

University for the Creative Arts
Research Project Portfolios

He Only Feels the Black and White Of It

By Steffi Klenz



Always the same photograph.

Project Details

Name of Researcher:	Steffi Klenz
Name of Output:	He Only Feels The Black And White Of It
UCARO link/s:	https://research.uca.ac.uk/3361/
Output Type:	T – Other; multi-component output comprising artist's book and exhibitions
Year and mode of dissemination:	<p>SOLO EXHIBITIONS: 2019 <i>Paradise Can Make Itself Scarce</i>, Filet, London 2017 <i>Settings, Resettings, Repeat</i>, Kehrer Gallery, Berlin 2017 <i>Stagings of a Room</i>, London Gallery West</p> <p>GROUP EXHIBITIONS: 2019 <i>Focus on Abstraction</i>, Milchpavilion, Berlin 2018 <i>Another Spring</i>, Exeter Phoenix Art Centre 2017 <i>Gestures of Resistance</i>, Romantso Cultural Centre, Side-Program Dokumenta Athens, Greece</p> <p>PUBLICATIONS: Klenz, S. (2019) <i>He Only Feels the Black and White Of It</i>, Berlin <i>Wall 14-07-1973</i>. Mörel Books, UK. ISBN: 978-1-907071-54-1</p>
Key Words:	Fine-art photography, spatial representation, documentary genre of photography, image-text relationship
Funding:	<p>IN-KIND FUNDING Filet, transport of work, marketing costs, financing technical assistants in order to hang and light exhibition</p> <p>London Gallery West, transport of work, partial financing of framing of work, marketing costs, financing technical assistants in order to hang and light exhibition</p> <p>Kehrer Gallery, transport of work, marketing costs, financing technical assistants in to order hang and light exhibition</p>

Synopsis

‘He Only Feels the Black and White Of It’ consists of 17 photographic images and a book with the same title. The work centres on a 1973 Associated Press archive photograph that pictures East German military guards and border police carrying out repairs at a damaged section of the Berlin Wall. West German civilians had attacked the wall in response to the sound of guns fired at fleeing East Germans.

The work embraces repetition as a technique of abstraction, creating images through a process of mutation. Multiple screen-printed images were made of the archive photograph. Due to the repeated use of the screen, each image is different. The image series is combined with equally fragmented text concerning Klentz’s father, who was black-listed for his political views and forced to develop a new persona in order to survive under the East German government and Stasi secret service. The texts highlight his difficulties and psychological pain.

Both the exhibition images and the book address complex issues of individual identity and freedom within the territorial borders of the oppressive and dictatorial political state of East Germany. The work offers political commentary through modes of repetition and appropriation used as artistic strategies. Subverting traditional photographic techniques, it invites the viewer to investigate new languages of photographic image-making in order to excavate traumatic content. The work shows an intensive interest in written and visual language that is expressed in the composition of text and image as equal elements.

This portfolio of contextual information includes evidence of the research aims, context and processes which led to new insights. It is illustrated with some of the 17 photographic images featured in the exhibition and the book. The portfolio also includes a PDF of the book in its entirety.



*Gestures of Resistance, Romantso
Cultural Centre, Side-Program
Dokumenta Athens, Greece*

*Settings, Resettings, Repeat,
Kehrer Gallery, Berlin*



Context

Over recent years, Klenz has explored themes of repetition in relation to the photographic medium's notion of seriality. Instead of aligning her practice with photography's over-determined idea of being 'in-series', Klenz examines methodologies of fragmentation and repetition. Her practice is also concerned with the failure of the photograph as a communicative form. As also explored in her body of work *Beun* [1], Klenz works with a photograph 'falling apart', exploring the foundational dialectic of absence versus presence. In confronting photographic representation with abstraction, the researcher uses imagery against itself. Visual details undo each other and leave a space that is not a disruption in the sense of an end, but more in the sense that something as static as a photographic image can be seen constantly to be altering in relation to itself and the viewer. Each image contains some of the visual attributes of others, making it difficult to see the larger whole. 'He Only Feels the Black and White Of It' identifies with ideas by Kaja Silvermann [2] in that the images in the series can be described as existing in a perpetual state of instability and in-betweenness, continually metamorphosing into another form.

