



**PINNED
BUTTERFLIES**

**MIKLOS GAÁL
CONVERSATING WITH
LARS MEXTORF**

2007

LARS MEXTORF

Miklos, I would like to start with a question concerning a common reaction to your work. Due to the focus differences that are unusual for extreme long shots, by looking at your photographs one is almost inevitably reminded of some kind of model landscape. My impression is that you consider your work a bit narrowed by this connection to a world in toy scale. Why is this and what is your personal focus on your work?

MIKLOS GAÁL

Yes, the unfocused photographs confuse the scale unfamiliarly and it evokes this reaction of a small-scale model very often. It seems like this is the most common and obvious way to create an interpretation to a surprising and confusing experience. The blurredness is a method that was developed over a long period of time and experimentation. My personal primary interest in the blurredness does not refer to small-scale models, but more directly and simply to show things in a new way. A new way of looking is able to question things that we take for granted.

But what exactly is it that we take for granted and that you want to question?

By this I meant the subjects I am photographing and I am interested in: small scenes and moments of everyday life, work and leisure time, the built-up urban environment and so on. When looking at this kind of subjects through these unorthodox photographs, one is invited to make an interpretation of one's own. Even a tiny moment can tell a story, and a familiar scene can be looked at in a new and even surprising way. For me a surprise can reveal something previously unseen, and it can therefore change my conceptions around me and within me. All of a sudden you have the sense that you feel and understand something intensively.

I would like to focus on this aspect of revelation. Am I right that you are not interested in taking a photograph using the method of the tilted film plane when, for instance, photographing a wildlife park without people?

You are right, it does not sound like a very interesting subject as such. I pretty much need people to serve my interests, to reflect social behaviour. This applies to an inhabited milieu also, no matter how intriguing the settings: because if you lack the human figures to give scale to the space, essentially you lack a motif and a surface for projecting oneself into the picture. Without the social aspect it is possible the image would be more about the way of looking itself and questioning photography.

Would you say that the appearance of people in your photographs inevitably implies a social aspect to your work?

Yes, for me they imply the social aspect of human people and society. Early in my studies I was fascinated by the certain scientific attitude that first appeared in photography of the 1920–30s. For me this has been an influence and a kind of a starting point. It is present in these photographs as the overview perspective: showing a detached and vast view it represents this attitude as if trying to be a fully described representation of its subject. It is like the overview is attempting to show us an essence, but in a quite clumsy manner. The complex reality is a little amusingly oversimplified into categories. For me there is a connection with these pictures and dictionary logic. My first idea with the blurred photographs was indeed to assemble a collection of this kind of depictions of human people and society, including a set of photographs each being a “complete” picture of its subject. These photos are singular works instead of being part of a photographic series.

It seems to me that there is an interesting link between this scientific attitude and the instantaneous perception of the scenes in your photographs as part of a model, since the aspect of a frozen motion in photography is doubled. A model landscape that situates people can be seen as a kind of three-dimensional photograph insofar as it also shows them at a certain, momentary position in space. The assumed model character of your photographs transfers this static character of the model back into photography and thus reifies the people and the social relation between them. This appears to me to be the reason why the anticipation of motion which we have learned to apply to people in photography doesn't really work in your photographs. So, in a way, you are showing people like pinned butterflies. How, do you think, does this change the perception of the social settings in your pictures?

These photographs have elements of both pre-planned staged photography and the famed decisive moment. Ideas for subjects occur to me often beforehand and only then do I start searching for a location, finding the timing and the permission needed. This was, for example, the case in my series *Swimming lesson*. At times I go to the same place several times to catch the “right” moment. So making these pictures is both staging the subject and finding it. Though I don't literally arrange the subjects, people or scenes in these pictures, they are quite arranged compared to the prevalent preconception of what photography is. This difference was once put by Jeff Wall as “hunter and farmer”. This staging is also affected by the fact that the technical complexities involved in using the large format camera, necessary for this kind of focusing, reduces the degree to which intuition can play a role.

For me it is interesting to use photography for real events and views. Even if the working method is quite non-spontaneous, typical to photography there are always surprises and unexpected things that I want to remain open to. The focus is not completely controllable because you are not able to see and consider everything during the act of photography. This brings up a somewhat random selection of focused details from the vast view, also things that otherwise would be perhaps disregarded. Maybe it is also worth noticing that the final images are chosen and edited from a much larger amount of material. It remains frequently unsaid that material editing is an essential part of photography.

