

GUY TOSATTO Through the Image

The world is a fathomless reservoir of images. By cutting, detailing and fragmenting the visible, photography merely emphasizes and augments this state of play. Likewise, it has enabled us to see the world differently, and therefore think about it differently, too. It has obviously forged a new psyche, such that our relationship to the real now proceeds through the filter of images that have marked us, and now inform and haunt us. The modern person's imagination is filled with these images which crop up every which way in family photo albums, magazines, and newspapers. Images, be they trifling or solemn, beautiful or ugly, which form a huge constellation within which our thoughts, dreams, fears and desires are unfurled and identified.

Photography has helped us to see the world differently by showing it at closer quarters; and in a reverse relation, inherent to the very nature of the procedure, putting it at a distance. Looking at the world close up and putting it at a distance is indeed one of the oddest paradoxes of photography. And makes it one of the most fertile features of this medium. In the past few decades artists like Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter have managed to make the most of this dimension by incorporating it in a critical line of thinking about painting, and the whole issue of representation. Concomitantly, Bernd and Hilla Becher based their work on the same paradox in order to redefine a new objectivity in photography. With them, the image is presented as the strict and pure recording of reality. In a perfect denial of its illusionist nature, and with an austere and old-fashioned grandeur, it is asserted as the last testimony of a reality stemming from the industrial revolution, and now heading for extinction. But in their approach did they not have a hunch about another revolution which would, this time around, affect the very instrument of their research? To wit, the technological revolution, and, in the field of imagery, the revolution caused by digital technology.

Students of Bernd Becher at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie, best known among them being Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff and Thomas Struth, actually called upon all the resources of the new technology, to conduct their personal research, after working on projects based on an exegesis respectful of their teacher's lessons. This also applies in the case of Jörg Sasse, a few years their junior, who nowadays, with his manipulated images, appears as the artist who most keenly illustrates the changes being brought about by the computer, where photography is concerned. Whether what is involved be the modification of the very stuff of the image or its status and its new relationship to reality and time. For some ten years before 1994, the year when he decided to systematically adopt the computer to process images which to a large degree were essentially not his, Jörg Sasse had nevertheless espoused an extremely coherent photographic approach, foreshadowing his forthcoming research projects in many an aspect.

The early images which he exhibited in 1984 set the tone. Against a monochrome or bright-coloured ground, one or more objects are displayed using a very simple arrangement such as a water pitcher set upside down or paper clips disposed in such a way that they conjure up winged insects... Here, merely a direct, cold, objective description of commonplace objects which, when placed in an unusual situation, become laden with new meaning. Executed with extremely economical means, we might talk in terms of a minimal arrangement, for these photographs, beneath their trivial appearance, nevertheless show a quite particular tension. Over and above the new appearance offered by these objects, which is not devoid of wit, by the way, these images actually seem to convey, above all else, the fictional character of photography. Thus the monochrome ground doubly heightens the flatness of the sheet of paper: the photograph has no thickness, and the sense of depth is an illusion. Likewise, the emphasis on the studio shot aspect indicates how the light, the framing, and the colour contrasts go to make an image which, far from being real, stems from a mental construct, and forms a pure fiction. In the end, this fictional character seems to be laid bare by these slight shifts which lend the commonest of

objects the powers of an enigma. Like strange and intriguing compositions, with strident chromatic harmonies whose simplicity is matched only by their hermeticism, they form a kind of initial, fundamental mystery, and cast a keen and searching eye over the world.

In tandem with this series of *still lifes*, Jörg Sasse focuses on "found compositions" by photographing certain objects on display in shop windows. He thus draws up an inventory of contemporary kitsch. Here again with unfeigned irony, lingering in front of knick-knack shops and other souvenir merchants... The shop window series also broaches the issue of screen and reflection. The screen is the screen of the view finder and the lens (later to be the computer screen); the reflection is that of the play of mirrors in the camera. Here again photography is the instrument and the photographer's subject. His methods are endlessly duplicated, and in so doing the artist keeps his distance from the imagery he proposes, to be taken somewhat tongue in cheek.

In the same period he embarked upon a series of interiors, private and public. As fragments of the day-to-day environment, these views appear like a layered cross-section of middle-class decor in Germany. With these works, Jörg Sasse asserts his concern for detail, and his attention for unimportant daily things which, like (Freudian) slips, reveal unsuspected truths. By way of these incisive compositions, he also deploys his ability to create nothing less than plastic compositions, where the interplay of the materials, shapes and colours offers soft counterpoints which often relegate the subject of the image to the background - these images, however, have a clinical and intentionally "objective" precision like those of the Bechers. Last of all, through his "quality-less" shots, he distils a poetry which, like so many haikus, has an ineffable flavour and suggests time suspended.

This plunge into the nooks and crannies of our everyday environment, with just what is needed in terms of caustic gaze to highlight the flipside - bad taste, incongruousness, dirtiness - is nevertheless never cynical. On the contrary, we feel in the author a kind of greedy pleasure, not to say celebration, in establishing categories within details which he pinpoints, here in bathrooms, there alongside Venetian blinds, and here again on the threshold of doors. This exploration, whose pretext seems as graphic as it is ethnographic, led, in the early 1990s, to increasingly abstract images. The real is done away with in favour of just interplays of forms and colours: shelf? wallpaper? It is hard to decide. The compositions become even tighter. Petty anecdotes about social life no longer seem to be enough to fuel the quest for a more complex and also deeper reality, the reality of a life which, today more than yesterday, seems to be just a dream.

