In the end, we won 2:1. Our group, together with Joachim Schmid, made up the German fans watching this particular match of the European Football Championship. We stood opposite a single Austrian. Five of us in total stood in front of the TV at the Photobook Festival 2011 in Kassel talking about hot sandwiches, the charm of simple, traditional things, and the question "where is this nice Italian place again?" We took advantage of the festival's atmosphere and personally interviewed Joachim Schmid the next day. In the 90th Minute, Gomez saved our team—and the evening—and proclaimed that football is absolutely crazy. Schmid is willing to take it a bit further.

Hunter and Gatherer

209 JOACHIM SCHMID

Since we were watching football together yesterday: You think that everyone should be completely quiet during football?

Yes, of course. Football is serious, and I have some thoughts about the game. One of them is this: The only true way to watch football is in a stadium. Televised matches show a distorted view of the game because the images are put together in a way designed to be artificially dramatic. Football really isn't as dramatic as it seems on television. If you're watching a match on television, you can't really understand what's going on. In order to understand it, you have to see the whole field, and that's only possible if you're actually there in the stadium. But I don't want to be disturbed when I'm doing that. I think there should be a silent block of seating in the stadium where people can't incessantly blather. My ideal situation would include a friendly applause when the teams come on the field and then when they leave again, and utter silence in between. That would just be wonderful. Oh and everything would be done in the Olympic Stadium in Berlin. But, unfortunately, I'll probably never be granted my wish.

My second thought is that the results are overrated and the game itself is underrated. I think certain games should be 'repertoire' matches. For example: "Today we will show the 1998 Brazil vs. Holland match in the Olympic Stadium using the players from Berlin's Hertha BSC and Bayern Munich." Then the game will be reenacted exactly. The Brazil vs. Holland match was fantastic. We just have to reenact it, something which wouldn't be very difficult to do. But then everyone would say "but we know how it's going to end." But that's not the point.

It's the same way with every film, too.

Exactly. I don't go to the opera to find out how something ends. I know that the woman will be killed after the third act. It's something I already know, and it still doesn't matter. Third: If it's being broadcast, then it should be broadcast like snooker in English TV. The camera hangs immobile above the middle of the field and we can see all the little players running around. And that's that.

That's pretty much like your way of working: There's a camera, manned by whoever, and you're completely isolated and separated from it. With you, there's just the stationary picture and you either use it or you don't.

Yes. A stationary picture is important. During my studies I played around a bit with video. I found out that I don't have the biggest fantasy when shooting video and that it takes an insanely long time to edit any material. The editing was the worst, just the constant staring involved. In the time it takes me to shoot five minutes of video I can make three photobooks. That's not even a joke, I mean that seriously.

When did you begin your studies?

In 1976. I ended them in 1981. After that I took a couple of years and worked intensively as a photographer. Later I decided to throw that all away because I noticed it wasn't very original. I began to be plagued by more and more doubt as I read more about photography. Then I started publishing a magazine about photography, which was further education in its own right because it allowed me to reflect more upon photography: What is it? What can it do and what can't it do? Over time, my own way of doing things just developed.

Did you also play the role of the traditional photographer during your studies?

Yes, yes, I studied visual communication at the Art Academy Berlin. It was really graphic design, but wasn't very regimented. But I quickly came to the conclusion that I couldn't spend the rest of my life worrying about if I should display the nonsense of others in 10 or 12 point font.

Then I moved to photography and stayed put. I was fascinated by both the practical and the theoretical side of things. There wasn't a photography department or photo class or anything else back then in Berlin, but there was a filthy darkroom where I taught myself both the practical and the theoretical aspects of photography. At the time, the end of the 70s, a very important book from Susan Sontag also came out. That's when the popular photoculture began to develop. DuMont then published the first photobooks.

What is typically involved in your work process from the initial conception of an idea to a finished book? How can we visualize that? What's your first step? Where do you begin and what comes next?

Sometimes it's a very quick process, sometimes a very slow one. I often stumble over something or find something along the way. Let's just say, I allow myself the luxury of wasting a lot of time by looking at this and that and oh that too, although it very often leads to nothing.

The idea for the last book I made, for example, L.A. WOMEN, was basically found by accident. But before I came upon it, I had probably wasted a hundred hours online just looking around. But sometimes I'll find something and think "Oh yeah, ok. That's exactly the type of material I'm interested in." I then unearth everything and it's relatively quick work because the scope of my work is now limited: I look at 180 pictures and think that the amount is important, but two or three photos need to be taken out because they don't fit the photo series visually. They fit chronologically, but I'm not interested in time, only art, so I fix the problem through some editing and then I'm basically finished. The only things remaining are the questions of the book's presentation, the length of the introduction, the title, and the book's form. I've got a whole series of bundles I've begun putting together, and I'll still look if I can add something here or there. Or maybe nothing will come of them at all …

How do you keep an overview of everything, technically speaking?

