

Conze I am really delighted to talk to you about *Westerwald: Eine Heimsuchung* (A Visitation). We communicated sporadically while you were producing the work; I was allowed to view preliminary results and am fascinated by the form you ultimately came up with for the film. With this work, you set off on a search for traces in the Westerwald and explore August Sander's creative work, speaking with the protagonists of his photos. And you also deal with the history of the landscape, that is, with the forest and this entire region. You went there for an autobiographical reason. Your family history is connected to the Westerwald and to August Sander. What motivated your research and what expectations did you have at the onset?

Schäfer It was indeed a long-standing wish to realize a work in the Westerwald. I had previously worked in more distant geographical contexts, for example, in Lebanon and Afghanistan. However, in these works I was always also concerned with relating them to the context here, since I do not grasp them as separate. For the work in the Westerwald, I searched for an approach for a very long time: What does it mean to draw closer to a place, its history and landscapes, to which I am biographically attached? In the process of this search, I came upon photos by August Sander among private family photos. I was particularly interested in the photograph of my great-great-grand aunt Katharina, née Schäfer, and her husband Adam Horn, which is so prominently on display here in the collection exhibition of the Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen. For it is hanging in the living room of the Horn family and is at the same one of the iconic photographs of the peasant portfolio, a part of August Sander's large, artistic concept work *People of the 20th Century*.

I am interested in the different ways of dealing with one and the same photo, in a family context and in an art context. That was how I got started. This photo is included in the collection

of Museum Ludwig, for example, and also in the collections of Museum Folkwang or the Ann and Jürgen Wilde Foundation in the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich. And it is now part of the collection acquired by the Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen. At Museum Ludwig, the photograph is handled with gloves. But when Karl and Marlise Horn talk about the photo, they hold it in its old original frame with their bare hands.

C So, at issue is also that photography can only be understood in context and that its meaning can change massively depending on the circumstances in which it has an effect and is used. A picture that we perceive as a charged artwork in the museum becomes a mundane family portrait in the living room. In the interviews you conduct, you go back to the original contexts of Sander's photographs, to the people or their relatives for whom they were simply mementos—portraits meant to represent these persons. What was it like to see these pictures in a different context? Does one even see them as the same pictures that are hanging in museums and are reproduced in books?

S Yes, they are the same pictures. But I also find them different, because they are more yellowed.

C That is also a consequence of the different contexts. As family pictures, they were not treated as carefully in conservational terms.

S In the home of the Horn family, they are kept in the original frames and are quite yellowed. The woodstove is also standing right next to them, something that is by no means ideal for the photographs. Besides, the famous photo of Adam and Katharina Horn is grouped together with other portraits by August Sander that were made on the same day at the same place. And these pictures, in turn, are hanging alongside other, much more recent family photos. And when we then look at the same motif belonging to the acquired collection in the Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen, for instance, the print is much larger, with a more distinct black-and-white tone, hanging on the wall of a white cube and not on ingrain wallpaper. The house of the



Horn family is confined, small, an old farmhouse; it makes me read the photos in an entirely different way. In this respect, the photographs cannot be viewed independently of their context. Although the stance, the clarity, and the concentration lying in this moment of photographic encounter exist in both photos. And that is something I highly appreciate in August Sander's work: the people had to keep still for a long time, both sides let themselves in for this process. Nevertheless, I find that the photos appear more detached in the context of the museum. They lack the traces of everyday use, like dog ears, creases, labels, something which lets you sense how people lived with the photographs in a family context.

C The title of your work, *Heimsuchung* (Visitation), possesses a certain ambivalence. Between which poles does it vacillate?

S The term *Heimsuchung* describes the process of dealing with something, triggered by the presence of and the engagement with the specters of the past. The term is ambivalent for the reason that one is haunted by these specters that were suppressed, forgotten, marginalized, or are perhaps quite visible but not easy to discern. And so, in the German word *Heimsuchung*, there are allusions to the words *heimlich* (secret), *unheimlich* (uncanny) and *Heim* (home). They therefore contain what is familiar but also the moment in which the familiar becomes or has become alien. One cannot elude *Heimsuchung*, but in the best case it can release energy that leads to engaging with something. And that is the process I let myself in for together with the protagonists.

C There is a sequence in the film in which the protagonist Mrs. Bitzer talks about how she had a portfolio of Sander photographs that she received as a gift from a friend auctioned at Sotheby's after the death of her husband. She used the proceeds to have her small home converted in an age-appropriate way. This story is touching. Occasionally, one has to smile to oneself, because of the Westerwald idiom alone. But the sequence actually leads to the core of the economic and social relations connected with the medium of photography as an object of the art market and to the specific history of Sander in the Westerwald. Through the eyes of your interviewees, we see Sander as the urbanite coming to a rural region and encountering a social fabric shaped by farming. How did you experience the theme of habitual and economic differences in your research? In what relationship do the people you talked with stand today to the photographs and also the figure of Sander?

