I generally let things develop slowly

Veit Görner

Dear Andreas,
I'm already enjoying the first days of my holidays, which, unless I'm extending the house or digging the garden, I almost always spend with my books, either leafing through them or sorting them out. On the shelf, only the bindings are visible, and one could in fact sort them by colour and size. It occurred to me that, almost as a matter of course, the order of my photography books is based on a prejudice: Goldin, Warhol, Ruff, Höfer, Tillmans, Beecroft, Billingham, Wall, and your catalogues are in the art monography section, while Avedon, Hujar, Evans, Frank, Tullmann, Eggleston or Weston are in the photography department. This is in fact anything but a matter of course. I only have to compare Eggleston and Tillmans, who in view of their thirty-year age difference could almost be father and son. Yet they both speak a similar pictorial "language", except that Tillmans receives just as much if not more attention on the art scene than Eggleston. Well, perhaps this comparison is too specific, as exhibition organisers have declared both styles equally acceptable sin ce the 1980s. In the best case, people's broader understanding of the term art means that they are only concerned with naming sub-groups and no longer insist on strictly separating art into classical categories. I would therefore be all the more interested to know how you fill your bookcases.

Dear Veit,
My bookshelves are ordered in an extremely paradoxical way, which roughly reflects the way I live my daily life. As a person who primarily experiences his environment visually, I am always observing my immediate surroundings. Consequently, I am constantly putting things in order, sorting them out, until they become a whole. Perhaps that sounds very general; however, I don't sort my books purely according to their content. Visual criteria also play a part which, when I have found the book I was looking for, I no longer understand. When I don't feel up to the demands of daily life, which happens often enough, all my tidy principles fly out of the window and there's complete chaos. Referring to your question: I also make a categoric division between photography and "pure art", except that Feldmann, Bustamante, Jochen Gerz, Ruff, Eggleston and Tillmans, to name but a few, are all in the photography section. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that I'm fascinated by a few specific characteristics of photography, such as the "photogenic" or what people think of as the "authenticity" of the medium. It could also be because I have had a lifelong relationship with photography, due to the fact that, as a child, my room was part of my parents' advertising studio. Which reminds me of a statement by Gary Winograd: "I take photographs to see how things look when they've been photographed".

You mention the photogenic. What do you mean by it when you referto it in connection with the authentic?

The photogenic is a term recently used in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in connection with the

"Catherine effect". It means exactly the opposite of authenticity. As you can see, I have a weakness for paradox. For me, the photogenic and the authentic are two characteristics of the medium which would appear to be mutually exclusive. The photogenic allows a picture to develop a life of its own on a two-dimensional surface, which doesn't exactly reflect the real object. One talks about photogenic people who are often less attractive in real life than they are in pictures. If you look at the Bechers' working methods, you could assume that the result can be precisely calculated in advance, as they always photograph a single object in the same light conditions and from the same distance. But the result is frequently just the opposite. When they repeated a picture in order to improve a particular detail, for example, they realised that the second picture was not as good as the original. Several unconscious decisions would appear to be important in photography. Decisions that are subconsciously taken correctly at the first attempt may be the wrong ones in a second picture, which, one likes to believe, is taken under greater control. Despite the fact that I have twenty years' experience in photography, I still find developing negatives is like alchemy.
Again and again, the results can be extremely surprising.

I missed the Catherine effect described in the article in the arts pages. What is it?

I don't have the article any more, but it was about how a woman who wasn't particularly good-looking was given the aura of a Russian grand duchess thanks to the way she was photographed. The picture was printed to illustrate the point.

We've already talked about that exciting moment in the dark room and how you wait a long time between taking your pictures and developing the negatives, so that you can look at the prints with a fresh, neutral eye. That way, the pictures don't have to compete with the still fresh impression of reality. Is it really such a big surprise? You are in fact implying there's an incalculable difference between the picture you have in your mind's eye, according to which you determine the subject, the angle, lighting and detail, and the final print. Is this perhaps a fundamental difference between photography and painting, where the artist always has the results of his activity in front of him?