I have a lot of digital material and a few boxes of analog material. But most of it comes from the Internet, so it's digital. I created a rather strict system of file folders and apart from that I use Bridge as my browser and haven't had any problems with it. But the most important thing is the folder system. If you don't have an organized structure to put files in, you're going to find yourself hopelessly lost someday.

How exactly do you search for something?

The entire search is based on alpha numeric criteria and you can forget about any type of visual search function, at least with current technology. That's just a part of finding pictures. You can only really search for contextual terms associated with a picture, which, of course, takes an insane amount of time. You've got some kind of an idea in your head and you start googling or searching through Flickr or whatever and your whole success depends on how people labeled their photos. Since most photos aren't labeled with any terms, you'll never find them. If you're lucky, you'll find them by chance.

There's always those "collateral finds" when you search for something and find something different.

Yes, 'collateral' describes that very well. I run into a lot of things by accident. I'll often search for something and find something completely different, yet much more exciting.

In photobooks, specifically in documentary photography, there's often a very strong charge to the pictures' narrative which doesn't match the context in which the picture was taken. You avoid that completely. Can you explain that a little?

Yes, I've got a lot of doubt about the traditional documentary photography. It reminds me of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. As soon as I observe something, the observation changes that thing I'm observing. That's just a part of finding pictures, or at least questionable, and should be incorporated into the look. That often doesn't happen and it's a dilemma in that type of photography.

At the same time, I think that there's so much quasi-documentary raw material out there and it's much more revealing and profitable to work with it as an editor or a director. I didn't come to that lesson through photography, but through people like Jean-Luc Godard, who take material and create meaning through their editing technique. I don't want to compare myself to Godard, but I think I'm doing something similar in photography.

What does 'collecting' mean to you? Do you collect for the sake of collecting? Is it like with football, where you're more interested in the progress of the game than the end result?

I wouldn't call myself a collector. Most visitors I have are surprised at how empty my apartment and workroom are. If you look at it from an anthropological point of view, there have been two types of people in human history: the hunter and the 'collector', as it's unfortunately termed in German. Unlike German, English differentiates between the terms 'to collect' and 'to gather', with 'gatherer' being the anthropological variant. This type of person gathers for their own consumption, not because they want to collect things in the sense of accumulating them. People we call collectors, art collectors or stamp collectors for example, also bring a certain meaning into the world, but they're also collectors of prosperity and I don't have anything in common with that. I'm not interested in possessing things. I'm interested in bringing things together and taking meaning from them. When that's completed, I'm very happy to then get rid of them.

It's possible to see how pictures in a book can be reevaluated due to the order in which they appear. The motifs of some of your pictures are banal and only gain their appeal thanks to the medium of books, don't they?

Books don't really interest me as objects, but I find books as traditions to be extremely interesting. I think that's the main reason so many people make books, except for those with a fetish for opulent objects. That's a desire which doesn't interest me in the slightest.

There's a border to books: outside of the book and inside it. The border creates frames of meaning; it defines something. That has its root in a tradition which stretches back over hundreds of years of knowledge progression and I believe it's a tradition which isn't very easy to topple. Books function linearly; they have clear sequences. Sure, it's possible to make a book which goes against the grain, but the basic concept remains distinct. That's also the reason why I'm sticking with actual book making and not shifting my focus to iPhone apps or whatever.

How do you feel when you think of a world which has been completely and entirely captured by photos?

That's obviously a very ambivalent issue. If you look at it critically, then of course there's a continually growing distance and a first and second reality. On the other hand, it's certainly very fascinating to what degree things are becoming accessible, something which has noticeably changed in the past 10 years and is completely different compared to 20 years ago. When I began to create my archive series, for example. Every weekend I went to the flea market and bought a handful of pictures. That was all the raw material I had. The disadvantage was that the pictures always came from one or two generations before my time and I only had a few thousand of them. Today I have access to everything. At the same time, it's almost impossible to have an overview of everything or find a way in. How many of the billions of photos right now on Flickr or Photobucket haven't been tapped yet?

So, intense searching and sampling from the Internet is as conducted by chance as walking along the street and looking through the lens of a camera to find pictures.

That's like what Jorge Louis Borges said. We've got a map which shows us the world on a one-to-one scale. Part of that idea is frightening and I try to work with that scary part.

So you're working in front of a a monitor?

At the moment, yes. Too much, though.

