

## Piedras

Exhibition with Sebastian Mejia in Wipkingen on 28 September 2018

more questions than the immediate reception of the photographs could answer. Where are they and why where they moved? The exact answers to these questions will remain open, as Mejia wants us to look at the underlying conditions of the medium of photography. As a photographer who is well versed in documentary and conceptual photography, his practice is always also about the limits of the photographic process and the photographic image. He himself names photographic time as one of his main concerns, exemplified in Piedras through its rigid concept and presentation. In contrast to film, photography can not show the passing of time but moments of it, and therefore it is not possible to picture the stones in motion. The traces in the soil are the only hints at a performative act, at time passed. Photography, in turn, eternalizes this single moment, which might only be temporary until the stones are moved again. The employment of analog technology and the eleven years between taking and printing the photographs expand this timeline further. Apart from the self-reflexive work as a photographer, Piedras also invites a more poetic interpretation due to an almost complete lack of narrative and stylistic soberness. In this vein, they recall the poems "Piedras de Chile" of Nobel laureate Pablo Neruda and his ode to his country. Mejia's practice is rooted in a profound knowledge of the history of art and photography, which he explicitly references to in his works and writings. Important influences include concept and land art artists, such as Ed Ruscha and Richard Long, as well as documentary photographers, such as Walker Evans and Robert Adams. Early photographic history and its key figures such as Carleton Watkins, too, are a source of inspiration for Mejia. His working with large format cameras identical to nineteenth-century equipment not only lends a technical mastery to his works, but also an understand of the materiality of photographic images,

The rocks of the series "piedras en movimiento" raise

Sebastian Mejia (written without accents) was born 1982 in Lima, Peru, and lives in Santiago de Chile. He studied at the School of Visual Arts in New York. Exclusively working with analog photography from early on, Mejia has developed a body of work that is both absolutely precise in his vision and technical skill as well as diverse and flexible in its conceptual approach. As much photographer as contemporary artist, he deftly draws from the history of photography and conceptual art history alike. Mejia has exhibited widely in Chile, as well as in Peru, Argentina, and the United States. Backed by several international galleries, his work has been presented at fairs like Paris Photo, Lima Photo, and Basel Photo. In 2019, he exhibited simultaneously in group shows at Fondation Cartier, Paris, and The Photographers' Gallery, London, and in a solo show in Berlin. "Piedras" is his first solo exhibition in Switzerland.

of which Piedras is but the most recent example.

http://sebastopolphoto.blogspot.com/ Watch an interview with the artist on YouTube: <a href="https://">https://</a> youtu.be/as15iPJE8mc







IN THE ARTIST'S WORDS

I was lucky to have studied photography in the midst of the transition from analog to digital technology. My education ranged from 2001 to 2007, a long phase that started in Chile in a professional school and ended at the School of Visual Arts in New York. I made all the mistakes conceivable in the darkroom, from loading the film the wrong way to trying many hours in the dark to get the film on the reel and develop my own rolls of black and white photographs. This gave me a very physical relation to the photographic material as I smelled the chemicals in my clothes, learned to handle the paper with my hands, and produced shadows under the enlarger. I got my first camera at the age of 16, a Canon A-1 from the 1980s. From then on I never stopped taking

pictures. In my daily work, I use a digital camera, which keeps surprising me. However, for my artistic work I still use analog cameras. Piedras was shot with a similar camera like my first one, which unfortunately I no longer have with me. I never accumulated a lot of equipment, in contrast to

other photographers who boast with a range of lenses for each occasion. In the past ten years, I have only used two cameras in my artistic practice: a large and a medium format camera, of which I am going to tell you more. The large format camera is not much different from those used in the nineteenth century. The only difference is the modern lens which yields a tremendous definition. The camera itself has a wooden body and a bellow. I bought it in New York during my last year of school. My medium format camera is like a 35mm camera but slightly larger. It yields a 6×7 cm negative and is very portable but with a high enough resolution to produce decent sized copies without a

tradeoff on quality. The most important part of my work happens without cameras while I move through the city, go grocery shopping, drive around my kids or run other errands. In these moments I see things that I will later go back to

with my cameras. The medium format camera is ideal to get a first shot. It allows me to move freely and spontaneously, still looking out for motifs on the go. It does not limit me in my ways and gives me the possibility to observe as I still walk around and follow my intuitions. The large format camera requires another strategy, it is a much more focused way of looking. Once I get a better sense of what I am looking for, I turn to this camera. The result is a very descriptive image due to its incredible resolution, and thereby invites a more contemplative reception.

