

Sinking Ships, June 20 – July 21, 2024

Somewhere at the beginning of his essay, Vilém Flusser says that photography is a technical image (an optics translated into a picture), and as such, it seems unsymbolic and objective, leading us to perceive it not as an image but as a window through which the world appears.¹ A series of further observations leads to the conclusion that photography is an ambiguous medium, filled with traps for philosophers, but unambiguous for naïve observers who consider it merely a reflection of reality, which becomes apparent only when one rebels against what they see in the photograph. Then no one views it as a bare technical image that conveys facts which need to be accepted the way they are. Flusser brilliantly notes that criticism does not target photography as an image but rather a way of looking at the world.² In fact, an unexpected twist takes place here: dissatisfaction with the scene as it is, captured by the image, is suddenly directed against the photographer who shows it to us. This means that everyone believes the photographer bears responsibility for what he photographed because it was done with intent. Such is the case with Jasenko Rasol, who is showing us a building with large infrastructure capacities, Zagreb's Brodarski institut, focusing his attention on the interiors that speak of the unique research facility in this part of Europe. Since its establishment in 1948, it has been the site where scientific tests in the fields of hydrodynamics and ship design have been conducted. Rasol records the situation in 2019: emptied pools, piles of 'stranded' boat models, long corridors and spacious halls shot from an angle, highlighting the monumental dimensions of the space, where a disturbing silence has recently settled. There are no people here. Things do not look good.

Alternating close-ups with panoramic vistas, Rasol is interested in facts as Okwui Enwezor specified in explaining the concept for *Documenta 11*, which in 2002 made a breakthrough in the field of documentary language in contemporary art. Between two types of documentariness – one that deals with truth as a state or quality of reality, and one that is motivated by a *sense of truthfulness (verité)*³, Enwezor relies on the latter to give artists the opportunity to express ideas that *elude the possibilities of representation*, ideas that act as

¹ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Reaktion Books, London, 2016, p. 15.

² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³ Evgenia Giannouri, "No Man's Land, Every Man's Home: Clemens von Wedemeyer's Documentay Aporia", in *Documentary Across Disciplines* (ed. Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg), Haus der Kulturen der Welt-The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, p. 233.

art, theoretical thinking and action.⁴ Rasol's approach also delves into realms beyond immediate perception. As the central theme he addresses a void that is initially unnoticed, thereby transcending the boundaries of documentary discipline. Conveying the state of affairs (aiming for truthfulness) does not offer us answers, but silently poses the question of what actually happened to Brodarski institut. It is also the starting point for a series of photographs that, with the evocative title *Sinking Ships*, reveals two semantic registers that are constantly intertwined and defined in two ways: while it initially presents itself as an aesthetic phenomenon, this series has an underlying ethical basis. And the emphasis is on the perspective. Twelve large-format photographs (3.5 m x 2.33 m) are placed on the floor without frames and museum furnishings, and printed on stickers, thus providing visitors with an unusual experience – of not only looking at but also walking on photographs. Rasol wants the viewer to experience the act of trampling on what undeniably represents value – he captured Brodarski institut two years before its official closure, which was shrouded in the murky circumstances of a restructuring attempt, despite the well-argued efforts of its employees and management experts to prevent it.⁵ What we are looking at in Rasol's photographs are not symbols that need to be deciphered, rather, as Flusser suggests, we encounter symptoms of reality through which we interpret it.⁶ Therefore, Rasol's exhibition requires a completely different way of observation: we cannot look at wide shots from a distance, nor can we see them in total. Their large dimensions demand a careful observation of details, which may lead to a loss of the overall perspective in favor of an disorienting effect. They serve as a reminder of the neglect of social interest amidst the transition, as well as the uncontrolled decay of cultural and material goods, signifying a crisis of unity and inflicting enduring harm. In administrative terms, we call this the weakening of Croatia's strategic importance and the waste of its resources.

⁴ Ibid., p. 216.

⁵ An online newspaper article details the facts surrounding the liquidation process, with statements from key figures in the leadership of Brodarski institut indicating that the institute's financial difficulties were misrepresented. The workers therefore issued an open letter addressing the Government of the Republic of Croatia's decision to initiate liquidation proceedings: <https://faktograf.hr/2021/11/17/zasto-je-propao-brodarski-institut/>

⁶ A paraphrase of Flusser's words from the same essay, p. 15.

He does not develop photographs on a permanent archival paper appropriate to museum standards; instead, he selects materials of lower quality, typically used for quick, short-term purposes. Once taken down, these photographs will become waste. In this action, we see a gesture of rebellion that doesn't seek to undermine the symbolic value of photographs, but aims to separate them from their material worth, removing them from the orbit of capital circulation governed by the laws of commodity exchange and consumption. Undoubtedly, the choice to develop photographs on stickers reflects his worldview, and anyone who thinks they are bad has the right to point the finger at Jasenko Rasol.