

PRESS RELEASE

EXHIBITION

SGUARDO DI MEDUSA
(The Medusa's Gaze)

ORGANIZER

Ida Gianelli

PRESS OFFICE

Massimo Melotti

CATALOGUE

Fabbri Editori

TEXTS

Giorgio Verzotti

INAUGURATION

Thursday 4 July 1991
7.0 pm
(press meeting 6.0 pm)

DURATION

July 5 - September 27 1991

OPENING HOURS

10.0 am - 7.0 pm
closed on Mondays

VENUE

Castello di Rivoli
Museo d'Arte Contemporanea
Piazza del Castello
10098 Rivoli To

The exhibition "Sguardo di Medusa" (The Medusa's Gaze) will be held at the Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea from 5 July to 27 September 1991. It is a collective exhibition of contemporary European and American artists who favour photography.

Sguardo di Medusa (The Medusa's Gaze), organized by Ida Gianelli, curator of the Castello di Rivoli museum, presents, for the first time in Italy, about sixty photographic works by ten of the most active proponents of the search of new modes of expression. Starting from artists like Andy Warhol, who used the mechanical eye to produce art, the contemporary generation has adopted photography to represent visual reality. This process no longer involves the emotions; the artist does not participate in the act of expression. It is a registration of factual data which almost crystallizes reality: the gaze of the Medusa.

The selected works offer a map of faces and situations in today's world which the artists put forward for comparison, as specimens against which to verify contemporary day-to-day reality.

The artists included in the exhibition are: Jean-Marc Bustamante, Clegg & Guttmann, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Günther Förg, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Andres Serrano, Laurie Simmons, Thomas Struth, Jeff Wall.

JEAN-MARC BUSTAMANTE

Among the most interesting French artists of the young generations, Jean-Marc Bustamante (Toulouse, 1952) uses photography in parallel with his sculpture. Sculpture and photography, often exhibited together, are the two phases of the exhibition, a polysemic dialogue into which the visitor is invited to read several meanings, several levels of meaning, none of which predominates. (...)

In his photography, Bustamante insistently follows a precise theme, the figures which the artist calls "figures of decivilization": a stripping process which betokens the transformation from one state to another and does not measure itself against the representative act. The reality which the photograph reflects is the reality of its language, its articulation, its canons, as well as being a reality outside its own specific system. That is, this reality, too, is posited as a dimension beyond, but reality is not the theme here. The artist uses photography, as we have seen, as another pole of sculpture. The types which he favours are a sort of "landscape photography", which he uses just as a type, where the theme of the operation becomes its very typicality. Bustamante's landscapes are photographed following precise rules which mould all of his creative work, and which by their very repetition become a sort of yardstick. The places the artist chooses are invariably the surroundings of Barcellona or the Costa Brava; he regularly visits these areas by car, stopping whenever a particular aspect of the environment seems appropriate to the forms he has already planned. (...)

In the "Lumières" cycle of works, which is Bustamante's most recent work (since 1989), the artist has resorted to 'images trouvés', black and white photographs of interiors illuminated by artificial light. The light becomes the figure around which the work is materially organized. The image is silk-screen printed onto transparent perspex sheets which project from a wall. The conditions under which the image is visible are the conditions of space, light, the wall in front of which the plates are placed, which acts as their background, and which shows them as flickering traces in empty space.

from the text of Giorgio Verzotti

CLEGG & GUTTMANN

The work of Michale Clegg (Dublin, 1957) and Martin Guttman (Jerusalem, 1957) is part of those trends in American art first seen at the beginning of the sixties, and now established, which belong to the so-called "post modern" themes. In the United States this term indicates that search for new forms of expression which arose during the eighties in opposition to the dominating pictorial neo-expressionism, and whose aim was to revive art's critical stance towards the cultural industry. (...)

