

The White Handbag

Photography and Ownership

In 1992 the Austrian artist Andreas Karner came across the slide collection of an unknown person at the second hand store sponsored by *Caritas*, a charity organization in Vienna. He bought the collection of about 1000 slides and decided to make these images the basis of an artistic project. Subsequently, he created a fictitious portrait of the unknown woman who appeared in many of the photos and displayed this installation in a show at the *OK Centrum für Gegenwartskunst* in Linz. He gave the woman a name, calling her “Frau Elfriede,” and set up a room for her where he presented the photographic remnants of her life. The idea was to give Ms. Elfriede a space for her imaginary presence where she should be available for assumptions about her life. Years after the exhibition, the artist generously left the slide collection to me as one of the co-curators of the show. As a kind of property on loan, it sat in a box in my working room awaiting further attempts to decipher its riddles.

Indeed, the challenge is considerable, but worth trying. Without any available information about the persons depicted, it takes time and careful scrutiny to reach conclusions about the identity and role of the depicted people and to determine their relationships. It is obvious that the collection belonged to one person. All of the hand-written captions, which are carefully affixed to the slides on narrow strips of paper, follow the same pattern of recording the date and the locations of the various images. The captions were obviously written by one person, namely Alfred, an elderly man by then. This is beyond doubt because the man referred to as “Alfred” in the captions took a photo of himself in the mirror and called it a “self-portrait.”

The largest portion of the collection, and in particular the photos taken between 1966 and 1978, are travel photos. These pictures owe their special charm to the performance of “Elfie” or “Elfriede”, as she is called. For about a decade, she acts as his partner and travel mate and then again disappears from his slides in the late 70s. The photographs from this period reveal the fascinating universe of a couple that enjoyed travelling and took pains to leave records of their moderate touristic ambition to posterity. They did not venture out too far, and kept the radius of their touristic explorations manageable.

A possible narrative of these journeys could revolve around Ms. Elfriede and her white handbag. Interestingly enough, she took a particular white handbag with

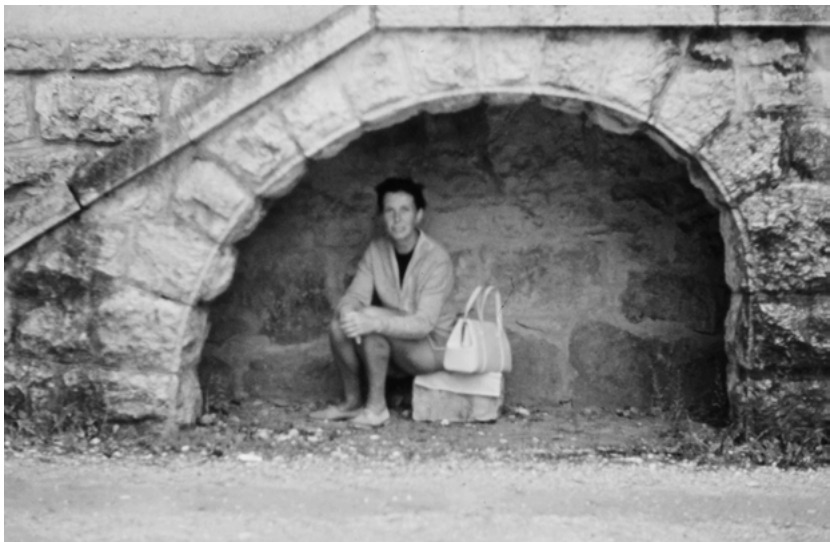
her when she travelled. She had it, for instance, with her on their trips to Rovinj and Figarola in 1968, their journeys to Opicina in 1969, and Porec in 1970. (Fig. 1) The bag features prominently in the photographs and becomes a strange sign of familiarity to the viewer. It guarantees continuity and is the comfort of the stranger. It is truly outstanding in the sense that it does not really match her other costumes. In many of the slides, especially those taken from a distance, she becomes identifiable by her white handbag. The bag accompanies her, is carried by her side and sits next to her, respectfully placed like an alter ego. The bag is white, chaste, closed but waiting to be filled with event units and portions of foreign reality suitable for the moderate appetite of a middle aged female traveller of the 60s and 70s. In its capacity to contain, it may as well receive impressions and perceptions and become both the stomach and the mind. The ladylike accessory can be taken as an indicator of a well-contained receptiveness. No doubt, she wants to carry something home but the appetite involved is restricted (Fig. 2/3)

All the travel images of that period seem to follow a particular photographic mode. Ms. Elfriede, Mr. Alfred's model, seems inserted into the selected reality in a kind of montage technique. She primarily stands in the foreground – upright, stable, reliable – and reminds one of the marker figures of early travel photography with their declared aim of introducing a parameter of scale into the unfamiliar surroundings. With Ms. Elfriede's appearance in the photos, Alfred seems to add a dose of human presence to the mostly unpopulated scenes. In some of the images she is planted into the Croatian environment like the poplar shown in the background. (Fig. 4) Concerning their documentation of foreign realities, Mr. Alfred and Ms. Elfriede act as a team. They mutually pose for each other and seem to adhere to a common staging method. It is either Elfriede or Alfred who occupies the foreground of the image and demands attention from the camera. Their photographer/model relationship is monogamous. They remain fully concentrated on each other and celebrate their mutual dependency. Consequently the one behind the camera would never tolerate a libidinal involvement of his/her model with the reality depicted. The non-negotiable standardization of their photographic recording results in an aesthetic stalemate of these images. Staying true to each other and to their documentary mission basically allows for no flirtation with the reality they turn their backs to.

