



The Window

1950-51, KeldHelmer-Petersen, from the collection of the Royal Library © Estate of KeldHelmer-Petersen

fractured visions urban and architectural representation in keldhelmer-Petersen's fragments of a city

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*In the post-war period a heterogeneous group of photographers articulate a new photographic approach to the city as motive in a photographic language that combines intense formalism with subjective vision. This paper analyses the photobook *Fragments of a City* published in 1960 by Danish photographer Keld Helmer-Petersen. The book is a pioneering example of this post-war tendency and yet it has not been analysed or presented academically before. In the paper I examine how the book forms a new mode of representation that balances between abstraction and realism and how this has an influence on both questions of representation and perception.*

keywords Post-war photography, Modernism, Representation, Abstraction, Urbanity

introduction

"It is not the life in the city, I have sought to depict, but the architectonic, in other words, that which frames the everyday life of people"¹. This is how Danish photographer Keld Helmer-Petersen (1920-2013) described his photobook *Fragments of a City* published in 1960. In the book, photographs of buildings, fire escapes, and overhead wires drawn as silhouettes against a greyish-white background are combined with photographs of details of wire fences, inscriptions on walls, torn sheet metal and broken windows. All in black and white, these photographs comprise Helmer-Petersen's "photographic report of Chicago as I saw and photographed it" as he stated in his foreword². It is not a report on social matters, everyday life, or scenes of busy street life in a pulsating modern city. What we encounter in the book is a graphic city of lines, geometric forms and structures. All but three of the 35 photographs in this book are devoid of people. What fascinated and captured the eye of the photographer were not the people living in the city but its architectural formations and structures. In the following, I analyse the aesthetic approach of the book and how this affects our reading of the architectural and urban. I argue that *Fragments of a City* articulates a new way of representing the city photographically by combining abstraction and realism in a radical photographic idiom. What I hope to show is that abstraction and realism in Helmer-Petersen's work are not two inimitable notions as often perceived, but are intertwined in a correlation that concerns perception as well as our understanding of the urban.

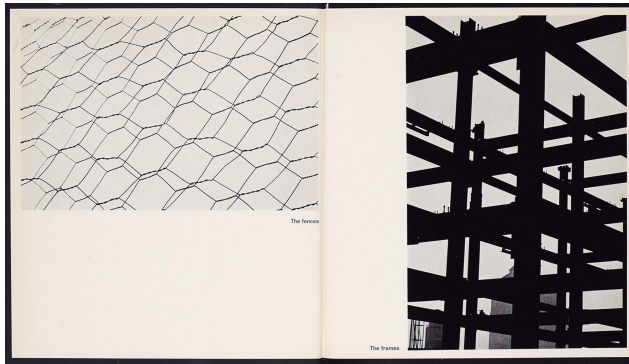
Keld Helmer-Petersen is recognized as the first modernist photographer in Denmark. His career spans more than 70 years from 1938 to 2013, and throughout it he found structures and patterns in nature and culture to create an imagery that unfolds the beauty of often overlooked everyday motives. In the urban landscape he again and again sought out motives in the outskirts of the city: in harbours, railway and industrial areas. Through his chosen subjects and his style, he introduced international tendencies of modernist photography in Denmark in the post-war period, which was otherwise dominated by documentary photography.

Fragments of a City was published in 1960, but the photographs were taken during his stay in Chicago in 1950/51. Two years earlier, he had published the pioneering photobook titled *122 Colour Photographs* for which he in 1949 gained international recognition due to a feature with images from the book in *LIFE* Magazine. This paved the way for him to travel to the USA to stay at the Institute of Design in Chicago for two semesters, where he was both a student and worked as a teacher of photography. The Institute of Design, established by Bauhaus-teacher László Moholy-Nagy in 1937, became a seminal place for the education of art-photographers³. Among Helmer-Petersen's teachers were photographers Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind whose aesthetic strategies and approach to photography together with European avant-garde photography and abstract art influenced the idiom of Helmer-Petersen's work.

photographs of geometry and contrast

With its 35 photographs *Fragments of a City* is a small book in length as well as scale. Besides a short foreword by the photographer the photographs are only accompanied by text in individual titles and three short quotes by Herbert Read, Charles Baudelaire and Jean Bazaine. As you leaf through the book, its diligent composition becomes apparent; on each spread is a photograph on verso and recto that either formally or thematically correlates to one other. This way of combining the photographs creates a tension of dualisms of light vs. darkness, movement vs. stillness, emptiness vs. fullness, which is often also apparent in each separate photograph.

