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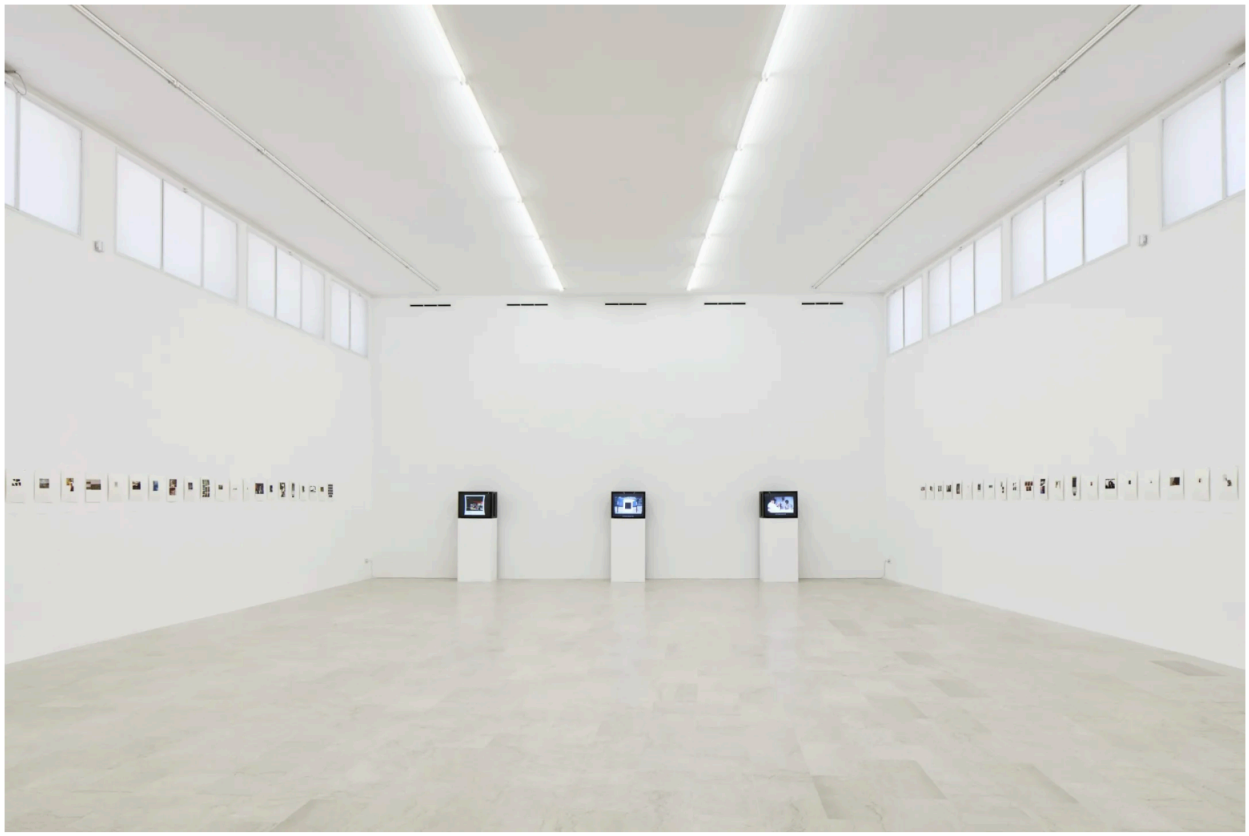

Joachim Schmid, *Photoworks*, 2021, installation view, P420, Bologna (ph. Carlo Favero)

Interview with Joachim Schmid (English version)

Mauro Zanchi: In the exhibition now underway at Galleria P420, in Bologna, you are showing part of the series *Bilder von der Straße* (1982-2012) while a video documents the thousands of images found over almost thirty years, in 25 countries and 123 cities. You considered this series as "a museum of photographic waste", a project that "redefines the genre of street photography". Most of these photographs were intentionally thrown away, often torn up. In your thirty years of research, a complex contradictory dimension has taken shape, in which on the one hand there is the desire to recompose fragments of existence (through the rediscovery of photographs and images of others, where moments that have been lost, or forgotten in the flow of history, or removed, or discarded appear) and on the other hand there is the doubt that it is not possible to do so. What does your work bring to light? What does it actually reveal or denounce?

Joachim Schmid: For me the central aspect is the very affective relationship people have with photographs. As long as nothing goes wrong in life photographs are cherished because they seem to confirm normality and happiness. People did put them in albums (and some still do), display them in their homes, on desktops in their offices, or on the dashboards of their cars that bring them from the one to the other. But then life takes its unexpected and unwanted turns, things go wrong, relationships fall apart etc. The people who throw out photos and often destroy them spend a lot of energy on this process. I think these are attempts to cope with a situation, they are rituals in which the photo often is a substitute for the husband that left his wife or the girlfriend that said good bye. The energy spent in this process volatilises, but in the samples I happened to find and preserve this energy is saved in my work.

