



8th Triennial of Photography Hamburg 2022

CURRENCY

Q&A WITH THE CURATORIAL TEAM

Could you tell us about your thematic approach? What is “Currency” about, and why did you choose it as a topic for the 8th Triennial of Photography Hamburg 2022?

Koyo Kouoh: Increasingly I've been looking at photography as a means of negotiation, of circulation and of translation. While discussing the topic among the team it became obvious that photography has acquired a different kind of currency specifically in this “retinal” era of ours, namely it is a tool of negotiation, and a tool of trade. This is one of the reasons why I was attracted to the notion of “Currency” and photography as a kind of transactional material.

If you look at the last thirty years, statistics indicate that humanity has produced more images within this time span than in the whole history of humanity. It scared me when I came across that observation. And I asked myself: What does that mean? This is the *retinal* era, where images are part of the processes of commodification. So that, again, for me was important in understanding photography as a currency.

Rasha Salti: Can I pick up where you left? If you think about all the genres and expressive disciplines in art that people use as a means for expression, photography is unlike painting, sculpture or drawing. People don't send each other sculptures. They send each other photos. Since the twentieth century photography has been an integral part of social life; it is intimately connected to the history of capitalism. Therefore “currency” is also about value-making, it's about circulation, it's about perceptions and how they shape relationships. This is the significance of living in our retinal age. In a manifesto published last year on the film web journal *Sabzian*, Nicole Brenez, the fantastic French film critic observed: “Previously, images were in the world. Today, it is the world that is swimming in an ocean of images. Our real, material and unique world; woven from and overflowing with real, immaterial, numbered (made of numbers), innumerable images.”

At the same time, there are still images that remain invisible. There are subjects, objects, and events that remain invisible. Photography in our retinal age doesn't necessarily imply more transparency, and it has not rectified injustice or revealed what capitalist forces wants us *not* to see. “Currency” is an abstract concept that is

borrowed from economics. But once you give concrete examples, it becomes very clear to everyone.

Gabriella Beckhurst Feijoo: Setting this term centerstage within the Triennial creates an open and expansive prompt; as Rasha says, it's a term that lends itself to examples, everyday examples, even. I see it as less about diagnosing a set of conditions and as more of an invitation to engage critically and conceptually with the kinds of values and meanings we see attributed to the photographic image. "Currency" becomes a way of opening up how we see through the camera and how we relate to photographs and their affective power.

Does the topic relate to all 12 exhibitions?

Koyo Kouoh: Yes, it does. The curatorial team proposed a framework for reflection and of curation that has been translated by the institutions through their individual institutional language. This is what makes the event so exciting, as a Triennial, because it's not like you have one central place and then other venues, but you have independent institutions who collaborate, and link to a thematic framework by translating it into through their own kind of institutional DNA.

The partnering institutions have been in ongoing conversation with us, the curatorial team. We have been listening to each other's perspective and ideas, and each project that will be presented has taken a particular direction from "Currency." This creates a kind of symphony in how the thematic framework can be translated.

Rasha Salti: The unusual aspect of about the Triennial is that it involves about ten different institutions, some are dedicated to art, but others are not, such as the ethnographic museum, the museum dedicated to labor history and the museum for the history of Hamburg. It was really encouraging to see how these institutions have engaged with a curatorial concept from contemporary art to produce their own exhibitions and use and activate their own collections in very new ways. In the Triennial you will see a range of conceptual approaches to photography, not only around social documentary, or photojournalism, but also very abstract and different ways of engaging with the medium.

What else is new about this eighth edition of the Triennial?

Koyo Kouoh: When I was invited to be the artistic director, it was clear to me from the beginning that I wanted to work with Rasha Salti, Gabriella Beckhurst Feijoo, and Oluremi C. Onabanjo. I think we are the first curatorial team for the Triennial. Usually, it was always one person in the role of a curator. And we are a team of four incredible women and non-binary curators. Hey, hello!