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f1_The fences and the frames

from *Fragments of a City* (Hans Reitzel, 1960), Keld Helmer-Petersen

One spread includes on the left side a photograph titled *The fences*; an image of doubled wire fences, and on the right side a photograph titled *The Frames*; the silhouette of a bare steel building construction (**f1**). This constellation can be understood as a photographic exploration of “the mystery and fascination of this sensitive geometry” as mentioned in a quote by French painter Jean Bazaine included in the book. The spread shows how Helmer-Petersen in his framing and style isolates architectural elements and transforms them into nearly abstract formations excluding the topography of the city. In the close-up of wire fences on a white background the context is dissolved and what is left are the geometrical shapes and the two layers of wire fence creating a complex spatial composition. The pattern is mirrored and reversed in the black silhouette of a steel construction, which is heavy compared to the lightness of the thin wires. In these two photographs, Helmer-Petersen extracts and frames two types of geometrical patterns from the city's fabric. Although the composition of *The frames* as well as its graphic contrast intensify the experience of architectural structures as central to the photograph, the city's subtle presence is conveyed by the fragments of buildings that can be seen through the patterns of the steel bars. In this way, there is an inherent dualism in the photograph at the same time abstracting and maintaining a notion of reality.

In a series of photographs of facades in Chicago in the late 1940s, Harry Callahan records an extract of the facade with minimalist precision, focusing on either the geometric formations of the windows or the lines created by shadows. They present “an uncompromised visual structure while suggesting human presence”, as Keith F. Davis has described Callahan's images⁴. Helmer-Petersen shares this intense formal interest with Callahan as well as the unsentimental and precise photographic style. *The fences* and *The frames* are good examples of the aesthetic strategy in *Fragments of a City*, which is to capture and insist on the visual qualities in our nearby surroundings, and to transform this vision into carefully framed compositions in a distinct photographic language where every element in the picture seems on a single plane, with only little depth. All the photographs in the book are shot with a Leica camera and developed on contrast full paper, which results in a graphic expression where the tonal spectrum is reduced to a sharp contrast between black and white. Although the technological development of both contrast full paper and film at the

time made it possible to create photographs with immense contrast resembling graphics, the technology is not, I believe, the motivation for the imagery Helmer-Petersen creates in *Fragments of a City*. As I will elaborate in the following section, this aesthetic strategy seems to stem from a representational level rather than merely technological. In an interview to a Danish newspaper in 1960, Helmer-Petersen explained, how it was important for him to keep a sense of the photographic in the book, although the images are graphic and full of contrast in their expression. He said: "It has been a balancing act between pure abstraction and pure realism"⁵. In effect this is part of the central tension in modernism of form and content, which is also central to a photographer as Callahan⁶. As Britt Salvesen points out, this is not just a matter of style, but also a matter of approach to photography and its way of representing reality. It has the potential to invoke a new way of looking at the world⁷. In the following I argue, that *Fragments of a City* represents a certain, if not novel, way of seeing that articulates a radical vision of how a city can be visualised through photography.

a graphic city of silhouettes

The majority of the photographs in *Fragments of a City* depict buildings, fire escapes, water tanks, and lampposts as they draw their silhouettes against a grey sky. The monotone greyish sky above Chicago becomes the canvas upon which the imprints of the city's architectural structures are organised. The graphic effect of the dark silhouette against the sky is intensified by the way Helmer-Petersen flattens the picture plane and removes almost any sense of depth. This effect is evident in *The Dwellings* (f2) where the contour of a building emanates in the right side of the image as a dark square and on the left side a water tank and possibly a lamppost stand out as cylindrical formations.

