

PROJECT ROOM
JEFF WEBER
Serial Grey



Carré d'Art-Nîmes
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PRESENTATION OF THE EXHIBITION

For Carré d'Art, Jeff Weber presents a juxtaposition of several bodies of work. In 2013, as part of his collaborative project *Kunsthalle Leipzig* (2012-2017), he undertook a journey of initiation with the artist Snejanka Mihaylova in order to study Coptic Christianity and more specifically its Gnostic component.

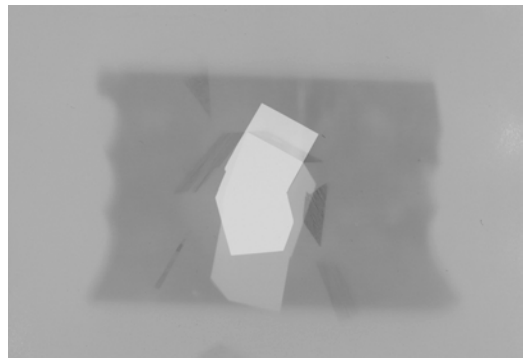
This idea of gnosis as a personal journey towards knowledge has resonated with his photographic project *An Attempt at a Personal Epistemology*, which he has been pursuing since 2009 and which sets out to define the paradoxical place where the artist operates, at the crossroads between objective knowledge and intimate experience. It constitutes an empirical method according to which it is through the work on the image itself, in its material form, in its fabrication by means of the photographic technique, that the ideas crystallize and are articulated: the image is the materialization of the formation process.

The corpus of large format photograms *Untitled (Neural Networks)* is the result of a speculation on neuronal activity and its transposition into a digital circuit. These black-and-white grid images are generated by an artificial neural network - a data processing software developed by the artist that emulates the way neurons connect to each other in the brain. The data processed by the software in the form of numerical series modify the relationships between these artificial neurons. They are then transposed into matrices and rendered into pixels by an animated sequence, which is later exposed on photographic paper; it is therefore the neural network that distributes shadow and light over the resulting photogram.

This exhibition is part of the satellite program of the Rencontres d'Arles as part of the Grand Arles Express.



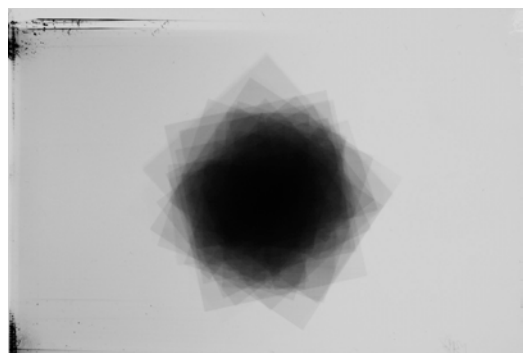
Architectural Fragment of Gnostic Monastery, The Bawit Monastery, AD 385-390, The Bawit Room, Musée du Louvre, Paris, 2014



Photogram with Crystal, Leipzig, 2015



Untitled (Snejanka Mihaylova), Giza, Egypt, 201



Rotating Square, Berlin, 2019

EXTRACTS FROM THE EXHIBITION CATALOG

Edited by Roma

Jean-François Chevrier, *Jeff Weber, Small Images, May 2021*

[...] The title chosen for the exhibition in Nîmes, 'Serial Grey', is a good description of the *Neural Networks* as a whole, but it is questionable in the light of the other (small) black and white – that is to say, grey – images. The idea of a standard (common) grey or a 'serial' grey (in quantity) is intended to unify photographic forms that seem at first sight very distant, and even opposite. And if we adopt the definition of the 'serial attitude' given by Mel Bochner in 1967 (at the peak of post-minimalist conceptualism), the figurative images on display in the exhibition barely correspond to it at all. Bochner talks of 'attitude' to dispel the idea of a 'style'. In his eyes, a predetermined 'order' is serial and takes precedence over execution and exhausted its possibilities in the finished work.¹ He distinguishes between 'serial ideas' from 'modular ideas' (implemented in architecture for example, see above). Even if one relativises this distinction by considering the standard unit of modular repetition as an approximate form of the serial attitude, the little grey images present a diversity of subjects and motifs that differ from it. One could mention another, more inclusive definition of seriality developed by John Coplans in response to Mel Bochner: 'serial imagery'.² Coplans admits two types of structure for the serial form, the 'continuum' (linear) and the 'constellation'. But he insists on the 'systematic' character through which each element in the series is deduced from a 'macrostructure'. Is it possible to identify this deductive logic in Weber's figurative imagery? The corpus is limited, each image is unique, carefully chosen both for its own qualities and its possible resonances with the other points of the *network* that is forming. Here one rediscovers the *bricolage* approach. Ultimately, the title 'Serial Grey' refers above all to the (mental and material) network's very constitution. In any case, the emphasis placed on the tonal component of photography and its quality as 'grey rectangle' have an enigmatic effect that distances the images' 'subject' (reserving it for curious viewers). In the bright, intimate space of the Galerie Erna Hecey, the variations of the *Neural Networks* defined the first nucleus of an itinerary that ended with the ensemble on the Coptic presence in ancient Egypt and its Gnostic component; the alignment of the rooms in Nîmes will inevitably create another experience. It might be supposed that the small grey images gathered together in the second room will produce a crowd effect and, perhaps, an ambient murmur. The little grey images are fragments and pages from a film shoot (or travel) journal. Each one might be taken from a short film or lead to one. The ensemble constructed around the voyage to Egypt is a crossroads – and not a series – of themes and motifs linked to Gnosticism and the culture of icons transplanted to pharaonic Egypt.

