

# In between spaces and places

Virginia de Diego and Julia Gaisbacher exchange photographs

Instead of a round at the table tennis table, in this publication, which was preceded by the exhibition PING PONG #1, there is an interplay via images. For the first round, the artists Virginia de Diego and Julia Gaisbacher play back and forth with photographs on the theme of public space. Following the rules of the game, each responding to the other's photograph with one of their own within a few hours or days, the two artists create a visual chain of 36 photographs that opens up a new narrative. The photographs refer to formal or aesthetic details of the previous image, establish references to content or pick up moods.

While Virginia de Diego's photographic practice is characterized by a desire to observe everyday life, directly and momentarily, Julia Gaisbacher's works testify to her interest in social conventions, architecture, and representation in urban space. The photographs assembled in the publication are mainly from the two artists' archives. They show architectural structures, situations and details in public space and were taken in different places around the world. Julia Gaisbacher mainly uses sketch material and preliminary studies for extensive artistic projects, or individual photographs from completed works. Virginia de Diego's analogue photographs are part of her large, ongoing series. Using the medium of photography, which she herself understands as „visual archaeology“, she draws a portrait of our society, mirrored by social practices, moments and places. By playing ping-pong, the photographs of the two artists are placed in a new context. In the playful dialogue between the images, new visual levels, meanings and contents emerge. Just as Virginia de Diego and Julia Gaisbacher were challenged to be inspired by a photo in the visual back and forth and to rediscover their own work, the viewers are invited to sharpen their gaze and be surprised by the visual dialogue of the artists.

# Artist Talk

Sophie Haslinger and Corina Lueger (curators of Ping Pong #1) in talk with Virginia de Diego and Julia Gaisbacher

**There was an open call for the PING PONG project. You have been selected by the international jury on the topic „Public Space“. What interested you in the project?**

JG Collaborations and the exchange with other photographers are always of great benefit to me, as it opens up other perspectives and lets me look beyond my own „image-box“. I found the idea of the PING PONG project very interesting, because I thought that I would be inspired by the given pictures in order to deal with new image levels, meanings and contents in a playful way.

VD One point of interest was the female gaze you were looking for: it is very important to me to make channels for female and other points of view.

**A few of the questions that led us to initiate the project were: „How does the meaning of a photograph change with different perceptual conditions? How do we communicate through photography?“ What does communication through photography mean to you?**

JG In my work I try to follow the approach to leave topics accessible in a way that the viewer can connect with them personally. Ideally, my work opens up thoughts, memories or questions, or people are just drawn to it from an aesthetic point of view. But in the end, of course, I can't influence that. I am interested in this way of communicating through images and art in general.

VD For me, photography is the language of intimacy: that universal shared sound, beyond cultural or idiomatic barriers. It is that shared moment in which we can all feel identified or, in the words of José Luis Pardo, intimacy is the specific human animality. Photography, for me, is the fundamental medium of communication with others through myself. My work seeks this intimacy through moments, places and/or history itself, and it is closely related to the archaeological discipline, which reveals what is hidden. Photography is visual archeology and my photography works as an intimate archeology.

**What were the challenges, surprises of the photographic ping-pong game?**

JG In the beginning, it took me very long to select a picture. I went through my archive and got stuck in albums and memories before I could think about the answer to Virginia's picture. With time, as I got to know Virginia's images better, it became more playful and easier and I could reply faster. In the last phase of the game, I already had a picture in mind the moment I saw a new picture from Virginia in my Dropbox, and I really liked this way of communicating.

VD In the beginning, the main concern for me was how I was going to work with somebody I didn't know at all. Normally in collaborative projects, you know the other or you work with her/him because there are certain proximities. When I knew it was going to be Julia I was very excited, as I found her work really interesting, especially on a research and conceptual level. As a surprise it came that occasionally I knew automatically which photograph I would use to respond to Julia's, and in other occasions it took me quite a while to understand how to answer.

**Julia, it was decided by lot that you would start the game. You chose a photograph that is part of your series „Kindheitserinnerungen“. It shows the Terrassenhaussiedlung in Graz, where you grew up, a participatory housing project built in the late 60s. The photo shows a view from above of the geometric shapes of the green area, the stone floor and a water surface. Why did you choose this photograph as a starting point?**

JG I was looking through my archive and searched for an image that I thought Virginia could reply to on different levels (in that case: colours, patterns, the swimming pool, the concrete, the bikes or the settlement itself). It's a picture that I took rather recently and I thought it would be a good starting point.