'He Only Feels the Black and White Of It' interrupts and slows the process of translation, making the viewer conscious of the act of looking in being forced to register the relation of different parts to one another before perceiving exactly what

he/she is looking at. The work draws on ideas of a series to understand the play of fragments and aligns itself with Parveen Adam's thoughts on collage [3]. It aims to determine the simultaneity of fragment and whole, investigating the relation between fragments and — like a photographic collage as defined by Adams — seeking the consequent disruption of the organisation of the photographic. The images in the series articulate and emphasize the struggle of vision. In terms of the most basic ability to see rather than picture an image, the series pits vision against visuality.

Klenz use the process of mutation and erasure in order to provoke the viewer to engage with this image of the past and with past politics. Erasure is also used in a metaphorical sense in 'He Only Feels the Black and White Of It'. There is no visible body in pain (her father) that feeds the consumerist spectacle of violence and trauma. The work subtracts the body from a sphere that denies its representation in any case, and suggests that the failure of speech to communicate the truth about the political regime and state violence demands new modes of signification, resting on refusal and disorder. The disappearance of Klenz's father's authorial presence through the disappearance of his political voice is visualised in the work through the methodical exhaustion of the image. The viewer faces the incident at the Berlin Wall and Klenz's father's loss of voice not just once but multiple times.

'He Only Feels the Black and White Of It' is not about erasing the image as such but rather aligns itself with Robert Shore's ideas of 'resuscitation' [4]: it resuscitates the image and its interrelated political context. The work also refers to a form of Shore's 'adoption', tracing a line of descent from Duchamp's recontextualizations of 'readymades'. The work emphasizes the text as being equally important as the image. Artists such as John Baldessari, Joseph Kosuth or Ed Ruscha destabilised a hierarchy which elevated either text or image to an authoritative status: in their work image and text interact, they elucidate and supplement each other. For those artists as well as filmmakers such as Godard, text and image are equal vehicles of the same linguistic system. Language as a system of signs, originating from the influence of Structuralism and in particular the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Levi-Strauss, perceives text as a representation, and this is echoed in 'He Only Feels the Black and White Of It'.

[1] Klenz, S. (2015) Beun, Online [<https://research.uca.ac.uk/3355/>]

[2] Silverman, K. (1988) *The acoustic mirror: the female voice in psychoanalysis and cinema*. Indiana University Press

[3] Adams, P. (2019) 'Adding and Taking Away: John Stezaker Collages', in *Photographies*, 12:3, 267-282, DOI: 10.1080/17540763.2019.1629995

[4] Shore, R. (2014) *Post-photography: the artist with a camera*. Laurence King



My father is not allowed to study at a university because of his political views. He works in a shipyard with anger on his mind. Beyond his furious thoughts, my father feels wounded.

*From the 'He Only Feels the Black
and White Of It' series*



A Japanese manga artist named Kouta Hirano is born. Gerald Ford celebrates his 63rd birthday. George Harrison's song 'Give me Love, Give me Peace' is one of the top five songs played in America. My father is waiting.

*From the 'He Only Feels the Black
and White Of It' series*

Research Questions and Aims

Research questions:

How can an artist find a new form of appropriation while working with archive material to mediate between collective history and individual experience, enabling the artist to re-subjectify the material?

How does the artist use modes of photographic architectural representation to represent trauma and the absent voice?

How can an artist use systematic repetition as an artistic strategy without the work becoming tautological?

When is a fragment a fragment and what can be determined as the whole image both before and after fragmentation?

