

# In the mirror image

By Klaus Honnef

# of the world of images

At the start we find the grotesque portrait of a pompous, female model made of papier-maché. [1] Lying on a carriage, the unblemished figure rolls over the cobblestones of a street flanked by crumbling, late 19th century houses. Despite the glaringly classic supporting leg – playing leg pose, its support is obviously so insecure that it needs to be strapped down with ropes. Even the houses and their matching streetlights are tilted slightly inwards, as if collapse were imminent. The photographer shot this image from below in black and white or more accurately grey in grey, making the figure positioned in the left-hand corner appear even larger than it already is. As a crowning glory to the whole piece, she holds a victor's laurel wreath above her plump, Ancient Greece-style neck. Everything about the image appears to be wrong: the backdrop, the atmosphere, the time structure, as false as the Goddess of Victory made of shabby waste materials instead of durable, precious marble. False as the self-image that an ideology projects of the circumstances it attempts to hide. The stage for the image could be Halle an der Saale, at the least the picture's title in the author's

earlier publications certainly suggests this. Everything could be real and true in the sense of "It is so", really: The peeling facades of the houses, the carriage that was once drawn by horses, the sadness and the clumsy, projected figure with its horizon of hope. The photographer has captured a piece or a trace of past reality and has made manifest its naked state of being in a grotesque exaggeration of the motif. It is not the image that is grotesque, it is instead the reality that transports it into the present. A keen eye of observation, knowledge of the impressive force of images, a dash of gleeful subversion and a practiced hand in dealing with technology have concentrated the grotesque aspects of reality in this frozen impression, thus creating a significant picture. The picture itself unites all characteristics that shortly thereafter grow into a bizarre blossom in a remarkable piece of photography.

Olaf Martens took this unique picture in 1987 when he was a student (since 1985) in the renowned Photography Faculty at the Academy of Visual Arts in Leipzig. Two years before the Wall came down, the fact and symbol of a demarcation line that separated Germany and Europe for decades. What makes the image so striking is its author's precise feel for the subcutaneous contradictions of a reality that shortly thereafter was to loudly collapse in on itself in a painful manner for many, without most people having recognised – or indeed wanting to recognise – the contradictions made manifest by the false images and statements. A vivid imagination is necessary to make such a concise statement on the complex contexts of visual images, as we see in the work by this young photographer (born in 1963).

Although the image with the throw-away title "Halle/S. | 1987" undisputedly has a documentary character, Martens' aesthetic interest is not centred on a mundanely structured re-enactment of real events, constellations or states. It is possible that he shares Bertolt Brecht's opinion that due to its specific nature, photography is indelibly linked to the surface of the manifest world. With the difference that the photographer has an eye for the original depths of the superficial and is able to perceive in its treacherous depths the mirror images of certain contexts that are more commonly only revealed by laborious and exhaustive analysis.

Nonetheless, the photographic imaging of an apparent removal truck, which was very popular as a matter of state in the now defunct GDR, is not all that it may seem. Although Halle was probably the place the image was shot, but it probably only mirrors the stage for a film that played in the nineteen thirties. The bombastic Goddess of Victory would not have been an expression of bourgeois-socialist aesthetics, but instead of bourgeois-national socialist aesthetics. The conditional tense is important. After all, the prop mirrors the aesthetic viewpoint of the Nazi era found in GDR films. In the perception of subsequent, quasi-westernised generations, the photograph has been transformed into a symbol of reality in the latter days of the GDR regime, shortly before it imploded. Reality as the backdrop to a film and vice versa: photography as a medium for perfect re-projection.

