The Photographer of Silence
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The dream of holding on to the fleeting moment is inseparable from the victory of photography. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Eadweard Muybridge, an Englishman living in the US, triggered the rise of a veritable cult of the moment when he astonished the world with his photographic motion studies of humans and animals. After Muybridge, what the naked eye perceived was no longer enough: pictures of a galloping horse, for example, brought proof that horses could "fly," with none of their hooves touching the ground in some frames. At that moment, if not even earlier, painting had lost the struggle over which art would represent what is real. Reality, according to a view that became common sense, is apparent only in the brief moment; the most beautiful reality flashes up in what the Frenchman Henri Cartier-Bresson, the leading ideologue of snapshot photography, would describe as the "decisive moment." And even if that spontaneous moment might not have taken place as depicted — its supremacy in the realm of photography seems undiminished. Paradoxically enough, one reason why this idea has proven so tenacious is that the concept of the moment in photography is far from unambiguous, as the photography historian Bernd Stiegler, among others, has pointed out; he writes that "the definition of the trace of perception, of the moment, indeed hinges on the observer's standpoint, and can be described equally well as ephemerality or as duration."[1]
Whether a moment is fleeting or lasting, that is to say, depends both on those who produce the images and on those who behold them.
Of what sort of moment do we speak? As a consequence, the ambivalence of the medium opens up creative leeway also for producers of images who, as it were, work at the other end of the spectrum.

Looking at Andreas Mühe's pictures, we immediately recognize his determination to put the ambivalences of the photographic moment to his own uses. The photographer, who was born in Karl-Marx-Stadt (now Chemnitz) in 1979, is not interested in the snapshot. Mühe says: "I want to create timeless images."[2]
Still, he too is a photo-grapher of moments — he just resolutely stages these moments himself. Mühe stretches his instants until they encompass eternity, pulling out all the stops. In some respects — regarding his use of lighting or his preference for abandoned buildings and mountain panoramas — his art is closer to the traditions of land-scape painting or the cinema than to his own medium.

As digital snapshot photography has become commonplace, cleaving to a heavy plate camera and elaborate lighting techniques has

come to look less like an act of nostalgia and more like a survival strategy.In Mühe's pictures, spaces and landscapes rest in deep shadows like history paintings looming through a varnishdarkened by time; bodies are arranged in careful choreographies like the pieces of a chess match. These pictures breathe a chilly air of dark romanticism. If the romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich was the "painter of silence," we might perhaps call Mühe the "photographer of silence." Like the works of his romantic kindred spirit from the early nineteenth century, Mühe's pictures are rigorously structured, with precisely balanced symmetries and constructions that seem almost geometric. Yet like Friedrich, he aims not at mere naturalism but at "spaces that resonate in the psyche."[3] In Mühe's case, these are places charged with history, such as the ruins for the athletes' village built on the outskirts of Berlin for the 1936 Summer Olympics, now strangely suggestive of a stage set, or the vestiges of the Nazi recreation facilities at Prora on the island of Rügen, which remain unfinished.

Mühe has indeed been described as a neo-romantic and a photographer of ruins; but only part of his oeuvre fits into these categories. Mühe offers a focused take on themes such as gloom, pathos, stasis, and distance without allowing them to overpower his art. His visual universe is more expansive and aesthetically unique, drawing on a great variety of sources.
It is the intersection of experience in fields such as the aesthetic of contemporary advertising and magazine photography with the use of a certain technique and the deliberate or intuitive implementation of artistic preferences we can associate with the visual languages of painting or cinematography. Mühe elegantly synthesizes the components required for his visual production, rendering classical oppositions such as that between art and advertising productive.

"The defensive art-historical construct of an autonomous aesthetic sphere," Holger Liebs writes, "has essentially relied, and still relies, on the existence of allegedly trivial visual media such as posters, store signs, newspaper advertisements, comic strips, the cinema, television, urban adver-tising screens, or shopping environments."[4] One school, however, and we may count Mühe among its representa-tives, tackles these oppositions head-on, playing on what the two spheres have in common; "they draw on the same reservoir of formal and technical innovations and always work, often hand in hand, to disrupt our visual habits in order to appeal to new audiences."[5]
In our photographer's case, this sort of boundary-crossing generates a sublime Pop idiom we can also recognize in artists such as Yang Fudong or Hedi Slimane. But Mühe's approach to advertising is practical, not theoretical in nature. After graduating from high school at the age of sixteen, he first received training as a photo lab technician at PPS Imaging, Berlin, before working for three years as an assistant to the