In 1993 Jörg Sasse made a shift in his working method. He abandoned the traditional process of, photography, and started to use a computer to manipulate images which he was no longer necessarily the author of. To this end he drew from a considerable stock of several thousand amateur photographs compiled by him over the years, which, in 1994 - the year in which he opted once and for all for this new method of expression -, would become his almost favourite working material. The method he then adopted was as follows: after a swift look at the photos amassed, he took a certain number of them for digitization - about one tenth of those viewed. These photographs which he worked by computer were his "sketches". They were the basis of a more advanced research which he carried out with a very small number of images, the ones which would in due course become his "pictures". For this change of method went hand in hand with a conspicuous enlargement of formats and a new type of presentation. Mounted under plexiglass with no frame, surrounded by a white border, these images are very slightly set away from the wall, as if floating on its surface. The first work which he produced using this new technique was a priori part of the previous theme. It involved the view of a green pleated curtain reflected on an orange floor. How, nevertheless, was it possible not to think in terms of the

artists deliberate intention, not to say announcement of a programme, in the choice of this image? Because, unlike the previous series, and in spite of its trivial character, this work seems pregnant with the weight of an enigma, a fathomless mystery. This mystery is the mystery of the visible. The enigma is what invariably eludes us in our desire to see and understand what surrounds us. It is this reality which is forever changing, fleeing, and disappearing behind the veil of appearances. Truth invariably crops up behind a curtain. In fact, to proceed from a photograph with an "objective character" to computer-manipulated images enabled him not to track reality as it is presented, but rather to try to understand it as it is, perhaps. This is the artist's self-appointed task henceforth; and rather than situating himself with the lens facing the motif, he passes through it, through the image, behind the curtain, with the computer. This subject also announces another aspect developed with this technique: the pictorial dimension of the new works. The curtain is a classical subject in the history of painting. Not only does it duplicate the idea of the canvas and refer to the image of a window, but its abstract nature also ushers in all manner of bold material effects. With the countless possibilities offered by the computer, the artist strives to process the very stuff of the image. He creates textures and structures which blur the usual features of the photograph, lending it a novel aspect akin to painting, an aspect further reinforced by the choice of formats which, from the smallish to the large, give the feeling of a perfect harmony between the composition and its dimensions.

From 1994 on, Jörg Sasses work developed in tune with the traditional genres of landscape, architecture and figure, which form so many categories to illustrate and enhance. In each one of the photographs, like a geneticist, he indulged in many different kinds of manipulation, removing certain elements and adding others, altering the perspective, changing the colours, lessening or bolstering the contrasts to obtain the desired image. An image which, far from displaying its hybrid nature, appears, quite to the contrary, to be alarmingly "normal". And a major part of the fascination of these new works probably comes from this unusual dimension. A dimension which immediately calls to mind the creation of dream images. We can detect a certain number of similarities between the two processes, such as, for example, shift: by removing a fragment from a whole, the artist places it outside its context and lends it a new identity; and condensation: several elements are at times "condensed" into one; and symbolization: the abstract character and "silent" nature of the compositions call to mind subjective projections which are produced in a symbolic way...

The confusion stirred up by these works also comes from their very specific temporal quality. To be more accurate, we ought to talk of timelessness. A clock stopped, an indistinct period, nothing here precisely indicates where we are in time, and if there be time, what its capacity is to involve these images which are not attached to it by anything. Time here becomes as abstract and illusory as the objectivity of photography. Everything is fiction, make believe, artificial a posteriori construction, this is what the author seems to be saying. In so doing, he brings us as close as possible to what our perception of reality conceals by way of packaging and affect. Jörg Sasse's whole approach is in fact underpinned by an analysis of the mechanisms of perception - from the obsessive pursuit of disguised fragments of reality culminating in abstract compositions, to the deconstruction of the photographic image which unveils its particularly fictional essence. The artist hereby invites us to experience the reification of the world in the age of mechanical reproducibility of the visible, and the unreal aspect of an ever more virtual world. Where lies the borderline between truth and falsehood, past and present, reality and dream? In each one of these images, everything seems to raise these issues. The answer obviously lies *behind the curtain...*

An attempt to analyse and describe the modalities of these works, in any definitive way, does not enable us to grasp the mainsprings of their power of fascination. But this is possibly one of the

keys to Jörg Sasse's world, like his early still lifes whose cryptic character ended up making them weirdly uncanny. We cannot say why these images fascinate, just as we cannot unravel dream images the next morning. Is it their unreal perfection, their indefinable beauty, their opaque silence? Is it the disturbed sense of having already seen this house beside the water, this man playing with this child in the snow, this wave breaking on mossy rocks? There is no answer to this but the fact remains that we have the feeling of having been in this nowhere place, that we know this child crouching in the grass, so because the secret remains sealed, all that remains for us to do is lose ourselves in contemplation of these images which, like a mirage throbbing in the light, seem to be the reflection of somewhere else, buried in time and, for a few split seconds, before us, here present.

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