

The Inner Eye and Extended Time.

Reflecting upon Bärbel Möllmann's Project *VISIONS NYC*

By Regine Rapp

A woman sits upright keeping her eyes closed. In the photograph's wide panorama format, she has been placed into the left half of the image, while the surrounding area sinks into a deep green-gray. Only her right face is brightly lit, and all other details of her person are blurred. She comes across as distant and introverted.



Bärbel Möllmann, *Estelle Ellis, Her Apartment*, Camera Obscura photograph analog C-Print on Alu-Dibond (60 x 96 cm), 2002

The person portrayed is the New Yorker Estelle Ellis, a former editor of the fashion magazine "Glamour," sitting in her private Manhattan apartment. This portrait is just one of more than forty photographs from the project *VISIONS NYC* taken by the Berlin artist Bärbel Möllmann between May and July, 2001 in New York City. The concept of the project was to portray different people in New York, and then record their personal visions and future plans. The different interviewees reflect the diverse biographies found in New York City: for example, the Baltimore native Matthew Gordon talks about his career

as a filmmaker, or the performance artist Michelle Carlo reflects on her dream to realize her own TV show.

In this case a special feature of the project is an exceptional photographic technique: Möllmann worked consistently with a camera obscura. For the artist it was very important to photograph the respondents in individual areas and rooms of their choice. In the moment of visual production – at the moment the photograph is taken – the protagonists were supposed to concentrate on their dreams and wishes with closed eyes.

Stretching Time – on the Use of the Camera Obscura

The camera obscura (Lat. *dark chamber*) has a long cultural history pertaining to images and their reflections. Ranging from Aristotle's observations on sunlight penetrating into a room through the chronicles on 'perspective' written by Alhazen in the 11th Century with his insights on straight beams of light or the phenomena that an image becomes sharper when seen through a smaller hole, to Leonardo da Vinci, who experimented with the camera obscura and conceived of it as an 'artificial eye', and Johannes Kepler, who used it as a tool in his astronomical discoveries - the camera obscura was an important way of perception. Between the 16th and 19th century it was used by many artists as an aid to drawing and painting. And not just in the artistic and scientific context – in the 19th Century, a form of walk-in camera obscura was a major public attraction in Europe and the American East coast, especially in New York.

The purist form of the camera obscura is the pinhole camera, which does not include a lens, but is based only on the light which shines through a hole and projects onto the opposite side of a container. This is what Bärbel Möllmann uses in her photographic works: a small black box, with a hole in the front, projects, without the mediation of an exterior lens, the image before it, onto the camera's inside where a medium format negative is loaded.

With exposure times of up to three minutes Möllmann undermines the quick aesthetic of snapshots. Furthermore, the soft focus and dispersion of light in the exposures of the camera obscura play a special role: the blurred soft focus gives the subjects distance and removes them from reality. Light prisms arise when the light breaks across the edge of the subjects' bodies or other objects. Möllmann has deliberately chosen to use these effects.

This creates an interesting effect: as the photographic exposure is time-consuming the person portrayed must remain still, which becomes a contemplative pause. The technology of the pinhole camera is not only the conscious opposite of snapshot aesthetics, it is itself based on time, which undermines all current achievements in time-effective photographic technologies. In reference to this deliberately staged delay time with the pinhole camera, the artist says: „One can not alter it. The ‚true‘ face, the real character of the people comes to light, the inner people show themselves.“¹

This staged inner view, caused by the simple, but cultural historically significant technology of the pinhole camera, evokes a constructive opposition to the urban area it refers to: the rapid pace of New York is set in deliberate and conscious contrast to the pinhole camera's time based technology. By means of selected portraits as well as personal texts, and autobiographical quotations, Möllmann conveys an unusually intimate portrait of New York City, which refreshingly distances itself from the tiresome 'skyline aesthetic', that is continually restaged in the media. In her photographs, the fast-moving metropolis of New York comes to a poetic standstill.

Visions and Projections – The City and the Void

Only a few weeks after the artist returned to Europe in August 2001, the World Trade Center was attacked – an event which happened exactly to a building where the artist had, only a month earlier, taken a portrait and made an interview with one of her subjects. This shocking event, this deliberate attack on the metropolis, ultimately became the trigger for Bärbel Möllmann to continue her project a year later. She met with her subjects from 2001 and interviewed them for a second time, as well as taking photographs and interviews. This second part of the project (which was not part of the project's original conception) puts the visions and dreams of the New Yorkers portrayed in Summer 2001 into a new light.

