doing so, she releases a future potential, one that is often located within the negative or peripheral areas of an image.

Collecting, analysing, speculating and fragmenting; these are just some of the words that describe Witek's artistic process. Working across photomontage, slide projection, video and site-specific installation, her work takes root from her extensive archive of print material, such as newspapers, magazines, books and posters, which she re-appropriates and re-casts through an alternative lens. Key to how this lens functions is the repeated process of erasing the main signifiers within each of the indexical images, be they people, objects, or text that allow the viewer to understand them in the intended sense. The artist therefore breaks apart the semiotic chain binding these images, subsequently cutting, reconfiguring and photographing these newly generated fragments. Her works therefore quietly resist the velocity and visual noise that characterises the easily consumable flux of images that we receive daily, asking the viewer to slow down and access a new frame of looking.

Unforeseeable Occurrences is a series of photographic works that Witek started in 2020. Beginning from a zeitgeist of isolation and confused truths, each work conveys an idiosyncratic and abstract version of this moment, while shifting between personal and collective associations. For the earlier works in this series, the artist's starting point was a series of archival copies of PM Magazine (formerly known as 'PM – Peter Moosleitner's interesting magazine') from the 1980s, a German popular science publication that centres on questions and debates around science and technology. The retro editions that Witek collected contain speculations about tomorrow's world, technological interventions and scientific discoveries, a series of future visions that oscillate between science fictional pseudoscience and at times accurate depictions of what is to come. The blurring of fact and fiction embedded within the pages that Witek was holding decades later engendered for the artist a mode of speculation that is perhaps not that far away from the ways in which information is generated in our contemporary moment.

Since its inception in 2020, Witek has continued this series, and in 2022, she began to expand its framework, introducing colour to several works, as well as analogue photography captured outdoors in the garden of her studio, plus fragments from a wider selection of newspapers that span a multiplicity of genres and time periods. As is embedded within its title, the series has become an ongoing exercise, practice or meditation on the inevitability of randomness and chance within how we perceive our everyday surroundings.

We continue to exist within a hazy yet interminable aftermath. We continue to live in a world in which the value of truth has been thrown into disarray: advertisements are presented to us based on a personal yet invisible accumulation of our online movements; world leaders tell lies and facilitate news stories in order to gain public traction; billionaires funnel their wealth through offshore tax havens, and pseudoscientists propagate ideas of bodily wellness. The extreme nature of these examples, each of which are subtly referred to within the titles of Witek's photographs, serves to illustrate the bizarre world through which we move. The heightened awareness of the news and the concentration of information and headlines that characterises our times has created a strange kind of science fiction that is, in fact, our present-day reality.

With *Unforeseeable Occurrences*, Witek harnesses this contemporary intensity. The titles of the works and the compositions themselves reflect a repository of references that the artist has collected over time. Personal anecdotes, Instagram posts, news stories, books and songs engender a certain sensibility and rhythm that is line with the erratic and at times overwhelming nature of how we continue to receive information. Grounding each of the works are the titles themselves, which are taken from a cumulative list that Witek has built over time. By aligning these textual fragments with those of her photographic compositions, she works through a process of linguistic play, asking how each title may or may not inform what we are looking at. This use of language marks a departure within Witek's practice, bringing the bearing of linguistic signifiers together on a level plane with the visual ones that she has continued to work with throughout her career. Rather than operating as visual descriptors, the titles are potential prompts or inroads into the image, allowing for new tensions and meanings to arise. In this sense, each work becomes a speculative exercise, blending the 'truth' of the original image with the fictive narratives that can be deciphered within its abstract rendition.

In their playful combinations of image and text, each of the works in *Unforeseeable Occurrences* treads a fine line between fiction and reality, whilst also highlighting the ways in which the past continues cyclically to haunt the present. For example, in a recent piece in the series, 'Parasocial Breakup', the artist utilises fragments from the cover of 'Österreichs Illustrierte Zeitung' from 1908, in which we can detect parts of an ear and the uniform of the emperor Kaiser Franz Joseph from the original image. This has then been combined with parts from the likes of *Penthouse Magazine* (1987) and the bodybuilding publication *Der Muskelbilder* (1961). When we conflate the references and title present within this work – sovereign, physical and sexual potency, as well as mediated parasocial encounters with the figures through mass media – we begin to draw our own interpretations and thematic overlaps, but we also notice temporal overlaps: moments of history repeating itself through our present moment. And yet in spite of the sensorial quality that Witek's photographs conjure, there is also something mechanistic about her approach. This is perhaps related to her interest in algorithms and artificial intelligence, such as when a machine might summon a set of images in response to a particular piece of text.

These associative movements are, of course, frequently used for commercial interests through the ads that pop up on our Instagram feed, or suggestions for further purchases that we are offered relentlessly online. Each of us is therefore defined by a network of algorithmic relationships that is personalised and coercive, and several titles in *Unforeseeable Occurrences* seem to nod to this rampant capitalisation of our thoughts, memories and desires (*Vegan Recipe Developer*, *The Vibrational Match*, *The drug of choice* etc.)

Although Witek's process may remove the reciprocal movement of familiarity between image and viewer, her transposition of archival and historical material into a contemporary inflection creates a different kind of recognition, one that is closer to the function of déjà vu. On highlighting the connection between déjà vu and language, Paolo Virno states that:

According to psychiatrists, people subject to déjà vu are, without exception, inclined to find familiar words strange. Their vocabulary is immobilised, stopping the phrase in its tracks: derailed from its habitual use, it comes into sharp relief, and produces a sort of echo.^[2]

Virno's description of the destabilising and dissociative effect that déjà vu can have on our understanding and interpretation of words can be paralleled to Witek's idiosyncratic visual language, which extracts, appropriates and transforms through defamiliarisation the visual language of her surroundings. These are historical echoes within our psychological and social chambers that crystallise and confuse us in the present, like memories of a future dream.

^[1] Derrida, Jacques. 'By Force of Mourning'. *Critical Inquiry* 22.2 (1996): 188.

^[2] Virno, Paolo. 'Déjà Vu and the End of History'. *e-flux Journal* #62 <www.e-flux.com/journal/62/60958/dj-vu-and-the-end-of-history> (last accessed: 22 May 2018).

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