I deliberately use controversial arguments to show that there are countless ways of taking photographs nowadays, and that since the photographic medium has been digitalised, a fixed definition of the terrn "photography" has become impossible. Amateur photographers take their pictures in seconds, yet the amateurish use of the camera can unintentionally lead to the most brilliant pictures; Jörg Sasse or other representatives of the current Appropriation Art movement are admirable examples of this.
This spontaneous, unthought-out use of the camera is the extreme end of the spectrum and proves that my theory about the element of surprise is correct. Another, completely different way of working is electronic picture processing, as exemplified by Jeff Wall, or Thomas Demand's recording of real, "stage-managed" spaces. This manner of working requires an arbitrary, gradual and utterly controlled procedure, and with these artists I can no longer make the distinction you mentioned between photography and painting. As far as my working technique is concerned, there are recurring themes, such as how photographing something is developed into a formalistic picture, but the raw materials for my pictures come from the most diverse sources. I follow no strict method to transform a visual experience or an artistic concept into a picture. I appreciate the seemingly coincidental circumstances which I can't include in my concept and react spontaneously to them, without knowing whether a picture taken like this is going to make sense. In such cases I put the negatives aside for months or even years before selecting the photograph. Since 1992 I have consciously made use of the possibilities offered by electronic picture processing, so as to emphasise formal elements that will

enhance the picture, or, for example, to apply a picture concept that in real terms of perspective would be impossible to realise. When I work like this, I keep the picture in my mind's eye and approach the final result step by step without allowing myself to be influenced by spontaneous flashes of inspiration. One of my most recent pictures, *Ohne Titel V* is a work of fantasy: more than 200 different sports shoes on shelves. There are several layers of reality in this picture. Originally I experienced a similar situation, but the documentary material alone would not have sufficed for a convincing photograph. The real shoe display was pictorially ineffective and harrnlessly presented. That's why I felt it would be all the more interesting to highlight the symbolic dimension of this phenomenon - the fetishism of our material world.

Having thought about it for several weeks I decided to go back to New York to photograph these shoes in a specially constructed, artificial room before I lined them up in rows and laboriously created an all-over using digital processing techniques.

You recently mentioned that you have to defend yourself against being described as a landscape or architectural photographer. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that many of your early photos really do show the countryside of your homeland and, later, alpine landscapes. And even in more recent pictures such as Yogyakarta, Grand Hyatt Park *or* Rhein, *nature and the landscape don't seem to have lost their appeal for you. However, the sometimes overwhelming fascination that these pictures of natural beauty exercise on the viewer can make us forget all too easily that human beings or other traces of civilisation are also in the picture. But there are two aspects of your pictures that I find even more interesting than this little contrast. Firstly, that you've added a global view of things to your local perspective, which I believe quite pragmatically is a result of the trips you take in connection with your artistic activities.*

What I find more interesting, however, is that your more recent works have become more strictly formal. What could be thought of as an arbitrary situation is dominated by a structure, such as in Rhein, *the pictures of Portman architecture, or the almost stage-managed pictures of shoes,* Prada I *and* II *or* Ohne Titel V (Untitled V).

How did this shift in emphasis come about? Is it just a way of avoiding being confused with other artists, or is it the result of a new fascination with the idea of order or the serially ornamental?

Yes, my pictures really are becoming increasingly formal and abstract. A visual structure appears to dominate the real events shown in my pictures. I subjugate the real situation to my artistic concept of the picture. Apart from the constantly recurring elements I have already mentioned, another aspect occurs to me which explains the way my pictures function. You never notice arbitrary details in my work. On a formal level, countless interrelated micro and macrostructures are woven together, determined by an overall organisational principle. A closed microcosm which, thanks to my distanced attitude towards my subject, allows the viewer to recognise the hinges that hold the system together. Of course, there are adequate reasons to justify such a formal, schematic representation of reality.

