

Traces of the Hidden
Light drawings by Marta Djourina

Sarah Frost

In her experiments with light, body, time and space, the artist Marta Djourina (born 1991, in Sofia) explores photography. Though her works differ in their production and in their appearance, a common idea ties them all together. With each project, the artist samples the ability of photography to bring what is hidden to visibility and to fix the ephemeral as an image. The apparatus¹ becomes the protagonist of the image process, whether it is a wieldy camera obscura, as in *Von Mir / An Mich (From Me / To Me)*, 2012, in which the artist sent a parcel to herself, or a pinhole camera fashioned by the artist from a matchbox and attached to a carrier pigeon to record what the camera's eye saw on its travels, as in *Doo*, 2013.

In her newest project *o.T. (Untitled)*, 2018, the apparatus is no longer a small box that records the outside world. It is instead an immense darkroom that becomes the vehicle for her experimental arrangements and, as it were, the stage of the photographic act. For this, Djourina has adopted the following spatial set-up: surrounded by darkness, a magnifying lens projects an image onto a 6 metre long wall from a distance of 7 metres. The light passes through the entire space until it falls on the light-sensitive photographic paper. The artist stands between the projector and the projection. Within a few minutes a performance takes place in which she interacts with the light, the movements of her body both defining the image and capturing a fleeting movement. Djourina herself calls this process "blind painting" that happens in a "colour development machine". In the dark room, light is her material and Djourina is a part of her apparatus: with a light-source in hand, she imprints her trail on the light-sensitive paper on the wall. Her movements are both flowing and thoughtful. Body, consciousness and intuition are highly active. They work in unison and steer the ultimate appearance of the image. This devotional act is reminiscent of that of an action painter or orchestra conductor whose body is temporarily wholly at the service of their work.

However, Djourina's perspective here differs significantly from that of a painter in that she must literally think 'around the corner'. While recording, the image is mounted horizontally on the wall, whereas in an exhibition situation it is often installed vertically; the horizontal orientation during the exposure phase gives the artist a wide space to work with. Rapid, brisk and wide movements are made possible. Djourina is able to physically walk from one end to the other of the large format of up to 3,5 metres, covering it in its entirety, from corner to corner, from edge to edge.

The combination of photographic and painterly movements evoke a hybrid materiality in *o.T. (Untitled)* that reveal hints of the process by which it was made² whilst retaining its elusiveness. Figure 1 shows an amorphous structure on a black surface that seemingly consists of a single

¹ What is meant by apparatus is not a compact camera, since Djourina primarily uses processes that do not involve one. She uses all the technical settings and their associated action structures which interact and ultimately bring together the image's specific appearance.

² The positioning of the apparatus and the arrangement and interaction of the various actors leave traces on photography and give insight into their origin. Four round white spots at the corners of each photograph are a recurring feature of the series. They are excerpts of the blank photo paper. It is exactly these places that were covered by the magnets that fixed the image carrier to the wall and blocked the protrusion of light. Now these places appear as voids in the images. They form a staple and a bridge to the artist's other projects, such as *o.T. (Untitled)* (2016), in which roughly folded colour photographs become objects, conquering space.

brushstroke - an effect that no light source can produce. Fine impressions of bristles fringe the white figure's outline. Due to its strong contrast with the black surface, it seems to shine from the inside out. At the same time a wild and resistant internal structure comes to light. The two overlay, obscure and displace each other: yellow-orange, glowing hatching, neon-blue scribbles, and black, impulsive strokes that reach from the outside in, gradually break the white shape down. In Figure 2 puffy purple and pink strokes appear as if sprayed with a can, their shrill colour reminiscent of graffiti. In Figure 3 the colour gradients are similar to watercolour; their intensity causes the picture to glow.

Such attributions are based on terms that derive from painting and drawing, although it is evident that *o.T (Untitled)* is created by a photographic process. The analogy with this once competing media is one we know well. Since the invention of photography in the mid-19th century, the idea has existed that the Sun draws images with light.³

Nevertheless, in Djourina's series of works, writing with photographic light is more than just a metaphor. The artist treats her instruments as she would a pencil and brush. With laser pointers and coloured diodes she leaves purposeful traces of colour on the photo-sensitive paper. The orange hatching in Figure 1 is reminiscent of a crayon drawing, but has in reality been created by a purple laser whose light scattering lens creates the shaded transitions. With flashlights, the artist creates painterly effects, such as colour gradients, clouds, fog or circles. The potency of photography transcends that of the painter, making the painterly qualities its own. The brilliance of the colours on the smooth surface, and the sharpness and transparency with which the works can be viewed, lands them wholly in the field of photography.

