

Joachim Valentin interviews

Manfred Koch and Rolf-Bernhard Essig about the photo cycle „Passed over“

Mr Koch, you have been working for quite a while on the photo cycle „Passed over“. How did you get the idea of photographing zebra crossings in Paris?

The first pictures were taken in 2004. That year I had a strange encounter when crossing a street in Montmartre. From a zebra crossing in rather bad repair a figure was looking at me, and it appeared like drawn by the cartoonist Lorient – Frenchmen, by the way, see Gérard Depardieu in it.

Then I discovered more and more of those anthropomorph beings; to me they resembled figures that life has left its mark on: kicked, mistreated, yet powerful creatures which radiated a peculiar vividness.

So „Passed over“ is to be understood quite literally and at the same time it has a metaphorical meaning.

Yes, that's right. I am fascinated by these encounters, these sudden, poetic moments. Amidst the ordinary, the seemingly banal something comes to life, which I can grasp with the camera and condense into a composition: lines and spaces form figures and turn into images and metaphors.

Your photographs appear to be composed purposely. Does the designing of the image happen in the instant of taking the picture, on the zebra crossing, or later at the computer?

When I have spotted a motif, the photographic composition ensues almost on

its own. Only occasionally must I slightly modify the picture in a follow-up adaptation.

That means the picture is complete at the moment of taking it?

Yes, it is, but only in my head. Later, on the computer screen, I have to develop the raw material that the camera provides and accentuate it, so that the motif can come out more clearly.

So this means manipulations, which would not be possible without digital treatment?

I would not like to manipulate. "Manipulation" sounds like cheating. I would like to make things more visible. I want to help the motif to express itself. This is an aim I pursue throughout the entire photographic process, starting with the composition of the picture.

When applying subsequent digital treatment I try to confine myself to work out the motif by partial darkening and by intensifying the contrast between bright and dark.

This is easier to do in digital treatment, but it is not fundamentally different from the classical work in the photo laboratory I did for many years.

What it is all about, from my point of view, is "seeing", seeing the real things, which is more than identifying and classifying objects. Like Paul Valéry put it: "Seeing is forgetting the name of what you are seeing."

Surely you like Paul Klee's quote then: „Art does not reflect the visible, but makes visible“.

Yes, I like this saying, it certainly hits the core of art. However, it is only partially commensurate with my photos. I would not like to give up the attempt of showing the visible. If the visible touches a deep dimension in the beholder, if in the material something is revealed that eludes concrete definition, then the picture is alive.

Mr Essig, you have composed poems attached to the photographic cycle. What relation is there between pictures and texts?

Mr Koch and I got together at an exposition featuring pictures by W. Kohn. Together with my wife I had selected and written texts on those pictures. At that occasion Koch asked me if I could consider something similar for his project on zebra crossings titled "Passed over". To be honest, first I felt rather sceptical about it, but that changed the moment I saw his pictures.

Everyone knows the feeling of being "passed over". And hopefully the one of being found, too. Not only because of the connection between both I found the cycle pretty alluring and inspiring. Ideas sprang up almost by themselves. I recalled researchers and artists corresponding to Koch's pictures, his altered view on the world and to the city of Paris. Playing with perspectives, discoveries, time and its effect are motifs that I hold dear as well, whether it is about Perotin, Lee Miller, Charles Baudelaire, or Robert Koch. Thus there are many relations between the poems and the pictures, but they aren't easy or apparent. What I'd like most is a reception as

merry and free as I was able to find it in a good deal of beholders of the pictures.

Mr Koch, what is the best way of approaching your photographs? Aren't the viewers' interpretations often rather divergent?

To me the pictures imply three levels: the first is that there are lines and spaces – they form an abstract graphical composition.

If you look at it for a longer time, or from a distance, it is often possible to detect shapes in those forms that are man-like, or animal-like, more or less clearly, but never unambiguous. Sometimes the break-ups in the asphalt attach something dynamic, something vivid to these figures, also in a metaphorical sense; they aren't static.

The third level is, in a sense, the essential one: when the pictures cause a dialogue with the viewer, when something cracks open in him, when associations, thoughts, memories, emotions, perhaps even fears come alive.

The most important thing for me is that the pictures set something in motion; they must be open enough for everyone to behold his own outer and inner images and those can be quite different from my pictures! The photographs are not cryptic images, which have to be deciphered and that's it. Anyway, the pictures have a life of their own; just the other day my little daughter explained one of my pictures to me, leading me to a yet new discovery of it.