The commissioned group portrait is the fulcrum around which Clegg & Guttman's work mainly revolves, and it is in this area that they have been most able to verify their theses. These photographic portraits have a sumptuous appearance, they possess all the canons of officiality and portray elegant persons of high society. The colours, the settings and above all the position of the body is reminiscent of the Dutch and Flemish portraitists of the seventeenth century. As in the Van Dick family portraits, for example, the various members are almost never looking in the same direction, and this expedient, in photography, creates an alienating effect. But then alienation governs these compositions entirely: if we look just a little more carefully, the sumptuousness of the settings appears to be fake. (...)

The treatment of the landscape is no different; it is treated as a conventional style of painting which photography reinterprets, countering the rules of painting with those of its own medium.

Clegg & Guttman's landscapes are "anonymous", too; that is, they are shots of exteriors with as few typical characteristics as possible, natural environments scored by motorways, crossed by electricity of telephone lines, dotted with bill-boards. It is impossible to say where these photographs have been taken, in what part of Europe or America, because the photographs show, or better report, an environment which can be found anywhere throughout the industrialized world. It is a world of contaminated nature and of the standardization of life-styles under the banner of consumerism, where whoever does not participate in the opulence of the powerful, ironically celebrated in the portraits, is condemned.

from the text of Giorgio Verzotti

PETER FISCHLI & DAVID WEISS

Peter Fischli (Zurich, 1952) and David Weiss (Zurich, 1946) are an outstanding "duo" among more recent trends, and have been working together now for a decade. Their installations, made up of sculptures and above all of photographs, have gained international notice for the strongly ironic vein, sometimes comical, with which they juxtapose the world of art with images from day-to-day life. (...)

In the cycles of works dedicated to "Airports" (1988-89), Fischli and Weiss transform themselves into the ironic counterpart of the Baudelairian "painter of modern life", and adopt photography as one of the most pertinent mediums for its presentation. The aeroplane is chosen as an obvious symbol of modernity: having cancelled out long distances and been instrumental in the creation of the "global village", the aeroplane alone symbolizes the idea of progress. But this objective reality has become inextricably associated with a mythology, and it is really this latter which the artists take as their theme. In their colour photographs, large and elegantly framed following the canons of "museum style", images of airports alternate with images of well known tourist destinations, from the Tour Eiffel to the pyramids in Egypt.

The "style" of the photographs perfectly imitates that of travel agency and air-line brochures, with all their emanations of exotic glamour and tranquillizing kitsch. (...)

With their most recent cycles of works, small photographs in glaring colours, the artists intend to build a sort of encyclopaedia of the common-place (they did something similar with their series of tiny tera-cotta sculptures portraying moments of ordinary life, which only the small size made touching). Here they portray snowy landscapes, night views of city lights, post-modern hotel furnishings. The style adopted is, if you want, once more that of the air-line magazine: technically perfect, but invariably seeking after effect, half way between objective documentation and its chicly softened version, and sometimes its kitsch degradation.

If this softening always contains a treacherous "promesse de bonheur", treacherous because it is made to seem easily obtainable, Fischli and Weiss's encyclopaedia shows it in all its fascination, which is sometimes undeniable, and at the same time its lack of substance.

from the text of Giorgio Verzotti

GÜNTHER FÖRG

Born in Fussen in 1952, Günther Förg is now recognized as one of the most interesting German artists, and as a protagonist of that search for a new form which would reconsider the experience of conceptualism, of poverism and of minimalism, and which came to the fore in the mid-eighties as an alternative to the pictorial expressionism dominant at that time. (...)

Förg's photographs bring us images of an architecture which is symbolic of something beyond the inner dimension, of a domain where equally rigorous rules of order are in force. Rigorous in its truest sense, of an aspiration which is rational and thus fully knowable.

Inside a space defined by figures of disjunction, architecture is seen as the sphere of conjunction. Conjunction, that is, between the a priori and the phenomenological, which the artist has expressed in its purest essence. Förg says that his large black and white photographs are to be seen as so many "windows", open, we might add, not onto an 'otherness' with respect to that set of interaction triggered off by the act of artistic expression, but as the verification of those interactions in the sphere of 'livability'.

