Located in Kleinbasel close to the Rhine, the Kaskadenkondensator is a place of mediation and experimental, research-and process-based art production with a focus on performance and performative expression. The gallery, founded in 1994, and located on the third floor of the former Sudhaus Warteck Brewery (hence cascade condenser), seeks to develop interactions between artists, theorists and audiences.

Eight, maybe, nine or ten 40 litre bags of potting compost lie strewn about the floor of a high-ceilinged white washed hall. Dumped, split open, the soil mixed with iridescent specks of green, blue and red glitter. On the walls hang large black and white photographic images—negative and positive prints barely clean, hardly sharp, scavenged from the world and presented half processed. On a third wall, hangs a framed golden and charcoal surface. Finally, a huge stain of black dye runs down a wall that descends into a sunken quarter of the Kaskadenkondensator gallery space.

The results of a collaboration between Oliver Minder and Walter Derungs reflect on themes addressed in the recent Aesthetics in the 21st Century conference held by the department of English, University of Basel. In particular, the joint show questions how an aesthetic experience may be other than a human-world interaction, hinting at the withdrawal and veiling that objects perform, while demanding that different works engage with each other and play out this game under the non-supervisory eyes of a human audience. Things here are becoming—sometimes it’s a movement towards a more complete ontic whole in a projection of finality, other times it’s a dispersal, an atrophy to rather disarrayed entities. Yet, in the moment and place in which the objects are, we take them as here and now.

Let’s get to the material of the stuff that Minder and Derungs have assembled. Oliver Minder...
employs organic materials—potting earth, cuttlefish ink secretion, rice, and insects; yet his works hardly seem natural in the sense of a harmonic relation between material and the form they are constrained into, the objects they are compelled to occupy. For the substrates on, through, or within which these natural materials are mediated are harshly inorganic substances—Plexiglas, safety glass, acrylic resin, boat varnish, spray paint. Minder, thus, generates a conflict within the materiality of his work between two polar opposites—from the human perspective—in the contiguity of materials engaging with each other in a thrown together formation that nonetheless appears to keep the materials and the objects they make in happy accidental relation to each other. Let me expand a little: on the one hand, the things Minder makes query our belief in substance as belonging in a particular domain, an environment suited to precisely that stuff. We are focused on thinking categorically where things belong, both in terms of natural place and natural relations they might extend to each other. Hence, we are driven to think of environment and order. On the other hand, while extracting things from their conventional place and arranging them within awkward constellations that we as observers feel isn’t quite right, Minder manages to persuade the viewer that the materials are nonetheless “doing alright.” So, simultaneous to our awareness of the appropriateness of the world according to our global notions of accord and uniformity, we are forced to accept the local discrepancies of disassociation, inappropriateness and misplacement. The tension between these two vectors generates a vacillation that intensifies Minder’s work.

In the Kaskadenkondensator works, then, it is vital to first consider the material of Minder’s works: potting compost—what is it doing here in the first place?—seems to enjoy being “polluted” by sparkly glitter. Glitter has a long history, used in cosmetics by the Egyptians, and in cave paintings, too, earlier made of beetle shells and mica, nowadays glitter is made of plastic cut to minute sizes down to 50 microns. So what’s the point here? Well shiny bits of dust-like material are actually generated from ultra-thin plastic sheets and are normally cut into shapes that fit contiguously on a two-dimensional surface: squares, triangles, hexagons etc.

What then appears to be totally random, chaotic decoration, is actually an array of extremely regular identifiable objects. Of course scale has a role to play here. The minuteness of the dimensions means the regularity is beyond our recognition—all we see are the twinkling surfaces of the multi-coloured grains of plastic. In contrast, potting compost, which appears to be unary in its dull unresponsive lumpy disposition, is in fact an amalgam of a variety of organic and inorganic materials: peat, bark, mushroom compost, and sand and perlite, and should perhaps be more proactively exciting to the viewer because of this complexity. Yes; we can (if we care to) identify different textures, different sizes in the mixture of the medium, but I claim that we tend to treat this organic/inorganic assemblage as just a simple substance.

Further and crucially important to our consideration here is that the medium is partially contained, but also partially spilling from the split plastic bags in which it is sold in garden centres. That the compost spills out gives it a movement suggesting life; that the bags are cast here and there in a random fashion by Oliver Minder, lying like discarded carcasses, hacked torsos, dismembered bodies, suggests a horrific murder scene, a Tatort. The glitter flourishes in the medium, lies happy and decorative; that is simply what it does, how it is—always already broken, made-for-scattering, designed to be incomplete; the taken-to-be-natural compost, in contrast, cannot rest content but is forced to speak to us metaphorically in its abject overflowing of violence and rupture.

While Oliver Minder’s elements in the installation direct our attention to material, Walter Derungs’ works raise questions around seeing and making in photography. There is a simultaneous flicker between the materials and their use in the...
production of a sense making representation, on the one hand, and on the other the very notion of what is worthy of picturing, framing, representing on the other. Derungs’ images are of non-places. Ranging from archaic decaying monster buildings, buildings that have gone far beyond the ravages of a time that we can safely associate with the genteel preservation of a Bernd and Hill Belcher post-industrial decline, to the background “noise” of an urban world that is falling apart, and to which we most of the time seem to pay little attention, and habitually just pass by. In this respect, their non-ness differs somewhat from the conventional association of the term with Marc Augé³, where emphasis is on the specifics (if we do care to examine them for their non-placedness) of the spatial or place containment in which movement between multimodal coordinates occurs in supermodern late capitalist post-urban spaces. In other words, we might be in an Augéian non-place and (not) experience—be impervious to—that environment, or we might in Derungs’ manner look out from such a position at the “scenery” around us. I claim scenery, as this is what Derungs seems to do with his partial photography—construct a very purposefully articulated, symmetric, flat world of image. Mostly depopulated, his images construct a space in which the direction of time is uncertain: are these partial structures falling apart, or perhaps terminated in a never-to-be-completed state, or are they a few steps from final completion? Temporal and spatial dimensions figure large in Derungs’ image-making: his world, and perhaps this is in fact the only way for it to be registered photographically, is already image before it is photographed.

