

BFF PROMOTION AWARD CATALOGUE 2003, by Prof. Manfred Schmalriede

Is there a possible form of the past? In his work 'The Dodo and Mauritius Island, Imaginary Encounters', the Finn Harri Kallio employs photography in order to invent the past. The reconstruction of the past takes place in language, in pictures and by using pictures and installations. In natural history museums we encounter presentations of animals and plants which no longer exist. Harri Kallio reconstructed a bird, the dodo, which became extinct in the 17th century.

He took two models of this bird to their former habitat in Mauritius and recreated scenes which make the bird appear real in these surroundings. The illusionary beguiling is perfect and it is only the knowledge that this bird was extinct before photography was even invented that irritates the observer for a moment. But even if this deception is detected, one is not actually disappointed but pleased at the successful action. In perceiving we are unable to discern between deception and reality. This means that photographs are real, but it does not mean that a photograph cannot deceive. It is the context which is decisive here. If the content of a text can be made to agree with the image depicted in the photograph, there is no reason for doubt. The picture titles create, together with the pictures, absolutely ideal preconditions for constructing knowledge.

But then what does the past mean in a picture where everything is so present? Are photographs not best suited to preserve something which no longer exists and to represent it when we want to see it? As a basic principle we can assume that everything which has been photographed is past. But using photographs to make something present provokes our attention, because this is what makes much of it into an event. This is how pictures create events or facts in an imaginary or fictitious world. Since the invention of 'new vision' in the twenties of the last century, specific, 'photographic vision' is held to be a special precondition for making pictures. The new ways of seeing were complemented by the 'subjective photography' of the fifties. Photography meant transforming the perceived world. The pictures were endowed with a type of life of their own. By taking radical extracts the image portrayed became so fragmented that it was impossible to guarantee an unequivocal version. The composition of the images became removed from the facts in front of the camera. By adopting unusual angles, the customary surroundings became confused. The quick photographic grasp froze movements into surprising figurations, leaving behind fragments of surroundings which can otherwise be perceived as a continuum and figurations of people which we would not register in the normal course of their movements.