Apart from this there's also an accidental, unintentional extra layer in many of the pictures that I like. The prints were out in the streets for a while and street life left its traces on them, scratches, tire and foot prints, deterioration.

And funnily there's also a personal level. Although I don't know anything about these pictures except when and where I found them, they serve as my photo album. Many evoke memories although none was made by myself and none shows any person I know or situation I was involved in.

That's what it is for me. For other people looking at the pictures things may be different, other aspects may play a role.

MZ: Do the torn fragment of a photograph, then pasted onto a blank sheet of paper, or the incompletely reassembled pieces signal something that has been lost? Are the relocated and filed fragments testimonies of the unseen in history or do they highlight more incisively the sense of precariousness? Is the work also an invitation to look back to see if we lost something important in history (and in art history), which would be useful to reconsider for the continuation or to try to take new directions?

JS: You can look at it that way, there often was something lost. Someone may have literally lost a portrait they kept in the wallet. Or someone lost a lover or the belief in the lover. When looking at these anonymous pictures we look both at something unseen and at a reminder of precarious human relations. I guess one can see references to a wider context. There's never just one way, the way we look at works very much depends on the individual viewer's background, preferences, preoccupations etc.

MZ: In the *Photogenetic Drafts* series (1991) you created portraits of non-existent people from the gene pool of the population of a small town in Bavaria. The 32 portraits were taken from the archive of a commercial photographer who donated the negatives he no longer needed to The Institute for the Reprocessing of Used Photographs. The photographer cut up his negatives to prevent future use, with the goal of precluding new prints. You combined two negatives into one image. With an ironic look, you played with combining different personalities, mixing sexes and ages, recreating even androgynous figures or ambiguous faces. Years later, how do you reread this series, also in light of current experiments in genetic engineering, recombinations, and gender issues?

JS: Frankly I don't look at it in any different way than thirty years ago when I made the work. All the ideas you mentioned were there back then, gender issues were not unknown even if they didn't play such a prominent role as today. The door to genetic engineering seemed to be wide open and there was a broad discussion of the potential and danger, often mingled with horror visions of Frankensteinian monsters. The work's title was chosen for this reason, but also because the method of creating these impossible portraits was actually very similar to what happens in genetic manipulation. Existing information is split and recombined.

MZ: For the past ten years or so I have been frequenting flea markets and vintage photo fairs, and so over time I acquired thousands of photographs, which from time to time I have placed in groups divided by themes, by connections of meaning. The intention was to constitute an archive of photographic memory, in a historical period in which most people forget very quickly what happened in the past, in a time in which every day enormous flows of images and other information continually replace what belonged to the previous days and weeks. After a few years I asked myself: why did I collect all this material, where are stored multiple moments of the lives of others? At first, after a few months, it even seemed to me to feel the weight of the mass of material that had been dispersed, to see again the faces met in the photo trouvée and then become familiar to me, to imagine the continuation of the scenes in the photographs. And now they are calling, like voices or murmurs locked in drawers, where thousands of found photos have been put together, coming from different times and places. I tried to put myself in the place of the people who held those photographs. I imagined juxtaposing my fingerprints with those who held the affective photographs. In some way, the memory archive can also be considered a useful device for establishing an empathic relationship, for feeling what is no longer physically there and can only be imagined through photographic memories. Sometimes, however, they seem to me to be places of forgotten memory, findings of forgetfulness, a chorus of ghosts. How did you dialogue with your archive of memory? How has your artistic planning shifted memorial issues towards other perspectives?

JS: I know what you talk about, I heard those voices myself. It may sound cold but I found it necessary and helpful to establish a strict professional relationship with other people's photographs. They are material. I know someone must have made them, I know they may mean or maybe meant a lot for someone, but when working with this material I am able to ignore all this. I am interested in the pictures, not in the life of the person who made the photos and not in the life of the persons depicted. It may be sad that personal things end up in flea markets and thus in the hands of people like you and me who didn't know the photographers or the persons depicted, but that's the way it is. I can only work with these pictures if there's enough distance.

MZ: When you are in a flea market, how do you decide which photograph to choose among many? What have been the various passages, developments, evolutions in the course of your collection over the years? Does the conceptual part of your collection start from the very moment you find it?

