

## Light shaft and adjustable tripod

### *Marginalia on Peter Keetman's manner of working during his outing in the Volkswagen factory in 1953*

Probably the same spring that Peter Keetman drove into the Volkswagen factory in Wolfsburg, his wife Elsa did a work portrait of him: the photographer is standing in his convertible at the edge of a forest park (those who know him, his living space, and his work assume it is a little wood between Gstadt and Breitbrunn above Chiemsee Lake) and looking into his camera. The camera is mounted on a tripod standing outside the car; the trunk is open and affords a view of another tripod, a linen bag with light towels - which might be have been used after a swim in the lake later - and the spare tire. The car is simple and small, and the tripod is an average one, but the camera is the best and most expensive available at the time: a Hasselblad 500 C with the 60mm wide-angle lens only recently designed by Zeiss. Picture and equipment are symptomatic: the photographer works with the simplest means, but these simple means are the very best

Today Peter Keetman's art photos are among the most expensive works in this medium, but he himself never got rich on them. Restricted by impaired movement and verbal skills, he had to limit himself to the essential in all his activities and had to plan all his actions exactly in advance to be able to react to possible imponderables in a suitable and casual way. The series he did in the Volkswagen factory in 1953 was very important to him both in terms of the subject and the time - he tested out his working methods, established a repertoire, and checked the results by offering the works for sale. The following remarks are restricted to the first two aspects of this experimental phase and are an effort to add a few details to my earlier descriptions of his mode of working.

Peter Keetman used good equipment from the very beginning. His father, a bank director, was himself an enthusiastic amateur photographer, so Keetman was familiar with camera brands such as Rollei, Contax, and Leica. If he did not own one, he had friends he could borrow one from. At the "Bayerische Staatslehranstalt für Photographie und Reproduktionstechnik" in Munich, Keetman learned how to use large negative cameras in formats between 4 x 5' and 8x 10' and perhaps even bigger; this period paved the way for his masterful creations in the photo lab. When he sought to become a photographer after World War II, the situation was more difficult; fresh films and photo paper were hard to get, and most materials rescued from the war were damaged during storage and could therefore be used only restrictively. Later, when everything was available in top quality, money was scarce.

Although this was no longer the case in 1953, Germans in all walks of life were reserved and cautious about cameras and material. While Peter Keetman had taken part in numerous exhibitions and presentations associated with fotoform and "subjektive fotografie", such activities devoured nearly all the resources that the war-inflicted young family father had saved from jobs. Sales from the artist group's exhibitions were meager, to put it mildly, and surely did not open up perspectives for Keetman as a photo artist. While his collaboration with a graphic designer friend was quite lucrative, this was only one source of income. Two members of the fotoform group had already had success with industrial photography, so Keetman thought that this was perhaps a promising path to take. During his three days in the Volkswagen factory, he intended to experiment with the means and possibilities of photography and establish rules for further work.

Rule 1: The camera has to be small, the tripod stable. So a Rolleiflex<sup>1</sup> or another medium-format camera is the first choice. The focusing screen has to be big enough for a picture to be composed on it. The square of the focusing screen and negative surface has to be suitable for a calm arrangement, and at the same time has to enable the photographer to take both vertical- and horizontal-format pictures. The view through the light shaft has to be distant for the composition but close enough for detailed focus and contrast. The small camera has to be able to be positioned at unusual locations near the ground, on a railing, or – fixed upside down with a binding screw – on a ceiling beam. An adjustable tripod is needed for low camera locations, from which Peter Keetman liked to photograph bundles of sheet steel or cogwheels. The tripod has three cross struts between the three legs, which can be pulled far apart, guaranteeing that it remained stable even when the camera was very close to the ground.

Rule 2: The light that is present has to be the main lighting source: aids such as flashes, lamps, shades, or cloths can only be used, if at all, for purposes of brightening. Peter Keetman did not have his own source of light. The high-speed flashes of the 1950s were not only heavy and unwieldy, but also emitted sparks and were in general not allowed to be used in industrial environments. When Peter Keetman with his camera and tripod is reflected in bumpers or hubcaps, only the photographer can be seen, no cloth and no light. The rule that can be derived from this is: no photographs with counter-light, if possible no view of a window. Illumination of objects may be appropriate for artistic work, but not for industrial photos. Direct sunlight with slanting shadows can be used outdoors and is even sought there. Inside, however, diffuse light situations are the best guarantee for deep effects and balanced lighting.

Rule 3: The photographer is not allowed to disrupt production operations. This is not a regulation imposed by the management but a photojournalistic and industrial photographic ethos – at least it was back in 1953. The manufacturing process, devised by engineers and executed by proud and comparatively privileged specialist workers, is a symbol of economic power, to which the photograph contributes a kernel of truth in pictorial form and nothing more. At this time the following were inconceivable: staged photos, worker poses going beyond a minimum of directing, re-parking of vehicles in the space, closing or opening the doors or trunk of the car in the assembly-line hall. Peter Keetman took his images from the real. He himself remained invisible, in so far as possible at any rate. In Schopenhauer's sense, "subjektive fotografie" here means that the individual's artistry is expressed by the image, not by an arrangement of things and people in view.

Exceptions: naturally, every photographer can violate his own rules. There are one or two photos with counter-light in Keetman's VW series. In these photographs, the factory hall has the flair of a manufactory. Sunlight shines directly into the delivery hall and sketches the outlines of windows on spare parts boxes – otherwise the latter would be extremely boring. Occasionally points of light shine on fenders or armature endplates and disrupt a perfect depiction of edges; not all of the bearing bushes of the gears have to be shown sharply from front to back. And when sparks fly during welding, the figure of the worker can be a little grotesque – as was the case in many of the pictures in the fotoform group's exhibitions which tended to shock visitors a little.

On the whole, the technology used by the photographer Peter Keetman corresponded to the technology of the objects he photographed: both are no longer modern but sufficiently perfect. The way Keetman worked in the VW plant exactly expresses the transition point of art, design, and industry in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1953 – the shadows of the past are still recognizable but the way is opened vitally for the new. Thus, the camshaft phasing gears, the drilling and turning chips, and the cables in

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<sup>1</sup> In a letter to FC Gundlach from March 6, 2003, Peter Keetman notes: „My whole equipment consisted in an old twin-eyed Rolleiflex, a tripod, and enough film rolls. That was all. No artificial light, no flash equipment. How should I have been able to buy this? Impossible!“

Peter Keetman's photographs are more than just processing of industrial design: they informally show the end of mechanization, in car manufacture and especially in photography.

All of the information provided here is based on materials I have collected on Peter Keetman since 1978 which are known from my previous publications on him, and, of course, on notes I took during conversations with him. Much of the information on 1950s' working techniques stems from my own memories as the son of a craft photographer and from experiences I have had working in this profession since 1963.

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