

‘Unterwegs, On the Way: Travelling in Europe’

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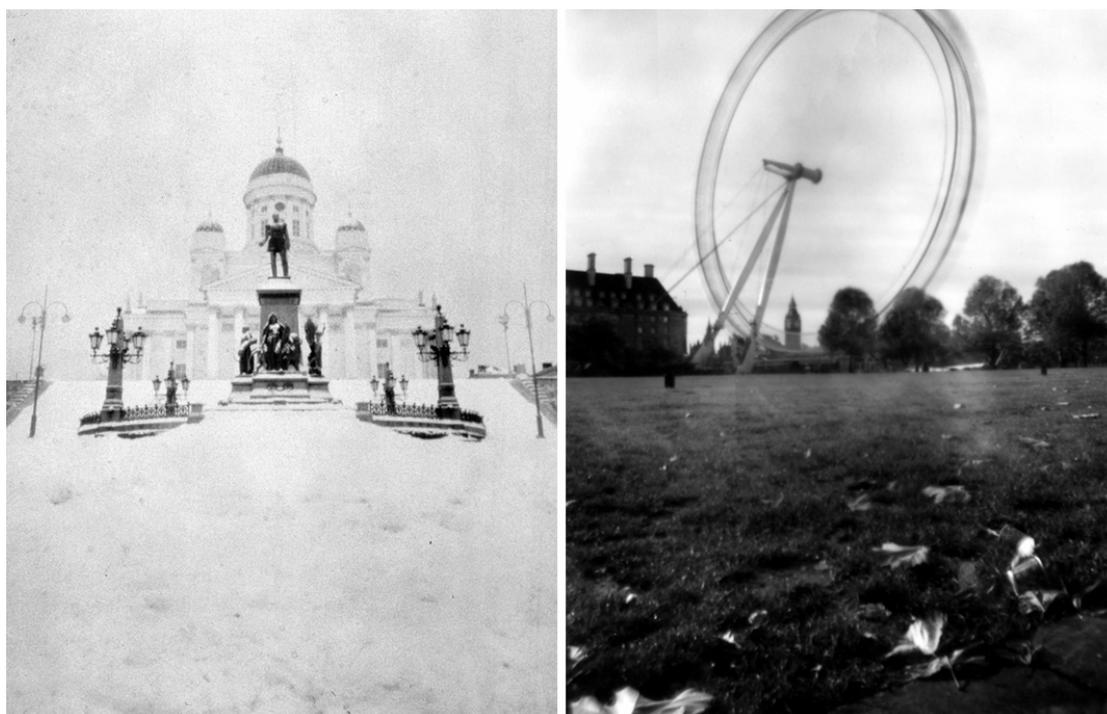
1. Tourists head to specific meaningful places, usually the capital cities of the visited countries.
2. Tourists seem to be occupied with the reproduction of the ever same images.
3. The main attractions of a city are its most visited and photographed objects and the space around them is eventually crowded.

Through the use of a pinhole camera I intend to challenge the collective tourist gaze and photographic behaviour. My choice of this medium is reasoned with the parallel development of mass travel and the invention of photography in the early 19th century.

Since 2002 I have been travelling to European capital cities and taking photographs of their crowded main attractions. The pinhole camera and its bulky equipment make image taking plus moving around a city extremely time consuming and exhausting. Only very few pictures can be taken on a day. Through long exposure the sight becomes an isolated object on museal display.

Introduction – Engaging Artistically with Sightseeing Photography

“Unterwegs” is an art project about relations between photography and mass tourism, focusing on generic photography and sightseeing. This conceptual photographic work is specifically concerned about representations of Europe and has been carried out with the means of a pinhole camera since 2002 for an MA project. Below I intend to describe my artistic intentions, the social theories considered, some case studies and experiences to illustrate the artistic process from my position as the producer. The analysis of and comparison with other artwork related to the theme is omitted for the benefit of the study of popular sources, as the main motivation for this work roots in the interest in the “low” cultural form of generic photography, rather than in the discourse of “high” visual arts.