My walks do not go very far, as modern life does not offer too many opportunities to wander around the city. It limits me to an area relatively close to my home, but so far this has not been any serious restriction in finding things I want to photograph. I usually gather images for a year or so, and only then begin to sort and edit them. At this stage I reach out for advice from friends to select the best pictures. Ideally, this happens with test prints on a big table where we can move things around. You could say this is the equivalent to a contact sheet where I choose the images with which I will continue. After this, I develop a sense of which direction the project is leading to, and with this idea in mind I go back outside with a more focused view, although in most cases I could not even express this notion. It is hard to say how much time this will go on for, maybe six months, sometimes two years. My style of working never really strays too far from one topic, it is cyclical and always concentrated on the slight changes in the surface of the earth. Although I spend most of my day in front of the computer, like most people nowadays, I never got used to look at photographs on the screen. For me, the printed work is crucial, and I think the book is the perfect and most complete format to express the intentions of a photographer. The edition, sequence, materiality, and the relation between text and image afforded by a printed publication accounts for an intimate experience with the work. At last I want to present to you some of my favorite books in my collection:

trace, with a lot of compassion and a profound relation with his environment. Walker Evans: He knew perfectly how to identify the power of documentary language as a means of both social and poetic (personal) communication. Robert Adams: His insisting on including culture as an important part of landscape comes across so magnificently, with so much attention to light, that one almost forgets the critical undertone of his photographs.

Ed Ruscha: He knows how to reveal the dramatic

potential of the most banal things, things that before we

were only used to seeing in the background of pictures.

Richard Long: In his creative process, walking is an

integral part, imbuing it with a personal (and literal)

Sebastian Mejia

"There remains an essential and significant difference between Ruscha [and the photographs in the show New Topographics]... The nature of this difference is found in an understanding of the difference between what a picture is of and what it is about. Ruscha's pictures of gasoline stations are not about gasoline stations but about a set of aesthetic issues." William Jenkins, New Topographics, 1975

**ESSAY** 

Nine stones pushed a few inches forward, leaving deep marks on the ground. Nine cuboids on a barren land, in a similar shape and setting. The camera is pointed directly at the center of each stone ("piedra" in Spanish) and the remarkable circular frame cuts out the surrounding environment except the marks in the soil. A viewer's first impression is likely of confusion, as these enigmatic photographs raise more questions than a cursory glance could answer. What are these stones? Where are they? Why were they moved? None of these queries will lead to a satisfactory explanation of the series by the Colombian photographer Sebastian Mejia. The straightforward questions, which are otherwise the cornerstone of our everyday life in news cycles, commerce, or science, are a dead end in Mejia's exploration of visual strategies of the image, and especially in regards to the medium of photography. Mejia received his higher education in the US, equipping him with a solid knowledge of the

history of Western photography and art history. Furthermore, he has taught photography for several years at Chilean universities, employing a wide set of historical references in his courses. Unsurprisingly, his practice finds itself consciously embedded in photographic history, thematically as well as technically. This background provides a fruitful basis on which to build further interpretation of Piedras. As we struggle to pinpoint the photographs, we realize that the pictures of stones are not about stones, just as William Jenkins described Ed Ruscha's photographs of gasoline

stations as not being about their subjects in the quote at the beginning of this essay.

