Niklas Goldbach: The Paradise Machine

HMKV – Hartware MedienKunstVerein, Dortmund, 16. 3. – 1. 9. 2024

by Krzysztof Kosciuczuk

The first words uttered in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) were those of the protagonist speaking about the place where his journey originated: "'And this also,' said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth.'" One might venture so far as to say that Niklas Goldbach has not taken a single photograph of a human being in his works. Which, considering his background in sociology and a photography practice spanning nearly two decades, testifies to a persistence and a sense of observation focused not on our interactions, but on what comes before and structures our existence: space, architecture, and social engineering.



Niklas Goldbach: The Paradise Machine, exhibition view at HMKV – Hartware MedienKunstVerein, Dortmund, 2024. Photo: Roland Baege.

For *The Paradise Machine*, Goldbach's most comprehensive exhibition to date, curated by Inke Arns, the artist transformed Dortmund's Hartware MedienKunstVerein into a maze. A labyrinth of cubicles, perhaps a makeshift hotel or an Airbnb rental outfitted with the most basic beds, common spaces carpeted with artificial turf and dotted with palm trees (which resemble real plants and perhaps they are), with an odd disco ball casting specks of light, and sections of construction fence set up here and there, held by concrete slabs. It is not immediately certain if those are knockoffs of tourist bungalows set up to welcome scores of revelers looking for entertainment in remote locations, or fragments of an ever-growing, and seemingly never-ending, construction site that has engulfed many cities in Germany.

This desolate landscape in which Goldbach's photographs—either framed or fixed on soft board—act as interior decor or outdoor messages is disturbing enough, even more so when we realize that it's pristine. It lacks any trace of past human presence and feels like a social experiment in the making.

Indeed, it is structured after Goldbach's series *Permanent Daylight* (2013–ongoing) which includes some 450 images to date, featuring locations around the globe: crumbling, disused interiors; building sites, alluring with their symmetry and nauseating with their scale; places of wealth and places for people with little means and choice. "The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires,"[1] all depicted by the artist in the same size.

Goldbach's exhibition design and scenography is inspired by the Center Parcs, a Dutch enterprise founded in the 1970s with the idea of offering a year-round possibility to relax in one of its "holiday villages." While *Permanent Daylight* evokes this promise of universal access to happiness across the globe, the 2022 video *Into the Paradise Machine* combines footage from the original villages, taken in 2021 with a voice-over of a diary by the Center Parcs' architect Jaap Bakema (1914–1981) in a different kind of a highly organized compound: the German deportation camp Royallieu-Compiègne in northern France. In Goldbach's film, the austere architecture of the Center Parcs clashes with descriptions of life in the camp: "The population of this prison camp consists mostly of Frenchmen of all kinds, sick people, cripples and people with any form of disability picked up from the streets and cafes, also black marketeers and, some say, communists."

Goldbach's practice is rich in contrasts and paradoxes that unfold between what is considered human-made and from nature, and what, in consequence, we tend to accept as "natural." His 2017 video *1550 San Remo Drive* recounts the sale of a California house commissioned by the German writer Thomas Mann in 1941, offered for sale and eventually bought by the German government below the asking price in 2016. Here, again, meticulous observation of the here-and-now blends with past narratives that are the driving force for some, while being of little consequence to others.

For *Paradise Now* (2024), his most recent work, Goldbach prepared a long cocktail of views of sprawling construction projects in Cambodia and Vietnam, some in the making, others abandoned, resembling vestiges of past civilizations: all culminating in an ecstatic shot of a rave fueled club in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, its name: Heart Of Darkness.

Goldbach examines how human desire can propel our actions, while rarely adopting a direct moral stance. His readings of modernity, identity, the colonial and decolonial in their complexity, the exotic and self-exoticization, as well as the unconditional implication of both the viewers and himself in the narratives we are invited to experience, are never one-sided: at the verge of permanent daylight there is invariably a brooding darkness.

1 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899; repr., London: Coyote Canyon Press, 2007), p. 6.

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Vertigo: Video Scenarios of Rapid Changes

Fondazione MAST, Bologna, 10. 2. – 30. 6. 2024

by Mariacarla Molè

The more I think about the time I spent visiting *Vertigo: Video Scenarios of Rapid Changes*, the more I feel like I've missed pieces and lost the complete vision of the exhibition narrative. In its place, I've retained a large number of images, often overlapping, like many windows open on the same desktop. It is a gigantic show—with over thirty-four videos on display, for a total of more than ten hours of screening, to which *15 Hours* (2017) by Wang Bing is added, a fifteen-hour video documenting a working day inside a garment factory in the Chinese province of Zhejiang. The subject of the exhibition is equally vast: the state of acceleration in which we are stuck, in terms of production, consumption, mobility, and communication, along with an awareness that the complexity of the world is becoming increasingly difficult to unravel. The staging of these macro themes is both fascinating and concerning. On the one hand, the efficiency and speed with which goods and information travel through the processes of technological innovation that enable them is captivating; on the other hand, the environmental and social consequences of globalization are enormous and equally fast. As a result, *Vertigo* emphasizes the profound anxiety that these operations can generate, while also encouraging viewers to consider their involvement in a system that prioritizes profit margins, speed, and efficiency over the well-being of individuals and the environment.

In all likelihood, you will go home with a feeling of disorientation, as if you had been released of a vortex. Yet this appears to have been the intention of the curator Urs Stahel, who opted for an open display rather than one that is fragmented into different dedicated spaces; the approach taken allows the video you are listening to on headphones to blend with others in your field of vision. This gives rise to multiple images and a chaotic atmosphere at any given moment. It seems to be a trend similar to the one that lately keeps us sitting at the cinema for hours, showcasing mammoth productions; in the specific case of MAST, a private ticket-free foundation located in a slightly decentralized neighborhood of Bologna, it can prove to be a strategy that encour-



Paulien Oltheten, still from: Kapitalism, 2016. HD video, 16:9 (color, sound), 6´25´´.