The photographs are of works from the period of the Italian Rationalism, chosen as a historical sphere where that set of interactions has been verified, or of architectural works which are subject to the same set of problems. Thus we have images of Florence Railway Station, of the Palazzo della Triennale in Milan, of the "Casa del Fascio" in Como, of Villa Malaparte in Capri, but also glimpses of works by Le Corbusier or by Mies van

REGIONE PIEMONTE BANCA CRT FIAT GRUPPO GFT
CASTELLO DI RIVOLI

der Rohe. And again examples of Italian Fascist architecture, of the EUR at Rome University, chosen as formal structures, in which the rules by which they were built are explicitly expressed, although their rhetorical grandiloquence invalidates any truly rational hypothesis. (...)

from the text of Giorgio Verzotti

ANDREAS GURSKY

Together with artists like Candida Höfer, Axel Hutte, Pietra Wunderlich, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth and others, Andreas Gursky is an important proponent of those recent trends in German art which take photography as the exclusive tool of expression. This is known as the "new German photography": an approach to the medium, and to the reality which this medium depicts, which is as neutral as possible.

The medium is used in the most elementar way, making use of no particular lenses, without attempting any particular effect in the framing, avoiding all possible distorsion in defining the spaces and in focussing on the subjects. All of these artists have studied at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art under Bernd Becher who, with his wife Hilla, is one of the most important contemporary German artists. (...)

Andreas Gursky appears to escape from that systematic classification which can be applied to similar artists; his visual repertory already contains images which vary widely one from another.

Panoramic views of the Rhine or of Garda Lake, mountain landscapes of images of water-falls, crowded swimming pools, railway stations such as the one at Oporto, football matches, flyovers seen from below, or more simply people strolling, the unifying elements in this wide variety of themes consist in the very normality of the situations portrayed, situations which have nothing particularly strange or dramatic about them, as well as in the way they are photographed, almost always from a point above ground level. This gives his photographs a greater sense of

space, and removes any hierarchical relationship from the various elements. This effect is accentuated by the fact that the photographs are often relatively small. There is a unifying theme, in point of fact, and it concerns those areas given over to free time, or, on the contrary, in his most recent works, to work.

Unlike Struth or Höfer, who show us deserted scenes, Gursky's places, whether closed or open, whether predisposed or not to certain functions, are populated, or could be populated. The natural landscapes are not seen as an alternative, exotic or wild, but as the tourist's banal destination, and the chromatic effects of the water-falls or the mist in the mountains, with their picturesque qualities, accentuate this sense of tamed nature. (...)

from the text of Giorgio Verzotti

THOMAS RUFF

Portraits, architecture, starry skies, and the images taken from the daily newspapers go to make up Thomas Ruff's visual vocabulary (born in Zell am Harmesbach in 1958). These selected subjects are stripped of every redundant line, so as to reveal them as objectively as possible.

Ruff's photography stresses the pure process of reproduction of the image, which is characteristic of the medium. In this he follows the indications of Bernd and Hilla Becher, who were his teachers at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art. The subjective element lies entirely in the choice of subject, which is entirely arbitrary and unconnected to any uniform theme (unlike the Bechers, who have taken industrial architecture as their theme).

In Ruff's work, the opposing criteria of subjectivity of the choice and objectivity in the treatment of the image become the contrasting poles of a dialectic which, in the end, makes it debatable whether photography can presume to be a neutral documentation of reality. The portraits, on which the artist concentrated in 1984, are perhaps his best-known and most characteristic work: the stripping process is clearer here. The persons they portray are fairly similar, all prevalently of the same generation, race and social position. Thus we have a gallery of young Germans of the middle or lower-middle class, whom Ruff meets daily in Düsseldorf, where he lives, and whom he photographs with the ascetic meticulousness of an archivist making a catalogue of physiognomy. (...)