Rasha Salti: I would add that this Triennial was conceived and produced in COVID times: this is an event that is the outcome of COVID. There was a lot of screen time which can pose the risk of depriving everybody involved from personal contact, from the invaluable mediation of body language, or from whatever happens when you are together in a room. And yet we pulled it off. And there was so much empathy among the group. When I think about the hours spent behind the screen to understand each other, to listen to each other, to explain, share ideas, there is something incredible about that. And the precarity of artists working during those two years! We were not able to conduct studio visits, but artists availed themselves to us in compelling ways. We managed to connect, change our minds, discover new work and show all the works that we loved.

And it was a very ecological triennial because we were not flying low-cost airlines to Paris or to Hong Kong.

Let's speak about the exhibition at Deichtorhallen's hall of contemporary art with "Currency: Photography Beyond Capture" that you as a team curated: What are we going to see there?

Koyo Kouoh: Well, you're going to see twenty-nine positions of conceptual and poetic approaches to photography. I think they really differ from the so-called "usual suspect"-way of curating a photography exhibition, because the twenty-nine artists have distinct voices that are bound together by our curatorial juxtaposition. They are bound together in the ways they engage with photography. It goes beyond documentation and many of them are making a kind of intervention into the photographic process or into the presentation process. We're attempting to expand the perspective and the experience not just of making but of showing the works.

And we love poetry, because it brings more spirit and life into the curatorial space. We organized it in different sections that include experimental processes and modes of display, poetics—as I said—sensory approaches, but also emphasizing

social relations, portrayals of community from within, the idea of a countercanon, and forms of counter-mapping. For me, these are integral parts.

We have positions like Otobong Nkanga or Fazal Sheikh or Anne-Marie Filaire, for instance. But also, efforts to deconstruct the canon, so to speak. In terms of what is agreed and accepted and elevated to a standard, how do you deconstruct that? And how do you demystify that? Further positions from Raed Yassin and Oroma Elewa will really use the photographic medium as a form of distortion. This is what you will see.

Gabriella Beckhurst Feijoo: I think what is quite unexpected about the show is that across the twenty-nine artistic positions you will see works by artists who are in their nineties as well as by artists who are in their thirties. This produces a compelling intergenerational conversation around the term “Currency.” I think you will also see an international sense of how “Currency” can be used as a lens for photographic relations. So the exhibition is also decentering a westernized view of visual culture by providing a series of entry points.

We’ve been thinking together about how these works deconstruct or challenge the representational value of the photographic image, setting up the conditions for another kind of portraiture, another kind of landscape genre, or another kind of documentary practice that is very much forged through connection and proximity, and in thinking about how the camera has trained us to see in certain ways.

Rasha Salti: Also, we didn't feel the pressure that everything in our exhibition should be new. This coming together, this empathy, this trust that was built gave us the boldness to imagine an exhibition, where you have works from the 1970s and works that are very recent being shown alongside one another. I think this is valuable in our day and age.

Do you think it's still reasonable to treat photography as a separate art form? And how do you rate its significance within the contemporary art context?

Koyo Kouoh: Yes, it is still very significant. I argue this from a position that sees photography as kind of underrated, and as having been a syncretic artistic practice for the longest time. And as such, I think it has developed its own stream of operational modes. Even though photography has now found its rightful place in the spectrum of visual practice, I still believe that it is a very particular practice in many ways that requires a specific study.

On the other hand, a lot of people believe that everybody can make a photograph. I think this is quite disrespectful for a profession that demands such high technical knowledge. Nobody can just say, everybody can be a sculptor, or everybody can be a doctor. But everybody can become a photographer. I think it's quite wrong. And that is another layer for me, that photography is so used by everybody.

Rasha Salti: It is an art form that stands on its own and by itself with certain implications. That is at the heart of our "Currency" exhibition at the Deichtorhallen in the sense that the artists involved are redefining or exploring the question of what photography is and what its role is in society. One of the ways is actually the materiality of photography. What happens, for instance, when you remove the camera lens, and you are in a place or a space that has very rarely been photographed and is charged with history and mythology? What happens when you click, when you have a photograph and an object?

Energies in the cosmos that come into play are captured into the image that you make. I can name two artists, the first one is Ziad Antar, the second is rana elnemr. And then there is the chromatic scale of photography. What does it mean? How do we perceive it with regards to art history, nature, and race?

