“There’s joy in repetition,” Prince sang, repeatedly, on “Joy in Repetition.” But as that other pop-culture icon, Sigmund Freud, pointed out, repetition is also a way of dealing with a very different state of being—trauma—a theme investigated in the work of East German-born, London-based photographic artist Steffi Klenz. Words: Robert Shore.

Steffi Klenz

He Only Feels the Black and White of It (Minal Books, 2016) is a meditation on political separation which takes as its principal subject a hole in the Berlin Wall and the efforts made to repair it by border guards on 13 July 1973. It consists of a single panoramic image, reproduced in around 120 black-and-white screenprinted variant states, and accompanied by fragments of text. Why did you choose that particular picture?

I was selected as one of twenty-three photographic artists to participate in the book publication Rights of Passage for the 2013 Venice Biennale. The overarching theme was territory and boundaries and how these have changed significantly over the course of human history. I felt compelled to make work about the one barrier that had shaped my own family and myself.

The most—Barbara W. Veit—I found a 1973 Associated Press photograph that presents a section of the Berlin Wall as damaged. West German civilians had attacked it in hopes of tearing it down. There are images of East German military guards and border police repairing the Wall. When I encountered the image, I was amazed by how loaded the scene was with meaning. The image is fragmented, yet the reader can see the “complete” image only in its fragmented parts.

What did you do to it so that you could reproduce the various states shown in the book? Over the last few years I have been very interested in exploring the theme of repetition in relation to the photographic notion of memory. For the book, I used the 1973 archive photograph to make multiple screenprinted images. I am particularly interested in exploring the moment when photographic images fail to communicate as an index to viewpoints, and how screenprints effectively capture that moment. Each print is different and is from the next and the reader can see the “complete” image only in its fragmented parts.

Where did you find the source image for your series Beans/175? And what made you want to reproduce it as an image?

It was inspired by a photograph taken by the artist, it extended itself into a “memory”. I was interested in the way this image could be used to explore the idea of repetition in relation to the idea of memory. The choice of the Berlin Wall as the subject matter was also due to the fact that the photograph was taken in 1973, a time of political tension. I was interested in exploring the theme of repetition and how it relates to the idea of memory.
My mother reminds Wolfgang that it is better to have a kind heart than none. “Will it start to break?”

Wolfgang replies.

Visit it to really know. Rebuilding an exact replica of the space in the studio became an opportunity for me to spend time with the architectural space—a form of “provisioning.” I regarded this process as my possibility to “actually” visit this otherwise “remote” space and spend actual time with it. In that way, it really started to feel like I was communicating through a space that I was already familiar with. This disquieting balance between the “visibly real” and the “strongly artificial” became very much a part of constructing the lifeline model in the studio as well as filtered through to the production of the final images in the series.

Different digital codes, which transform and erase the information of the images, were applied to the digital image. This process resulted in the deformation of the image and created several fragmented versions of the same image. The image becomes fractured, ruptured, deformed and displaced. By transmogrifying the image, I create several fragmented versions of the same image. These forces the viewer to hover over each individual image in order to combine all the fragments into one image. Collapsing time and space, the images re-emerge as the same, yet not - quite - the same. Photography is recognizable and strangely out of reach. For me, repetition is not about repeating the same thing. It is about small differences. I feel that images function like the action of a footnote referring the reader/viewer to another text or better detail within the image—corpus within a corpus.

How “random” is the series? Are you ultimately its creator or its curator? A digital software engineer and myself created about fifty different digital versions of the same image. At the end, we selected the images in relation to one another. 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 both a space of presence and absence at the same time.

In this digital age, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between the producers, curators and the consumers of images. I wish to forge unexpected interpretive relationships, to make you—look and shudder—with this collection of assembled and at the same time appropriately photographs that propose new readings of the original archive image. The title Bolt is an early seventeenth-century word for a theatre stage. A stage can present anything except itself; it needs an actor to animate it. It resides in my own work, I like the idea of the digital software programme functioning as an anonymous form of enactment for the space stage I build. In the theme, the drama provides a narrative, but in Bolt any such tangible narrative is witheld.

“Sleeping of a Dune” will run at London Gallery W1 until January.