Jenkins wrote these lines for his landmark 1975 exhibition New Topographics at the

George Eastman House in Rochester NY, featuring photographers such as Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd und Hilla Becher, and Stephen Shore. Jenkins describes their works as bearing "stylistic anonymity", an alleged absence of style. Being inspired by Ruscha's conceptual photo-books such as 26 Gasoline Stations, he elaborates on the unrecognizability of stylistic choices, the pure concentration on the subject-matter, and the eschewing of "beauty, emotion and opinion" in the photographs of the show. Ironically, today, the Bechers' typologies, for instance, or Robert Adams' lyricism, have become a recognizable style and part of the photographic canon as uniquely distinct positions. Yet Jenkins' analysis has been utterly important in recognizing this non-style, putting it into words and express its concerns. The plainness first perceived in the photographs of New Topographics led to a new understanding of what a photograph can be and how it can be

utilized in both documentary and conceptual approaches. The frankness and minimal

narrative of these canonic works also manifests itself decades later in Mejia's series

Piedras.

Following Jenkin's consideration of style and complicating its internal tensions and contemporary standing in Piedras, we may approach the present series in a similar manner. Adapting Quentin Bajac's description of documentary photography, we may say that "in its simplicity [the objet trouvé], its systematic nature (the unvarying composition, the regular intervals), and its vocabulary (black-and-white film, [35mm focal length]), the series seems to embody a certain documentary essence of the photographic medium" [Photography at MoMA, 1960 to Now, p. 238]. Indeed, Mejia's practice as a whole has a strong documentary tendency, demonstrating a deep concern with this method as well as elaborate skill. Yet, in comparison to his others series, Piedras is the most stylistically rigid in terms of subject-matter and presentation. It evokes the pattern of a typology, but deliberately lacks the background information as exemplified in the work of industrial Meija's works are endowed with a truth value, yet the subject matter does not need to prove its existence in the same manner as, for instance, press photographs. Hence we

architecture by Bernd und Hilla Becher. By virtue of using analog methods of photography may state the style is undoubtedly documentary, but is the content? In fact, the repetition of very similar stones in the same position and the same light neutralizes their differences and thus the sense of novelty of each photograph in sequence. More so, the rigor of the series is the epitomization of a core capacity of photography: that of pointing. The act of pointing is a semiologically self-referential gesture, ultimately reflecting back to the person behind the camera or in front of the print. Therefore, the uniformity of the subject-matter and presentation rather suggest the strategies of conceptual art. This continuity is mainly achieved by the aforementioned style in which Piedras is executed. The execution itself, however, is unlike the point-and-shoot

practice of references such as Ruscha or Garry Winogrand. It is a conscious decision of Mejia's to work slower with multiple steps of developing the film and print and embrace the contingency the analog process brings forward. The sophisticated selection and editing process and high quality printing stands in contrast to a mere photography-as-a-gesture practice and turns the focus to the materiality and processuality of photography. In this vein, Piedras is reminiscent of another thematic exhibition in photographic history, the Guggenheim's 2015 Photo-Poetics. This show, conceived with artists in mind that build on the legacy of Conceptualism and at the same time reference today's digital transformation of photography and art, emphasized the validity and duration of certain key principles of photographic practice. Points in case are participants such as Elad Lassry and Erin Shireff. Lassry's cat photos take on the cultural phenomenon of photographing cats, but with utmost technical sophistication and therefore increased attention to production and its subject ("Is a cat usually photographed in a frame? Does it stand still?"). Shireff's video of photographs she took of the UN building in New York City, in turn, express the double

distance she experienced while looking at the building from across the East River and again while reviewing the photographs she took. In the video, the materiality of the photographs resurfaces in the reflections of the glossy paper, and with it the representational character of them and, in analogy, the building. This "photography about photography" with a strong theoretical inclination is exactly what Mejia is engaging with, In Mejia's own words, his two main points of preoccupation are photographic time and scale, and how we must reconsider these points despite our routine experience and use of photographic images. Regarding the first, the question seems initially obvious. While photography does have the capacity to indicate the passage of time on indirect levels, such as blurriness due to a long exposure or the sharpness of splashing water drops, the photograph always presents itself "in one instant". Time is not visible in the pictorial content, but in its technical reproduction, requiring previous knowledge of the functioning of the photographic process so as to decipher blurriness as a long exposure, for instance. The viewer does not experience this time as a lived time as she would if watching a movie or a performance. In Piedras, time is visible in the marks on the ground, suggesting a