**It was up to you whether you take new photos or use existing ones – you both used photos from your archi-**

**ves. How did you proceed and what significance does the photographic archive have for you?**

JG In my artistic process, taking pictures as sketches is always the starting point for a new concept. Therefore I have many images that 'never made it' to be an art piece but still are ones that I like a lot. Once in a while, I like to browse the archive because it often inspires me for new works or makes me connect images and topics on new levels. In the beginning of the ping-pong game, I liked the idea to produce new images for the exhibition. But because of the time frame that we had, I noticed that it would be impossible for me to achieve that. Hence, I used the opportunity to dig through my archive with a new perspective.

VD I normally checked my archive upside down every single time we „played“ – but just from the last three years, as I felt more comfortable and closer to these photographs. The photographic image, for me, is an object. That's why I use analogue photography. This is a very important part in my practice: having the „objectual“ aspect of the photograph to be part of the photograph itself, part of the content. The medium is the message, right? The archive is just an elongation of that: a collection of objects. So yes, playing with the archive was natural to my way of understanding the photographic medium as a very material one.

**How did the photographic dialogue develop over the six weeks you played? From where to where?**

JG In the beginning, it felt like an experiment since I did not know where it would lead to. I only had met Virginia a couple of days before, and just knew her works from her website. As I said, the beginning was maybe a bit slow, but after the third or fourth week, it got very easy and funny. Sometimes we replied two times within a day and at that point, I had the feeling that our ping-pong dialogue really started of. I often had to laugh when I saw the new picture that Virginia had sent me.

VD It was a relationship. As I said, we didn't know each other, just a tiny part of our work. So we had to start from the very beginning! Basic communication, haha. But I have to say that our relationship evolved very quickly, as I felt – and I guess Julia felt too – we understood each other quite well. It ended being really natural, as a game played with a friend. In the end, I wouldn't have minded if the game had continued a little longer, although the closure Sophie and Corina gave, felt perfect, as we closed a narrative.

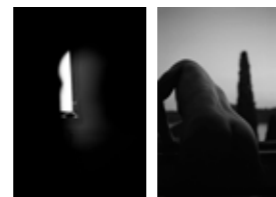
**Which pair or group of pictures do you particularly like, find interesting, exciting and why?**

JG For me, many different aspects came up during the six weeks, in which way the pairs of pictures developed, and in which way we communicated through them. I like for example the photos 28-31 (see overview on page 46/47) for the formal aesthetic approach and the photos 15-19 for the development of the content.



VD I have a few favorite groups, but I will mention two. I find the very first pair of Julia's Terrassenhaussiedlung and my horse very appealing, how they interact compositionally and formally. The images are very powerful together: the very same lines as opposed to the figure and idea of a horse, and the three different kind of horses.

The second pair is the one with the view through a keyhole by Julia and a male naked body by me (photos 17-18). I think the content and the shapes are a great fit together, conceptually as well. This is one of the things I'm happy about with our ping-pong dialogue: from the use of two pictures coming together, you can really see



there's a concept behind it. This is a narrative you never get, even though you would have chosen two pictures of mine or two of Julia's. I love how they create a space between – and within – us.

**Can you each tell us a story behind the following image pairs? What is the original context of the image? Why did you choose this one as an answer?**



JG I took the picture in the settlement in Graz where I grew up and it was my answer to the picture from Virginia that says „closed“. One day I visited my parents and I found the stones fenced in. When I was a child, I used to play on and around them a lot, that's why I paid attention to the fence. In that moment, I realized, that neither this pile of stones actually made sense or had a specific meaning, nor did the fence around it. I liked that paradox.

VD I fell in love with Julia's picture: poetic, strong and neat, very graphical as well. Of course, the central element captured the most of my attention: a „contained“ rock – as if you could fence in stones! So that's why I answered with another „contained“ stone...

JG The graffiti's mark the walls of an informal refugee



camp in Belgrade that was cleared and demolished when I was there on residency in May 2017. This picture was my answer to the picture „La vie“ (12) and I found this the most difficult one to answer to. In that case, my intention was to put another reality and message next to it, so I answered with another graffiti.

VD The message was so powerful. You start imagining who painted it and why. The term „containing“ has something to do with that story as well, in a very different world, in a very different situation... contained humans. Contained and, maybe, contagious.



**Both of your bodies of work are united by an interest in the relationship between public space and human beings. However, you have two very different approaches, which become evident in the ping-pong dialogue.**

**Julia, you mainly work on long-term artistic projects. You are interested in the relationship between social interaction, architecture and representation in urban space. How do you find your topics and what role does photography play in approaching your projects?**

JG I'm actually trained as an art historian and sculptor, but in my studies at the Art University Dresden I started to focus on photography, hence I am a self-thought photographer. In that way I never really worked with the medium of photography itself, instead photography was a way that I found convenient to develop and realize my ideas and projects. The topics that I recently dealt with are located around the questions of housing, public and private space: who has the power to decide about it and what social justice or injustice can be seen through that? My first project was about the architect Eilfried Huth and his participatory social housing projects in Graz and Deutschlandsberg from the early 1970s. My second project dealt with the new luxury district „Belgrade Waterfront“ in Belgrade at the Sava river. In both projects, the starting point, next to the research phase, was

to take photographic sketches to understand and make the topic tangible for me. Out of that material I start, in the second phase, to develop my concepts.