JS: This changed a lot in the course of time. When I worked a lot with snapshots in the 1980s and 90s, I went to the flea market every weekend, and because things were super cheap back then I basically bought things in bulk. Later I would sort it, pick the photos I found useful and threw out the rest. By doing this I helped creating the situation we are now complaining about. Prices went up. So a few decades ago I had an abundance of material and the work developed by sifting through these piles. Nowadays I buy very selectively, often nothing, but I look until I find the one thing. I didn't even know it existed but the moment I see it I know that's what I was looking for. Several of the works I made in the past years are based on material found this way, among them *Estrelas amadas*, *The Artist's Model*, and *Il Mare*.

MZ: In *Il Mare* (2018) you juxtaposed fragments of a vintage book with images of wave surfaces – bought in a second-hand store in Rome – and images of the sea taken recently. What did you actually juxtapose, in this middle ground where the desire to contemplate meets the human propensity to want to rationally subdue something that belongs to the wild and chaotic nature?

JS: That copy of the book I found was particularly attractive because of the many underlinings and annotations by its previous owner and reader. Someone studied this book thoroughly. And I studied that person's traces. So I got caught in an anonymous person's desire to understand the sea. I struggled for a long time trying to make something out of it, and eventually I arrived at this juxtaposition – the linearity of writing and scientific thinking on one side and on the other side a subject that existed before linearity was even a thing.

MZ: I think about *Tellaro* (1980) by Luigi Ghirri, a photograph in which the image of the expanse of sea – seen from a panoramic point – is compared with the word MARE (in capital letters) in the foreground on the railing. Ghirri emphasized the relationship between visual and verbal language, between something that belongs to nature (the sea) and the name that represents it and constitutes its linguistic sign. You, on the other hand, used the time factor, juxtaposing images of the sea in the past with those of the sea today. Do you use time as a medium at the service of your conceptual intuitions?

JS: In this particular work time clearly is an issue. The textual fragments that build the center of the work are all from the book's first chapter describing the history of the exploration of the sea. So we have particles of a timeline spanning millennia. On the other hand there are photographs of the subject the book is about, and that's one of the very few timeless things. The sea was the same now and then (except for its pollution), and it will be the same as long as Earth rotates and the Moon orbits Earth.

MZ: The ancient Greeks used different words for time: χρόνος (chronos), which is chronological and sequential time; καιρός (kairos), the moment in an indefinite period of time in which something special happens; αἰών (Aion), which refers to eternal time. What time do you carry within your works?

JS: Ancient Greek understanding of time is not really my expertise but as far as I can see kairos seems to be a nearby idea. In photography there are basically two times: *now* and *not now*. The moment someone makes a photograph *now* is meant to be frozen and preserved, and everything that follows is *not now*. We look at photographs and see *not now*, no matter whether *now* was a minute or a century ago. In modern smartphone photography the distance between *now* and *not now* is minimized, they have nearly become the same. Snapshots are not meant to create memory any more but are made for the moment and replaced by the next one the next moment.

MZ: In a previous interview you defined your work as "an irregular, volatile and random process", discontinuous even. Could this lack of linear and progressive development also be understood as the "catching of breath" of which Benjamin writes, recalling Holderlin, as something that interrupts the linear path of thought, not to put it out of order but to revive it?

JS: Yes, I think that's a way you can put it. There's no masterplan but I go from A to B, not knowing whether the next step will take me to C or to E. Once I arrive at B I take a break, look around and reconsider the options. Maybe back to A? Or jump ahead to F? Or rather leave the alphabet and continue with numbers? We'll see once I made the next step.

MZ: What is the relationship between your writing and the manipulation of images?

JS: They are separate things. In the beginning of my career I did a lot of writing but the longer I worked the more I got interested in getting my hands onto images. The past years I have been writing little, and if I do write it has little to do with my own artwork.

MZ: Did some interviews or exchanges with other artists or intellectuals (i.e. an exchange between the artistic practice and the critical part) happen to illuminate for some reason aspects of your work that you had not identified? Did you then look at your work in a new way?

JS: Yes, that does happen occasionally, and if it does I am happy. As an artist you work and you think you know what you do (to a certain extent) and then the work goes out into the world, and once it's out there it takes on a life of its own. People react to it, and many reactions are predictable and not very interesting, but then once in a while you meet that one person who has a particular sensibility and his or her own way of looking at things, putting them in unexpected contexts and you realize that your work actually contains or triggers something you never thought of. Not that it would be needed, but these moments are welcome reminders of the fact that every work is completed not by the artist but in the viewer's mind.

Joachim Schmid, *Bilder von der Straße* (1982–2012), fotografie trovate montate su cartone, Courtesy the artist & P420, Bologna (ph. Dario Lasagni)