By Christophe Gallois

Tris Vonna-Michell was one of the artists to be invited for the exhibition ‘Image Papillon’ curated by Christophe Gallois at MUDAM in Luxembourg. The artist showed here a first version of the work Postscript I (Berlin). A second iteration will now be presented in Brussels. On this work Gallois wrote the following text which will soon be published in the catalogue of the exhibition.

LUXEMBURG, OCT. 15 – One of the first images that one gets to see in Postscript I (Berlin) (2013) illustrates the way in which Tris Vonna-Michell builds his narratives. What we see is a large amount of photographic prints placed on a table to construct a spatial montage. Images of different kinds are juxtaposed, overlapped or overlaid to end up forming a ‘constellation of narratives’. This montage is designed to serve as a sort of ‘visual script’ to some of the vocal recordings made by the artist as part of a series of works entitled hahn/huhn, which was begun in 2003 and in which Postscript I (Berlin) belongs. The work illustrates the way in which the artist’s narratives are built on a series of fragments of information as well as heterogeneous elements collected according to the principle of ‘objective chance’, of coincidence, and leaves a large amount of space to accidents, unintended events or other forms of sideway motions that crop up as it unfolds. This is reminiscent of the technique which German author W.G. Sebald used to write his narratives on the basis of documents, notes, and stories gathered up haphazardly. And so, Sebald said, “you then have a small amount of mate-
and you accumulate things, and it grows; one thing takes you to another, and you make something of these haphazardly assembled materials."

Made up of two slide projections and a recorded narrative by the artist, Postscript I (Berlin) looks back – or at least, that is what the title suggests – on a story that was begun ten years before, when Tris Vonna-Michell was a student at the Glasgow School of Arts. As often in his works, the starting point of this narrative was the conjunction point of several anecdotes connected to his immediate surroundings. In this case, it is set in the city of Berlin, and it brings together memories of the artist’s mother, who was born in Berlin in 1945 while the Russian troops were overrunning the city, and a story he heard from his father about a man he called Reinhold Hahn. The man, whose real name was Reinhold Huhn, was an East-German soldier who was killed in 1962, at the height of the Cold War, while he was on duty on a surveillance post near the Anhalter Bahnhof. Tris Vonna-Michell’s narration goes back and forth in time between the two stories, their connecting point in 2003 when the artist tried to find their traces during a visit in Berlin, and the remnants of this research as they stand today.

In Tris Vonna-Michell’s works, this ‘hiddering’ is amplified by the difference in the rhythms of the flow of the narration and the images, the speed of the voice and its often hurried delivery creates a stark contrast with the slow, nearly contemplative flow of the slides. In a 2009 interview, Tris Vonna-Michell expounded on this aspect of his work: “I have always felt that my speech delivery and my editorial process of images each have their own natural rhythm. I keep them independent, but also allow them to be harmonious at the level of interpretation. I always speak fast, which might create a certain frustration for the viewer, but there is a slower and more delicate pace for the images. I think the combination of these different rhythms creates a space for the viewer.”

Creating a space for the viewer, keeping the work open-ended – in the end, this could be the utopian place outlined by the detours and repetitions, but also the hesitations, the errors in interpretation and the moments of confusion that define Tris Vonna-Michell’s works. As he states at the end of Postscript I (Berlin) “For me, all seems to make sense in a sort of circular way”. Each instance of his narratives could be taken as an attempt to expand on this very movement.

Translated by Boris Belay

Footnotes

1 Tris Vonna-Michell, written conversation with the author, October 2013.
3 See also Tris Vonna-Michell, JRP/Ringier, Zürich, 2010, p.12. “Like a minstred arriving at night, during the depleted hours of my concentration, my father summoned his regular rites, and continued his epic tale. Dancing within the rigid doorframe, until a recurring name broke my immersion in distant thoughts. You keep talking about him, but I keep forgetting who he is. I still don’t know who the hell he is. I could sense that he enjoyed the outburst. The continual repetition of a figure who ceased to become any more available or comprehensive over time. Tenison broken by laughter, he thumped his thighs, and swung the door in all directions, hailing, who is Reinhold Haahn…”