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Imitation of Life

How biology adapts to art in the photographs of Jochen Lempert

BY PATRIZIA DANDER

Six years ago, for his exhibition at Museum Ludwig, Cologne, photographer Jochen Lempert used an image of smoke rising from the Stromboli volcano as a central motif for the show.¹ Lempert's choice was a premonition of sorts: just a few days before the opening that April 2010, another volcano, Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull, erupted for the second time in a month, hurling a cloud of ash miles into the sky. Air traffic throughout Europe came to a standstill, and travel plans were re-routed (mine included, after visiting Lempert's show). Everyday life was disrupted and nature took centre stage to an usual degree. This may only have been a brief, drastic event, but it is a good example of what Lempert has been interested in for years: the influences man and nature exert on one another. In 2005, he laid out this interest with the title for his show at Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen: *Ko-Evolution*.² Instead of replicating the dominance of man over nature, he quietly reassessed the relationship between the two spheres.

Lempert studied biology, and his knowledge of the natural world shapes his photographs of the plant, animal and human realms. As well as a chapter on stuffed birds, his first major catalogue, *365 Tafeln zur Naturgeschichte* (365 Plates on Natural History, 1997), contains a chapter entitled 'Uexküll' with photographs of scientific publications from the estate of the zoologist Jakob Johann von Uexküll (1864–1944). The book also contains work from Lempert's ongoing project *The Skins of *Alca impennis** (since 1995), for which he plans to photograph all 82 specimens of the great auk preserved in natural history museums around the world. So far, the series has 45 pictures of the now extinct sea bird. Moving through the sequence of images, differences among the specimens are clearly visible. A fascination with the phenotype – the observable traits of a given species – runs through Lempert's oeuvre, though not strictly in a biological sense. As a

result, *365 Tafeln zur Naturgeschichte* contains not only chapters clearly compiled along scientific lines, but also associative-comparative groupings like ‘Genetical Resources’ where a fish with a translucent body finds its apparent relative in a fish-shaped comb.



Untitled (Feathers), 2013,
silver gelatin print,
51 x 40 cm. Courtesy the
artist and ProjecteSD,
Barcelona; photograph:
Roberto Ruiz

Such ‘phenotypologies’ are a key ordering principle in Lempert’s books and exhibitions. Although guided by the appearance of their subjects, they represent a convergence of aesthetic and scientific concerns. In *Belladonna* (2013), where Lempert presents a deadly nightshade plant next to a surprisingly similar image of a squirrel’s eye, the animal and plant resemblance says just as much about our perception of a migration of forms as it does about strategies for adaptation and survival in nature. For with its eye-like form and colour, the berry draws attention to itself and ensures the spread of its seeds.⁵ Lempert’s picture combinations are as much about an unbiased practice of seeing as they are about norm and deviation, varieties of mimesis and mimicry, and processes of assimilation and adaptation – as well as their role in the development of species (including *homo sapiens*). This also applies, in an undogmatic and humorous way, when he captures pairs of pigeons ‘strolling’ on footpaths, zebra crossings and road markings (*Stadtstrukturen*, Urban Structures, 2004) or when he renders extravagant footwear to look more like unwieldy horseshoes than cutting-edge fashion. Not least, this raises the question of who took what from whom, and with what result. It comes as no surprise that humans do not necessarily benefit from such cross-pollination. In Lempert’s works, however, the focus is not on winners and losers, but on forms of togetherness amounting to *co-evolution*.

Central to these comparative observations is Lempert's choice to work exclusively with black-and-white photography. In doing so, the artist places another filter between the object and its photographic representation, permitting even the everyday to be seen in a new light. Thanks to the resulting stylistic unity, he manages to make supposedly impossible pairings (like the fish and comb described above) appear reasonable and self-evident. In some cases, as in the *Belladonna* diptych, individual motifs enter into permanent alliances with other pictures; in others, they are placed in a succession of contexts. In one combination, Lempert juxtaposes a photograph of a bird above the water basin of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion (*Untitled (Barcelona Pavillon)*, 2007) with a close-up of a spider's web (*Spiderweb*, 2015). In their combination, the background – the pavilion's surrounding travertine wall with its finely structured surface – suddenly becomes the foreground. In dialogue with the fragile spider's web, themes like structural engineering and stability come to the fore, as well as the slow build-up of structures over time. If, on the other hand, the photograph is framed by the photogram of a dandelion and a bee and a picture of a stone horse's hoof (as in his 2008 book *White Light*), then the emphasis is on the subject's threefoldvisual presence: as a bird, as a shadow and as a reflection on the water. Lempert's photographic archive is shaped by his constant questioning of the validity and relevance of given constellations, and his knowledge of the temporal dimension of what images tell us, prompting him to create new combinations, depending on which aspect he wishes to emphasize in a given context. His archive – shown, for example, several times at his Barcelona gallery ProjecteSD, recently at an exhibition at Between Bridges, Berlin, and a subject of a forthcoming solo exhibition at BQ, Berlin, in May – thus functions like a swarm, arranging itself endlessly into new temporary formations, according to its own inner logic, whether on the walls of his exhibitions or in the many artist's books he has published since the late 1990s.



