
Jeff Weber: Image Storage Containers

CNA – Centre national de l’audiovisuel,
Dudelange, 6. 5. – 1. 10. 2023

by Steven Humblet

Since 1994, the Luxembourg-based Centre national de l’audiovisuel (CNA) has had the famous *Family of Man* exhibition of 1952 on permanent display at its Clairvaux site (originally conceived and curated by the Luxembourg-born Edward Steichen while he was the curator of the photography department at MoMA in New York). Between 2011 and 2013, the CNA undertook a large restoration project of the exhibition prints. In this time frame, the Belgian photographer and filmmaker Jeff Weber made a series of six images of the restoration of one particular image from that exhibition: a photograph of the *Ivy Mike* hydrogen bomb test of 1952. This series, together with nine other images showing different interpretations of a self-made image storage container, is now presented in a small exhibition curated by Michèle Walerich at the CNA in Dudelange.

The *Ivy Mike* image, showing the immeasurable violent force unleashed by a man-made object of mass destruction, was an outlier in the *Family of Man* exhibition, which was mainly promoting a humanist agenda of togetherness as the ethical basis on which to rebuild Western society after the moral catastrophe of the Second World War. As such, it punctuated the rather optimistic tone of the exhibition and pointed toward the geopolitical challenges that lay ahead (the Cold War and a generalized fear of the atomic bomb). Focusing on this particular image in 2011 (and the current presentation of the series in the CNA) allows Weber to reframe the *Family of Man* exhibition and put it back in the complex history that informed it.

The series is not a documentation of the restoration process: it doesn’t follow the itinerary of the image from the exhibition space in Clairvaux to Studio Berselli in Milan (which conducted the restoration), nor does it show how the restored print returns to its original setting. Instead, Weber uses the act of restoration to put in motion a couple of oppositions that could clarify what is at stake for him. All oppositions circle around the tension between the violent content of the image and the thoughtful care by which it is being restored. This becomes immediately clear in the two photographs that show the subtle retouching by women working at the restoration stu-

dio. Their delicate touch contrasts sharply with the forceful energy that is contained in the image. Another photograph, showing the *Ivy Mike* image loosely wrapped in thin paper to shield it from dust and scratches, adds another layer to this opposition: it stresses the fragility of the photograph as a material object. Yet another photograph focuses on the visual distortion in the upper right corner of the image, which seems to show the ripple effects created by the enormous



Jeff Weber, *Untitled (Operation Ivy Mike, 1952)*, 2011–13. Gelatin silver print, 86 × 110.5 cm. Documentation of the restoration of photographs from the collection *The Family of Man* at the CNA by Studio Berselli, Milan.

force of the explosion, thus alluding to the idea of photography being capable of capturing the full physical imprint of an event. As such, the series becomes a reflection on (the paradoxical nature of) photography, on its eerie ability to register the full effects of an event, and on its material (and thus fragile) substrate that requires constant care.

During his stay at Studio Berselli, Weber was struck by the studio’s use of a mobile image storage container where images were temporarily stocked during the restoration process. Intrigued by this object, he constructed a smaller version of it (also shown in the exhibition). For him, this container became a conceptual device that could contain any (and thus every) photographic image, which he illustrated by presenting nine slightly different images of the container itself. In each image the container was photographed straight on, with the light differing in each take, thus creating nine distinctive interplays between light and shadow. Whereas the explosive light in the *Ivy Mike* image stands for imminent destruction, the ever-changing light patterns of the container images show the productive nature of light. Showing these two series together, Jeff Weber seems to be pointing to the ambivalence of light, the source from which each photographic image springs.

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Isabelle Le Minh: PENTAMENT

TSD – Technische Sammlungen Dresden,
7. 7. – 24. 9. 2023

by Sarah Messerschmidt

It is sometimes assumed that artistic interventions into museum collections have the capacity to revitalize them, holding them open to new interpretations and potentially unasked ques-

tions. Andreas Kruse had this in mind when he invited the media artist Isabelle Le Minh to develop an exhibition at the Technische Sammlungen Dresden (TSD), alongside the museum’s collection of material from the once-booming photographic industry in Saxony. The resulting body of work is *PENTAMENT*—the exhibition title is a fusion of *pentimento*, a term that denotes the appearance of formerly covered markings in an artwork, and Pentacon, the company name of the former Dresden camera manufacturer. It is an exhibition that merges object display and conceptual image-making, engaging this notion of an emergent set of traces that are resurrected or made visible by an artist’s hand.

There is an obvious emphasis on mechanics in the display, yet the questions posed by Le Minh turn away from purely technical demonstration. László Moholy-Nagy is an important art-historical referent, particularly his *Telephone Pictures* of 1923, which have inspired a series of abstracted renderings of instructive images pulled from the TSD archive. Le Minh’s works *FEED-BACKLOOP*, *AFTER LÁSZLÓ MOHOLY-NAGY*, *Refraktion*, *Reflexion*, and *Projektion* are collage-like in form and combine stock photographs of women demonstrating that they too (!) can release a shutter, with details of camera innards and other geometric compositions reminiscent of the twentieth-century avant-garde. Stylistically, Le Minh does indeed draw on a modernist lineage, an aesthetic choice that seems to point to the historical period of camera manufacture and the bygone era of widespread analogue use, yet her adoption of readymade materials and strategies of abstraction also breathes fresh life into outmoded technologies and the aesthetics of mechanical production.

Though not interested in directly interrogating the historical transition into digital media,



Isabelle Le Minh, *Raw Loop*, 2023. Installation at Technische Sammlungen Dresden, 2023. Copyright: Bildrecht, Vienna, 2023. Photo: Sophie Arlet / Museen Dresden.

a series of motor-driven Mutoscope sculptures, titled *Raw Loop*, does in fact reflect one such technological flashback. Their cumbersome rotating alludes to the history of proto-cinema, but it could be said that the works also point to the constant image streams of the contemporary era. A white shelf of 3D-printed camera replicas lines two walls, all unadorned and without descriptive placards. Their ostensible neutrality is intended to acknowledge a disappearing technology, although it is contestable whether white is indeed the neutral genre of contemporary art and culture.¹ Elsewhere, two wall works made up of T-card planners enact a digital “glitch” aesthetic, while their provenance, in fact, traces to Le Minh’s own hand, who has produced them piece by piece without the aid of digital rendering.



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