[...] Jeff Weber has always been drawn to what is contained or inscribed in objects that bear witness to ancient cultures. When he stayed in New York in 2016, he spent much of the time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He is not one of those artists who turns his back on museums and forgets the dead in order to immerse himself in current events. Like many 'modern' figures, he is reluctant to adhere to the idea that real life takes place on earth (even though that is where it appeared). At any rate, he does not agree with modern or postmodern scepticism. He does not doubt the fact that photography gives access to the world. On the other hand, he thinks that this confidence is a belief which, turned towards the world, can also be turned away from it. It would appear that it was by combining Coptic (Christian) Egypt with Beavers' mythological Greece that he found an ancient fund of Euro-Mediterranean culture, one that has become vital for him. In Egypt, unless the event took place in Greece, he came across a female sphinx. He readily talks about his approach to female mystique: 'Snejanka asked me if I was interested in documenting her research in Egypt,' he says. 'She is an Orthodox believer. She is interested in women's place in Christian religions, in Coptic Christianity and in manuscripts from the Nag Hammadi library.'³ At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he had seen an Egyptian object, probably a child's toy (*Model Paddling Boat*) representing

¹ Mel Bochner, 'The Serial Attitude', *Artforum*, December 1967, p. 28–33.

² John Coplans, 'Serial Imagery' (exh. cat., Pasadena Art Museum, 1968), reproduced in *Abstract Art in the Late Twentieth Century*, ed. Frances Colpitt, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

³ The Nag Hammadi library is a collection of Coptic manuscripts discovered in 1945 and today conserved at the Coptic Museum in Cairo. It includes a version of the famous 'Gospel of Thomas'. Publication of these texts since the 1960s revitalised study of the Christian gnosticism of Antiquity.

a miniature boat with all of its oars: a dual image, between life and death, combining the static object, the fixed motif of the boat and the movement evoked by the oars. In Giza, there is also the museum that contains, like a glass case, the life-sized Sun Boat from Kheops, which had been buried at the foot of a pyramid, in parts (to be reassembled in the hereafter). Weber photographed the hole (*The Pit*) giving access to the grave where the object was discovered. He thus pursued his project of 'personal epistemology', allowing objects that suppose faith to intervene and the secret attached to ritual actions more than a nomenclature of knowledge or procedures of scientific enquiry. In Greek, *gnosis* refers to a level of knowledge that is distinguished from simple knowledge, known as *episteme*. Access to a complete, total, absolute knowledge linking theology and cosmology, gnostic knowledge is science and conscience: participation in the unity formed by the objects that it comprehends. According to Henri-Charles Puech, *gnosis* 'can be defined as a knowledge that immediately involves salvation.'⁴ Over the centuries, this cosmological conception of knowledge found its mystical response in the idea of non-knowledge, as a propaedeutics of ecstasy. There nevertheless remains a pragmatic criterion of experience, for which certainty cannot be a possession of the immutable. Jeff Weber evidently prefers being drawn to things, as well as to people, to feel their attraction, rather than grabbing them and keeping them under his control. Here enigma acts against the intellectual lethargy that the search for certainty leads to when it becomes indistinguishable from the quest for an immutable truth. John Dewey wrote: 'Any philosophy that in its quest for certainty ignores the reality of the uncertain in the ongoing processes of nature denies the conditions out of which it arise.'⁵

Marie Muracciole, *WITH, (Art is not just knowledge*⁶)

In 2013, Jeff Weber sets out to open the *Kunsthalle Leipzig*. In this city, foreign to him, he finds two 70sqm flats on the first floor of a derelict house, and begins to renovate them in exchange for a rent exemption. For 2000 euros, he transforms one flat into an exhibition space, the other into living quarters. Then he proceeds to invite artist Alexi Kukuljevic for a three-month residency, and launches his first exhibition in 2014.⁷ Six invitations were to follow. Weber was then a young graduate of La Cambre in Brussels and had subsequently attended a residency at the Jan Van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. His diploma consisted of a strange tree-structured classification of his research in a card file. His first works, *Anticipative Images* (2007-2012), were performative experiments with light and its power to reveal, informed by an extensive reflection on photography. *Kunsthalle Leipzig* appears as the outcome of these attempts, albeit in varying degrees. It offers a significant *development* to Weber's approach - in the photographic sense of an increase of visibility on a specific support.