This multi-layered image is not the first result of Olaf Martens' practical work as a photographer. His love-affair with this technical medium finds its roots in his early adolescence. Before this, he had had a sideline as a copier, after discovering an illegal market niche by accident. He copied the West German teenage magazine Bravo, which his grandparents had secretly smuggled across the border after their travels. There was a lot of demand in Halle and Leipzig for the posters of the popular Western film and music stars. The comparably sterile view of youth in this magazine that

introduced entire generations of pubescent West Germans to the world of sexuality awakened his slumbering creativeness and provoked in him a desire to create his own images instead of copying others. [2]

Comparatively quickly and intuitively, he discovered his very own domain within the manifold variety of the universe of images within the so-called media age. This is the interface where reality and vision, objectiveness and subjectiveness, the exterior and interior and the reality of facts and the truth of images overlap, mix and merge. It is possible that the odd reality of the part of Germany in which he learned to live and in which right from the start the powers that be attempted to hide the desolation of life behind a false curtain of what could be played second fiddle to the artificial reality of the laboured, youthful magazine on the unconscious search for his own subjective, aesthetic standards. He soon discovered that although a camera is a machine that records accurately and in one process what it captures before the lens, it can at the same time function as a projector for latent longings, wishes and desires that seep into his pictures below the surface as it were. The way the picture is set up in front of the camera is not solely responsible for this, as people frequently claim. Instead, it is the medium itself that lends even the least believable of scenes credibility as a result of its inherent technology. "The objectiveness of photography (thanks to its "development in becoming automatic"—K.H.) lends it a strength and credibility that is lacking in all other works of fine arts. Whatever critical objections we may entertain, we have no choice but to believe in the existence of the represented object, that which is truly represented within what became manifestly present in space and time." [3] If we take this assertion by the French film theoretician André Bazin, the differences between document-ary and non-documentary photography shrink to become a "quantité négligeable".

The photographer's predilection for masks and costumes emerged analogue to his sensitivity for the contradictions lurking beneath the surface of reality. In every day life, these varied masks fulfil two purposes, one obvious and the other hidden. The obvious side serves the desire to hide something. A façade or sham is a perfect example of this. Conversely, the hidden purpose mirrors a complic-ated state of affairs. This purpose is often fed by the channels of the subconscious. It is often found manifest in carnival celebrations. People who put on a costume want (at times) to be someone else, and wish additionally to lend expression to a desire that most people not wearing a mask would be embarrassed of. Furthermore, one may wish to embody something that is unat-ainable in the reality of everyday life within the momentum of the "what if" and the appearances. Naturally, the hidden purpose has long since reached everyday existence within this post-industrial media society. Pursuing this purpose has become part of the armour we wear to manage our lives. Although the gurus of self-help equi-vocally call for us to "be ourselves", but empirical research shows plainly that playing a part is the true solution in social interaction.

Very few contemporary photographers feel quite so at home in a mimetic sense in this interaction between masks and costumes within the social network as Olaf Martens. What appears so au-thentic in his pictures is frequently a product of his boundless imagination, absurd and inconcei-vable and yet equally and no less frequently undisputedly real. The maxim of his aesthetic actions is perversion in its literal sense, allowing what is real to become manifest in what is fictitious. It is by no means coincidence that the photographer focuses much of his interest on the backdrop. He lends a significant role to the backyards, stairwells, points of sale, dilapidated industrial zones and

living rooms just as much as the overloaded palace rooms. They are more than decorative stages and are just as important as the models, their body language, the clothing and the other accessories in the scene. This lends a surprising twist to the term of background information. Halle and Leipzig, Berlin, Prague and St. Petersburg lend his pictures a seal of authenticity. The game that is being played here incorporates the ambience of the stage in its dramaturgy. In some cases, the actual producers of the clothing and the glitzy, visible side of the game are seen personified in the seamstresses and the photographer's crew.

It is no coincidence that Olaf Martens is a pioneer in a field that is largely neglected by Western lifestyle and fashion photography: Central and Eastern Europe. He has designated these regions the preferred backdrop to his art. It is no coincidence that the wilful force of revolution that will change all of Europe speaks through his photographs. At the same time, he demonstrates how fragile the ground is on which this revolution will take place.

In view of the depiction of the human, if not always the female body, the chronological sequence of his pictures reveals increasingly a pronounced tendency: from complete nudity to a sometimes elaborate form of cloaking, which of course reveals more than it hides. However, it would be just as wrong to see in this a growing prudishness that has emerged at the start of the 21st century, as it would be to claim a change in the photographer's emotional perspective. Motivation is a current within society that runs deeper.