**Virginia, your photographic practice is characterized by a desire to observe everyday life, immediate and momentary, your work stands in the long tradition of street photography. You photograph exclusively analogue and you are especially interested in photography as an object, the material itself well as the composition of the image. Can you talk about your photographic approach?**

VD In general terms, in my work I am interested in archaeology. Not so much as a scientific discipline but as a moldable practice which I can borrow from. Photography is a very archaeological strategy: it creates object-images – or I create object-images. Sometimes, I fantasize how they will look in a certain amount of time. Not just because the decay of the object, but how would people from other times or places understand the picture? The process of the (analogue) development is like archaeological digging – on the paper, instead of in the sand. Through layers of time (paper/sand) you discover that image-object. The very practice of photography – the creation of the image-object – is foreseeing an artifact. Street photography has deep roots in anthropology and, of course, this is totally related to archaeology as well.

**Since you both have very different approaches to the topic of public space (direct & immediate with Virginia, conceptual & long-term with Julia): Did the PING PONG project game give you a new perspective on your own work, or on your approach to the topic of public space?**

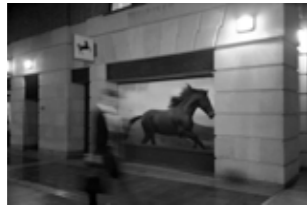
JG The PING PONG project definitely expanded my own photo repertoire, as it gave me the chance to look outside the box of my own work and image language with the new template, given by Virginia. I was inspired by Virginia's approach to photography and how she reflects on public space.

VD Julia's approach to public space made me think about other possibilities in my own work, reminding me that long-term projects can be seen as street photography as well. The architectural details present in some of Julia's photographs caught my eye, as well, as I'm very interested in the melancholy some of these spaces project - an emotion that I (recently) have discovered my pictures tend to produce, so I started digging in that direction. Julia's wide angles of open architectural spaces fascinated me.

# Overview



1 / Julia Gaisbacher / from the series „Kindheitserinnerungen“, Graz, 2019



2 / Virginia de Diego / London, UK, 2019



3 / Julia Gaisbacher / Annapurna-Himalaya, Nepal, 2012



4 / Virginia de Diego / Vienna, Austria, 2018



5 / Julia Gaisbacher / from the series „Kindheitserinnerungen“, Graz, 2019



6 / Virginia de Diego / Madrid, Spain, 2017



7 / Julia Gaisbacher / Schloss Hof with view to Bratislava, Lower Austria, 2019



8 / Virginia de Diego / London, UK, 2019



9 / Julia Gaisbacher / Anstruther, Schottland, 2016



10 / Virginia de Diego / Sukothai, Thailand, 2018



11 / Julia Gaisbacher / Belgrade, 2018



12 / Virginia de Diego / Paris, France, 2018



13 / Julia Gaisbacher / from the series „One Day You Will Miss Me“, Belgrade 2017



14 / Virginia de Diego / Turin, Italy, 2017



15 / Julia Gaisbacher / Airport Charleroi – Brussels, 2010



16 / Virginia de Diego / Paris, France, 2017



17 / Julia Gaisbacher / from the series „Privat“, Dresden 2009



18 / Virginia de Diego / Dubrovnik, Croatia, 2015



19 / Julia Gaisbacher / Gent, Belgium 2010



20 / Virginia de Diego / Bangkok, Thailand, 2018



21 / Julia Gaisbacher / Belgrade 2019



22 / Virginia de Diego / Vienna, Austria, 2019



23 / Julia Gaisbacher / Belgrade, 2017



24 / Virginia de Diego / Torrevieja, Spain, 2015



25 / Julia Gaisbacher / Guadalajara, Mexico 2018



26 / Virginia de Diego / Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2019



27 / Julia Gaisbacher / from the series „Magritte am Sonntag“, Brussels, 2013



28 / Virginia de Diego / Madrid, Spain, 2019



29 / Julia Gaisbacher / Schloss Niederweiden, Niederösterreich, 2019



30 / Virginia de Diego / Madrid, Spain, 2019



31 / Julia Gaisbacher / Guadalajara, Mexico, 2018



32 / Virginia de Diego / Madrid, Spain, 2017



33 / Julia Gaisbacher / Guca-Festival, Serbia, 2010



34 / Virginia de Diego / Madrid, Spain, 2019



35 / Julia Gaisbacher / Mexico City, 2017



36 / Virginia de Diego / Vienna, Austria, 2019