Historical Relations

Mass tourism and photography developed parallel since the 19th century and have been connected ever since. Even in pre-mass travel times it was common to bring drawings home, which often were created with the aid of a Camera Lucida or a Camera Obscura (Newhall 1998). Finally a change of view took place towards environments to be looked at for inspection during the 19th century. Things put on display – outside in urban planning and inside in museums – made them look significant. Thus the priority of the gaze was established and reinforced through the invention and use of photography.

At that time the ideal of romanticism and pre-industrial idylls of untouched nature and history was prevailing. Although this was already visible earlier in the epoch of romanticism, these tendencies that can be claimed to still exist in today’s tourism. If romanticism can be seen as a reaction to the era of Enlightenment, today’s search for “authenticity” in either urban or rather natural destinations can be seen as its continuation visualised in tourist imagery.

At the beginning, both travel and photography was limited to wealthy social classes. Photography to the day is especially subject to male domination. While technical development of cameras made them easier to handle and cheaper to buy, the increase of

wages and holidays caused more people to go on journeys and to take pictures of the sites visited, which has become more an obligation than an option. As a consequence nowadays we are flooded by professional and private photographs of the ever same tourist subjects.



Case Studies

From photographic and social theories three main assumptions have been drawn, which are underlined through case studies of the analysis of quantitative and qualitative text and image sources mainly consisting of various forms of tourist media, private photos, interviews and online communities such as the hospitality network "Couchsurfing.com". Although claiming being alternative travellers, even backpackers still follow the routes of the so called beaten track of mass tourism, and they finally meet in front of the same sights/sites.

1. Tourists (and travellers) head to specific meaningful places, usually the capital cities of the visited countries. Studying planned Euro-trips a strong focus on the central-western European capital cities strikes our attention, which also might result in their geographic proximity and tourist infrastructure, but also in their well-marked fame. This is enforced through the recommendation of many travel guide books to a visit of the capital if the stay in a country is short. Although it can be argued, that as centres of powers much artwork and grand representative architecture is accumulated there, this rather reflects a strong emphasis on bourgeois educational cultural values.

Table1. Example of travel itineraries of world travelers

Dany, 20, Canada:	London-Dublin-Brussels-Paris-Marseille-Lyon-Berlin-Vienna-Prague-Madrid
Becky, 23, USA:	Paris-Brussels-Amsterdam-Copenhagen-Berlin-Leipzig-Dresden-Prague-Barcelona-Lisbon-Madrid-Marseille-Nice-Florence-Rome-Patras-Athens
Gurkan, 21, Sweden:	Copenhagen-Hamburg-Berlin-Paris-Brussels
Daniel, 24, Mexico:	Madrid-Barcelona-Paris-Amsterdam-Brussels-Hamburg-Copenhagen-Warsaw-Krakow-Zagreb-Lubljana-Sofia-Bucarest

Source: www.couchsurfing.com, accessed 23.5.2007.

2. Tourists seem to be occupied with the reproduction of the ever same images that visiting and gazing at buildings and monuments become swift acts they hardly may be aware of. As Susan Sontag pointed out, travelling becomes a picture making strategy (Sontag 2004:15).

“I do not know, what it is, but it looks important. I just take a photo, just in case...On average I take about 300 photos per week.“ Rene, 35, Austria, about a statue in London.

“I went to Rome and did not take a picture. I am not so keen on photographing. Well, in the end I took one in front of the Colosseum. Nobody would have believed otherwise that I had been there.“ Susanne, 30, Austria, about her Rome trip.

These comments stress the importance of documentary, affirming and memorizing functions of photography for the privately snapping tourist, confirming the successful trip for the future. The chosen statements are also very symptomatic for the male domination of photography – who dominate the sector of ambitious and competitive amateur photography – in opposition to the socially integrating role of women as keepers of the family albums as a chronicle of life.

3. The main attractions of a city are its most visited and photographed objects and the space around them is eventually crowded. In our imagination attractions often appear in a lone purity, but matter-of-factly all those other tourists are covering the view on them. Only formal strategies - like taking detailed shots, going far into the distance, or framing the upper parts of monuments – enable to create people-less images of crowded sites. For the ordinary visitor it hardly possible to take one of those essentialising photographs associated with a kind of romanticized “authenticity” often proclaimed in promotional material.