However, both the framing that cuts off the lamppost and the building, as well as the leveling of the objects on the same picture plane, creates a spatial ambiguity that makes it difficult to apprehend the perspective and the spatial relation of the elements in the picture. The photograph lingers between an image of an architectural appearance and a reduction of this to almost geometrical configurations. In general, Helmer-Petersen's use of photographic silhouettes as visual expressions imply a dualism of a distinct appearance of objects and a hiding of details and texture. Helmer-Petersen wrote on the effect of silhouettes: "The silhouettes of the objects stand clearly and distinctly against the white background and



f2_The Dwellings

1950-51, Keld Helmer-Petersen, from the collection of The Royal Library © Estate of Keld Helmer-Petersen

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unveil in that way their structure and contours and hollow spaces, its play with lines and the distribution of surfaces⁹. However details of windows, materials, and texture remain hidden mainly due to the heightened contrast of the photographs. In this way the objects appear in a new light, which the photographic presentation and technique enhances. I am referring here to the definition of photographic presentation by Dag Petersson: "the event of making something show itself photographically the event whereby the photographed comes into being"⁹. In this understanding of presentation as an "actualizing event" that transforms something photographed into a photographic being, lies the notion that photography translates the photographed into something else; it adds something to the photographed. Furthermore this notion suggests that photography has the potential of making things visible in a sense not possible for the eye to see. However photography is also characterised by a special relation to reality through its much-debated indexicality. I believe it is exactly in the interplay between an experimental photographic translation of objects and an underlying reference to reality, that the silhouettes of Helmer-Petersen achieve their ambiguity as visual expressions.

In the photograph *The bars* (f3), the fire escapes are almost reduced to vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines, thin and thick, running across a white background. It fills the entire image and is framed in a way that dissolves the context, and as in *The Dwellings*, the depth is flattened in the picture plane. The fire escapes are here abstracted to a play of lines: a geometric system on a white surface, resembling the style of early modernists as Kandinsky or Miro, or contemporary abstract painters as Newman or Soulages¹⁰. Nonetheless the texture and materiality of the steel in parts of the construction are still sensed, where the light falls, making the tone change slightly. Through this Helmer-Petersen maintains a sense of the photographic and lets a noise from the real world remain in the image. In this way the silhouettes as aesthetic strategy is both a reducing of reality to geometrical forms and an emanation of reality in a new light, which gives this sense of a familiar and yet unfamiliar world.

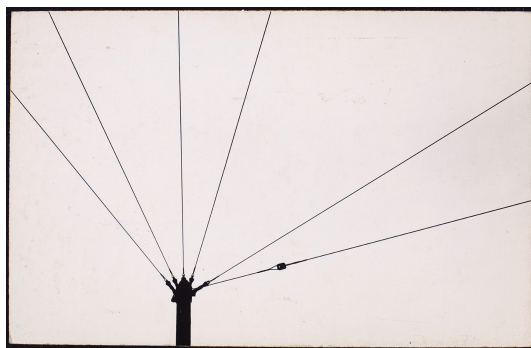


f3_The bars

1950-51, KeldHelmer-Petersen, from the collection of The Royal Library © Estate of KeldHelmer-Petersen

a play of lines above our heads

It was in the space between buildings high above his head that Helmer-Petersen found a world of motives, that eventually became a “veritable obsession to capture [...] as precisely as possible”¹¹. These photographs’ clear precedents are found in the interwar period with the oblique views and geometric patterning of urban motives as seen in *New Vision* by Moholy-Nagy among others. As Brendan Fay notes on Harry Callahan’s series of *Telephone Wires* (1945-1955), the upward view and geometric patterning were hardly novel in the postwar period, but the chosen subject and technique enables key departures mainly concerned with abstraction and spatial as well as perceptual ambiguity¹². Fay describes Callahan’s photographs as a transformation of overhead wiring into spare graphic configurations of black lines against a white background. This results in “an abstraction concerned with perceptual ambiguity”¹³ that involves the spatial position in which the sky functions as an unstable ground for the linear configurations. Whereas Callahan isolates the wires to black lines, in Helmer-Petersen’s photographs of telephone and electricity wires they remain recognizable and readable, but they are still translated into a stark graphic composition of thin wires running across the picture plane as seen in *The Pole* (f4).

