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BERTHOLD'S GUM BICHROMATES IN/AS ARTISTIC PRACTICE

Résumé

Le procédé à la gomme bicromateé était connu bien avant son popularization par les photographes pictorialistes vers 1900. Il était particulièrement proche des techniques néo-impressionniste, de Monet tardive ou divisionniste. Avgust Berthold (1880–1818) était un photographe slovène de renommée internationale, considéré comme le cinquième impressionniste de la tradition artistique slovène. Ses tirages à la gomme

bicromateé correspondent aux peintures de ses quatre amis au point qu'il est impossible de dire ce qui était arrivé en premier.

La comparaison des plaques de verre utilisées dans le processus de gomme au bicromate avec d'autres révèle que les plaques destinées au procédé de gomme au bicromate étaient surexposées. Ainsi, le processus de postproduction identifie les intentions artistiques du photographe et de ses amis peintres.

Keywords: bichromate gum print, Slovenian Impressionism, Avgust Berthold, mutual inspiration

Daguerreotype, puharotype, and the gum bichromate process

Like almost any great invention, photography was invented in a search for something else, a perfect reproduction of an image in which a chemical process would replace subjectively guided hand.¹ Thus, the daguerreotype, as well as the puharotype,² were unique and singular creations deemed unrepeatable, just like

any other work of art.³ Soon, their claims to art were negated by the extension of the medium to limitless reproduction of (almost) identical images. Even today, there is no universal definition of the medium of photography. The Bressonian punctum disdainfully relegates the dark room part of the process to artisanal execution. Nevertheless, there are photographers who extend the creative process into dark-room wizardry, using the negative, the fruit of the punctum, only as a primary source to interpretation that hypothetically makes each work of art unique and “unrepeatable”. Gum bichromate printing

1 S. BANN, *Parallel Lines. Printmakers, Painters and Photographers in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 89–92.

2 The term has been coined from the name of Janez Puhar (1814–1864), Slovenian inventor of a particular and still mysterious process of photography on glass plate in 1842.

3 'Images transparentes sur la verre par Pucher', in: *La Lumière*, II, št. 37, Pariz (1852), 147; *La Lumière*, II, št. 40, Pariz (1852), 160; M. KAMBIČ, 'Izumiteljja Janez Puhar in William Talbot', *Sinteza*, št. 28, 29, (Ljubljana 1973), 27–30.

is part of a process most suitable to the artistic intention of photography, because it is finished in a darkroom by a prolonged postproduction process. Known from the earliest years of photography's history, it was popularized after 1894 by pictorialist photographers.⁴ The gum bichromate process allows the manipulation of light and the selective treatment of details towards an articulation of the mood in postproduction that does not necessarily correspond to a snap-shot document. The National Gallery of Slovenia has had the privilege of acquiring several bichromates in recent years but above all to clean and conserve Berthold's photographic plates and make new prints from them.

Berthold's photography and Slovenian Impressionists

Slovenian photographer, Avgust Berthold (1880–1919) probably learned the gum bichromate process at the *Höhere Graphische Bundes-lehr- und Versuch Anstalt*, department of *Photographie und Reproduktionsverfahren* in Vienna in the 1902/03 academic year.⁵ It was allegedly Rihard Jakopič (1869–1943), Slovenian Impressionist painter and amateur photographer, who catalysed Berthold's career as a photographer. The school that stimulated experimentation ideally suited the obsessions of the young Berthold. Within three years, he experimented with different plate sizes, with

different pigments and tried out landscape, architectural photography, genre, portrait, and the nude in the open air.

In 1904, he exhibited his *Portrait of Jakopič* in Belgrade.⁶ This "official" portrait had several experimental predecessors discovered a few years ago in the Jakopič Bequest. Berthold tried differently textured paper supports, varying in grain in black and red pigment and a smoother paper with seemingly lighter red pigment. In contrast to the black-pigmented image, red-pigmented ones are less satisfactory. It is no wonder then that Berthold preferred black, grey, or blue pigments. However, the red-pigmented portrait of Jakopič in an oblong format is a beautiful document of the intimate friendship between the two artists (Fig. 1). In contrast to the others, the portrait is extraordinarily direct, informal, even relaxed and thus a testimony of proximity of the two soulmates.

As a native of Škofja Loka, where painters Rihard Jakopič (1869–1943) and Ivan Grohar (1867–1911) lived at the time, while Matej Sternen (1870–1949) stayed in the nearby hamlet of Godešič, he worked closely with the Slovenian Impressionist painters. Their work lends evidence to the cross-fertilization of painting and photography. Jakopič and Sternen were amateur photographers and used photography extensively as their working tool. It is evident that the painters also used Berthold's photographs for their purposes, and Sternen might have utilized them even in Munich during his winter sojourns. One of the most important Slovenian icons *The Sower*, 1907, by Ivan Grohar was based on Berthold's photograph. Berthold's gum bichromate photo, exhibited in 1906, helped the painter to resolve a pictorial problem laboured on for over a year.⁷ Coarse grain, light and shadow

4 The photosensitive property of the bichromates was known in the 18th century. Alphonse Poitevin applied it to photography in 1858 adding pigments to the colloidal solution. An advanced gum bichromate process was introduced and popularized in 1894 by Pierre-Auguste Rouillé-Ladéveze, when he showed his prints at the exhibition of the Paris Photo Club. It was in use until about 1930, especially by the pictorialist photographers. G. BALDWIN, *Looking at Photographs: A Guide to Technical Terms* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, London: British Museum Press, 1991), 51–52. C. JAMES, *The Book of Alternative Photographic Processes*, Boston, 2015, pp. 58–61

5 Education in Munich and Frankfurt has not been corroborated. His inquisitive nature and the quality of his artistic oeuvre testify to self-education. Among other things he constructed his x-ray camera himself. S. SOSIČ, *Avgust Berthold: fotograf z začetka stoletja*, <Mestna Galerija, Ljubljana, junij–julij, 1997>, (Ljubljana: Mestna galerija, 1997), 20.