If you talk about my interest in nature, I have to explain my extended notion of nature. I am perhaps more interested in the nature of things in general - again and again, the term "aggregate state" comes to mind when I describe the existential state of things.

Being confused with other photographers has ceased to be an issue for me since I stopped working thematically. After my degree our work did occasionally overlap within the Becher circle, which sometimes caused headaches. The more success we had, however, the more we learnt to deal with such things more calmly - thank God. But it would be a sorry state of affairs if my artistic development were to depend on the results of my colleagues' work. The shift in emphasis you mention could also be seen as a logical progression from the seemingly naive landscapes of the Eighties to today's drier

and more abstract pictures. I believe that there's also a certain form of abstraction in my early landscapes: for example, I often show human figures from behind and thus the landscape is observed "through" a second lens. I don't name the activities of the human figures specifically and hence do not question what they do in generai. The camera's enormous distance from these figures means that they become de-individualised. So I am never interested in the individuai, but in the human species and its environment. This is also true of Rhein. I wasn't interested in an unusual, possibly picturesque view of the Rhine, but in the most contemporary possible view of it. Paradoxically, this view of the Rhine cannot be obtained in situ; a fictitious construction was required to provide an accurate image of a modem river. The same thing happened when I visited over 70 world-famous industriai companies. Most of them had a socio-romantic air I hadn't expected. I was looking for visual proof of what I thought would be antiseptic industriai zones. If these companies had been systematically documented one would have had the feeling one was back in the days of the Industria! Revolution. After this experience I realised that photography is no longer credible, and therefore found it that much easier to legitimise digitai picture processing.

Your answer is enlightening because it shows tbat you don 't work according to strict methods. Your photographs are both constructed pictures of a potential reality, as in the sports shoe photo, Ohne Titel V*, or of a fictitious reality, as in* Rhein*, and of spontaneous discoveries which you think are worth photographing.*
Observing how your work has developed, you could say there's a certain leitmotif which could be described as the examination of the visible world. In one of your first letters you defined this as your interest in the nature of things in general. Even if you do repeat certain motifs, such as landscapes, stock exchanges, industrial production centres or architecture, one would be ill-advised to put you in any kind of subject pigeonhole". Yet I can imagine that you take a great deal more photos than you list in your catalogue of works. How do you decide whether a picture is good? Which criteria have to be met, if such criteria can be called obligatory at all?

In fact I don't take a great many more photos than I publish. In the last few years I have often thought about various ideas for pictures over longer periods, and the creation of a photo can also take several weeks. That reminds me of something Gerhard Richter said that could, to a certain extent, apply to me: "I see millions of pictures, photograph thousands and opt for a hundred, which I paint... "It isn't easy to cite generally binding criteria for a good picture. Compositional decisions are always important when structuring a picture, of course, but I don't think these are particularly interesting, as they should be a matter of course. The immediately visual experience should in any case be the catalyst for a pictorial decision. Questions of social relevance or contextual strategy should, in my opinion, only be considered in a second phase. In the first instance, what concerns me is the autonomy of the picture and confidence in the power of the image.

The expression "confidence in the power of the image" could come from Leni Riefenstahl, Max Ehlert, Eisenstein or Capa, yet your work has little in common with propaganda or manipulative photography, and just as little with the intimate involvement that typifies the work of Nan Goldin or Richard Billingham. Your interest in things in general is more similar to a de-romanticised sociological investigation. I would like to compare your phrase about confidence in the power of the image with another statement you once made, referring to the traditional attitude towards the constant repetition of similar images: "... There is clearly a common language, comprehensible to all human beings, which could be called the language of pictures". To me, it sounds a little understated when you say that the issue of social relevance is only raised in a second phase. You created an icon

of techno culture with Union Rave*; Hong Kong, Stock Exchange has recently been in the news every day in connection with the upheavals on the world's capital markets; and the jogging shoe fetishism shown in your latest picture,* Ohne Titel V *reflects the Nineties' obsession with fitness and brand names.*
With these pictures you are standing up against a tide of familiar images which, in our media age, flows ever faster. What makes you so sure that your work can survive this daily competition?