Ruff has treated the buildings (since 1987) in a very similar way. Buildings are equivalent to human faces, the neutrality of

the photography forces us to consider them as objects. The frontal view now presents us with houses which, architecturally, are of no particular significance, which even are of rather a banal type, the "functional" type dominating in all of our cities. The photograph shows us only the facade, it tells us nothing of the structure: here, too, the information is reduced to a minimum. The building, in the same way as the portrait, is considered as pure surface, as a "flatness", and Ruff's work revolves, we might say, around the analysis of the potential "flattening" which is part of the photographic medium. The images of starry skies, on which Ruff has been working since 1989, are also flattened, like decorative patterns. These are not photographs taken directly, but from the negatives which the artist has bought from an observatory in Chile. After the portraits and the architecture, subjects so close to us as to become banal, the artist now turns to things infinitely far away, which only the scientific photography of an observatory can, in some way, bring closer. The artist comments ironically on the limits of the technical medium, giving it the impossible job of attesting to infinity.

from the text by Giorgio Verzotti

ANDRES SERRANO

Like many of his colleagues, in particular American ones, belonging to the most recent currents, Serrano (born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1951) rejects the hypothesis of subjective expressiveness. He rather starts from the tradition of the ready-made and of the conceptual analyses of the instruments, and indeed he uses instruments with extreme freedom. Serrano talks about instinctive choices, where the analysis follows after the action, and the method is based on immediacy. It is not the process, though, which gives the artistic work its quality, as happened in conceptual art, but rather the result. Beauty, believes Serrano, should be sought as the element which can save us, redeem us from alienation. The underlying premise of immediacy is to link the artistic fact to a disalienating cultural practice. Liberation cannot be immediate but will come about through the mediation of a prefiguration (the beautiful) and through an indication of method (critique). Serrano's critique revolves around the social system as the generator of emargination, and around the religious institution as an instrument of repression of sexuality. (...)

And if the social order is based on the production of emargination, suffering, poverty, with his photographs of "Nomads", the homeless of New York, the artist only re-introduces into the scene what the scene had banished. In the heart of post-modern society, where any antagonistic stance loses all meaning, where the very concept of the real is no longer thinkable, the artist summons up the very reality of need as an irriducible factor of resistance to the regime of

simulations. No new thought, no plan for new cultural work can ignore this truth. As Cornel West has written, there is "a reality which cannot be known" and which the artist shows us as the very image of the false conscience.

from the text by Giorgio Verzotti

LAURIE SIMMONS

Photography is the main vehicle of the icons of the consumer society, the most suitable for the diffusion of its ideology. The strategy common to many artists, and many American artists in particular, is to act on those icons to reveal the underlying ideology, or, in other words, to point up their latent meaning by acting on their manifest meaning. Along with other artists, from Cindy Sherman to Sarah Charlesworth and Barbara Kruger, Laurie Simmons (Great Neck, New York, 1949) has always worked in this direction, aiming to uncover the stereotypes with which the mass media construct the female image and legitimize its configuration within the collective set of images (...)

In her earliest works, the image of the woman, always the protagonist, become literally the image of the object. The woman is substituted by a small plastic moulded figure, roughly outlined and somewhat graceless. This derisory mock-up is photographed in front of obviously faked backgrounds, projections of slides of conventionally luxurious rooms. The little plastic statue is extraneous to the scene portrayed: the relationship of non-participation indicates the passivity induced in the consumer and the substantial alienation. The artist is not so much dealing with the consumption of objects in general as with those status-symbols which idealize the banality of the goods. (...)