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Many of the photographs in Mr. Alfred's slide collection show personal belongings which are proudly presented to the viewer. My point is that the pictorial codes of these images strongly resemble those of the views of the foreign countries that they visited. In this connection, Mr. Alfred's house bar assumes special





importance. Someone, probably the owner himself, opened the door of the bar to introduce a view of its impressive contents. Bottles of Cinzano, Bols, and Stock prominently feature in the first row. The scene is theatrically lit by the type of light mechanism that is activated the moment the door is opened. There are three glass shelves of different heights. The bottles and glasses present themselves in perfect formation. The mirror in the back enhances the illusion of depth and the rows of glasses seem to recede in an almost militaristic order. A half-filled decanter hints at instant and spontaneous consumption. The carefully taken photograph presents a middle class sanctuary of potential temptations. While the impressive parade of bottles speaks of alcoholic excesses, the frontal view and rigid order of the setting suggests that this would not be appropriate. To reach into the well ordered space of the bar would result in the destabilization of a perfect arrangement. For certain, the temporary removal of the Cinzano bottle in the first row would create a scandalous void at the core of this disciplined order. (Fig. 5/6)

In connection with his analysis of 17th century still life paintings, in particular those of Juan Sánchez Cotán, Norman Bryson (1990) calls such arrangements of defied appetite and sublimated pleasure “*anorexic*” (p. 66). This term seems applicable to Mr. Alfred’s photographs of his and Elfriede’s belongings. With a motif like the well assorted bar, it becomes especially clear that this zone of possible consumption is essentially meant for contemplation and documentation. Pleasure is presented as an option but what is actually celebrated is abstinence. With post-war house bars of this sort there is too much light, glass and transparency to guarantee a zone of remorseless consumption. The specific light mechanism would flash up and haunt the alcohol addict with its enlightened clarity. In contrast, the flash of the camera ensures unstressed visual pleasures.

Mr. Alfred’s proudly presented personal items are mostly for display. The Milva cassette is not depicted as a music producing device but as an object of wonderment and scopic desire. Placed on the “Agfa Stereo Chrom” cover, which takes the role of a pedestal, no traces of use spoil the image. The intended musical portrait of the singer turns into a photographic portrait, meant for the eyes only. And the diva turns to Mr. Alfred, her photographer, acknowledging his sense of distance and his disciplined desire with a gracious and mesmerizing smile. (Fig. 7)

Tourist Photography

Mr. Alfred’s photographic appropriation of a foreign environment does not differ much from his demonstration of ownership of a Milva cassette or a well-stocked house bar. The foreign reality is presented within reach but is left untouched.







In his photographs the backcloth of the unknown environment remains sealed and inaccessible. As a mere backdrop for their temporary posing, reality takes on the character of a two-dimensional stage set. This type of photography cannot be compared with the touristically animated scenarios of today's travel brochures where people are shown in interaction with their surroundings. They splash in the water, taste food, take up offers custom tailored for them, participate in local festivities, etc. When Mr. Alfred discreetly inserts Elfie in the carpet market in Rovinj, there is no indication of interaction. From today's point of view, Ms. Elfriede would not pass as an enthusiastic traveller. There is no demonstrative excitement in her encounter with the carpet display behind her. Although a street market was probably tempting and alluring for an Austrian traveller of the late 60s, the photograph does not render this appeal. Ms. Elfriede with her white handbag stays unaffected by the scenario behind her and is quite obviously unable to turn the market into an adventure zone, or an arena for consumption and fun. Neither does she as a tourist force her environment into a happy relationship. There is a sense of solitude and distance in these images and something that I earlier tried to describe as firmly rooted in a dialectics of desire and renunciation. (Fig. 8)

