ATP DIARY

J. Schmid, Other People's Photographs, 2008-2011, 96 artist book, cm.18×18 , 36 pages each (Things-int detail)
Courtesy the artist and P420, Bologna

Interview with Joachim Schmid

By Sara Benaglia and Mauro Zanchi

SB/MZ: 40 years after you started working on found photography, what are the most interesting drifts that can be made today by your intuition and this kind of look? How can you go beyond the current mainstream trend of those who work from found photography?

JS: My work is an ongoing research of visual culture with a particular focus on non-professional photography. That's a vast field and surprisingly there's still unmapped territory. Whether or not part of it is "interesting" I only know after stepping into it. Of course I am not the only one working in this field, and some works based on found photography may now be compatible with the art world's mainstream. I do the work I wish to do; neither becoming part of the mainstream nor distancing myself from it plays any role in my mind.

SB/MZ: Which has been the evolution of this practice?

JS: The evolution of my work was and is subject to the same factors that characterize evolution in its Darwinian sense. It's an erratic, volatile random process rather than a development following any logic. Maybe you could call it continuous discontinuity. The only progress is that I try to limit repetition, in particular avoiding mistakes I made before.

SB/MZ: How has the approach changed through the Internet tap, search engines and the flood of images?

JS: The flood of images isn't a new phenomenon, you can trace the topic back at least a century. But the numbers have exploded of course after digital photography became a popular pastime. The amalgamation of phone and camera was the final boost. Now photographs are the constant background noise of every human activity. The really crucial thing however is not the number of photographs that are being made but the fact that many of them are public now. A generation ago the majority of photographs were in private, corporate, or governmental archives with very limited access for a limited number of people only. Now an ever-growing number of images are accessible for virtually everybody. Online photo hosting created an utterly new visual environment. And the search engine makes it manageable, at least to a certain extent. However, the search is based on verbal input; many photos are uploaded without any captions or descriptions and for this reason they are not included in the search results. Thus online photo hosting sites turned into tremendous digital landfills of visual trash.

All of this has had a big impact on my work. I have access now to many more photographs than I could possibly ever look at. So does everybody else. In many respects things have become very easy. You are looking for something, you start the engine, and there it is, in all its diversity. You wish for the blue flower, you get thousands of them in no time. And that's as boring as it sounds. When I explore sites like Flickr I usually don't look for anything specific but I study the incoming stream of uploads, and occasionally I discover something that catches my attention. I only know what I look for when I see it.

SB/MZ: Compared to Baldessari, Hans-Peter Feldmann and Boltanski how did you direct the found material?

JS: I won't compare my work to the work of other artists. That's the job of art historians. Birds don't do the work of ornithologists.

SB/MZ: After exploring Flickr with the 96 volumes of the *Other People's Photographs* project, where did you direct your attention?

JS: Compiling these 96 volumes was an enormous effort. It took more than three years and in that time I looked at Flickr for up to twelve hours a day, sometimes probably even more. After a while I started feeling like a junkie who's appalled by his own addiction. Looking at other people's photos for such a long time is not good for your mental well-being. When I started the project I did have an idea but no plan. But it became clear after some time that this had to stop at some point. When the project was completed I didn't look at any photo websites for quite a while. Instead I went back to looking more at my physical environment again, including occasional visits to flea markets. The result are works like *Estrelas amadas* or *The Artist's Model*. These are also based on found imagery, but on photos of an industrial nature that were personalized in various ways by their previous owners. I like how photographs are being used and altered by people, how they are shaped according to someone's wishes and obsessions. That's probably even more interesting than the snapshots people make themselves.

SB/MZ: Are you still going out of the house today in search of concrete ideas or relying on the chance factor, the chance encounter at a flea market? If yes, what does it mean for an artist to start again from something he had probed many years before, having also experienced the innumerable material of the net?

JS: Chance does play a crucial role. As I mentioned before, there's always an idea what I may want to do but not really a plan. I have always been open to chance encounters, many of my works react to something I find or to a situation I find myself in. When re-visiting a situation after some years that situation isn't the same any more, and I'm not the same I was before either.

SB/MZ: The photos end up in flea markets mainly after the death of their protagonists. What does it mean for you to work with what has disappeared, with the loss, with the trace of moments in someone's life that is now gone? How do you project yourself in all the stories of others that have come to you?

JS: When working with snapshots from flea markets in the 1980s and 90s there were two main problems: first, only a relatively small number of photos were available but for identifying patterns I needed many; second, because of the fact that photographs usually are sold at these markets only after a person's death I was always one or two generations behind my own time. For these reasons I was happy to say good-bye to flea markets when online photo hosting sites became a viable alternative.