Research aims:

‘He Only Feels the Black and White Of It’ interrogates abstraction, appropriation, repetition and fragmentation as artistic strategies to address complex issues of individual identity and freedom within the territorial borders of the oppressive and dictatorial political state of former East Germany. Unlike previous artists using such methodologies, this work does not aim to explore freedom from the constraints of its subject matter, but is concerned with and challenges representation.

Research Methods and Process

For both the photographic images as well as the book, Klenz used a 1973 (14th July) archive photograph from the Associated Press. The image presents a damaged section of the Berlin Wall, picturing East German military guards and border policemen repairing the Wall.

- The original archive image came with the following caption, giving context to the image (the caption is also included in the book): *The hole in this wall was created by angry West Berlin citizens. After hearing the shooting of East German soldiers at three refugees last Sunday, the hole was closed by a working team of East-German border guard soldiers.*
- Over several months, the archive photograph was used to make multiple photographic screen-prints on paper (about 500 individual prints were created).
- 17 images were selected as the final images to be exhibited.
- Those 17 images were printed on gold-rained aluminium sheets. The 1 mm sheets were custom-made by a factory in Norfolk (the sheets needed to be thin enough to be framed).
- The original press photograph is also the trigger for a series of textual reflections and Klenz wrote short pieces of text in a style almost approaching ‘telegraphese’ in order to pack information into the smallest possible number of words.
- 17 text pieces were selected for the exhibition images. The text was laser-cut onto the glass and the images framed in wooden ash frames.
- The text on the glass casts a shadow on the gold-grained image and makes viewing the work challenging. Each text is arranged in a different place on the glass so the beholder has to become an active viewer, finding and deciphering the text, rather than remaining a ‘passive body’.
- For the book 100 screen-printed images and 100 text pieces were selected.
- The book was designed with the graphic design office Büro International London with images placed on the right and the text placed below.

Due to the repetitive usage of the same screen, the photographs produced become increasingly more smudged, ruptured, and disfigured, breaking apart with each further repetition until the images verge on abstraction. This process of continuous repetitive screen-printing creates fragmented versions of the same image: each image is the space of revelation of particular details so that what is revealed in one image is concealed in another. Each image becomes a space of both presence and absence at the same time.