S There are different persons who are biographically connected to Sander in different ways. For example, the two sisters, Marlene Gauss and Elfriede Zimmermann, stood in a friendly relationship to August Sander. After August Sander's wife had died early, he often visited the Gauss family and also ate lunch there.

C The daughters of the Gauss family sometimes helped in the darkroom, right? What I found exciting about this

story is that one of the sisters said that they squandered a lot of films, which did not seem to bother Sander. In view of economic issues, that is an interesting statement: Photographic material was expensive at the time and photography a valuable commodity in monetary terms. For many people, it was not a matter of course to have a portrait made of themselves.

S I was impressed by the fact that August Sander taught this young girl how to work in the darkroom and tolerated "squander." He also made an effort that the two girls could attend an academic high school, which was by no means a matter of course at the time, especially not for girls, and what is more, girls from a village. And this makes the class difference visible. Even if August Sander initially came from this milieu, he took a different biographical path and returned to the Westerwald as a bourgeois person, with entirely different knowledge that he then shared. For example, he helped Elfriede Zimmermann collect an assortment of plants, when she at first had no idea how to do this school assignment.

Mrs. Bitzer, in turn, was only in occasional contact with August Sander, but she was a close friend of Günther Freigang, who played an important role in the calligraphic design of Sander's portfolios. So, there was a lot of production in the background that involved other people. Sander's wife also participated, something which is often forgotten. It is interesting that Günther Freigang did calligraphic design also in the context of the church. Here, a traditional, crafts-oriented understanding of design meets a contemporary artistic idea.

Then I was interested in how people talk about the photographs. The Horn family, for example, immediately talks about work in regard to the portrait of Adam and Katharina Horn. About the inheritance relationship of gavelkind and why it was hard to live solely off the land, the reason why Adam Horn first worked in a mine and then as a wagoner. So, he was never only a farmer, but also a worker.

C That fits to a scene in your film in which it is said that Sander was actually like a foreign body in the village,

where everyone was just trying to survive with back-breaking work in agriculture or the mines.

Since the conception of the human is at issue in the exhibition here at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Siegen as well as in Sander's oeuvre, I would be interested in the reason why you decided not to show the faces of the protagonists in your film.

S That was a deliberate decision, because on the one side I find the hands in Sander's portraits very eye-catching. And so I show the hands that show something, for example. There are parts of the body that can be seen. But at the same time, I wanted to place the focus on listening and not so much on what a person looks like. There is one exception, though: In several shots, farmers can be seen working at the farm. Besides, I also show the photographs, the interior spaces, the locations. So, it was not my intention to directly transfer Sander's working method to the present, which in my view is not possible anyway.

C Since you just mentioned the farmers you filmed at work—you also include the current landscape with them in your film. What arises in this context is the topos of modernity that purportedly torpedoed the countryside idyll. In the interview, one of the farmers criticizes that people today only drive by car through the village: people don't greet each other in the street anymore. What motivated you to talk to present-day farmers?

S August Sander portrayed farmers whose daily lives were entirely different at the time. I was interested in what the everyday life of farmers looks like today. In this regard, I found the August family and their farmstead exemplary, because they come from smaller subsistence farming and then went through different development stages with the farm. For example, there was land consolidation leading to larger fields. A policy was enforced that was no longer interested in subsistence agriculture. This led to newly established farmsteads outside of the villages that produced on a larger scale. And I was interested in this daily life, also in the role that machines play. Although the farmers act very

locally with their cultivation, they simultaneously act within a global economy. The presented farm mainly produces milk and grain. But milk can partially be imported cheaper from other countries. And then there are EU policies whose guidelines have a concrete impact on the daily life and production of the farmers.

At the same time, many people are alienated from agricultural work, even though they grew up and live in the countryside. For this reason, Silke August, for example, is engaged with public relations to explain what agricultural work looks like. Currently, a lot is being foisted off on the farmers. That is why I found it important to include their everyday life.

C Agriculture, and thus the cultural landscape, appears in two respects: you juxtapose your own filmed images of fields and forests with technological image material that is, at first sight, puzzling and forms a sharp contrast. How did you come upon this image material, and what is it about?