When looking at tourist media, the listings of top attractions and their reflections on private tourist photography Europe appears like a museum collection of mainly historic buildings and monuments. The differences between doing sightseeing in a city and visiting a museum are only small (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). After all both practices are manifestations of the establishment of the gaze in the 19th century, when museums made collections accessible to public viewing and urban planning was directed at the strolling viewer.

Guidebooks, sign-posts, brochures, postcards, snapshots, etc usually correlate to a very large extend and close a redundant circle of representations of a mainly romantic-historical Europe at display, resulting in the dense accumulation of tourists in the capital cities at the

ever same monuments and quarters. These considerations lead to my decision of travelling to European capital cities and their main sights for this project. Since 2002 I have been taking photographs of their crowded main attractions with a pinhole camera.



Choosing and Using the Camera Obscura

The intention to challenge the collective tourist gaze and photographic behaviour is met through the use of a pinhole camera, a black card box with a hole. This choice is reasoned with a combination of historical relations between photography and travel and its role for image making even in the pre-photographic era, as outlined above, but also with its technical particularities. Its optical laws can be used to create a perceptual shift and its operation forces to a different style of travelling and looking. The absence of a view-finder and accurate mechanisms result in giving up full control of the image. The infinite depth of field leads to a slightly shifted perception of space and the linear perspective supports a central positioning of the subjects. Most importantly due to long exposure times of between two minutes and two hours the sight becomes an isolated object, emptied of people.

Although not visible, the processes and experiences through the use of this medium are vital to the production of the photographs as a reflection on tourist photographic practice. The pinhole camera and its bulky equipment makes image taking plus moving around a city extremely time consuming and exhausting. Carrying that heavy and bulky equipment forces to take time and only very few negatives can be exposed per day. While waiting for the

exposure time to end there is plenty of time to observe the attractions, its surroundings and other tourists. The heavy load, with which I cannot run away out of a sudden, and the fact that the camera is not available as a protective shield makes me accessible and approachable to other people. Although big, one cannot hide behind it and sitting around with this unusual camera in some places attracts attention. Sometimes I am looked at and photographed like another attraction. Often people show interest in the apparatus and start conversations about photography. Strangers stop and recommend best views. The huge camera also attracts odd people at certain places, reminding me of the vulnerability of a woman travelling alone. The absence of a view finder separates camera and viewer: Exposing a photograph in this case also exposes the photographer. Thus, additionally to the changed way of looking and photographing the factor of interaction between tourists was added, an experience of the situation in the literal sense of intersubjective gazing (Intersubjektives Sehen): we are part of the situation, but also observing the situation (Flusser 1995: 100ff).

Through the lack of signs of life the photographs become factual depictions of the monuments, an object for museum display. The camera becomes seemingly a purely technical tool, which seems to work objectively without traces of the individual. Photography loses the private functions for memory and the social use for integration within the social group. The historicity and narration of the moment is lost, the creation of tourist fiction is undermined, their untouched historicity seemingly confirmed.

At the moment the series includes about 50 photographs of sights in Stockholm, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Tallinn, Dublin, London, Berlin, Bratislava, Vienna, Paris, Rome, Athens and Madrid. The aim is to complete a collection of the main sights of all capital cities within the European Union, a museal collection of journeys without narration. Many arising questions are not answered here, but they lead to my current PhD research project for which I am investigating media and private tourist photography of European Cities.

Technical Details

Camera:

distance hole – film: 150mm (equals a normal angle lens)

hole: 2mm, equivalent to f:360

negative: 13 x 18cm B&W negatives

Photographs

Black and White photographs on fibre based paper. 13 x 18 cm, Edition: 3 -5



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Figures and Images

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p.417: Unterwegs - Berlin (Reichstag), Wien (Schönbrunn)

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p.419: Unterwegs: Athens (Acropolis)

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Supported by the Austrian ministry for education, art and culture

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