A key combination of images in this show is a matrix of six black and white negative prints measuring 300 x 215 cm that form the image of a semi-derelict (or is it yet incomplete) church, and adjacent on a perpendicular wall, a single black and white positive print 150 x 250 cm of two bricked-up windows of a late-Victorian industrial building. What are we led to believe that we see here? In the negative print, the conditions of perception⁴ are sufficiently reproduced for us to recognise the structure of the building, to distinguish ground and form, to relate some partial elements of narrative, and to recognize symbols such as the alter cross and figure of Christ, a looming crane, a traffic cone, and banks of tiered seating. We piece the image together both from the individual forms which we recognize despite the tonal reversal, and we piece the six prints together as a whole, the matrix of lines between them emphasizing our purview onto the world. While we recognise the forms at work in the image and might possibly relate the negative reversals to other figurations such as Vera Lutter’s camera obscura exposures, we cannot but avoid seeing the partialness of the image in the sponge marks of the developer that was spread by hand across the prints.⁵ Derungs’ thus intervenes with our usual conception of photography as the mimetic realist vehicle sine qua non, by exposing the viewer to tonal reversal and incomplete or over developed areas of the print. We thus confront both the idiom of such image making and its raw (chemical) materiality at once in the simultaneity of the recognition of what the image pictures and the recognition that it is in the act of picturing. The church image, taken from the series “BW Negativs 2011,” thus orients us towards how we see things in the world via photographs.

The single image of the bricked-up wall presents us with a completely different visuality that relates to a faciality⁶ which we cannot easily escape from. We look, or rather try to look with no success, through the face of the windows, through the classic Albertian screen⁷ which has already been given to us in the church matrix beside. Yet although we should be able to make more of these concealed windows because they are a positive print, because they are complete, because they approach us on a more realistic scale, reproduced at life size, we cannot. The objects pictured here withdraw from us; furthermore, they merely mock our blindness at not seeing how we look. Blocked up with quite a hint of paned glass behind, one window is blanked out with a white blind, the other simply blankly dark. The apertures look like eyes with teeth in them, or a Dogon mask, or even Man Ray’s Noire
et Blanche (1926) if we want to get really perverse. The height of elegant modernist chauvinist beauty thrown against the vacuity of post-industrial decline. Derungs thus catapults us consciously into a world enfolded with and through images, but in such a way that the images themselves become objects that stand resistant to us, impervious to our gaze, indifferent. We—and indeed they—do not attempt to reach out to a real that is beyond, rather the images play in a world that is just theirs, and we can only enter that world if we too submit to their regime: tonal reversal, segmented, partial, inadequate, still, wrenched out of time. In contemplation, in the flood of the image “falling” off the wall, we too become image-object.

Perhaps enough has now been said about the works, yet enough can never really be said, we know the image will always exceed the word—let’s accelerate the critique: Derungs’ work continues in a second space partially partitioned from this first room. Opposing three more “BW Negativs” which figure yet more quotidian aspects of the world is Minder’s gold spray paint and cuttlefish secretion mix: things that just shouldn’t work together do in the dialogue between stuff that Derungs and Minder have constructed. Minder makes things; Derungs makes images; together they make objects which inhabit their own world which we can approach and sensually engage with and come to grips with only on those objects’ own terms. This is best summarised by a final work made by Oliver Minder which on a third wall faces these two semi-partitioned spaces.
A deep black stain about 100 X 200 cm with streak marks running down a further 2 metres hovers positioned to observe the whole work, and also to be part of this installation, too. This liminal flat suzerain lies in/out of the whole work. The stain of cuttlefish secretion resonates with Derungs’ sponge strokes on the church image; it mirrors the iris of an all-seeing eye; it combines material in situ with the situation itself. Where Minder’s other works have material and medium or substrate upon which the material is exercised, this single black hole is image which sucks everything up into itself. It draws the viewer, who must otherwise look away attentively at the floor work, and imagine horror, or smile at the ironic play of glitter. Look away at the image constructions that suggest how it is we too look to our world. See the play of thing and image in a third area. Or, finally return to the base of the pyramid that triangulates, to realise the stuff-image that unlocks it all for us. Black on white, organic on inorganic, material to substrate, that which in the falling out of one on the other, in its running down the wall simply gives form to both content and expression in one direction, and content and expression to form in another.

NOTES

1. In fact, glitter is used as associative forensic evidence: the 20,000 or so varieties are all uniquely identifiable.
4. An echo of the uneven paint strokes of-lightsensitive chemicals in the paper preparations made by Henry Talbot some 170 years ago in the first sun drawings that also often pictured architectural forms. It was Talbot’s surprising discovery that where a weaker chemical solution was more thinly spread, greater light sensitivity was actualized, yet this virtual image had then to be chemically developed in a second step. Thus, Derungs unevenly finished spongings suggestively trace back to this originary technology (although his sweeps are the stains of uneven development and not those of the initial preparation of light-sensitive material).