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Winterthur:**

**Opening speech „Rund um das Fotogramm“, Photoforum PasquArt, Biel,  
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the representative of the Swiss Foundation of Photography, I am very pleased to open the exhibition „Rund um das Fotogramm“. Although, I am not directly involved in this exhibition, I have known and appreciated the works of the three artists, Anita Pfau and Françoise and Daniel Cartier for some time, and I am proud that they are part of the Swiss Foundation of Photography collection.

I do not intend to tell you much about the artists themselves, instead I would like to give you with a few general ideas about “Rund um das Fotogramm” from my perspective as historian of art and photography.

But first, what exactly is a photogram?

Essentially a photogram is a photo that is created without a camera. It is literally a „photo-graph“ meaning the light has left an imprint or mark on the photographic paper without first going through a lens, creating an image – or at least a contrast between light and dark. This mechanism – light creates darkness – is the basic process that made photography possible in the first place.

Intentional or not, when an object is set on light sensitive paper, a piece of lace or an old toothbrush, the area underneath the object remains light, while the surrounding area goes dark the longer it is exposed. This creates a kind negative shadow image, a silhouette, while the area where the object was located is more or less a white gap.

The classic photogram is the most simple, reduced form of photography. Normally the work is a unique print that cannot be reproduced. It is simply based on light and light sensitive material.

László Moholy-Nagy, the constructivist painter and pioneer of photography, writes about the photogram in 1920: „This method makes light composition possible, where light can be used as a new medium much like colour in painting, tone in music.“

So a photogram is composing with light.

Looking back on the 150-year history of photography, one finds that the photogram was prominent at very specific times. It comes up when photography has to prove itself against another visual medium, or when it is in an identity crisis. These points in time also often mark breaks in the history of photography, moments when the influence of other media come about, and against which photography has to defend or prove itself with a „back to the roots“ reflex.

Precisely this already occurred on the invention (or discovery) of photography in the mid-19th century: A totally new, mechanical image medium had been created and had to prove itself vis-à-vis painting and lithography. The earliest photographic efforts were photograms that their inventor, Henry Fox Talbot, called „photogenic drawings“. The photograms were images of delicate plants and the finest lace, used to demonstrate the accuracy and precise detail of the new process: Nature represented in its divine perfection, without the intervention of the artist. And before 1850, Anna Atkins, one of the first women to work with photography, published a kind of photographic herbarium, a book with photograms of algae.

The next important era for the photogram did not come about until just after the First World War in connection with the new photography movement of the 1920's, which displaced „decadent“ art photography, whose only objective was to imitate painting. I am thinking of the Dadaist, Christian Schad, who created his „schadographs“ using scraps and bits of paper, or the famous objets trouvés photograms by Man Ray, who described them as a „composition of objects selected with both eyes closed...“ So we have the photogram as the counterpart of the Surrealists' écriture automatique. Of course, not to be forgotten is Moholy-Nagys „pure light composition“, which radically questioned the scorned photographic Impressionism at the turn of the century.

The next time the photogram gained in prominence was in the 1950's and 60's, a time when photography wanted to rid itself of the political propaganda baggage of the war years, in fact rid itself of the war impressions to go back to individuality and subjectivity. I am thinking of Otto Steinert with his expressive light drawings, and Floris Neusüss, the grand master with his life-size figure photograms of the early 60's, or the non-representational photography movement that includes some of the first Swiss artists, such as René Mächler, a pioneer of the abstract photogram, whose influence we can still feel today.

As you can see, the photogram also functions as a kind of “index fossil” whose manifestation always points to breaks or shifts in the allegedly clearly structured tectonics of photography’s history.

However, you might ask why the photogram has resurfaced just now? We live in a time when photography is more and more dematerialized, in pixels, dots per inch, bits, bytes, mega- and gigabytes that can not only be manipulated randomly and imperceptibly on the computer, but which generates totally, new, independent virtual worlds beyond the reality we see. Reality – however one chooses to define it – threatens to lose itself completely in medial virtuality. The boundaries between our real experiential world and the virtual world of media are disintegrating more and more.

In reaction to the uncertainties to which photography is currently subjected, today’s time cry for photographic fundamentalism: Back to the roots, back to concrete, honest photography, or back to simplicity, to the essence of photography, back to the technical fundamentals, for example the pinhole camera – the most simple form of camera photography, which is experiencing a boom – and of course, back to light and paper, back to the photogram.

I think we can look at the work of Anita Pfau and Françoise and Daniel Cartier against this backdrop. This is where the few commonalities in these otherwise very different works can be found. Both artistic strategies do not really revolve around the photogram. Instead they take on contrasting positions, which both have their roots in photography’s history, but develop a field of tension that revolves around the themes of life today. It is visual research that brings up more questions than answers.

Anita Pfau sees her „Herbarium“ as a „return to values apart from the trendy trash culture“. On the one hand, the images relate to the early photograms by Talbot or Atkins, and on the other hand they are very much a part of our times through her use of complex, refined photogram and pseudo solarisation techniques, and her strong creative inclination. This is also the case with the Cartiers: In their work “Vanitas” they turn away from the digital world, and radically resort to the most simple photogram technique with hours of exposure to sunlight. However in terms of content, they use objets trouvés from today’s object world. While Anita Pfau’s

photograms are black and white and carefully composed, the Cartier images appear to be flowing, dipped in a soft pink colour.

With Pfau every image is a formal solution with precisely defined plant parts within an image framework; and with the Cartiers, it is an image continuum, an infinite sky in front of which various everyday objects seems to float by. It is nature on the one hand, but not untouched, perfect nature that must function as proof of reality. No, it is instead fractured nature, more surreal than real, photogenic but slightly degenerate, a nature in which the aura of the once living plants is so strong that one can not let go of the idea that they might be radioactive. The imaginary Pfau Herbarium from a post-modern, post-nuclear world. [...]

The artists, the Cartiers and Anita Pfau, transform the banal into something special, into visions that take over the exhibition space as stringent image series, and ensnare the viewer in a subversive, sensual way.

Ladies and gentlemen, enjoy the exhibit and thank you for your attention.