

The Suicide of a Potemkin Person

The expression Potemkin village is derived from the story of Russian minister Grigori Potemkin who purportedly erected fake villages along the Dnieper River in Crimea to impress his empress, Catherine II, with the value of her new conquests. This was in 1787. Today, the term Potemkin village is used to designate any facade erected with the intent of fooling onlookers.

In his exhibition *The Suicide of a Potemkin Person*, Petter Buhagen shows primarily two-dimensional works on paper, along with video and sculpture. The method that arrives at his abstract and vague imagery varies, but often involves some kind of multiplication or division that blurs or subdues the original motif. In the *Xerox Incognito* series the image is gradually watered down through repetitive xeroxing, to the point where it's on the verge of dissolving into unreadable noise. In *Fragments* shredded photos are reassembled into abstract patterns and clusters, making photography's objective mediation subject to a violent subjective repossession. In *Biography* toner powder has been applied directly to the pages of a book, circumventing the printer, which would potentially render the book readable. Instead the book records the interaction between the pages and the hand that applies the toner, becoming a record of the pure materiality of paper, hands and ink (or, in this case, *toner*) - the stuff that text is made from. *Vertical Landscape* is a video shot through a train window, where the scenery that flows by is reduced to a blurry belt of green noise. This process of abstraction that takes place within the medium itself, springs from its incapacity to process speed, and pries from video a testimony of its parallel acts of obscuring and conveying information. The train seconds as a vehicle for this continuous transformation of distinguishable objects into uniform noise that the automated perception of the camera facilitates. Whether through a gradual erasing of pictorial information, a willed misuse of technological aids, or through an act of complete destruction and consequent reassembling, Buhagen's imagery is coaxed to resign its representational function, leaving behind a fluid, material reality made up of indeterminable traces. The ideas both of suicide and empty facades evoked in the title conjoin in a metaphor for the shedding of surface to reveal this shapeless undercurrent - that which has no recognizable value or import. The privileged categories of images, books and recordings are overcome by the noise from their own background, and are reduced to transient sheets of paper.

While the other works in the exhibition only relate to the notion of a "potemkin" via metaphorical allusion, the work *Solitude* - a free standing plaster board that hosts an imitation of a brick wall on the front - quite literally mimics the appearance of a deceptive prop. Here to we are again presented with the two-dimensional, but, even if we are not fooled, the representation remains intact. An innocuous and impenetrable wall, itself the very emblem of a background, albeit an intentional one. The subject of background is returned to the realm of human intentionality and artifice. This theme is furthered by Buhagen's extension of the potemkin-metaphor to apply not only to buildings but also persons - suggesting that this tension between surface and background, or noise, could be transferred to the vocabulary of interpersonal or social interaction - layering his seemingly deadpan methodology with possible existential implications.