

## Still Images

The message of this image is written all over itself, literally. Its horizontal plane is dominated by one word: *real*. It is the word that is perhaps the most contentious in photography, but just what does being “real” mean in a photographic image? Is the picture an equivalent of the real object even though it rendered the three-dimensional world two-dimensional? Or is the image a faithful representation of the subject? Everyone knows that a photograph can be easily manipulated through its composition and optical effects produced in the darkroom/digital post-production. Or perhaps it is implying that it’s a *real* photography, with film and light-sensitive paper, as opposed to a digital print? Brushing aside these doubts, the photograph continues to obviously insist on being *real*. Roland Barthes called the moment when a photograph penetrates its viewer’s emotion as *punctum*. This image does the opposite of such pricking. Its insistence on its purported meaning inspires only skepticism. It is a picture that is insecure about its very existence.

The photograph in question is ‘real’, 2014, by Michael Schmid. It is an elegantly framed black-and-white Inkjet print of modest size (38cm by 31cm) with most of its surface in white because of the narrow horizontal cropping of the image. It is modest and understated, but its precise presentation jars with the bluntness in which the image crashes with the biggest bugbear of photography, namely the troubled relationship it has with its truth claim. Such tension between the reduced and exact formal language of his works and the fundamental questions of image making they tacitly pose is at the heart of Schmid’s practice<sup>1</sup>.

In order to productively engage with his works, it is important to first situate his practice in the rich history of dialogue between conceptual art and photography. Most notably, Schmid continues conceptualism’s pictorial strategy, which is characterized by its muteness and the staunch refusal of fine art photography — that is of course not to say it lacks skill. Each picture by Schmid is carefully staged or composed. Rather, he regards photography as a vehicle for measured thinking. Schmid’s photographs resist certain styles in photography that rely upon instantly legible storylines or the seductiveness of tableau. One may notice that for instance, his pictures are usually of

<sup>1</sup> There is however another potential reading of this piece. The word “real,-” in the picture, with its comma and hyphen, is instantly recognizable for a resident in Germany as the logo of a discount supermarket chain, which connotes certain social and economic status. This social realist aspect of the picture adds another layer of complexity to it.

one thing, and this solitary motif tends to be static and dominate most of the imagery, meaning that these pictures have little in the way of picturesque composition or narrative. As there is no foreground or background, the images are fairly flat. Instead, through their sparseness they examine the nature of photography, image-making at large and the object/image distinction. Take, for example, 'Brille', 2014. It is a black-and-white picture of a pair of disposable 3D glasses upside down. It is lit in such a way as to cast a sharp shadow to its front, resulting in something of a mirrored appearance. Here, a humble pair of cardboard frame glasses gives the impression of monumentality, almost architectural. It is a tight image. But what is more significant than the tautness of the picture is what it means to photograph such a motif. On the one hand, a pair of 3D glasses evokes the act of looking. It is a metaphor of our vision and by extension our own eyeballs. On the other hand, unlike a normal pair of glasses, it is a tool for creating an illusion. It tricks us into seeing something two-dimensional as having volume. The act of seeing and creation of illusion, their co-existence, is in fact the hallmark of photography itself. The complexity of its self-referentiality is concealed by the image's plainness. Its focus on the *photographic* is further emphasized by the fact of it being black-and-white. With the removal of the distinction between red and blue of its cellophane lenses, which is what makes a pair of 3D glasses functional, it being a photographic *print* rather than a stand-in for a real object is clearly stressed. For what is more essentially photographic than black-and-white photography?'Ohne Titel', 2011, is an example where one can unmistakably observe Schmid's inquiry into the distinction between physical object and photographic representation. The piece is produced in three stages. First, Schmid photographed an unfolded ordinary paper napkin. This picture was then printed in the size of 67cm by 67cm and Diasec mounted by Grieger lab in Dusseldorf. Finally, four metal table legs were attached to this print and it was used as a tabletop, producing a visual correlation between the shiny surface of the table legs and the acrylic mount, as well as the black rubber feet of the legs and the black core of Diasec mount. At first, the piece gives an impression of being a commentary on the enduring separation between the discipline of design and discipline of art as it blurs the division of sculpture and furniture. In this reading, the clean minimalism of the piece evokes modernist tradition of such blurring, from Bauhaus to Donald Judd. However, at a closer inspection, its true complexity as a witty philosophical examination of the nature of photography and its connection with the physical object becomes apparent.. A napkin, nor-

