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Persons

MILJA LAURILA / Statement

Atlas und Grundriss der Psychiatrie

"They say that I am insane, but I am merely contemplating", wrote Amanda, a patient at a mental hospital in Finland, in her diary in the late 1900th century. Amanda, a vagrant and a sexually active young woman, was diagnosed with "menstrual insanity", and was taken to Seili Island, a former leper hospital that was transformed into an institute for the mentally ill. Like most of the patients – or inmates – at Seili, Amanda spent the rest of her life there.

The work Atlas und Grundriss der Psychiatrie (2013) is inspired by a German psychiatric book from the year 1902. The book not only describes different types of mental diseases, but also visually demonstrates them in the form of photographic images of patients. However, the symptoms, diagnostics and treatment of mental illnesses reflect the views of their time, and what is regarded as "normal" or stated as a scientific fact changes during the course of time. In the early 20th century, the hereditary of mental illness as well as degeneration was a topical issue. It was believed that mental illness manifested itself as physical signs, meaning that it could be seen. Common practice was to describe the appearance of the patients meticulously. And what could be a better way to do this than photography, which had leant itself to the use of science ever since its invention? The photograph was taken as evidence, as proof. A photograph of a mental patient showed you what a mental patient looked like.

The meanings that we give to a photograph depend largely upon the context, the practices and institutions in which the photograph is used. A portrait of a woman with the caption "Hysteric" leads us to believe that this woman is in fact hysterical. But what will happen, if the captions are left out? Is she still hysterical? Do we know, how the face or the hands of a mentally ill person look like?

The Latest Knowledge

I use old encyclopedias and out-of-date fact-books as material for my work. The grainy black-and-white photographs by anonymous authors portray exotic places and animals, and the poetic entries describe the most recent achievements of mankind and technology. I am curious to find out what will happen to these images when they are detached from their original context of describing knowledge. Do they forget what they once were proof of? Can sensible be beautiful? How will today's knowledge look like in 50 or 100 years' time?

The 1952 edition of Pikku Jättiläinen, a popular Finnish non-fiction book, describes a scale used for measuring the magnitude of an earthquake. It contains ten levels, the sixth of which is as follows:

> Those asleep will awaken; all small bells chime.
> The clocks stop, and trees and bushes sway considerably.

Could it be that mere knowledge cannot solve the mystery of life?

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To remember

I have few memories from my childhood. After my father died when I was eleven, I tried to forget my life up to that point. I didn't want to remember. In our family pictures, I saw unfamiliar places and people I couldn't recognize.

My works are based on old family photographs taken by my father. He worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland and was a keen amateur photographer. He had three cameras, and he made markings on his negative pages with a green pen. From one of the pages the negatives are missing – only my father's markings are left. The missing negatives are like my memories: knowing that they are gone makes their presence even stronger.

In the photographic series To remember (2004–2007), I use the technique of multiple exposures to merge the past images with the present. For me, it is important that the elements of the picture are not separable, but rather constitute a whole, also physically. The unpredictability of the method, the haziness of the pictures and the faded colors reflect my experience of forgetting and remembering. My photographs are not recollections but rather images of forgetting, memories I am unable to reach.