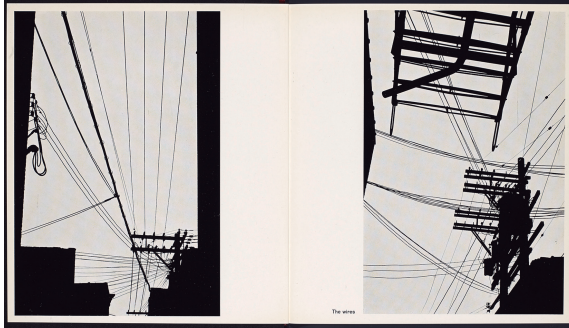


f4_The pole

1950-51, Keld Helmer-Petersen, from the collection of the Royal Library © Estate of Keld Helmer-Petersen

In Fay’s reading of Callahan’s *Telephone Wires* he finds a pursuit of ambiguities involving spatial position; in Callahan’s compositions it is difficult to place the wires’ spatial relation to each other, which ultimately produces a strategic confusion of convergence and divergence¹⁴. In *The pole*, Helmer-Petersen’s viewpoint and framing of the pole and its connected wires against the sky creates a resembling destabilization of the spatial perception, as the direction of the wires are difficult to determine in the flattened picture plane. The two photographs, both titled *The wires* (f5) are not as radical in their framing and perspective, but their dynamic tension between the thin wires and the black surfaces of buildings and masts show how essential elements of the modern city can function as the motive for artistic investigation in line with formal concerns in contemporary abstract painting. In these two photographs the viewpoint gives a sense of being in the city, looking up, and in that way, Helmer-Petersen combines a stark graphic composition with a sense of the city. He extracts a commonplace, but nonetheless essential, element of the modern city and makes its aesthetic characteristics visible.

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f5_The wires

from *Fragments of a City* (Hans Reitzel, 1960), Keld Helmer-Petersen

typological fragments of a city

In their introduction to *Visions of the Modern City*, Leonard Wallock and William Sharpe describe how the urban sensibility during the first half of the 20th century increasingly becomes a modern sensibility difficult to define. According to them, the city and aesthetic strategies get intermingled in a way so that “the urban environment shapes an aesthetic perception, which in turn produces a new form and vision of the city”¹⁵. Helmer-Petersen’s *Fragments of a City* seems to be an intuitive photographic response to his experience of the city. In his foreword he describes how it became “a ritual” and in an interview he explained that he created the photographs almost in a trance, because the visuality of Chicago had such a profound effect on him¹⁶, and finally in retrospect he wrote how it became an obsession to capture it as precisely as he could.

Fragments of a city opens with a quote by writer Herbert Read: “The world is, as it were, haunted by significant forms”. As we have seen, the photographs of Chicago isolate architectural details from the topography of the city and extract patterns and structures in often overlooked details of the urban fabric; in that way Helmer-Petersen scans the world of existing “significant” forms to be evoked. As noted in the beginning of this paper, Helmer-Petersen presents *Fragments of a City* as his photographic report of Chicago. If we follow this way of thinking of the book, it is possible to read it in its totality as a systematic photographic condensation of the essential elements of the city. As a Swedish journalist wrote in a review of the book in 1960: “Chicago is an unfamiliar world, which the photographer has tried to understand through an archaeological approach. He typologies the phenomena and collects them in groups: Facades, Faces, Inscriptions”¹⁷. This way of isolating urban details and organising them in both descriptive and associative titles such as the dwellings, the torn, the spotted, the openings, the frames etc. can be seen as a way of making sense of the experience of Chicago. Wallock and Sharpe describe how the modern city and the experience of it become increasingly difficult to describe and depict in a coherent way during the first half of the 20th century, which results in a collapse of the belief in a realist or naturalist mode of representation¹⁸. Graham Clarke follows the same line of thought, as he unfolds the history of photographs of the city. He states that although its roots are the panoramic views of the 18th and 19th century, as the 20th century advances, an increasingly dominant condition of disunity, fragmentation, and meaninglessness meets the photographer who tries to capture the city photographically¹⁹.