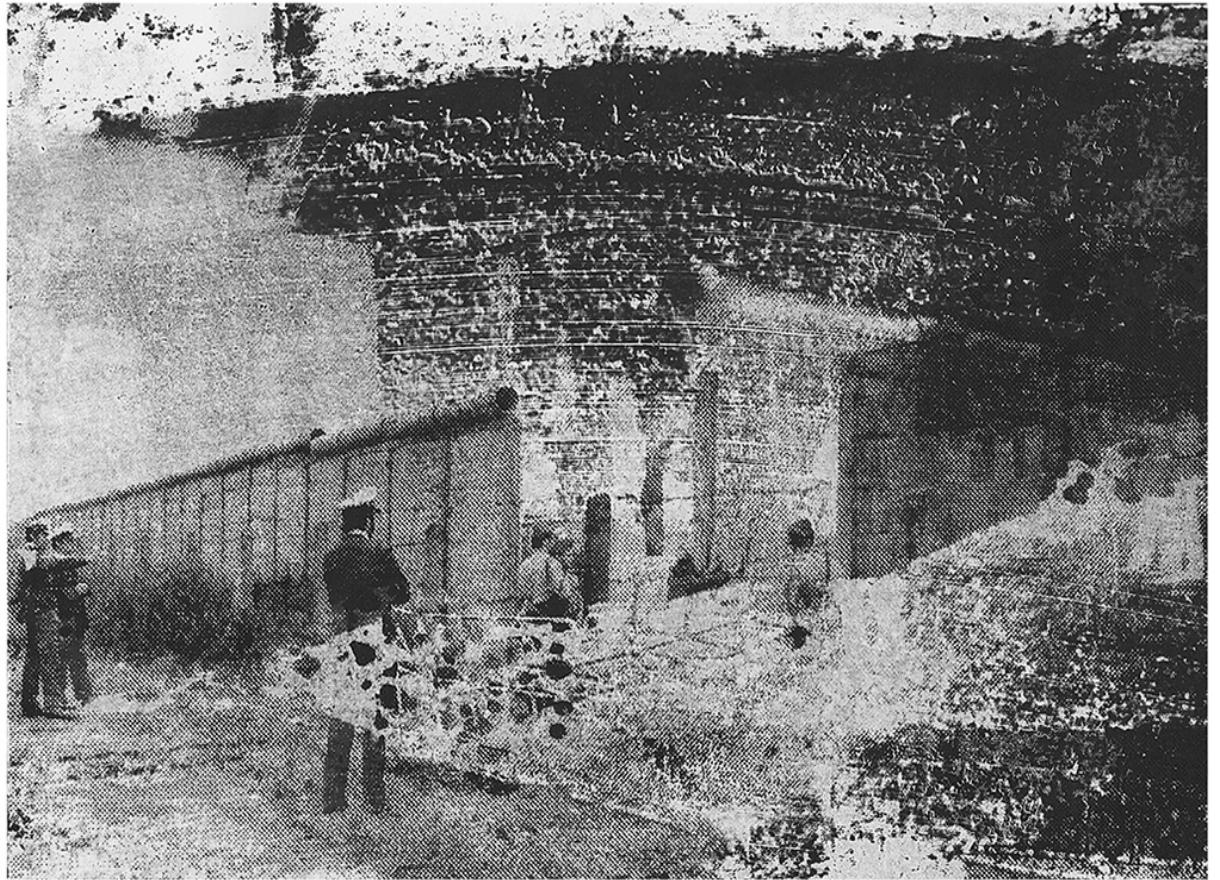
The text pieces reflect on Klenz’s own family history, illustrated mainly through the figure of her father. Some of the text also explores the artist’s mother’s and grandmother’s experiences of East Germany during this time. Some work has been done with a research assistant who used the date of the photograph (14th July 1973) to find other political incidents that happened on that day in order to place Klenz’s family’s history during this time in the wider context of world events.

The book cover features a vibrant marbled pattern in shades of blue, pink, green, and brown. A solid green rectangular panel is centered on the cover, with a thin black border. A diagonal pink stripe runs from the top right to the bottom left across the green panel. At the top center of the green panel is a small white circle. The text is printed in a black serif font within the green panel.

He only feels
the black
and white of it,

Berlin Wall,
14 – 07 – 1973

STEFFI KLENZ



Always the same photograph.



*Another Spring, Exeter
Phoenix Art Centre*

Research Contribution and Recognition

Insights and contribution:

Klenz's practice has been preoccupied with the built environment, exploring the notion of place and spatiality, as in 'He Only Feels the Black and White Of It' and other works including 'So To Speak' (2018) and 'Beun' (2015). Klenz's work unfolds in urban places and buildings, but it is not editorial architectural photography; instead, it uncovers unexpected narratives and traces of history embedded in place.

In 'He Only Feels the Black and White Of It' Klenz's use of repetition, mutation and autobiography to intervene with an archival photograph provides new insights into a historical moment, bringing it into dialogue with the contemporary socio-political context.

Further dissemination details:

'He Only Feels the Black and White Of It' contributed to the group exhibition *Gestures of Resistance* at the Romantso Cultural Centre, supported by the British Council and part of the side program of *Dokumenta 14*. With its working title, *Learning from Athens*, *Dokumenta* was shown for the first time in its 62-year history outside the German city of Kassel. Examining issues such as mass migration, displacement and the search for identity, *Dokumenta Athens* aimed to examine the European perspective from the vantage point of Greece. *Gestures of Resistance* aligned with the wider concept of *Dokumenta Athens*, responding to society's general mood of political anxiety by opening up socio-political critique in order to resist the palpable feeling of disempowerment. The exhibition of sixteen international contemporary artists made connections and links between current socio-political conditions and examples of disempowerment and political alienation in the past, and 'He Only Feels the Black and White Of It' was an example of this.