Both when working with flea market and with online photos I always tried to keep it impersonal. The work is not about the persons depicted and not about the persons who made the pictures but it's about the pictures. It isn't about myself either although people who study the work may come to conclusions about me. That's ok but I don't play a very active role in this process.
Not getting involved in a stranger's life can be difficult when you have all the photos of that person on your desk. Sometimes you learn quite a lot about that person, and it's often not exactly what you wanted to know. To avoid getting too much involved in an unwanted way I took photos out of context, ignoring any biographical information, strictly concentrating on the one aspect I was interested in at the time. Any historian's hair would probably stand on end if they watched my work in progress.

SB/MZ: In your research, how do you expose yourself to the world? Do you remember any particular ecstatic or revealing moment when you found photographs or images, which you probably needed to meet at that exact moment of your journey?

JS: I walk through the world with open eyes and try to remain open-minded, ready to pick up whatever may be useful along the way. Of course there were serendipitous moments, encounters, findings – without them you are lost if you don't have a plan. Most of my art originated from such a moment of serendipity. It's the perfect start, the rest is work.

SB/MZ: What strategies did you put in place after compulsive observation of other people's photos to free yourself from the streams of images of people using Flickr and the inevitable addiction?

JS: Cold turkey. No daily routine any more of switching on the computer in the morning and switching off at night. I didn't visit any photo sites for months. Go for walks, free the mind, re-direct my attention, read, go to the movies.

SB/MZ: Most people always reproduce (both in the analogue and digital age and probably in the quantum machine age) certain images of themselves, both in the intimate sphere and regarding their role in the world. Does the same projection also occur when one collects material that comes from others?

JS: I guess that's a serious danger. There are preferences, habits, patterns of perception. I try to be aware of them as far as possible. It helps that I am guided by the material at hand and not by a pre-conceived plan.

SB/MZ: Have you ever considered or worked on the question of images taken on a momentary whim (obviously with a view to the snapshots taken with mobile phones) and that are not looked at by anyone, photographs that are forgotten after five minutes or those that are stored somewhere and are not looked at anymore? Can you tell us about the new one that keeps burying the already taken with countless other forgettable shots?

JS: I'm afraid that's true for the majority of photos made today. Considering the number of photos people churn out it is rather safe to assume that many of them are looked at once and never again. Some are shared on social media, replaced by the next one in no time, they move down the timeline and disappear in the abyss. Studying Flickr and similar sites I came across accounts with six, seven, eight figure numbers of photos, most of them untagged, identified only by the file number attributed by the camera. It's nearly impossible to find them again, impossible to remember all of them, and unlikely that anyone will ever look for them. Often I wonder why anyone would even care to upload them. It seems to be an automatic process, upload the entire batch of the day, empty the camera's or the phone's memory, make space for the next batch, move on. And frankly, the vast majority of them are totally and utterly uninteresting if you were not at the party where the photos were made; made for the moment, looked at once, pushed to the background by the next series, forgotten. There are also lots of abandoned accounts. People do make and share photos for a while, they get interested in other things, they move on, never log in again, but their photos are there until the server breaks down or the host disappears.

SB/MZ: We are very interested in your project *X Marks the Spot*, which is about Dealey Plaza in Dallas, where Kennedy was assassinated. In this project the photos show people standing in the middle of the street, right at the spot where the murder took place, also filmed by a webcam that transmits footage of the street. What is the relationship between watching and being watched, in the relationship between freedom of action and control from above?

JS: That's one of the collateral products of *Other People's Photographs*. Looking at the constant stream of uploads without any particular emphasis I came across photos of persons standing by an X painted on the pavement of a street. It was easy to find out what was going on, and strange to see that people did it. I started gathering these photos. They didn't make it into the big project. Later I did some research around this phenomenon and discovered the webcam placed exactly at the location where the assassin stood. The camera's perspective matches that of the gun. I started watching the webcam's footage for months and grabbed frames whenever I saw people taking photographs at the spot. It's a closed circle, the webcam records people taking photos and some of these photos are later shared on social media. Both are accessible instantly to someone thousands of miles away. I watched people being watched. Freedom is not something that came to my mind in this context, except maybe the freedom of turning everything into a business. The webcam is operated by a museum which is a commercial enterprise as usual in the US, and the X is painted on the pavement by souvenir hawkers, attracting clients who risk their lives for a snapshot that wasn't their idea.

SB/MZ: What is your relationship between a first idea and the building of a project through the book?

JS: In the beginning I find something, often I have to look for more, and when I think there's sufficient material I start to work without knowing what it's going to be, a book, a work for the wall, or whatever. Work means looking and looking again until I think I understand what I look at. Then select and arrange the parts until the newly created combination works. At some point in this process it becomes clear what the most suitable form for the respective material is.