The events of 9/11 are only shown indirectly in these pictures – and that is the unique power of this project. In none of the photographs is the destruction shown, nowhere are the attacks immediately visible. It is rather in their absence that the location and time of the attacks are described in Bärbel Möllmann's project, an effect which increases their potency. The comments of the respondents in 2002 about 9/11 are not all of the same intensity. In some the 2002 interviews 9/11 is not even mentioned. As is the case of Pablo Resnik, who had only recently come to New York and had developed a very unique relationship to the city: „[...] I like the city. Compared to Israel it's very calm, it's quiet [...].“² In Bärbel Möllmann's project the events of 9/11 can be understood as a turning point. This is particularly clear with Estelle Ellis, who remarked in her second interview from 2002 that: “[...] Anyone who has lived in New York and witnessed as I did the terrorist attack on the city will never be the same. Our view of ourselves, our view of the city, all of this has changed. This whole year has been one in which many different feelings and thoughts and perspectives on ourselves as well as our future have been required [...].“³

1 From an interview with the artist in June 2011.

2 Pablo Resnik in an interview with Bärbel Möllmann, Summer 2002, see afterthoughts CD 2, Track 01.

3 Estelle Ellis in an interview with Bärbel Möllmann, Summer 2002, see afterthoughts CD 2, Track 4.

In fact, some of those Bärbel Möllmann interviewed in 2001 had moved away from New York after 9/11, and many plans and dreams were delayed or dashed by the events at Ground Zero.

Rather than take its place among the many superficial forms documenting the destruction of the World Trade Center, the artist chose a rather indirect and discreet path through the renewed encounters with and questionings of her initial interview partners.

There is one photograph in this project, which shows no person, but is a portrait of the urban space of New York. *View over New York City* shows the view from the Empire State Building (midtown) looking southward at the skyscrapers in downtown Manhattan in the fall of 2002. Vague contours of blurred blue and gray enhance its stage like character. A non-ending sea of architecture seems to grow from the lower part of the image up towards the center, becoming ever brighter, until one gets the impression that downtown Manhattan appears through a spot set in the center. In 2011 one still searches in vain for the emblematic Twin Towers. The empty space is not so much marked by the absence of the two towers, as by their historical presence.

The city portrait could be interpreted as a delayed, photographic (and artistic) response to a literary text, a description of New York by Michel de Certeau from 1980. Early in his famous theoretical work „The Practice of Everyday Life“ („L'art de faire“) in the chapter „Walking in the City“ the French sociologist and cultural historian describes a view of the city of New York – from one of the towers of the World Trade Center looking northward to (Midtown) Manhattan: ⁴

“Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. Beneath the haze stirred up by the winds, the urban island, a sea in the middle of the sea, lifts up the skyscrapers over Wall Street, sinks down at Greenwich, then rises again to the crests of Midtown, quietly passes over Central park and finally undulates off into the distance beyond Harlem. A wave of verticals. Its agitation is momentarily arrested by vision. The gigantic mass is immobilized before the eyes. It is transformed into a texturology in which extremes coincide – extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal oppositions of races and styles, contrasts between yesterday's buildings, already transformed into trash cans, and today's urban irruptions that block out its space”. ⁵

Back to the city landscape by Bärbel Möllmann: This work does not so much show the conflicting architectural styles as what de Certeau pointed out was the urban “sea in the middle of the sea,” and here, too – although in a different time and under different circumstances – the artificiality of the metropolitan experience is also explicit from this elevated position; a raised position which allows in both cases an overview, but not an insight.

It is very instructive to continue the comparison between photography and literary text: later in his works de Certeau writes exactly in opposition to this panoramic view, this „optical artifact“, and argues instead for a concrete urban practice, for example in the form of walking (see the „process of appropriation of the topographical system by the pedestrian“ ⁶).

4 Consider that the Twin Towers were completed in 1973 and during formation of the text of de Certeau were much discussed.

5 Michel de Certeau: *The practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley and Los Angeles 2003 (original fr. ed Paris 1980), p. 91.

6 *ibid.*, p. 96.

And also Bärbel Möllmann – in another context but with similar intent – conveys this panoramic view as not sublime or grand, but as something dark and (socially) impenetrable. It is as if this panoramic view wanted to lead us away from the individual biographies of *VISIONS NYC*, to accentuate the lifestyles of the interviewees with their desires, hopes and fears by means of a staged distancing.

Forms of Presentation – the Exhibition and the Photo Book

Bärbel Möllmann has chosen different ways of presenting her unique project. First, she presents it in the exhibition *VISIONS NYC – afterthoughts* at Art Laboratory Berlin in late summer 2011, in the form of an audiovisual installation. In the exhibition space the portraits can be studied side by side as large format C-prints. By means of headphones it is possible for the visitors to hear the original voices describe their visions for the future as one stands before each image. In a constructive way, looking and listening are staged. Image and text are combined to create a visual-acoustic portrait, by means of the digital perfection of the sound recording the viewer moves closer to the portrayed. Then the artist has designed the photo book *VISIONS NYC. Portraits and Interviews from New York*. The portraits from New York are collected in a volume as large format color photographs. Sometimes the wide-format images extend over double pages. The photo book is able, as a special bibliophile medium, to give space to individual life concepts. The pages constitute a central moment in the reception process, sequentiality and seriality by the ordering of book pages, to meet the heart of urban agglomeration and diversity of urban life. Not least through its archival nature the artist's book provides an ideal format for this unusual and material rich project.

Published in the photo artist book:

Bärbel Möllmann: *VISIONS NYC. Portraits und Interviews aus New York*, Berlin 2011