Helmer-Petersen's photographs may be fragments and fractures of Chicago, but their balanced, geometric compositions do not express a shock-experience of an overwhelming city or a collapse of meaning, but rather a profound fascination of the formal potential of the motives to be found in the city. Each photograph depicts a tiny part of the giant machinery that is Chicago, but in total they constitute a fractured characterisation of an industrial modern city and its architectural frames under which city life unfolds. Helmer-Petersen manages to extract geometric structures from the city's fabric, turn them into dynamic compositions of lines and forms, of the tension between black and white, but nevertheless maintains a connection to the experienced world of sensuous materiality. In this way, *Fragments of a City* is part of the subjective, yet formalist approach in post-war photography as seen in works by photographers such as Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind, or Minor White. As Shelley Rice points out, this tendency in parts of the experimental and creative photography in this period does not challenge the aesthetic achievements of the inter-war avant-garde, such as New Vision, but it casts "a dreamier glance on the world"²⁰. Although the photography of Helmer-Petersen definitely represents a subtraction of hidden beauty of the city, it casts more than a dreamier glance; it partakes in an on-going investigation of photographic representation of urban and architectural motives and how this affects our perception of the city. *Fragments of a City* constitutes a way of seeing that may envision the "world as haunted by significant forms" in its formalist approach and style, but on a perceptual level the condensation of forms and lines influences our understanding of the city as a complex layering of structures and patterns, which have a visual and aesthetic quality that we seldom acknowledge. This has to do with the aesthetic strategy of Helmer-Petersen, in which he let the motives remain graspable in the almost graphic abstractions. In its complex interlacing of abstraction and realism *Fragments of a City* thereby articulates a radical vision of how a city can be visualised through a photographic approach that takes the photograph to its limits bordering on graphic abstractions, but maintains that photography can make us look at the world with new eyes.

endnotes

1. Bent Grasten, "Det er måden at se på. Det er ikke det at se", *Aktuelt Weekend*, March 18, 1960. My translation from Danish.
2. Keld Helmer-Petersen, *Fragments of a City, Chicago Photographs* (Hans Reitzel, 1960).
3. "A Visionary Founder", Aperture Foundation; Princeton University Art Museum, no. 87 (1982), 7. Until 1944 the name of the school was New Bauhaus and the ambition of Moholy-Nagy was to create a school based on the principles of Bauhaus, which closed as the Nazis came into power in Germany in 1933.
4. Britt Salvesen, Harry Callahan: *The Photographer at Work* (Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona, Tucson, 2006), 30.
5. Grasten, "Det er måden at se på. Det er ikke det at se". My translation from Danish.
6. Salvesen, Harry Callahan: *The Photographer at Work*, 17. Salvesen regards Callahan's management of this particular dialectic between form and content as essential to his approach and style.
7. *Ibid.*, 25.
8. Keld Helmer-Petersen, "The Form of Photographic Expression", *Katalog, Journal of Photography and Video* 3 (1990). Originally published in 1954.
9. Dag Petersson, "Photographic Space", in *Representational Machines: Photography and the Production of Space*, ed. Anna Dahlgren, Dag Petersson, and Nina Lager Vestberg (Aarhus University Press, 2013), 111.
10. Helmer-Petersen was also affiliated to a constructivist artist group in Denmark of primarily painters and sculptors called Linien II.
11. Keld Helmer-Petersen, *Photographs 1941-1995*, [1. oplag] (Christian Ejlers, 2007), 64.

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12. Brendan Fay, "How to Hold a Camera: Harry Callahan's Early Abstractions", *History of Photography* 39, no. 2 (2015): 170.
13. Ibid., 167.
14. Ibid., 170.
15. William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, "From 'Great Town' to 'Nonplace Urban Realm': Reading the Modern City", in *Visions of the Modern City, Essays in History, Art, and Literature* (Columbia University, 1983), 5.
16. "I Trance", *Berlingske Aftenavis*, April 30, 1960.
17. Bengt Olvång, "Skärvor Av En Stad", *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, June 10, 1960. My translation from Swedish.
18. Sharpe and Wallock, "From 'Great Town' to 'Nonplace Urban Realm': Reading the Modern City", 5.
19. Graham Clarke, "The City in the Photograph", in *The Photograph, Oxford History of Art* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 80.
20. Shelley Rice, "Beyond Reality. The Subjective Vision", in *A New History of Photography*, ed. Michel Frizot (Könemann, 1998), 661.

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CV

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