by step, so as to emphasize the momentariness of each stage and thus its gradual change. However, Piedras is a series of completed time, condensing the sequence of the action into the result and therefore only alluding to time passed. In this vein, it could be described as an image for Henri Bergson's concept of duration: As humans we are unable to measure the passage of time, since each measuring point would not halt time but instantly become a thing of the past; the duration of the movement goes on, only fathomable by intuition [The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics, pp. 164f]. Piedras are such points. They may suggest the continuation of the movement, but cannot predict it so as to keep up with its duration. Again, Mejia tries not overstretch the capacities of photography with technical tricks, but lays bare the limits of a photographic image and

movement which presumably took at least several seconds. Imitating film and mimicking

performance photography, Mejia could have pictured the process while it happened, step

the necessity for interpretation that is implied in them. The latter, scale, is a problem of optics and pictorial context. Mejia is known for his photographic walks in the city of Santiago, resulting in studies of plants in the urban fabric and geometric formations of sidewalks and buildings. What crosses his part documentary, part flaneur-like view is at the heart of his projects. This human perspective (as against the bird or frog view, or that of a Google Street View car or surveillance camera, to name but

two examples of the extended perspectival chart of today's photographic production)

a kneeling position. This is where the main question comes up: How large, in relation to common references points, are these stones? Again, the exact answer is banal and does not interest us. A studium of clues in the picture like leafs and other vegetable debris would give us an idea, but to what end? The key point is that the photograph betrays our eyes at first sight, that pictures as simple as Piedras are confusing our quickly scanning eye and forcing it to halt. The round shape of the images is therefore not just a superficial stylistic diversion from the usual rectangular picture frame, it evokes a couple of associations of photographic history relating to scale: Astronomical photography and photomicrography, as early as the 1840s, produced circular images due to the setup of the camera with telescopic or microscopic lenses (figs. 1 and 2). The resulting images of planetary surfaces or cell lumps are often confusingly similar, yet ranging from the smallest to the largest scale imaginable in human terms. This play on the perception of different scales has, among others, also been masterfully employed by aerial photographers such as William Garnett in the 1950s-1970s. The allusion to historic photographs and the employment of analog camera technology is adding to the initial bewilderment in regards to the depicted. Mejia's works are not trying to trick the eye through unusual perspectives or image manipulation—rather, the quasi scientific approach and unedited, analogue (i.e., indexical) image suggest the neutrality of the photographer, readily showing the cards on the table. However, unlike scientific

photographs that were devised with a clear research query in mind, Mejia is not giving any guidance as to how to proceed with the interpretation of the information given, thus completely opening up the possible readings. Although Mejia avoids clear references to specific locations in his photographs, it is worth looking at the historical and pictorial relation of Piedras to the genre of landscape photography and his current country of residence, Chile. Since Latin America had been colonized for hundreds of years prior to the arrival of photographers, many salient (and populated) regions had already been cartographed and represented pictorially. However, in the wake of the independence of the Latin American nation states and developing

industrialization in the second half of the nineteenth-century, the territory received fresh

attention. Like the US-American West—the mythic land of Mejia's idols, such as Carleton Watkins—, the vast South American continent was subject to increased scientific and especially commercial interest, seeing expeditions of government officials, mining speculants, and geologists making their way through untapped areas, often equipped with cameras to document their findings. The importance of visual proof for recipients in far off capitals (Santiago, New York, and London, in the case of Chilean mining explorations) justified costly and cumbersome travels of photographers and photographic equipment to the extremes of the country. The effort of the photographers was, in any case, worth the investment, and already the first step of the industrial infrastructure, or, as the scholar Tomás Cornejo puts it: "where the camera can go, so will the machines" ["La fotografía como factor de modernidad", in HISTORIA, 45, vol. I, (2012), p. 14]. Along their way, the "wonders" of these soon-to-be westernized lands became famous postcard motifs, such as the Piedra Movediza in Argentina (with accompanying tourists for a better sense of scale, fig. 3), and it made nature itself the subject-matter and a representative image of a country. Landscape photography therefore became an important means for states to claim territories and create a national imaginary. Accordingly, Chilean photographic archives are full with documentary photographs (documentary in the sense of the late Walker Evans, as bearing concrete pieces of information and serving a purpose, see Interview with Walker Evans, Art in America, 1971,