According to Jeff Weber, the conceptual starting point for *Kunsthalle Leipzig* is the difficulty he faced while setting in motion *An Attempt at a Personal Epistemology with a Card File as generative Mechanism* (2009-2010). What appears as a file, is mapping an analogue of the nervous system's operation, on the basis of neuroscience research; the *attempt* being to uncover an activating principle that could be transmissible to an artistic process. Cognitive biology and physics are central to the field in question, in particular the notion of autopoiesis, a recent definition of the living used in biology. Autopoiesis is the capacity of an organism to evolve in its exchanges and communication with its environment and thus to constantly adjust without losing its structure. Materially speaking, *An Attempt...* consists of a wooden box containing cards with elements of text, the contents of which are linked by way of the indexing. The piece attracted the interest of the Jan Van Eyck Academie, a research institute whose core activity rests on epistemological debate. But Weber is not an artist-researcher. His reflections on cognitive forms denote his interest in the nervous system as a potentially externalized instance, a scheme of knowledge regulation intended to generate

⁴ Henri-Charles Puech, *Sur le manichéisme et autres essais*, Paris, Flammarion, 1979, p. 8.

⁵ John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, G. Allen Et Unwin Limited, 1930, p. 233.

⁶ Je déforme ici le titre d'un texte assez bref du cinéaste expérimental et compagnon de Robert Beavers, Gregory Markopoulos *Art is Not Knowledge*, écrit en 1973. Les cinéastes expérimentaux Gregory Markopoulos (1928-1992), et Robert Beavers ont quitté les États Unis pour l'Europe en 1967. Markopoulos a commencé en 1970 à concevoir un lieu pour faire l'expérience de ses films, le Téménos, en Grèce, dont Beavers s'occupe toujours aujourd'hui.

⁷ Alexi Kukuljevic produced a series of sculptures on site, which were exhibited under the title *You Can't Rely on the Joke as the Only Mode of Social Relation*. Together with Weber, he collected salvaged materials in Leipzig, which was then in the midst of a reconstruction boom, which he assembled, re-cut and constructed. The two artists produced two photograms for the exhibition. The carefree attitude displayed in the portraits, in which Kukuljevic floats in a cloud of smoke, corresponds well with the understatement of the title and the press release, which focuses entirely on the cigar.

actions. Weber is interested in the performative potential of artistic practice: its capacity for *transformation*, in the sense of an effective participation to the worlds around it.

The card file is a paradoxical 'object' in conceptual art. The first was Robert Morris's *Card File* in 1962, in which the artist ordered fragments of handwritten texts as a way to resist the transformation of art into an object, and thus into a commodity. Ten years later, conceptual artists' group Art & Language's *Index* demonstrated that even when reduced to language, any dematerialization of the work of art is a delusion.⁸ But here, it comes alive in a different manner. The anatomy of the *generating mechanism* makes it a potential epistemological *boîte en valise*,⁹ to which the very scientific aspect of the explored domain gives a somewhat *célibataire*¹⁰ aspect. Transmission here is far from obvious.

Weber is motivated by those factors that inform his artistic approach: the will and expectation of profound changes, himself included. He pursues experiments that he calls *Anticipative Images* (2007-2012), whereby the delegating processes of his visual production are increased, as well as the possibility for external disturbances. He does so through different tools - related to photographic techniques, but also to various factors of visibility. In any case, 'boxes' come to life. They open up; light flows in and out of them; they establish more hazardous forms of readjustment between what is visible and what is not. To achieve this, the artist gradually integrates accidental occurrences into the circuit. These iconoclastic gestures precede the *Kunsthalle Leipzig* and testify to a shift that is confirmed with this project - from a research *on* the tools of perception and knowledge, to a work *with* tools and worlds.

[...]

⁸ Art & Language, *Index I and II*, 1972. One of the purposes of this installation was to denounce the forms of dematerialization of art, precisely as forms. All of the texts were filed in metal drawers, while the walls displayed only their indexing, all in a sober and supposedly neutral manner. This not only demanded an effort on the part of visitors to access the contents, but also underlined the authority of this presentation's very administrative 'style'.

⁹ I chose to keep the French term, as formulated by Marcel Duchamp, that translates as 'box in a suitcase'; miniature replicas, photographs and color reproductions of works by the artist, placed into a leather valise that could 'travel' with him (1936-1941).

¹⁰ I am referring to Marcel Duchamp's *Machines célibataires*, an expression that relates to *The Grand Verre* (1915-1923), and connects to his concept of failure as the imago of sexual desire.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

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