mally placed on a table, becomes an image and then itself becomes a table. This means a representation of an object was transformed into the structure (table) that normally supports it in fulfilling its intended function. In a sense, this piece compliments the questions put forward by 'real', as it demonstrates the extent of transformation and manipulation of a "real object" photography is capable of.

Another aspect of Schmid's output that reveals the conceptual nature of his practice is the fastidious attention he gives to the presentation of his works. His installations are concise and clean, one may even say classical. Most of the pictures, though not all, are printed relatively small and have white borders around them. They are all framed without passe-partout. These pictures are sometimes accompanied by the video of the exhibition space where they are shown, or in the case of 'Hören', 2016, of the sound of the acoustic of the exhibition space. Most significantly, the frames of his photographs are either made by the artist or specially produced for him based on his design. This point is important not only because it shows the degree of control Schmid insists on in the presentation of his works, but also for the disjunction these frames create with the pictures they frame. His prints are always digital archival pigment print, meaning they are endlessly reproducible. However, each one of their frames is bespoke. In the hierarchy of artifacts, the normal positions of the artwork and the frame is reversed, as from the perspective of scarcity and exclusivity, a bespoke frame is more "valuable" than a digital print for being an original object. Through this subtle gesture of reversal, which can only be recognized if one has an expertise in the field of photography, Schmid reignites the question of artistic/monetary value (reads rarity) that dogged photography ever since its invention due to its reproducibility. It is also a gesture that is drily humorous.

The question of space and presentation is of course the question of context. Though the critical contextual analysis is usually associated with that of social context as a result of the enduring legacy of institutional critique, it must be however remembered that a reflection on the physical properties of an exhibition space could and should have a critical dimension. In his influential essay 'Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance', architectural historian Kenneth Frampton wrote:

*Until recently, the received precepts of modern curatorial practice favored the exclusive use of artificial light in all art galleries. It has perhaps been insufficiently recognized how this encapsulation tends*

*to reduce the artwork to a commodity, since such an environment must conspire to render the work placeless. This is because the local light spectrum is never permitted to play across its surface: here, then, we see how the loss of aura, attributed by Walter Benjamin to the processes of mechanical reproduction, also arises from a relatively static application of universal technology. The converse of this "placeless" practice would be to prove that art galleries be top-lit through carefully contrived monitors so that...the ambient light of the exhibition volume changes under the impact of time, season, humidity, etc. Such conditions guarantee the appearance of a place-conscious poetic—a form filtration compounded out of an interaction between culture and nature, between art and light.<sup>2</sup>*

Though the artistic concerns of Schmid is naturally different from those of architects, he shares the understanding of how spatial details that are perhaps imperceptible to the untrained eyes can radically change the meaning of a building's interior (or for an artist an exhibition) and how engagement with these details can have a critical facet as discussed by Frampton. With its meticulous attentiveness to the arrangement, framing and hanging, Schmid's practice can be located in this intellectual tradition of critical space production.

One must recognize the importance of this uncompromisingly self-referential photographic practice in the world today. With their austere composition, modest scale, precision and deeply cerebral discourse they put forward, Schmid's images are *quiet*. And in this image-obsessed and picture-driven society which has gone far beyond the most grotesque spectacle Guy Debord could have imagined, production of such quiet images are by definition an act of critique and defiance, even if that was not the explicit intention of the artist in creating these works. The tight control Schmid yields on his works and their presentation implies the necessity for such control to practice as an artist in the society hostile toward disciplinary autonomy and intelligence. The quietude of his images exacerbates its absence from the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance" in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), p.27.