However, the unique fusion of graphic, painterly and photographic gestures owes, above all else, to a process of several stages whose origin lies in painting. The exposure phase is in fact only the third and final stage, preceded by two others. First, Djourina uses black paint and various narrow paintbrushes to paint on A4 sheets of clear plastic. After applying the paint she then uses the back of the brush to scratch into it, and uses her fingers to distribute, press and scratch the acrylic onto the transparent image carrier, often leaving her fingerprints — as seen in in Figure 4. This not only serves as a signature, but also depicts the photographic metaphors of the *imprint* and the *trace* of reality in a truly haptic way.

In the second step, the finished intermediate image is placed on the magnifying object, which now throws light and shadow through the stencil onto the blank photo-sensitive paper. In some of her photos, specifically Figure 1, the artist places the slide slightly obliquely, creating a frame in the photograph and an image within an image (pp. 8, 12). By doing so, she achieves spatiality and evokes associations of a landscape with a horizon (Fig. 1). Through this step in the process, chance structures in the photograph are made visible. A detail of Figure 5 (p. 69) reveals many fine, light strokes that make the blue surface appear as if it were being worn down. In reality, this is a magnified projection of the dust that lay on the lens and has imprinted itself on the photograph. The lens functions as an imaging tool with which the artist can test different magnification modes and so vary a spectrum of excerpts - from the overall view down to microscopic details. In this way Djourina

³ See: Bernd Stiegler, *Licht-Schrift*, in: id., "Bilder der Photographie – Ein Album photographischer Metaphern", Frankfurt a.M. 2006, pg. 131f.

reveals not only process-oriented temporality, but also the material essence of colour which is hidden from human perception (pp. 18, 19).

Bodily, chemical and physical processes merge in this series. The colours of the image are altered by the light transfer and the chemical reactions; only at the end of the exposure are they fixed. This is where black and white switch. The colour photo-sensitive paper plays a big role in the metamorphosis — particularly in the 3.5 metre portrait formats (pp. 41, 55) as the *Kodak Professional Papers* used in these expired in 2005. This means that the colour reactions are no longer predictable. The colour of the light thus mixes with the chemical reactions and produces largely random effects, which Djourina has attempted to control to a certain degree in the course of this seven-month project.

The duration, which is at the heart of the photographic development, is continued in the viewing, and thereby experiences a deceleration. The works are taller than us and offer the viewer countless perspectives, which they can pursue in their own sequence and at their own pace.

From a distance, the photograph towers up to 3.5 metres in height, showing itself as a whole and revealing a myriad of photographic effects. The gaze does not follow the usual reading direction from left to right, but tends to move from the bottom up, along the dynamics of the image composition. The vertical axis and the glowing presence of light fill the room with sacredness. As the viewer approaches the image, a photographic panorama opens up that completely takes over their field of vision and enables contemplative immersion. The viewer chooses their own excerpts, their eye follows unique tracks and new sequences and references thus emerge. The size of the format and the dramatic qualities of the image's elements evoke this cinematic view. As the observer moves back and forth, their perception penetrates the depths of the image, time and space. They are just as in flow as Djourina's body during the exposure.

Djourina's experiment turns into something of a ritual. In every photograph, in every project, the act of materialisation and dematerialisation is done and redone. Readable traces and irritating gaps allow the view of the photographs to oscillate, between inside and outside, human and apparatus, active movement and passive resistance, and finally between the visible and the imagination. Thus, her work should not be understood as the sum of individual series, but rather as a photographic cosmos, constantly in motion, expanding and displaying the visual power of photography.

About the Author. In her dissertation on the work of US photographer Jerry Berndt (1943 - 2013) the art historian Sarah Frost researches photographic visibilities based on the discursive figure of the spectral. Since 2016 she has held the scholarship of the DFG PhD Program "The Photographic 'Dispositif' at the Braunschweig University of Art and Design. She works as a freelance author and curator in Berlin and has organised numerous exhibitions, including DIS/APPEAR: Photographic Materiality for the European Month of Photography in the GEDOK gallery in Berlin (2016), in which some of Djourina's works were displayed. Prior to that she worked as an assistant curator at the Kunstverein Braunschweig, as an academic trainee in the Museum for Photography in Braunschweig and as a freelancer for the Art Museum Wolfsburg.