A Tourist in One's Own World

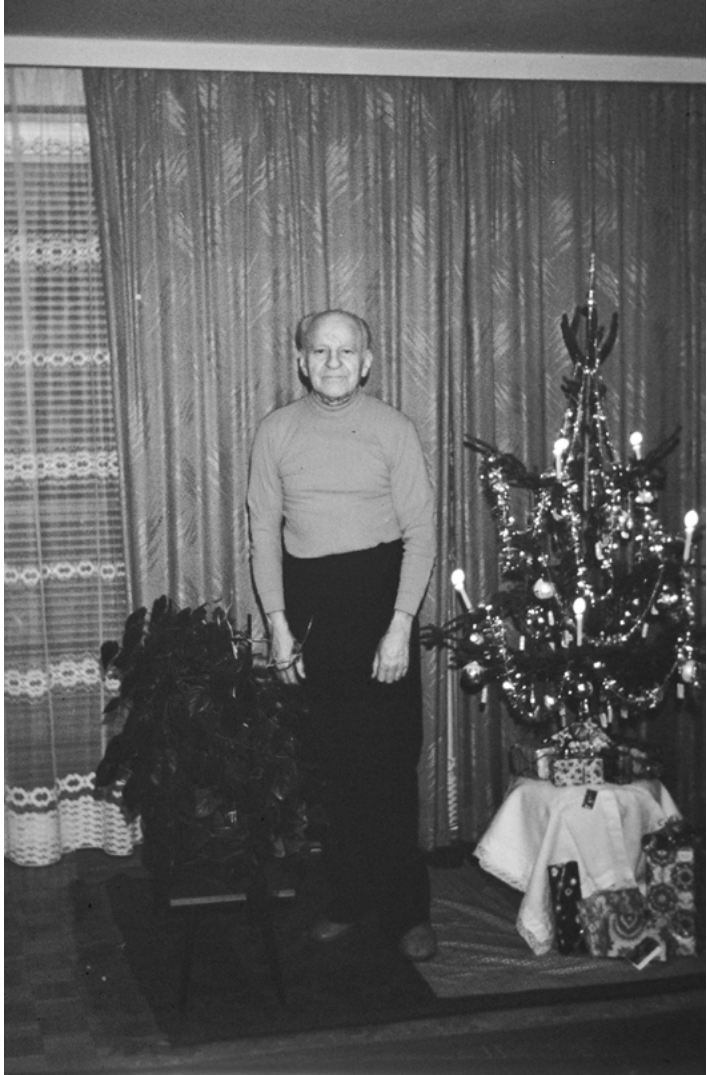
Susan Sontag's statement (1979) that "essentially the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people's reality, and eventually in one's own," (p. 57) seems to hold true for many of these images. Tourists usually pose in an environment that is not their own. Their desire for a change of scene provided them with photographic backgrounds that require explanation. In their photos, they look like a species taken out of context and transplanted into a different habitat. Consequently, the persons in tourist photos sometimes have an air of not-belonging about them. While the camera should attest to their almost limitless capability to adapt to any given foreign surrounding, it often preserves their alienated status. In many instances featured in the debated 60s and 70s photographs, Mr. Alfred and Ms. Elfriede remain foreigners. Their lives pass in front of the rolling panorama of Elfriede's red living room curtain. The almost monochrome background of the curtain effectively brings out the specificities of the travellers' appearance at certain stations of their journey through life. Details of clothing stand out, as for example, Mr. Alfred's blue turtle neck pullover from 1977, or the chic pullover that Ms. Elfriede wore in the same year. Their poses vary almost indiscernibly, while their bodies increasingly show signs of aging. For their photo shooting, they draw the curtains of their amateur studio, shut out the world and pose there, strangely disconnected and isolated. For the sake of these records, they agree to a ritual of being displaced from their own environment. (Fig. 9/10)













Photos Without Elfriede

As Ms. Elfriede repeatedly assumes the same position in the travel photos, she can be legitimately called a strategically placed figure. In that function she is, of course, replaceable, preferably by another female person who stands in an equally central position and looks into the camera. There is in fact nothing random about the constellation in which the Elfriedes in Mr. Alfred's photos are shown. They are his deputies, delegated to ease the conquest of pictorial space. Marked as the main protagonists, they are mediating figures who draw in and ward off at the same time. As signifiers of desire, they communicate the appeal of the reality depicted. By occupying privileged pictorial space they, on the other hand, relegate the depicted reality to the back and thereby establish and guarantee distance from it. Mr. Alfred's muses lure in and at the same time protect him from too much closeness. These observations tie in with investigations about the gendered nature and libidinal structure of the classical perspectival space. As a number of writers like Silvia Eiblmayr (1993) and Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat (1994) have argued, the challenge for the viewers has always been to feel the allure of this potentially unlimited pictorial space opening up in front of them and at the same time be safe from its libidinal pull.

In 1978, Elfriede disappears from the slides and probably also from the life of Alfred, who nonetheless continues to fill his "bag" with photographic findings from his travels. On his journeys to Berlin and Leipzig (1981) or to Rome and Florence (1979) he can no longer rely on her performance in his images. The absence of Ms. Elfriede as catalyst of desire leaves a vacuum that the photographer refuses to fill. Instead, in a most radical move, he empties his photographs of people. With no one looking back at him, the photographed reality becomes mute and unaware of its appeal. (Fig.11)