S As to the production of images, I span a temporal range of one century with my video installation. From the indexical impression of the death mask via the analog photography of August Sander all the way to digital image production and LiDAR technology. The second channel of the video installation presents a five-minute loop that, as opposed to the main film lasting 44 minutes, is repeated a number of times. Along with agricultural landscapes in the Westerwald, the loop shows images created with LiDAR technology. LiDAR sends laser impulses and decodes the light dispersed back through the atmosphere. In this way, surfaces are scanned and distances and/or molecular densities are measured. This technology is used, for example, in the area of self-driving cars or tractors and was mainly researched and developed in the agricultural sector. In addition to being employed in self-driving vehicles, it also serves to assess tree damage in forests or the development of crops using drones flying over these areas. The video recordings that I use in my video installation are didactic videos explaining to the users how the technology works. In this scanning method, no images are produced anymore, instead, data is read and evaluated. This data-generated, imageless

process thus radically replaces the indexical image of analog photography from the beginning of the twentieth century.



C Did you consciously decide not to include landscape pictures by August Sander in your film? The film is indeed mainly about Sander's portraits.

S There is one landscape photo by August Sander in my video installation; the curator Thomas Seelig of Museum Folkwang speaks about it. At issue are the traces of human labor in the landscape: How strongly is it shaped and belabored by humans? What is Sander's perspective on this? What focus does he choose? I in fact studied many of Sander's landscape photographs and did research at the places he shot them. There are highly unusual pictures that I at first did not associate with August Sander at all: detail studies dedicated to light, shadow, and structure. In the exhibition at Camera Austria in Graz, I presented two landscape photos by August Sander and combined them with my photographic works. [→ p. 50] In my video installation, I had to be more focused.

C In one landscape shot appearing in your film, Sander explicitly views the landscape as cultural landscape. This gives rise to a nice tension with the sequence in your film that is about Sander's garden, and one of your interview partners says that he only cultivated autochthonous plants, meaning wildflowers that have always grown in the region independently of humans. Here, the topos of the original and untouched pops up after all, something which has partially shaped the

historical reception of Sander. In my view, your film is also about the relationship between photography, history, and suppression. In what ways did you encounter suppression in the conversations you had? How do people talk about the relationship between suppression and photography?

S The two sisters, Marlene Gauss and Elfriede Zimmermann, talk about suppression in the postwar period, when it was all about getting back on one's feet. But in the portraits that I looked at with the protagonists, fascism hardly appears, although it does in other photos by August Sander. That is why at the very beginning, a picture can be seen that is a bit disturbing: the death mask of Erich Sander, August Sander's son. He was active in the anti-fascist resistance, arrested, and incarcerated in the Siegburg penitentiary, where he died shortly before the end of the war because he was not treated in time by the physicians. That really upset August Sander.

A bit later in my video installation, the Gauss sisters say that, as children, they interpreted the death mask in the hallway as a grotesque face. Only later did they learn that it was the death mask of August Sander's son who was murdered by the National Socialists. And I, in turn, found that this was a moment in which



National Socialism bursts into everyday life and the narration of silence is broken open. In the photos by August Sander in the various family contexts, the theme of fascism was not as visible as in this case. Even though it then, of course, became part of his work *People of the 20th Century*. There is a second piece of mine currently on view at Camera Austria, *what futures are promised, what futures are forgotten—Reading a Family Archive*, that deals with the private photos of my family. And fascism is visible there in a different way.

C In your exhibition at Camera Austria, you integrate the private photo archive of your family, adding a further layer to your work. How does this photo archive relate to your engagement with Sander? After all, the pictures are of a totally different nature.

S They are different pictures, but they are not to be understood as a counter-archive. In the private family albums, there are also staged photographs, a zeitgeist is reflected. Something that is also the case with Sander, by the way, and is revealed in his categorizations, for instance. And there are also many gaps and omissions.

Many people are probably familiar with this from older family albums, pages on which photographs are missing. Of course, when looking at them today, I ask myself: Which photos are missing and for what reason? Or which pictures were not even taken in the first place? What are these voids, really? And therefore, I take up the voids in my display in the form of colorless, transparent Plexiglas panels that are inserted in the sequence of photos. They refer to missing photographs, but also to what was not photographed or what I did not select. But the voids also allow the viewers to fill in their own stories. So, what I was concerned with in the exhibition was to establish relations that have not been established in this manner in the past. And at the same time, to propose a reading that as a possible line remains discernible in its fragmentary character.