Berlin- and London-based photographer Ali Kepenek and then to Anatol Kotte in Hamburg. Both Kepenek and Kotte are commercial advertising and portrait photographers. Kotte taught Mühe to take pictures with the analog large-format camera. Since then he has mainly used a Linhoff 4 × 5 Inch, a Bavarian-made large-format cassette camera. He started out as an independent photographer in 2001, initially portraying musicians and bands; that brought him to advertising photography, a phase that lasted for five years. What does a photographer learn by taking pictures of trains, cars, medications, buildings, sometimes on budgets of up to 150,000 Euros? "Professionalism" and "being organized" more than anything else, Mühe says.[6]
Magazine photography is another source of influence on his style. A slew of new German glossies were founded in the mid-2000s. A mood swept the country around the Soccer World Cop that Ulf Poschardt, then editor-in-chief of the German edition of Vanity Fair, enthusiastically described as "Germany 2.0" in his editorials.[7] When the art magazine Monopol is founded in Berlin in 2004, Mühe quickly joins its photographers pool. He gets assignments from the newly founded German Vanity Fair as well as its competitor, Park Avenue, but both magazines disappear from the market in late 2008 or early 2009. A "new generation that embodies a different intellectual attitude"[8] had its own media, but only for a brief moment. It is probably not a coincidence that Mühe would photograph for these media, taking on assignments that lead him to the portrayal of politicians as a visual theme. Like the magazines he works for, Mühe represents the "Berlin generation." His pictures of politicians, artists, actors, hip restaurateurs, and bouncers contribute to the self-image of a self-proclaimed "new Berlin"[9] whose existence is largely based on bold assertions.

Frank-Walter Steinmeier is the first politician whose picture Mühe takes. In April 2007, he accompanies Steinmeier, then the foreign minister, on a trip to Mexico on assignment for Vanity Fair. The "grand coalition" of conservatives and Social Democrats governs from 2005 to 2009. A little later, the magazine sends him to New York, where he captures Chancellor Angela Merkel during her first speech to the United Nations — and a story begins without which no essay about the photographer would be complete. Mühe works with a medium-format Ringblitz camera that bathes the chancellor's face in a soft and flattering light, smoothing out the "traces of power" (Herlinde Koelbl) and adding a note of glamour to the leader's public image. "For the first time ever, Angela Merkel looked pretty attractive,"[10] the Berliner Zeitung would later write about this coup. Over the years since, he "was able to photograph her three or four times,"[11] Mühe explains in interviews. Which is also to say: he would rather not be pigeonholed as a "chancellor's photographer" or as "Merkel's court

photographer." But the image of the chancellor Mühe produces is not without its inner contradictions. His famous portrait of Merkel — standing beneath a tree in the botanical gardens in Berlin-Dahlem, the chancellor has turned to the side and faces away from the beholder — allows for various readings. We may recognize in it the desire of a public figure to be alone.[12] The image of the "woman turning away" has roots in the art-historical tradition, addressing the audience of beholders to emphasize their inability to determine the sitter's identity or her reasons for turning away with complete certainty. Both only incite our curiosity. "A woman looking away is obviously considered worth looking at," Jennifer Higgie writes, and "her resistance to our scrutiny must be compelling, pleasurable even."[13] Is the image of the woman in a blue blazer turning away from us a particularly skillful political staging, the opposite, or both at once? By portraying the chancellor in the botanical gardens, Mühe attacks an iconographic tradition that goes back to the days of Konrad Adenauer. Ever since, the chancellors have had their pictures taken seated at their desks as "the first servant of the state." "The motif means to say: this man does not receive supplicants; he is a democratic chancellor working for his people."[14] Mühe, too, photographed inside the chancellor's office, but the desk is
deserted. Instead, our gaze falls on a portrait of Adenauer by Oskar Kokoschka that Merkel had mounted on the wall, flanked on the left by the saturated colors of the German and European flags.

Discussing the particular case of reportage photography, Roland Barthes once pointed out that "all too skillful" photographs deaden the beholder's passion: "someone has shuddered for us, reflected for us, judged for us; the photographer has left us nothing — except a simple right of intellectual acquiescence."[15] Despite the great skill and precision with which Andreas Mühe works, his art is well guarded against the danger Barthes describes. His pictures convey enough ambivalence and moments of uncertainty to provoke our impassioned gaze.

1 Bernd Stiegler, Bilder der Photographie. Ein Album photographischer Metaphern (Frankfurt am Main 2006), 39.

2 Interview with Jan Schimmang, bild.de (April 19, 2010).

3 Norbert Wolf, Caspar David Friedrich (Cologne 2007), 9.

4 Holger Liebs, "Kunst und Werbung," in DuMonts Begriffslexikon zur zeitgenösischen Kunst (Cologne 2002), 186.

5 Ibid.

6 Conversation with the artist, Berlin, June 2011.

7 See "Der Spaß beginnt erst!", Vanity Fair (Germany) 22 / 2007 (May 24, 2007), 5.

8 Heinz Bude, Generation Berlin (Berlin 2001), 13.

9 See Dagmar von Taube (ed.), Berlin Now (Kempen 2011).

10 Maxim Leo, "Der Mann mit dem Tiefkühl-Blick," Berliner Zeitung, January 19, 2010.

11 "Mit der Kanzlerin bei Obama," interview, Freie Presse Chemnitz, June 15, 2011.

12 F.C. Gundlach, "Werkschau 2," in 1997–2010. Andreas Mühe (Cologne 2010), 42.

13 Jennifer Higgie, “Alone Again, or The Persistent and Enigmatic Subject of Women Turning Away,” frieze June–August, 2009, 157–61.

14Frank Padberg, “Die Kanzler und ihre Arbeitszimmer,” in Wolfgang Ullrich (ed.), Macht zeigen. Kunst als Herrschaftsstrategie (Berlin 2010), 106.

15 Roland Barthes, The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley 1997), 71.