

Filmstills, 2000

The four-part photo-work, **Filmstills**, created in 2000, marks a crucial step in the art of Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler. Up to this work, the two American-Swiss artists were mainly known for their large-size photo-series - such as *Falling Down* or *Holes*, which were choreographed down to the smallest detail – as well as for their video-works. **Filmstills** was the first work done outside the studio and on the spot and only afterwards was digitally processed and condensed with regard to its composition. **Filmstills** show four Berlin movie-theaters, which have been getting on in years. Two of them, *Rio* and *Capitol* (Vine), were closed some time ago and let go to ruin, whereas the other two, *Odeon* and *Bundesplatz-Studio* (Gloomy Sunday) still try to survive as individualistic district-cinemas and to maintain their hold against the flood of standardized movie-palaces by showing non-dubbed movies or changing programs every day.

All the four shots are based on the same formal principle. A very narrow detail shows the respective main entrance with the cinema's name written in big letters. The building as well as its immediate surroundings are partly visible, yet only provide little information about the architectural and urban environment. The facades of the two closed cinemas are characterized by blind, sometimes broken windows and blocked doors, whereas illuminated showcases and announcements suggest a running business. Hubbard and Birchler took the photographs of all cinemas from a frontal position, i. e. a perspective which conveys objectivity and authenticity. The depth of perspective is reduced to a minimum, the flatness is emphasized. Architectural elements are put one on top of the other like layers, making the overall composition look like a collage. During the digital processing, the artists did not add anything, yet displaced or removed single elements, such as a trashcan, a poster or some graffiti, which are so typical of Berlin. Not only indications are missing as to where the cinemas are sited geographically, but also any

people, i.e. the main actors in the earlier works by Hubbard and Birchler. The **Filmstills** show a kind of artificiality which suggests a movie-set rather than an existing architecture. This impression is even enhanced by the photographs' wide format, borrowed from movie screens.

The movie, its history, media characteristics and experimental possibilities form the core of Teresa Hubbard's and Alexander Birchler's artistic work. It is mainly the illusionistic moment, the ambivalent relationship of reality and fiction, which inspired several of their works. With **Filmstills**, they turn to the actual place at which reality and fiction merge – the reality of the place and its visitors and the fiction of the movie. The digital processing of the photographs as well as their sizes make the viewers perceive the cinemas as film-stills or clips from a movie. In contrast to filmic illusion, here reality is fictionalized. As the artists mentioned in 2000 in a conversation with Lilian Pfaff and Philipp Kaiser: "We want to evoke the experience of movie-theaters, rather than that of photography. We do not want the viewers to see the photograph of a movie-theater." Despite their factual way of shooting, borrowed from documentary-analytical photography, the artists succeed due to a precise design of the pictures and subtle illumination. **Rio** and **Vine** are characterized by an even, pale coloring which reminds one of slightly faded color photographs, whereas the colors of the two movie-theaters which are still open, are strong and emphasize the light and dark areas. **Rio** and **Vine** look like lifeless monoliths from a bygone era, whereas **Odeon** and **Gloomy Sunday** are filled with mysterious light which attracts the viewers as if by magic. The maelstrom is enhanced by the stairways, visible in both pictures and adding to the impression of three-dimensionality, whereas **Rio** and **Vine** are almost all surface. In essence, movies and photography are designed light, dematerialized dreams on celluloid, which only come true when the auditorium is dark. The artists' subject is not the movie-theater as an architecture, but rather the auratic impact of the movie which transforms a place. At the same time, their pictures of these old movie-theaters resonate with a feeling of melancholy also vibrant in the titles, **Vine** and

Gloomy Sunday. The **Filmstills** are inscribed with the memory of a time, when there were no gigantic multiplex-cinemas erected in the open countryside, which stylize any visit to a blockbuster-movie into an event – which is almost instantly forgotten. They pay homage to the small movie-theater just around the corner, which was rooted in urban daily life and – due to the high-quality movies it presented and the handful of visitors who watched them – promised an individual, often unforgettable experience which also influenced the two artists' biographies. Here, the place of action, i.e. the movie-theater, is inseparably connected to the passion for film as a medium. Hence, **Filmstills** can be read as both a homage to cinema and as evidence of the suggestive power of pictures as against reality.

In the work of Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler, **Filmstills** represent a turning point as well as a temporary end. While most of their former photographic works were shot in the studio and focussed on the moment of a filmic *mise-en-scène*, with **Filmstills**, the artists move to the actual intersection of reality and cinematic fiction and, at the same time, to the end of their own analysis of the medium of photography. Since 2001, they almost exclusively have been creating video-works, which in parallel resulted in photo-series. In *Eight* (2001), *Detached Building* (2001), *Single Wide* (2002), *Johnny* (2004) or *House with Pool* (2004), they explore the artistic possibilities of a non-linear, repeated and never ending story between reality and fiction, illusion and disillusionment.

Dr. Inka Graeve Ingelmann
Curator of Photography and New Media
Pinakothek der Moderne Munich

(Translation: Brigitte Kalthoff)