Oiseaux-Vögel, 1997-2009, 12 silver gelatin prints, each 53 x 44 cm. Courtesy the artist and ProjecteSD, Barcelona; photograph: Roberto Ruiz

Not only have his image combinations changed over the years, but also the motifs of his photographs. Whereas initially he focussed mainly on solid objects (from stuffed animals to coral to zoomorphic everyday items like a mug with a handle in the shape of a giraffe's neck) for some years now he has increasingly shifted toward portrayals of the ephemeral and the immaterial. This includes pictures of waves (*Un Voyage en Mer du Nord*, 2009), raindrops, shadows, wind and solar energy – stored in leaves by means of photosynthesis and released again in the burning trees of Easter bonfires. Recently, it is as if Lempert's object-oriented logic has been replaced by a temporal one, as if his interest has shifted from capturing the essence of things to the temporary manifestations of larger-scale energy and life cycles – to forms of transience. Most of Lempert's pictures are taken with an analogue 35mm camera on black-and-white negative film, which he develops and prints himself. But his oeuvre also includes many pictures made without camera or film, in which temporality is inscribed not only on the level of content but also as a decisive factor shaping the image itself. His so-called 'foliograms', for instance, are the result of inserting thin segments of leaves into the enlarger in place of a negative for several hours. Only this length of exposure allows sufficient light to pass through the leaf to fix its structure on the photographic paper. The passing of time is captured more vividly still in his luminograms and photograms: the movement of a glow-worm across a strip of unexposed film manifests itself on the photo paper as a blurry trail on a black background in *Glühwürmchen (Bewegung auf 35 mm Film)* (Glow-worm, movement on 35mm film, 2010); small frogs sitting on the photo paper leave ghostly prints due to their activity during the exposure (*4 frogs*, 2011). The photographic event as something that can be reproduced (via the negative) is replaced by the unique manifestation of a non-repeatable situation on the photo paper. Lempert's use of such early forms of photography (as early as 1834, William Henry Fox Talbot made camera-free pictures, before Louis Daguerre exposed photographic plates using a camera for the time in 1839) reflects his deep interest in the history and inherent qualities of the medium.⁴ He has repeatedly explored this history in his works, often in the form of open-ended experiments, as in his *Subjektiven Fotografien* (Subjective Photographs, 2009): with their erratic lines, these photographs of a star in the night sky, taken lying down with the camera resting on his chest, are both a light trace and a document of the rise and fall of his ribcage or his heartbeat during the exposure. Life time and photographic time interlock.



Jochen Lempert, *Eidechse (Lizards)*, 2009, Photogram, 24 x 30 cm, photograph: Roberto Ruiz, courtesy: the artist & ProjecteSD, Barcelona

The intersection of biology and fine art is Lempert's ongoing concern.⁵ Sometimes he addresses the links between science and its photographic visualization directly⁶ – underlining the fact that scientific insights cannot be understood in isolation from the medium of their communication. The series *Anna Atkins* (2011), for example, consists of photograms of his computer desktop, which in turn features digital scans of the plant photograms published by Atkins in her books *British Algae* (1843) and *Cyanotypes of British and Foreign Flowering Plants and Ferns* (1854).⁷ Just as the early photography of the mid-19th century positioned itself between the poles of scientific and artistic practice, so Lempert's works, too, remain in this border zone.⁸ His pictures grant access to our immediate surroundings – as both aesthetic realms and as sites for scientific insight. In this way, they show that the world around us, with which we are mutually dependent, is shaped by factors that always mark us out as parts of a larger whole. As such, his work is an example of biology in the best sense – a lesson in life.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

¹ *Museum Ludwig Cologne, 25 April–15 June 2010; the poster motif is from Lempert's series Continental Drift (2010). See also Jochen Lempert. Drift, artist's book accompanying the exhibition (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2010).*

² *Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen, 21.10.–7. 11.2005. See also: Eva Schmidt (ed.), Jochen Lempert. Coevolution, exh. cat., Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2006), p. 158.*

³ See entry on 'III Phasmids, g.-h.' in Jochen Lempert, *Notes*, in: Brigitte Kölle (ed.), *Jochen*

Lempert. Phenotype, exh. cat., Kunsthalle Hamburg (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2015), unpaginated.

4 *Malcolm Daniel, William Henry Fox Talbot (1800–1877) and the Invention of Photography, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/bd/tlbt/bd_tlbt.htm (retrieved 23 January 2016).*

5 *See description of Lempert as ‘artist researcher’ by Stefan Berg and Annelie Pohlen in: Berg, Pohlen ‘Epilog’, in: Berg, Pohlen (eds.), Jochen Lempert. 365 Tafeln zur Naturgeschichte, exh. cat., Bonner Kunstverein and Kunstverein Freiburg, Bonn and Freiburg 1997, unpaginated.*

6 *‘From the time of its invention it [photography] was imagined as both an object of science (its early practitioners were as interested in chemistry and optics as they were in the quality of their images) and a powerfully modern tool for scientific observation.’ Corey Keller, ‘Picturing The Invisible’, in: Keller (ed.), *Brought to Light: Photography and the Invisible, 1840–1900, exh. cat., San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2009, p. 20. I am grateful to Miguel Wandschneider for bringing this essay to my attention.**

7 *See entry on ‘XXIII Anna Atkins’ in Lempert, Notes.*

8 *Keller (ed.), Brought to Light, p. 22 f.*

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