



Noses, 2016, C-Print, 180 x 135 cm

ART AND ROMAN SCHRAMM

by Dominikus Müller

„Der Mensch wird am Du zum Ich.“
Martin Buber

How can you actually create something like art these days? Something so abstract, something so strange? And what does that mean anyway? First of all, even at the risk of sounding corny and nostalgic: It's about sensibility. You have to be willing to confront uncertainty, not to know what you are doing. You have to be able to let yourself in for it, that something will come up; that something will happen. Actually you always have to do that, but when it's about art, this feeling—and the fact that this seems like such a special case to me is what constitutes the corny nostalgia—this feeling is in my opinion more present, urgent, more susceptible. It's of course also a bit old school, this rather existential understanding of it. Because it's obvious that art is also simply a codified system with a specific visual vocabulary, with rules and specifiable parameters. True enough—but shouldn't it be a bit more? Yes it should, shouldn't it? That's what I think at least.

Roman Schramm makes art. He used to make photographs. 2009 I reviewed an exhibition of his at the Berlin gallery Croy Nielsen. It was called “Living as an Art” and it was about how even life itself was to only be regarded under aspects of style how everything stiffens to attitude and form, even the loss of form, the breaking of the attitude; just life—all-encompassing as it is and without the possibility of an outside—as a system of arrangeable symbols. That's what I worked out for myself back then at least, through the lens of an art system in which I then had just immersed myself as an author and critic and at whose internal rules and boundaries I liked to chafe at that time. It was fun. Made sense as a text too. It didn't really do justice to the exhibition though.

For Roman Schramm it was, as I remember from the conversations we had afterwards—after we had eventually gotten to know each other personally—about this exhibition (and my text), more about showcasing the capabilities of photography as a seductive medium. This was embedded in an examination of magazine culture, fashion photography, gender stereotypes and marketing strategies. For this Schramm photographed bespoke shoes or men and women in fancy clothes and distinguished poses, he planted—and this was part of the conceptual superstructure—so called “baritone elements” in the exhibition: highly

staged and aestheticised photographs of bullet casings or a boat engine—markers of masculinity as they were utilised time and again by the American magazine *Esquire* (this was part of the narrative behind the images) to still the readership's fear of their own homosexuality (after all when the magazine was established in 1933, mostly women read magazines); or he referenced promotional concepts from advertising in the titles like the Diderot effect or to Ernest Dichter, the father of public relations. Behind the actual images, a world of research revealed itself. It grouts the individual works to a thematic series, to an analysis of the power of images. It offered the concept and the framework in which one could contemplate and make sense of the art. Safety—for the viewer and just as much for the artist himself.

But in the years after, something has transpired within the oeuvre of Roman Schramm. Schramm left this safety behind. It was still about seduction. But now also about being seduced yourself, as the artist. And that makes—as much as it sounds like a small step—a huge difference in the end. Because for the artist Roman Schramm this meant: saying goodbye to verbally directly communicable concepts, and frameworks. And to say “yes” to the image and its power (therefore precisely to that, which was still conceptually fenced in and supposed to be questioned in a way in “Living as an Art”). Now though: believing in the image and letting yourself be seduced by it. Playing with it and being played by it. And at the same time leaving behind a notion of the image in the context of art, according to which it is in some sense limited to a “replica” and a however subtle “illustration” of a concept. Instead now: an orientation towards the image as possibility and counterpart.

In his images, Schramm moves away from the strict works, shaped by the precise and extremely stylish approach of classical photographic subject like still life photography or portrait photography, to a freer, more playful approach to what an image is capable of being, how you can compose and assemble it. He started working with 3D renderings, began embedding single, captured motives—sometimes these were self-made and then photographed salt dough sculptures—in perspectival spaces or oftentimes to so to say “hang them on the wall” as photographs in these spaces.

On *Today's Lies, Tomorrow's Truths* (2013), the central piece of the exhibition of the same name at the gallery Croy Nielsen in the fall of 2013 for example you can see four close-up views of a couple—a female hand disappears under a men's jacket, the knee of the woman on a patterned carpet, besides it the black leather shoe of the

man, the chin of the man, resting on his palm, and a photo book lying on the carpet—as they seemingly hang freely in the air in front of a cg-wall vaguely painted in sponge technique. On *Untitled* (2013) from the same series the faces of the two are to be found as if mounted on photo cubes, which this time hover in front of a colour gradient iridescent into red.

For the series “Satellite City”, which largely came about during a stay in Mexico City and besides portraits of people mainly features architectural, nature, animal and plant motives, Schramm refined and expanded this method (in 2015 the series was on display in the exhibition “Welcome to the Jungle” in the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin). The layers often interleave beyond recognition now, motives imprint as pale shadows, free of the actual image framework, on the coloured backdrop; giant trees photographed in black and white reflect on polished virtual black, which surrounds the actual photograph; a bovine rumen appearing insanely sculptural seems to break through a green colour panel hanging aslant in front of a red surface.

