

With playful calculation

Katja Hoffmann

Florian Schmitt's works are a calculated challenge for the viewer *not* to believe his or her eyes. He himself refers to his photographs, taken in underground stations in Cologne, as "temporary interventions". They confound the eye, for they consciously make places that can be described as "transit spaces" in terms of Marc Augés the focus of photographic staging: Schmitt disturbs our fleeting everyday perception, which for the most part doesn't pause, stand still, look at these "places of transition" – on the contrary, all movement is determined by the flying change from A to B. However, the photographs provoke precisely this process of consciously "looking" with playful calculation, for instance, when sparkling strands of tinsel are accurately fitted into the abstract tableau of two meeting red tiled walls and follow the vertical and horizontal lines of the joints. The eye stumbles. Our everyday perception is highlighted by the fact that a material that contrasts with the background surface is arranged, almost casually and yet carefully composed, in these so-called "transit spaces" and "non-places". At the same time, the materiality of the added props is evocative of pop culture strategies of representation where glitz and sparkle are used as an aesthetic surplus in sometimes shrill (self-)staging; trash utensils of a perverted consumer culture are subversively celebrated.

In Schmitt's subtly calculated photographs, tinsel gold and streamer silver also play with a logic of value that has evolved in the course of cultural history and which we encounter in medieval icons and religious rites: the golden halo ennobles the wearer, the curtain conceals the inner sanctum. However, it is only on the first, fleeting glance that the artist's arrangements enhance our everyday perception of almost invisible places – on the second glance the subversive, ironic gesture is emphasized: namely when the actual materiality is revealed to the spectator, when it becomes apparent that the curtain isn't concealing anything sacred, anything holy, but rather – quite profanely – marking a functional metal door; when it becomes clear that the transformation of the place is based on a cheap mass product of capitalist consumer culture. The world seems meaningless and at the same time the marking of a place gives it a new, subjective meaning.

On the one hand, Schmitt draws from a cultural historical repertoire of forms but also from pictorial phenomena of pop culture without a clear affiliation to its systems of reference. "Remix" – an artistic strategy of appropriation and assimilation, of blending and layering pictorial elements that circulate within the visual cultures – determines his process. The play with "primary structures", a term coined by the minimalist movement in the U.S.A. to describe their reduction of form and material, characterises the artist's works, just as references to photographic positions of the 1920s do. Schmitt's unconventional visual perspectives, but also his earlier almost stage-like arranged

photographs with their precise formal structure, are evocative of staging strategies found in Russian constructivism and the Bauhaus movement, calling to mind names like Rodchenko and Moholy-Nagy. However, Schmitt's neon colour schemes, chromatic compositions of pink and yellow as well as the use of rainbow-coloured film contradict the formally stringent aesthetic references to the 1920s, invoking associations with pictorial worlds of eighties trash.

In the tape installations he arranges in public space for his photographs, for instance, the earnestness and stringency of constructivist compositions are transferred to an everyday "non-place" and ironically broken. Once again, Schmitt's choice of form and colour play with the aesthetic standards of public space: complimentary contrasts, neon pink or green as well as the conscious crossing of purely vertical or horizontal tiling contradict the architectural grid and colour-scheme of the underground stations.

In addition to his photographs in public space, Schmitt's artistic process is characterised by his work in the studio or atelier: here, he constructs fragmented models from everyday materials and photographs he has taken, often arranging these to form miniature abstract pictorial worlds in which all spatial relationships are lost. Sometimes the laws of gravity in the world of things seem to be suspended; the coordinates of "up" and "down" no longer exist. It is only through the lens of the photographic apparatus that the composed pictorial whole is created. If you watch Schmitt arranging his photographic scenarios, his work primarily entails the exact positioning of fragments and snippets of card and everyday utensils, and sometimes of mirrors. The camera is then carefully positioned creating a composition that is arranged down to the smallest detail. What at first seems to be a scenario produced purely by digital editing is in fact the result of calculated handwork. On closer examination, Schmitt's works betray something of the process of their making and reveal that his artistic process is not only driven by perfectionist calculation but is constantly in search of playful methods of handling materials and equipment as well as allowing room for chance: for example, when cut edges of cardboard rise up almost inconspicuously in the picture or the lines of a tile composition are casually continued with a pencil only to end abruptly in an indefinable white space; when the edges of a cardboard box become tattered or a shadow divulges something about the miniature-like properties of the space. The deviation from everyday perception is staged here too. The perceptual relationships of media, spatial coordinates, material properties don't become obvious on the first glance: a second look, a closer inspection is required. Once again, this is calculation.