In any case, you explore this interface, which acts as a place to deposit the real world. To what extent do the pictures which you say you don't like but still sample or curate tell something about yourself? What things aren't you taking into consideration?

I can give you a really dumb example which still managed to scare me: A gay friend of mine looks at my work and tells me: "Tits, always tits …" There's not so many of them, just a couple. Yes, but that's a part of me and that's the way all the possible personality aspects and individual preferences at hand play a role. A fondness for certain colors or a type of composition or whatever.

It's true that it's a very personal choice, as it probably is for everyone. But you could try to purposely avoid making it personal. You'd almost expect someone who takes photos from the Internet to want very much to keep to the background. But I'm seeing someone who wants to make a statement.

True, I view my work as something personal. I can also reveal a secret: Many photos were taken by me, but I find it better to say they came from anonymous sources. And I won't tell you which ones I took.

Do you need to take your art seriously? Do you want them to take it seriously?

Nobody has to do anything. I make something and I show something and I don't really care what people do with it afterwards. I'm happy when they do something with it, but I don't have a clue what they should be doing with it.

When you choose your pictures, you're able to recognize different patterns of human behavior, including human needs, dreams, etc. Would you characterize yourself as a friend of the people?

That's a good question … maybe as a potential philanthropist. I'm terribly interested in what's happening in the world and what's happening around me. Even if I don't find everything pleasant, I'm immensely interested in and insatiably curios of human behavior. That's why I'm probably a philanthropist, even when I'm happy to have some peace and quiet now and then.

It could also be ultimately interpeted as a cynical act to gather up pictures in order to hold people's wishes up in front of their faces.

No, no, I hope it's not cynical. I'm aware that's a possible way of looking at it, but I try to keep my cynicism back, although I'm not always successful.

In "Same/Same" the topics picture doubling, visual coincidences, sampling, and the restaging of pictures are discussed. Accompanying these discussions is the idea that there's nothing in photography which hasn't been done before by others, regardless of where you are in the medium, with special focus on the Internet and visual communication therein. How topical do you think this idea is? How can it still be exhausted artistically?

The idea of originality has definitely come to an end. Regardless of what you're doing with a camera today, someone else is doing the same thing at the very same time with their own camera. And that's just the way it is. The quantity of photos was always a very important aspect and with digital photography, where taking photos doesn't cost anything and everyone has some type of camera in their hand, the quantity has exploded through the roof. What's more, both the technical quality as well as the visual quality of photos and cameras has improved a lot. Visual awareness is much more distinct now compared to 20 years ago. That's why it's still a relevant topic, and I think we've only just scratched the surface of its possible implications. It's very popular nowadays, not just in photography but in all media forms, genres, in music and film, and in literature.

Although it's been much more common in music.

True, there's also a more relaxed attitude there, too. If Richard Prince still gets sued due to his works, you really have to ask: "Excuse me, but what century are you living in?"

Do you also think that our concepts of things like copyrights need to change drastically?

Yes, but that's definitely a long, drawn-out process. There are certainly some very strong financial interests who want to block that, too. The important people who are asked about it aren't the artists themselves, but the photography agencies for example, which sit on acquired or inherited copyrights and have a clear interest in keeping the status quo. But I think there's no way around it: modern thinking will eventually become part of the law. It could take one or two decades, but eventually it'll find its way in.

What is photography unable to show?

Photography is obviously bound to images, which limits it quite a bit. But the ways of utilizing photography are endless and that's the most important thing to keep in mind. That will also be the next paradigm shift to occur. If I take two pictures I found and place them together, I'm doing something different than if I actually take a photo myself. I could also use two old photos to the same effect. Placing photos next to each other or on top of each other, or arranging them consecutively is actually much more interesting than running around with a camera and pushing a button.

Do you even consider that photography, or would you describe it as something to do with curating?

To me, it's photography. Many photographers would disagree, but this fixation on the camera and the 'inside the camera' way of thinking don't play that much of a role anymore. Thanks to how our visual awareness has developed up to this point, people know now that sequence, order, context of usage, etc. are much more important than making a single picture or developing your own visual language, which is just nonsense.

You're an artist who works photographically. What's your favorite drink?

Wine, good wine. Mainly red. Like with football, I've also got some thoughts about drinks: Most of them could be banned. Coffee, wine, and water are enough.

What would be the very last picture you'd like to ever see?

Good question. I've never thought about that. I don't know. According to the public's preconceived ideas, we see light. Light's not bad. Definitely better than darkness. I've got a truly horrible concept of hell: Hell is a place where multiple TVs are on and the sound isn't adjusted quite right, and the walls are made up of large posters with bad advertising and everything is way too loud. In that kind of a scenario, maybe darkness isn't so bad after all?

Thank you, thank you, thank you.