For example, on one panel we see two studio photographs of Olga Petrus that simultaneously exist as postcards. These postcards popped up at one point during my research. I had never

seen them before and asked my parents: who is this person? And then my father told me that it was Olga Petrus who, in the 1940s, had worked on his father's farm. She was one of the forced laborers deported to the Westerwald. And she wrote a postcard to her female friends, probably in Poland at the time. In these postcards, I today also read a gesture of self-empowerment. Olga Petrus is well dressed and had this self-portrait made in a studio to remain in contact with her friends in Poland. At the same time, I set these photographs in relation to the death mask of Erich Sander and to the portraits of family members in National Socialist uniforms.



C For the presentation of the private archive, you strongly altered the format of the pictures. What was your reason? What is actually characteristic of everyday photos is that their format is oriented mainly toward their usability. The pictures are supposed to be pasted in albums or fit on the passports or, as in this case, be sent as a postcard. You strongly alienate these pictures in the exhibition display by altering the size.

S The postcards are usually 10×15 centimeters, and the photos from the 1930s and 1940s are even smaller and often have serrated edges. I collaborated with the graphic designer Wolfgang Schwärzler, and we decided to omit the serrated edges because we wanted to free them of their object character and instead focus on the selected picture itself. That is also the reason why we enlarged them. The result was that elements like the floral pattern in the background of the portrait of Olga Petrus, which

we didn't even notice beforehand, suddenly became visible. Or this photograph from 1945: In the foreground, you see my great uncle in civilian clothes driving the cows to the pasture with my great-grandmother; in the background there are military vehicles of the National Socialists that can hardly be seen in the small picture, but that prompted me to ask my grandmother, when the picture was precisely taken. It turned out that the photo was shot shortly after the end of the war, when the Allies were already in the village. My great uncle, a former Wehrmacht soldier, had jumped from a prisoner truck shortly beforehand and can now be seen here in civvies. His everyday clothes overwrite his former membership in the Wehrmacht. So, the photo marks a radical break in time, but as perceived in everyday life. The picture can only be deciphered with the help of an accidental detail in the background and the knowledge that goes with it.

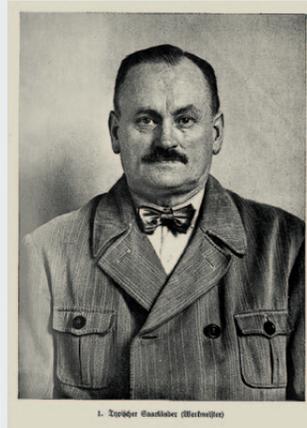
That is also why there are seven postcards with a text on the reverse side that contextualize some of the photographs on the panels. We additionally worked with transparent colored Plexiglas panels. They cite a display, but do not cover the panel in its entirety. Instead, in some places they highlight a section of a picture, in others they establish relations between two pictures. They intervene in the documentary character of the photographs and simultaneously refer to my perspective from the present.

C You say that the civilian clothes of your great uncle and the military vehicles in the background mark a radical break in time. I would say that what is revealed here is less a break than a creeping in of change in and *through* the medium of photography. It becomes clear how adequate the medium of photography is to integrate caesuras, as the end of the war or the arrival of the Allies appear to us retrospectively, in biographical narrations that are not *interrupted*, but continue. When looking back today, we might say: at this point, at the end of the breach of civilization, if you like, the album should actually come to an end and the remaining pages should remain empty. But because photography always also produces a surplus, because things appear

in the picture that were not in focus, changes can be narrated alongside in the background—in this case literally. Photography is capable of absorbing changing political and social circumstances, at first latently.

And conversely, one could also say that photography is very adaptable when considering, for example, that the photographs by Sander remained showable and publishable during the time of National Socialism as well. So, the medium nestles up to the demands of the respective time, while simultaneously showing great persistence.

S During National Socialism, August Sander edited books on certain regions, for example, the Saarland. Some of the photographs were shot by his son, Erich Sander, who used these photographic research trips as camouflage for his political resistance activities. Various regional volumes were published that sold quite well during National Socialism. There is also the portrait of a man with the caption “Typischer Saarländer (Werkmeister)” (“Typical Saarlander (foreman)”). As you say, it fits in, but simultaneously serves a different purpose. I find these contradictions interesting.



C They cannot be resolved in one direction or the other. At the beginning, I asked you about the expectations you had when you set off. What surprised you most?

Can you tell us what you reckoned with least at the beginning of the project?