It finds its expression in the growing externalisation of privacy, promoted and hurried on its way not least by the mass media. Particularly the naked skin of the female models has become a form of flexible armour over the last twenty years of the previous century, the time covering the period of Olaf Martens' work, that quite obviously hides more than it reveals. The cool photography of Helmut Newton and his epigones emphatically celebrated the smooth and essentially non-erotic female body. The cosmetics industry and plastic surgery have become their real-time creators. Apart from a lamentable residue, eroticism has vanished from public images of the human body. The clothing breathes life once more into the disquieting secret.

In comparison to Newton's models, the vital women in Marten's early pictures appear more naked or even stripped than they are disrobed. Their erotic charisma is therefore equally direct. There is no hint of glamour. Their charisma appears to destroy the iridescent varnish of the photographic surface. There is no doubt, these women not only know what they want, but are also people that take it for granted they may select their own partners for sexual gratification. The pictures of von Bianca and Simone, of Ute and Ilka e tutte quante, all of whom are female friends or female friends of friends within the photographer's social group and by no means professional models, dig a deep chasm to hold the sturdy, insecure and artificial Goddess of Victory from Halle. Two more contradictory images of women could not be conceivable. While the one symbolises the prudish attitudes and the repressive bourgeois morals of the totalitarian regime, the other pays testimony to a sovereign individual who lends full reign to lust and who is vigorously conscious of their own body. However, these vivacious women are just as far removed from the sterile, papier maché Goddess as they are from the stodgy fare found in magazines for teenage girls or from fashion photography. When the photographer portrays them as puppets, he is simply offering a parody of a typical male viewpoint and of traditional "beauty photography". Martens has blown fresh air into the genre of photographing the human form.

The German, Czech and above all Russian successors to the original models from Leipzig and Halle are just as emancipated in front of the camera of the now quite renowned lifestyle photographer: Anna, Katya, Sveta and Ulyana from St. Petersburg or Nicole, Lola and Lilli from Halle and the rest. Some have made a profession out of playing to the camera, while others are dancers, former sportswomen or members of "upper class" society. The photographer names them in the titles of the pictures out of principle. They are not obscure objects of his aesthetic desires, but instead equal partners in the play with costumes and partial nudity with grotesque punch lines. This is manifestly obvious in the unchecked pleasure they reveal in working in front of the camera. This pleasure in the images is automatically transferred to the observer.

In view of the fact that Martens works the frontier line in the world of traditions in contemporary photography [4], he plans the steps he would like to take with his photography very carefully indeed. His apprenticeship as a technical draughtsman and his work as a constructor in an engineering office (1982–1985) helps discipline his bubbly temperament. It is therefore almost impossible to find one word to characterise his photographic attitudes. His images refuse to fall into the standard categories of the art or media markets. It would be insufficient if not erroneous to call him a lifestyle or fashion photographer. This does not hit the mark. It is indeed his goal to transcend the standard patterns of depiction. In addition, he pokes ironic fun at generally accepted perceptions. For example, the machismo dream of a "ménage à trois". In the picture entitled "Ute, Ilka, Thomas | Halle-Trotha | 1988" [5], the man fails to perform in view of the challenge facing him. He falls asleep on the partially naked legs of the beautiful women. The two women, who have been left in the lurch, must themselves finish what was started. Man – the overestimated being. In his photography, Martens focuses entirely on concept. In the backdrop to his pictures we find other pictures, pictures of art, photography or collective dream worlds.

[1] Ill. p. 47, "Halle/S. | 1987". [2] Olaf Martens: davor + dahinter. exhibition catalogue. Cologne, 2000. p. 13f. [3] André Bazin: Ontologie des fotografischen Bildes. In: André Bazin: Was ist Kino? Bausteine zur Theorie des Films. Cologne, 1975. p. 24. [4] Klaus Honnef. In: Olaf Martens. Fotografien. Kilchberg/Zürich, 1994. p. 8. [5] Ill. p. 57, "Ute, Ilka, Thomas | Halle-Trotha | 1988".