On the perception of looking: I think the blurredness has some elements of human sight. We are used to think of photography resembling a natural view, in spite of the fact that it hardly resembles human sight: a photograph is a halted moment in time, it is geometric and it focuses on many things simultaneously. In fact there was a landscape photographer Peter Henry Emerson who used the blurred manner in the 1880s and called the technique 'Naturalistic photography'. The selective focus is used all the time in commercial imagery, studio photography, and several contemporary photographers are experimenting with this technique.

Undoubtedly, the use of selective focus is by no means a new invention in photography. But I think the way you use the method gives the motif a certain artificiality that is specific. Emerson is a good example of an opposing approach to yours in fact. He attempts to mimic the eye's alleged way of seeing by reducing the depth of field so that the plane in focus is relatively thin, and so represents, more or less, the actual inability of the eye to see things at varying distances in focus simultaneously. In most of your pictures, the area in focus corresponds in no way to our ordinary visual experience. What interests me is how the perception of the content of your photographs is altered by this method, compared to a photograph of the same view with no blurred areas. What do you think about that, especially in regard to the social aspect?

The area of focus is very unusual for a photograph, and therefore its reception is easily contradictory. But I don't think it would be the reverse of our visual experience, even in this context of a vast overview. In our sight we follow singular subjects at a time. So our sight actually "zooms" in and out in terms of our attention and also other senses. Maybe our way of looking is more similar to cinematic story telling than halted single photographs: The film montage makes flying shifts in direction and attention, like our sight. A similar kind of film cutting can also happen when looking at these photographs, when one can feel as if drawn into a scene, making accidental observations of it following the focused route. So maybe the photos are unorthodox as a flat image, but as an experience they in fact resemble our sight.

The unorthodox image directs some of the attention to the image itself, instead of recording objectively with almost unphysical presence. But I don't know if it is possible to say precisely how the content is altered by the blurredness. Maybe it changes according to each image following various factors.

When I began experimenting with this method I was not concerned about questioning the way of photographic looking or the conventional photographic practice. In fact if no one had asked me these questions and my relationship to them, I probably would not have given such aspects a moment's consideration.

Before becoming more involved in photography, I studied graphic design and was led to drawing. I mention this biographical background because I believe it inevitably shaped my relationship to photography. Hand-made drawings originate without a deliberate plan: they gain visual shape during the physical act of making. As my perception of making images was that of a draughtsman involving a close relationship to the process of making, in photographic techniques also I had the idea of producing images utilizing photographic materials and techniques in various different ways. With the pre-conception of working quickly, directly and physically, I always found photography a bit complex for its technical and industrial character. On the other hand, this background has made me identify some points of interests in photography, such as the stopping of a moment and the illusion of reality. In the beginning I was fascinated by photography, for its characteristic of creating a strong illusion, and its relationship to interpretation. Nowadays when thinking about what photography is, it seems to have various forms of being. It is easy to talk about it as an experience, event or a process - instead of a reproduction or an object.

Anyway, these were some influences that led to this method that I see as a texture of different elements: the feeling of dimensionality and scale, caricature-like depictions of everyday subjects, visuality, nostalgia, and the previously referred to quasi-scientific parodic attitude. These are some themes present in many of my art pieces besides this particular body of photography as well. They are kind of general elements of interest that are transferred to different works regardless of subject and media of expression.

This slightly caricature-like aspect in your work came earlier to my mind when I was thinking about your titles. Often they have a certain innocence that is reminiscent to coffee-table books that show, in a very opulent way, life in foreign countries. The photographs in these books are usually accompanied by captions that describe the scenes as if they were not in themselves expressions of a society that is structured in a certain way but rather some kind of performance that stage

a cliché detached from society. Titles such as your *Event on a shopping street*, *Demonstration day*, *Perfect tan*, etc. pretend an almost naive glance that collides with the social reality shown in your photographs and so create a tension which I find very convincing. Did such kind of considerations influence your choice for the titles in any way?

Yes, these were particular influences not only for the titles but for the photographs in general. The coffee-table books introducing distant places appeared at the time most people were unable to travel, and in more recent times they have been revived through the tourist industry. I love them. They imply this characteristic attitude that is not devoid of humour. And it is indeed often forgotten that these depictions are expressions themselves and not neutral, empirical samples of a place. It is as if they are indiscriminate but nevertheless depict their subjects extremely competently. Sometimes when you look at these books you are surprised at the subjects which appear. Perhaps the themes flourishing have at sometime played an important role, but are now forgotten ideas and appreciations. Or you are too far away from their culture and motives to understand them.