The chromatic scale of human communities has been so vexed, so politically charged and so defining of social relations. So, in a way the short answer is: Yes, photography stands on its own, as a medium, as a discipline, as a creative field, even though more and more people are making photographs. At the same time contemporary artists are appropriating it, defending it, and redefining its role, and the different implications of what it means to have a camera and to produce an image.

Gabriella Beckhurst Feijoo: I think the tensions you're both naming around photography as a sidelined discipline yet one with its own historical lineages and a highly charged iconography make it unique. Photography may feel diffused in society in that many of us have a relationship to the photographic image and to making and archiving it (say, on our phones). These tensions are precisely why we should think about it or defend photography as a strange beast that has undergone some of the quickest developments in how it is used in society. I don't think we should allow it to become completely absorbed by contemporary art discourse.

Is the Hamburg photography scene involved in the Triennial? And in which way?

Rasha Salti: Very much! The Hamburg photography scene has an entire program dedicated to it. The Triennial has issued a set of resources and a summon, which is the invitation for photographers, artists, curators, and independent spaces to participate with proposals in what is known as the *Triennial Expanded*. The ten partnering institutions are very much the identity of that make-up.

The *Triennial Expanded* will run at the same time as the festival from June 2 to 6. We have set it apart from the opening to give space to impulses to both events and make sure people are not overwhelmed by what's on offer. And there is enough time to enjoy and discover all twelve exhibitions and the projects of the *Triennial Expanded*.

What is going to happen during the festival?

Rasha Salti: The festival (The Register and the Recital) basically takes cue from the different exhibitions that are proposed as well as the *Triennial Expanded*. It is a public program that is intended to engage a wider spectrum of institutions and publics in Hamburg. It includes conversations, panel discussions, film screenings, and performances that are related to all the twelve exhibitions and the *Triennial Expanded*.

The program is magnetic and vibrant, there will be a lot to do in four days. People will be pulled in different directions, and it's a kinetic dynamism that our commissioners, the administrators of the Triennial, really wanted.

The program is very diverse, polyphonous, and eclectic, you have side-by-side artists talks with a very rich program by the Freundeskreis der Fotografie, film screenings in collaboration with FilmFest Hamburg and Hamburg KurzFilm Fest, followed by discussions with the filmmakers. There are walking and bicycle tours, and there is even a dance performance.

How are you including the Triennial website in the program?

Gabriella Beckhurst Feijoo: The new website was our chance to extend—as Rasha said—the Triennial's relationship to its audience in COVID times. We wanted to use the digital as a way of engaging with our audience in Hamburg as well as

internationally, whether or not we could be together physically, and to use it in the lead up to the Triennial itself.

As part of the new website we launched an editorial platform called *Allegories of the Visible* in August 2021. This is a platform that we've used across this period for commissioning critical essays by writers and theorists, as well as dialogues between artists and curators. There you'll also find a segment called *The Errant Photo Album*, which is a form that runs across the Triennial. *The Errant Photo Album* is a simple prompt; it's an invitation to narrate one image and for these images to be collected up as an album constructed by many authors. The contributions are quite short, but they go into the depths of a person's relationship to the image they've chosen. They're often very subjective responses to what that image means to that person.

Allegories of the Visible offers various ways of relating to "Currency" through these contributions and interpretations. I think it's a chance to see how the term runs through contexts as wide-ranging as community activism, media relations, or a legal sense of authenticity, for example.

Will there be a catalogue?

Koyo Kouoh: No. We won't have a catalogue because we are all very wary of these exhibition catalogs that nobody reads. There will be a reader based on the symposium *Lucid Knowledge* that we held in September 2021 in Hamburg. The reader is being published by Hatje Cantz Verlag with the title *Lucid Knowledge: On the Currency of the Photographic Image* and will be launched with the exhibition openings in May. There is also a Triennial Guide that will inform visitors about all of the exhibitions, the program of the opening weekend and the festival, and events by the Triennial's programming partners.

Thank you.

Questions by Annette Schäfer.