Research Contribution and Recognition

Further dissemination details:

‘He Only Feels the Black and White Of It’ was also featured in the group exhibition *Another Spring* which brought together work by internationally recognised artists including Andreas Angelidakis, Forensic Architecture, David Birkin, Layla Curtis and Kennard/Phillips. ‘He Only Feels the Black and White Of It’ tied into the exhibition at Phoenix Gallery in Exeter as it reflected on the current trends and broader developments of nationalist impulses in Western society, where the debated question of citizenship, the foundation for identity and political governance, is tied to increased measures to regulate and control the movement of people across borders.

The research was also presented as part of:

- A 3-day Symposium at Falmouth University from 23rd-25th February 2016.
- An artist talk, explaining the work and its relationship to the *Gestures of Resistance* exhibition (23rd May 2018 at Phoenix, Studio 74, in association with Exeter School of Art).
- A workshop organised by the Leverhulme Trust-funded initiative Fast Forward: Women in Photography at the Lagos Photo Festival in Lagos, Nigeria.

Follow-on activities:

The book and its meditation on political separation and its relevance to the current politics of Brexit was explored in the article ‘Murmurs from the Wall’ by Robert Shore for *Elephant Magazine*, one of the leading UK art magazines surveying the international contemporary art scene (<https://elephant.art/murmurs-wall-steffi-klenzs-feels-black-white>).

Shore also interviewed Klenz for another piece focusing on ‘He Only Feels the Black and White Of It’ and its elements of fragmentation and repetition (<https://elephant.art/new-establishment-steffi-klenz/>).

Research Contribution and Recognition

Follow-on activities:

The book was discussed by Ollie Gapper for a 1000-word magazine piece exploring the erasure of image details and the specific image-text relationship that appears in the book (<https://www.1000wordsmag.com/tag/oliver-gapper>).

The book was also selected as one of the case studies exploring the particularities of the relationship of contemporary photography and text and its interrelated notions of 'polyphonic seeing' in *Art World*, issue 310 in 2016/17.

Influence of the research:

As a result of her work on urban places and buildings, Klenz was invited to create a new work in response to the Maiden Lane Estate in Camden, London, as a commission from Camden Alive. The project started in 2019 and is co-funded by London Borough of Camden and The Mayor of London as part of the London Borough of Culture programme.

This commission led to a collaboration with Maiden Lane rappers Brownsilla and Boss B as Artists in Residence at the Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre. As a result, a new album of sounds and images was produced. It is released in print, with Klenz's images taking centre stage, alongside lyrics from the raps and an introduction to the work by Suzie Plumb. The work will be presented through innovative use of augmented reality on the streets of the Maiden Lane housing estate, enabling art-interested as well as local audiences to immerse themselves in the work. The work will also be exhibited in a solo show at Camden Arts Centre between 23rd April and 30th May 2021 (delayed from 2020 due to COVID-19). A live performance by rappers Brownsilla and Boss B is also planned during the exhibition. The printed fold-out album will be available for visitors of the exhibition and will also be distributed to the local residents of the Maiden Lane Estate.

Another Spring, Exeter
Phoenix Art Centre





An awkward silence reigns. Unfilled promises. Something, which is the opposite of effort is required.

*From the 'He only feels the Black
and White Of It' series*

*From the 'He Only Feels the Black
and White Of It' series*



A Japanese manga artist named Kouta Hirano is born. Gerald Ford celebrates his 63rd birthday. George Harrison's song Give me Love, Give me Peace is one of the top five songs played in America. My father is waiting.



University for the Creative Arts
Research Portfolios

© Copyright All Authors

Graphic Design:

Studio Mothership