6 First Yougoslav Exhibition dedicated to the coronation of king Petar I Karadjordjević.

7 T. BREJC, "Groharjev Sejalec / Grohar's Sower", in: *Slovenske Atene 1907-1991 / Slovenian Athens. (premikajoč se po polju slovenske umetnosti kot sejalec / the motif of the sower a challenge to 43 contemporary artists)*, <Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 22.10.–24.11.1991>, (Ljubljana, Museum of Modern Art, 1992), n. p.

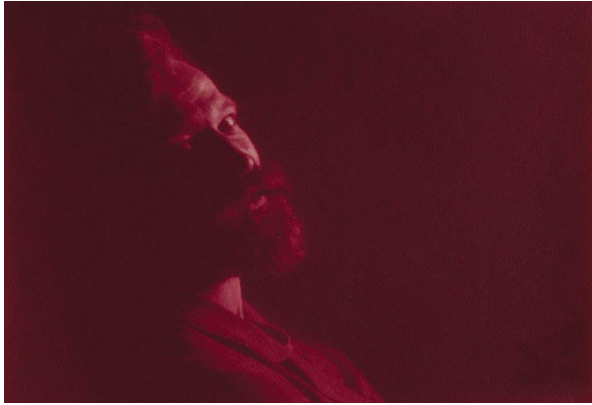


Fig. 1: Avgust Berthold: Portrait of Rihard Jakopič (1904), gum print, National Gallery of Slovenia NG F 213

contrast and softened drawing keen to the late Impressionist and Symbolist painting techniques lead Grohar to an equivocal articulation of the figure and the landscape to encapsulate the ideological identification of the land and the man who works it into an image of the Motherland.

As for Berthold's photography, we should consider first the influence of contemporary Western art that shaped the photographer's vision. His Symbolist landscapes with cropped tree trunks correspond to the compositions of Grohar but even more so the ones by Matija Jama (1872-1947), who as the fourth Impressionist painter was present in Škofja Loka only metaphorically through intense correspondence with Jakopič. Berthold's gum bichromate photographs make us more aware of the share of Symbolism in Slovenian Impressionist painting which makes this local phenomenon so peculiar. In the *Devin/Duino Castle* print, Berthold's trick was the transformation of a daylight photograph into a nocturnal scene (Fig. 2). Berthold's little bichromate was by far the most successful among the known images of the castle, such as a photograph of Fran Vesel (1884-1944) and a painting by Ivan Grohar. The picturesque tourist trap changed into a praying Sphynx looming large in the moonlight over the Gulf of Trieste.

By 1905, Berthold established a photographic studio in a newly-built house in



Fig. 2: Avgust Berthold: Devin / Duino, 1905, gum print, black pigment, Private collection

Ljubljana, next to the new Palace of Justice, purchased with lottery winnings. His gum bichromate creations won him medals in international exhibitions in Brussels (1905), Brno (1907) and Oslo (1908). The *First Exhibition of the Slovenian Photo-amateur Club of Ljubljana* in Jakopič Pavilion, 1911, marked his last public appearance as an artist. His inquisitive spirit took him to experimentation with X-rays, and his lack of awareness of the damaging effects of the rays hastened his premature death.

To claim a predilection of the photographer for dawn and dusk lighting effects needs some qualification.⁸ So far we have been unable to identify Berthold's plates used in gum bichromate process. However, a careful comparison of the existing negative with the bichromate print of *Devin/Duino* lends evidence that the same negative

8 SOSIČ, note 8, p. 41
S. SOSIČ, "Fotograf Avgust Berthold, slovenski impresionist" in: *Slovenski impresionisti in njihov čas 1890-1920*, ed. by B. Jaki and others, <Ljubljana, National Gallery, April 23, 2008-February 8, 2009>, Ljubljana, National Gallery of Slovenia, p. 208.



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Fig. 3: August Berthold: Self-portrait, (c. 1905), gum
print, blue pigment, Private collection

was used over a long period of time and even posthumously. Our working hypothesis is that Berthold enlarged his negatives for the bichromate prints in his darkroom. As negatives for contact printing they were redundant, oversize – harder to store, perhaps even useless after serving their purpose, and therefore expendable. Such an enlarged plate was overexposed, losing detail in comparison to the master negative. Despite burned plates, Berthold masterfully manipulated light. In his *Self-portrait* (c. 1905, Fig. 3), he managed to cast it “from the inside” in a counter-light effect just like in the red-pigmented portrait of Jakopič. The *Devin/Duino Castle* is the crowning example of the counter-lit scene that almost incorporates the solar disk, a peculiarity of specific paintings by Jakopič, turned into a mysterious nocturnal drama. A predilection perhaps, but the effects were the fruit of the postproduction, an interpretation that enhanced the photographic plate. This is the meaning of pictorialism: Berthold’s intention comes closest to that of his painter friends.