S I didn't know that the two sisters, Marlene Gauss and Elfriede Zimmermann, had lived so closely together with August Sander. I learned a lot about Sander's role in the daily life of the family and the village through this. Then we found out that on the day August Sander photographed Adam and Katharina Horn, further photos were shot of other family members at the same location. When I looked at these photos and especially the backgrounds, I was eventually able to reconstruct precisely where they were taken. That was one of those moments in which I thought: They actually went all the way up to the forest with chairs. And then I found it interesting to see the different ways in which Sander staged these persons. There's a young couple photographed at a greater distance to the forest. And then there's a young girl, Aunt Lizbeth, portrayed in front of bushes—the background is much more floral and soft. And since all of these photos exist from different angles, we knew exactly in which part of the forest the photos were shot.

C Was the shooting location perhaps chosen simply on account of the light conditions?

S If you want a forest as a background that has both spruce and deciduous trees, that is the only corner that is easy to reach.

C Then that's local secret knowledge.

S Otherwise, you would have to walk much farther. And then it would only have been the deciduous forest. Sander rode around on his bicycle and was familiar with the area.

C Location scouting, so to speak.

S In my video installation, I isolate these backgrounds. For example, I filmed one shot of the forest that can be seen in the background of the portrait of Adam and Katharina Horn. There's another shot filmed out of the forest. There were severe storms during the shooting that due to the climate change and the associated long droughts led to wind breakages and destroyed many forests. That can be seen in the last sequence of my video installation. Filmed in the evening, the few remaining trees sway in the wind.

C Sander usually shot his portraits outdoors. There is one exception that is included in your film: the old female peasant in her living room. It is said, however, that this may have been for purely pragmatic reasons; that she was perhaps not as mobile anymore, that she couldn't move about well. In your own work, on the other hand, you narrate a lot about the people you speak with via their articles of everyday use, their interiors, and domestic surroundings.

S It was a surprising moment, for instance, when during my research at the Pinakothek der Moderne I came upon the portfolio entitled *Der Bauer* (The Peasant) from 1926 in the context of the Ann and Jürgen Wilde Foundation. This portfolio was a preliminary study for the *Portfolio of Archetypes* or the overall concept of *People of the 20th Century*, and at the same time a Christmas gift to a friend of his, the writer Ludwig Mathar. From the perspective of an artist, I found it informative to gain insights into Sander's working process in this way.

C In a certain respect, an intermediate step on the way to the actual concept. And would you say that you came closer to Sander through your work on this film? Does the film lead to coming closer to his oeuvre, for you personally? How has your relationship to Sander's work changed?

S I came closer in the sense of an engagement with his work—in a positive sense—that also raised many questions: For example, what does the application of categories entail? How did he work with the structure and backgrounds of his photos? I was very interested in scrutinizing and comprehending that. In this respect, my approach has many layers and is sometimes a state of coming closer and then, again, of distancing.

The portrait of Adam and Katharina Horn, for example, counts as one of *the* iconic representations of peasants. But like many other peasants, Adam worked in a mine and later as a wagoner, because subsistence agriculture on the small farmsteads was no longer sufficient to survive. And things like these are omitted in the categorizations. So, the question for me is:

How precise are these categories? What do they mean and what do they conceal? And why was this portrait chosen as being representative of the series of peasants? So many questions arose while I dealt with August Sander's work.

C This, too, cannot be resolved in one direction or the other. Did you speak with other people, apart from Mrs. Bitzer, who left their family albums to the art market? The moment the art world realized that there were still some Sander photographs lying dormant in the Westerwald, many people must have been panting for them.

S Apart from Mrs. Bitzer, I didn't meet anybody who sold or contributed photographs by August Sander to the art market. But there are persons who used their knowledge of their value and significance to talk farmers into giving them their photographs or trading them for prints or other things. The farmers were, of course, later upset when they found out how valuable they were. That wouldn't happen today anymore, because everyone now knows their value. In this manner, around 500 commissioned photos changed hands, of which 464 were sold to the Getty Museum in the mid-1980s. They are now viewable online and at least accessible again to those families from which they originally came—but only as small digital pictures and after doing complicated research.

C Would you say that your biographical connection to the region was an important door opener to talk with these people? Did your interviewees still perceive you as one of their own, so to speak?

S It played an important role in getting a read on me. And so, I was asked by those who didn't already know me from which village I'm from. Mr. and Mrs. Horn have naturally known me since my birth. So, there is great trust. But on the other hand, I have been living in Berlin and Munich for a long time, I don't speak the dialect fluently anymore and am always also someone coming from the outside.

[The starting point of this edited version was a conversation that took place in January 2022 in conjunction with the exhibition *After August Sander. People of the 21st Century* at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen (January 28, 2021 – May 29, 2022), where the video installation *Westerwald: Eine Heimsuchung* (A Visitation) and the photographs entitled *Contaminated Landscapes* were on view.]