

## Preface

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For several years Stephan Wittmer has been collecting photographs taken on multiple visits to South Dakota and Arizona in digital, virtual storage spaces—his personal artistic archive. The images, according to Stephan Wittmer, capture motifs of being on the road, being torn between domesticity and rootlessness, but also everyday moments and impressions. They are photographs that flaunt, perhaps inevitably, their belonging to Stephan Wittmer's image cosmos. Tin cans keep appearing in the images like a trail of breadcrumbs, and they provide the fitting title of this book. We encounter the cans in different states: flattened by cars, bent out of shape, carelessly crushed. At the same time, they are recovered in a new visual horizon by virtue of a translation of their material aesthetic qualities: they are not only woven into the image sequences of the book, but also serve as the template for the printing process the artist developed in collaboration with Thomi Wolfensberger, with which a series of monotypes was produced by frottage. Therefore, the re-translation of the digital image world into the materiality of the medium of the book is one express goal of this publication.

In doing this, Stephan Wittmer intervenes in a current discourse and contemporary practice, which has seen numerous artists engaging with the vitalization—in the widest sense of the word—of image archives in various media, be it in the context of performance art, digital media or photography. These practices engage with the paradoxical awareness of a continuity inscribed in an intangible, ephemeral tradition, as the authors Clarke/Jones/Kaye/Linsley put it (New York 2018: 16). This tradition is understood as an embodied transfer of knowledge as well as of identities and cultural ideas. The inherent desire for the re-materialization, localization and embodiment of intangible experiences, events and memories stands out to me on every page of Stephan Wittmer's book. In the context of the art book, the personal image archive becomes accessible in a new way: it becomes the subject of engagement in a curated and minutely designed sequence and, as a result, slots into our own conception of the image archive.

Stephan Wittmer's photographic approach in *Tin Can* also offers a contribution to the dialogue that Sujin Jung identifies as occupying a conflicted position between cultures in her text "Abolishing Whiteness." This dialogue is characterized by refraining as much from romantic generalizations as from ethnographic objectification (Jung 2021: 4). In my view, this dialogic principle, which is also capable of elegantly accommodating resistant and recalcitrant elements, represents a crucial feature of Stephan Wittmer's artistic work: he practices it whenever he brings together discourses in his artistic practice; when he, in the role of a curator, offers a shared context for collective and individual work; and, finally, when he ties his position to other perspectives in different exhibition formats.

Aside from the photographic sequences (or series), five authors, each one an expert in the field of photography, engages with Stephan Wittmer's works: Jana Bruggmann, Daniel Blochwitz, Katy Diamond Hamer, Michel Rebosura and Valeska Marina Stach. Taking the same group of images as their starting point, they all develop their own frameworks for

understanding Stephan Wittmer's work. In his contribution, Daniel Blochwitz attempts to come to terms with Stephan Wittmer's images by way of free association and by connecting these associations with his own observations of travelling through America—which leads him to the straight-forward prose of the open road and the vernacular poetry of the everyday that shimmer throughout the photographs. In "America in the Cheerful Mirror of Photography," Michel Rebosura reads Stephan Wittmer's images as transitional spaces, as representations of places of passing through, understood as a third space of experience between the inner and outer world. According to Rebosura, these spaces in turn create a space of "survance," of resistance, which he locates in the technique of the photographic works. Katy Diamond Hamer tackles the question how we perceive and experience our lives through photography in her contribution. She interprets Stephan Wittmer's image productions as tropes of the everyday that reveal as much about the artist as about the places they present, places both "incredibly authentic and cinematic." Jana Bruggmann titles her interview with Stephan Wittmer "Fragile Time Capsules," in which photography emerges as a medium that can conserve a personal image archive and import it into shared consciousness. The tension between the ephemeral and monumental, the personal and general, generally figures as a central concern in their conversation. A last contribution is offered by Valeska Marina Stach. She examines how Stephan Wittmer's images are made. She understands them as hinges between documentation and fiction—"docufiction," which we know well from films, resurfacing in a new fashion in the field of photography.

The book in your hands was designed by the graphic designer Megi Zumstein in collaboration with Stephan Wittmer and published by the Berlin-based Vexer press. It accompanies the eponymous exhibition series *Tin Can* on show in various institutions and locations in Berlin, Basel, Lucerne, Zurich, Solothurn and "elsewhere."

In the context of this photo book archives become tangible, vulnerable; they develop a magical pull, as did Stephan Wittmer's *\_957 Independent Art Magazine*, that makes one want to never stop leafing through the pages.

#### References:

Sujin Jung, Abolishing Whiteness: The Art World's Reception of Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Academia Letters*: Article 942. [doi.org/10.20935/AL942](https://doi.org/10.20935/AL942).

Paul Clarke, Simon Jones, Nick Kaye, Johanna Linsley, *Artists in the Archive. Creative and Curatorial Engagements with Documents of Art and Performance*, New York/ London 2018, Introduction, pp. 11–23.