Of course, phenomena such as the world's stock exchanges, the leisure industry or techno culture are currently of social interest, but whether you look at a picture twice seems to depend rather on how these ideas are visually implemented. At the moment I am taking pictures in the German parliament. The raised public gallery we are familiar with thanks to television offers the ideal view of the circular assembly room and corresponds to the de-romanticised sociological interest you mentioned. Only the possibility of looking through a "second skin" (view of the parliament building from the outside) transforms the archaic circular form of the assembly room into a mysterious figure which makes the grouping of the assembled members look odd. The complex structure of the architecture is emphasised from this perspective by the many horizontal and vertical lines, which seem intrusive. I have used a pictorial pattern which has been effective in other photos like *Montparnasse* or *Hong Kong, Shanghai Bank*. But there are also completely unspectacular, timeless motifs which only become relevant when they are seen from a contemporary point of view. When I talk about a second phase, of course I don't mean that I look at the world with naive eyes the first time. You can't see things without referring to the images stored in your brain; and you can't see without knowledge, as Goethe put it. I presume that it's my consciously unprejudiced view of the world that makes you think it's a deromanticised view. I have the ability to sort out the "valid" pictures from the images we are inundated with every day and have them ready for use when my intuition tells me the right moment has come, before mixing them with immediate visual experiences into an independent image.

In your last letter you mentioned that you intuitively filter the "valid" images from a selection of several possible motifs. You are right to refer to this as an ability that, in the end, separates a good artist from the rest. This is certainly the reason why your pictures have a typical signature or individualism, which could be described as having a "painterly" effect on the viewer. The fact that you don 't work serially is more a way of distinguishing yourself in your working methods from other photographers. We've discussed the importance you attach to the contemporary in your pictures. If I understand correctly, this implies that we are all inextricably linked with what goes on in the world. But your pictures never merely illustrate reality, as Fischli/Weiss perhaps aim to. This is especially apparent in your architectural photos of the Portman hotels, Atlanta *and* Times Square. *Compared to the pictures of these two buildings published in architecture magazines or catalogues, you have, by leaving out atmosphere, as Annelie Lütgens first pointed out, and by creating a photomontage using two pictures taken from different angles, emphasised a specific aspect of this architecture. I would even go as far as using the word "stylised". An almost fictitious reality which the uninitiated viewer of these buildings would never see. The results are not only very formal in their symmetry and perspective, but they also examine issues intrinsic to art, such as the view from above and below, depth etc., familiar to us from Donald Judd's vertical stacks, for example, or Piranesi's architectural drawings. Do you consciously pursue these aspects or do you have a pronounced preference for clearly defined forms?*

I don't intentionally raise issues intrinsic to art in order to reformulate them in modern terms. In my opinion, a context-related procedure such as this leads to dull results, because the calculated approach

denies the irrational laws of creating a picture with the necessary freedom. Nonetheless, parallels with historical styles are apparent in many of my pictures, from Albrecht Altdorfer's *Alexanderschlacht* which can be discerned in my images of stock exchanges, to De Chirico's *Pittura Metafisica* reflected in *Ayamonte* or my more recent photos such as *Rhein*, which is reminiscent of Barnett Newman, and *Prada II* which can be compared with Dan Flavin's work. As I have already said in interviews, the history of art seems to possess a generally valid formal vocabulary which we use again and again. It would perhaps be interesting for you art historians to find out why an artist who is not versed in your subject such as myself still has access to this formal vocabulary. My preference for clear structures is the result of my desire - perhaps illusory - to keep track of things and maintain my grip on the world.