A parallel development occurred in the opposite direction: beyond the actual “image”. Roman Schramm literally expands his work beyond the frame of his previously always classically mounted prints – into what one would commonly call a “display”. Instead of confining himself to the existing walls of the respective exhibition space, he began to bring in his own walls: brightly coloured modules, like the sweeping and cruciform constructions in the 2013 exhibition “Arbeit und Leben, Roman Schramm, Guten Tag!” in the Kunstverein Hildesheim, which created intimate cabinets for one, two or three images in the nooks of the cross; or the triangular modules, that were inverted compared to the exhibition in Hildesheim, in “Today’s Lies, Tomorrow’s Truths”, which stood freely in the room and had to be wandered around (similar triangles were additionally put on rolls for the presentation of “Satellite City” in the KW, so that they could be moved within the space; furthermore the inner surface, which was only visible from an elevated staircase, was now utilised to hang a picture). Lastly in the exhibition “Ja Straße” at Terigarten Berlin at the end of 2015 Schramm presented his works on elongated panels, which were upholstered with colourful or densely patterned fabrics and which acted as a kind of second frame for the already heavily interleaved image compositions created in 3D programs on the actual “photographs”. What happened internally with the images thus also happened outside with the displays. Nested logic, doubly folded. On the images, the images became windows in a virtual room not

existing in reality, in the physically existing exhibition space they become windows in walls. Roman Schramm has put the image—as a photographic image as well as a framed work of art—into a context. A kind of expanded, reinterpreted framing. But it’s important: Where Schramm’s previous works were framed by a concept—and a narratable story—as much as by the passe-partouts, the framing itself is understood pictorially now; as a visual expansion, not as something separate from the images, which confines it and puts it at its place. The things—and the layers of photography, framing, display, of motive and space—can permeate each other in all directions. At least since an exhibition like “Ja Straße” Schramm has acquired a freedom for himself, in which ordinarily common structural mechanism of the serial—the same framing, the same mounting process and so on and so forth—have been dropped in favour of openly experimenting with and running through different elements from A to Z. At the same time the exhibition was held formally together by the presentation on panels.

In this commitment to the image Roman Schramm on one hand dismisses conventional photography—but all too conceptual art too, because even though this is about the internal logic of the formal, about the combining of a set of elements, there is always a certain freedom and open intuition at play in the approach towards these elements, which quickly break the mould of purely conceptual thinking. Schramm’s art is by no means an intrinsic, autonomous playing around with form and format, it’s much too lively and open for that. In my opinion this approach is most likely to be related to those conceptual varieties of painting that indeed rely on expressive gestures, but contain and encode them in a self-reflective but by no means didactic approach to the medium. It’s not without reason that in “Ja Straße” one can find a slapped on dab of oil paint on one of the prints.

In Roman Schramm’s exhibition in the Barlach Halle Hamburg and in the Kunsthau Jesteburg—the first two by the way for which Schramm completely relinquished a title that allows associative interpretations or suggests a thematic framework—this correlation of gestural freedom and formal encoding further solidifies once more. The images’ motives appear even freer once again, figure and ground interleave even tighter once again. The formal and the intuitive move closer together, the spiritual and sensual of some motives—on one image Schramm presents a salt dough version of the Greek monk’s mountain Athos, on another one you can see how the fingers of a woman slowly push through the skin of a ripe peach—melds in seemingly natural fashion with

the grids and edges of the renderings. At the same time a new group of works appears which almost returns to conventional still life photography and shows an arrangement of various props and items on a table. All of this is now allowed and can stand side by side. The exhibition is held together by specifically developed, prominent metal profile frames on the level of presentation, which give the images an unfamiliar, new physical presence.

In the end it’s about a balancing act, an equilibrium, which can only be achieved out of a certain maturity. And that has to do with being clear on the relationship with the image; recognising the image in its autonomy. Knowing that it has to do with life (also and first and foremost one’s own) and yet leads a life in its own right—it’s not for nothing that Roman Schramm’s images literally look back at you, one comes upon eyes on them time and again: the “real” eyes of the people in the portraits, comic-like rendered eyes or objects like those salt dough replicas of Aztec sacrificial knives with eyes affixed on them from “Satellite City”. And yet one has to ask oneself again constantly what this is – art. And one must not turn it into a vehicle for this or that, or break it down into a rigorous thinking of a concept that only has to be executed. Because only then images can become art (in the empathic sense). Creating images, day after day, moving pixels and letting the computer render things, building frames, carpentering modules, searching for motives, making prints, meeting people—thinking holistically, time and again anew. And in doing so recognising that the image is a counterpart. And then one realises that oneself is nevertheless inside of it too. Just as it is inside of oneself, if things are working out. In a way this is something spiritual too. Something big and universal, an approach to life as well as to art. One just can’t be afraid of the pathos of the big “yes” (even if it sounds corny, even if it may be nostalgic—but it’s the only way). Hello image, how are you today? Fine, thanks. I’m glad to hear that. Because I’m fine too.