In her most recent works, though, we find the body entirely substituted by a singular metaphor: the eroticized object. The images which Simmons now gives us, in large colour or black and

white photographs, are those of the most diverse objects, a bag, a pistol, a perfume holder, but all with female legs. The legs of small dolls, clearly pin-up girl style, have been fixed to the actual objects, and here the artist has taken inspiration from an American advertising campaign of the fifties (in reality anticipated by certain futuristic inventions for the theatre). In this way we have a perfect representation of the essence of the object-symbol, its value, that is, as an erotic fetish. Fetishism is the very nature of the goods bewitched by these symbols, because the consumption of such goods acts as compensation for the suitably repressed libidinal investment.

from the text by Giorgio Verzotti

THOMAS STRUTH

Thomas Struth's approach to photography is, as he himself says, "shy". His images have no "creative" elaborations, they do not testify to any interest for particular biases of shots other than the elementary ones of the front view, nor for any bizarre elements in the mounting or presentation of the finished work. For Struth, photography is a highly informative medium, and the information must concern new, unpredictable aspects of reality, above all that which, wrongly, we think we already know well. Subjectivity is not involved in Struth's work, except in the choice of particular subject which the photograph documents. Struth was born in Geldern in 1954, and lives in Düsseldorf where he has studied at the Academy of Art under Gerhard Richter and Bernd Becher, from whom he has inherited a non-subjective, distinctly conceptual vision of artistic works. (...)

The artist has declared a polemic intent: his black and white photographs of deserted urban scenes without any human presence are all, without distinction, infused with a strong atmosphere of melancholy. The city is seen as a place of alienation, of pollution, of danger threatening our physical and psychological well-being, and in this sense architecture has a certain responsibility. "I think the role of architecture as expressive of the values and structures of society", says the artist, "has been underestimated". The subjects he deals with tend to make this expressive function, which is inherent but not always explicit, emerge, in the way of life which architecture organizes. And Struth's insistence on the most anonymous quarters of the city becomes an implicit criticism of the degradation of

the rationalistic aspirations of the Modern Movement. These aspirations, generated in the sphere of the German Bauhaus, were originated as a revolutionary utopia under the banner of functionalism and egalitarianism, but were shipwrecked in the uniformization of our suburbs, cluttered with architectural styles which are mediocre, when they are not actually squalid. (...)

The photographs of family groups which the artist has been taking since 1984 can be seen as a contrast to these. Often in colour, Struth's couples or groups of people seem to want to oppose their irreducible individuality to the forced uniformization which the city represents, and they incarnate, one might almost say, that residual difference which, in his pictures of streets and quarters of the city, can only be found in the minimal traces of life. The large photographs of museum interiors, Struth's most recent work, can be interpreted as representing the very place where quality is conserved, where it is possible to experience that beauty which otherwise is denied one. The rooms of the museums, from the Louvre to the National Gallery in London, to the Kunsthistorisches of Vienna, photographed in colour, displayed in large format and always crowded with visitors. They do not seem to notice the artist who is photographing them, they turn their backs on him; what the artist wants to show us is the relationship between the architectural space and the works of art, the conditions, that is, in which they can be seen, and above all the relationship between the work and the public.

from the text of Giorgio Verzotti

JEFF WALL

Born in Vancouver in 1946, Jeff Wall has become internationally known as a protagonist of the latest artistic researches. With other artists, among them Rodeny Graham and Jan Wallace, he has formed what we might call the "Vancouver school", whose particular characteristic is the use of expressive media, and in particular photography, as instruments in the critical investigation of the realities of our society. (...)

Wall's images have a contemporary urban setting and an evident narrative frame, even though this is fixed in the single scene the photograph shows us. Here there is a direct link to the structure of the cinema and the television - the type of image - and to the theatre - the process to which the image itself is subjected. However realistic, Wall's works have more to do with the simulation of reality in films and television serials than with reality itself. The artist undertakes a survey, which we might define as sociological, of the aspects of day-to-day life of the poor living in a large city such as Vancouver. His works are emblematic images, we could say symbolic, of the social and moral degradation caused by the division of labour in a class society. To succeed in this symbolizing reality, the work must not simply reflect it, but must actually reconstruct it. It is the same process which controls the images used by the mass media, used here to turn it against its own rationale. The effect of reality which the artist sets up show us the world as it is and as it should be; they show it as needing change. To build up his works, the artist first drives around the city; he finds places and people who can trigger off a narrative core; he