pp. 120-2), ranging from geographic surveys in the nineteenth century and the large scale

exploitation of natural resources in the twentieth century. These photographs directly picture the value of the land and the wealth of a country embodied by waterways, fertile plains, modern cities, and industry. In the middle of the twentieth century, Antonio Quintana and Luis Ladrón de Guevara stand out as depictors of a modern Chilean industry, the latter having worked for decades for private and governmental companies consigned to photograph and advertise mines, power plants, and engineered agriculture (fig. 4). Yet, the process of exploration and exploitation is not a static, nor a linear one. Both the exhaustion of raw material deposits and economic fluctuations such as the Great Depression have had a considerable effect on these artificial landscapes. Mines and miners' cities were built and abandoned only to be rebuilt again in an economically and geologically more profitable environment. Chile's strong economic dependency on its copper (and formerly nitrate) exports has made the whole population identify with the exploitation of their natural resources and the cultivation of landscape. Quintana and Ladrón de Guevara also employed photography in non-utilitarian ways to depict Chilean landscape. Interestingly, both worked on a series "Piedras de Chile", of which Quintana's would later enjoy a visibility unusual for photography at the time in the eponymous collection of poems by Pablo Neruda (fig. 5). The literary and photographic praise of the Chilean land, exemplified by peculiar rock formations along the extensive

coastline, fostered national pride and the identification with a landscape that had first been the subject of colonial rule and later foreign industrial exploitation. The mythification of the rocks, ubiquitous on the borders of the ocean and the Andean cordillera, is a powerful attempt to grasp the defining features of this geography and the feeling it imbues in its people. It was furthermore a unification of a literal stretch of land that reaches from the desert of the North to the Arctic in the South, a process of such immense conceptual scope that could only be achieved through the embrace of multiplicity. The Nobel laureate understood to de-link Chilean nature from Chilean landscape, the latter being a product of rapid technological modernization of the past one hundred years. Instead, the rocks are emptied from any economic value and seen as a primordial home to its people. Mejia's Piedras are reminiscent not only of Chilean geography, but also its concrete use value and centuries of manipulation through its inhabitants. These stones have been pushed away to reveal something and to make room for new developments. Mejia, as an attentive pedestrian in urban Santiago, is a witness and maybe also a tourist of this ongoing modification of his surrounding landscape which began on a large scale 150 years ago. Chileans, however, have been used to the ceaseless transformation of their environment not only since real estate speculators got hold of cities and nature alike. Natural catastrophes like earthquakes, tsunamis, and wildfires have shaped the mentality of the people for thousands of years. They therefore adapted not only to recent technological progress, but to a natural state of perennial change. For them, stones can be

obstacles in a road or bearing copper ore, they can be the remnants of a destructive earthquake or building material for new houses. Piedras, as reduced in context as it is and quite opposed to any industrial practicality, continues the deep connection of Chilean nature with the country's history in science, industry, arts, and poetry. It is both a reflection on the specific use of photography in its own history and a quiet homage to its very grounds. What it communicates to the world is not so much the mineral riches of Chile nor the poetic symbolism of the actual stones, but the self-reflexivity and critical potential of its thinkers and their tools. The scrutinization of photographic time and scale, the act of pointing, the materiality of the analog process, and the connection with the subject-matter will remain the most important approach to photographic images. This is because these issues are fundamentally about our personal relation to images, in a very corporeal setting behind camera or in front of the

print. Piedras is exemplary in its strategies to delineate this specific thematic field through subject-matter, style, and concept. By reducing interferences, such as an obvious narrative and an ostentatious visual décor, he develops an almost meditative process, comparable to praying along a rosary, the circular frame and the stones resembling the beads. Ultimately, the questions raised in Piedras are long-lasting inquiries into the capacities of the photographic process and its images. Mejia's goal is not to answer them nor to exhaust them visually. Rather, they are an exercise of asking the same fundamental questions, almost two hundred years after the invention of photography, and particularly today as every technological novelty generates an array of micro-studies and sub-theories. Mejia's rootedness in the history of photography proves a distinct awareness of this tradition and