This caricature-likeness bears an interesting connection to the previously mentioned model landscapes, for model landscapes also show characteristics. The model makers seek caricatures, distinctive features and qualities that emphasize the character and make the subjects recognizable. Model makers construct an assortment of the society, environment and people, they produce accurate copies and show them in a condensed space. It is like collecting ideals of the typical and exemplary to create an extreme caricature of a place.

You mentioned model landscapes being three-dimensional photographs. I think they certainly have a remarkable connection. Both photography and model landscapes carefully reproduce their sources. They both have a striking similarity between the depiction and the source, which is why they are not seen by most people as objects, material or an act of expression but simply as that which they depict. There is something odd about similarity. Both model landscapes and photography display this characteristic so powerfully it seems to even dominate their character.

Following these very interesting insights regarding the motif, I would like to come back to some more technical aspects mentioned earlier. A photograph taken in a conventional manner is usually organised through space, i.e. there are people, things, architectural elements or parts of a landscape in different depths that provide the viewer with the information necessary for orientation. Additionally the viewer's glance may be directed by a short depth of field that

indicates what is supposed to be important in the picture but since the plane of focus is parallel to the image plane this does not affect the overall organisation of space within it. Your photographs are different insofar as they show usually only a comparatively small area in focus and this area is not coherent to the spatial organisation because it does not run within a plane parallel to the image plane, but on the contrary is entirely independent of it. This makes instantaneous orientation difficult. Although it is possible to grasp the spatial organisation very quickly one often has more or less to search for the area in focus. Within this small zone that runs from one edge of the photograph to the other usually lies the subject indicated by the title but also a lot of other things that would normally be of minor interest. So again one has to look for something that captures the attention. I agree that this process is closer to the ordinary perception in everyday life. But I wonder to what extent you are still directing the viewer's glance, and if it is possible to have a more contemplative sight on your work or whether its layout inevitably activates an interest in finding the subject. What do you think of your role as choreographer of the viewer's glance?

I do believe that the careful usage of blurredness related to the motifs and the view activates some interest in itself. This method of making pictures creates some pre-determined conditions and applies them. It is about making images obey some existing limits and on the other hand utilizing possibilities offered by them. As the method involves various uncontrollable and accidental elements, the photographs mostly turn out to be something different to what I occasionally had as a pre-conception.

I compose the focusing impulsively regarding aspects such as the subjects, the space and the composition. The picture can change extremely according to how the blurredness combines with the possibilities in skewing and distorting the perspective of the large format camera rearranging the perception of the space. The blurredness is obviously also a way to omit unwanted elements from the picture that would not suit the theme I am looking for. It is a means of reducing information within the picture. It produces contradictory tendencies in the overview sight as it forbids the viewer to see the large view.

In the titles I often have the tendency to create a new awareness to the image and to the "real" subject. Again, there is a connection to coffee-table travel books, or even naive paintings and children's book illustrations that all share a certain pedagogic approach and a story is shown as an image. The naming is not necessarily to give hints for finding the necessary leads to discover the mystery of the art piece, or to solve the intention of the artist, the image should function independently of any title.

You already pointed out that the famous decisive moment is still of some importance to you. I wonder if this also applies to the classical composition as spatial counterpart to it. I find it interesting that you mentioned your previous studies in graphic design since I believe there is a close connection between graphic design and classical photography. Both are concerned with the partitioning of a plane which is, contrary to painting, really two-dimensional and absent of any gestural expression. But this kind of composition requires a defined plane. By blurring the boundaries and most areas of the photograph my impression is that you weaken the compositional potential of the elements within the picture. Is composition in the classical sense still of relevance for your work?

There is definitely a connection between the photographic composition and graphic design. The background of graphic design is for me a visual attitude, a kind of all-round education on communicating visually. On the other hand it is quite contradictory to the fine arts as it is tightly bound to conventions and to communicating with the recipient.

The blurredness could be seen as weakening the flat and definite composition of an area. I don't necessarily see photography as so flat, but it does carry a strong illusion of space. Hence, this fact has specific importance for me. In the blurred photos I have made a great effort to get the composition as seductive as possible in the final flat output. In this case I don't see composition as two-dimensional, but the focus-blurredness touch is a kind of three-dimensional composition. The sense of a space can be operated on and it can affect the forming of a place and the condensation of subjects.

When thinking about the decisive moment, for me it is slightly different than the classical dramatic crystallisation of a moment and its mastery capturing on film. In many of my photos there is lack of visual drama as there has often been a consciously chosen moment when nothing special is happening, or the motif is even an understatement. One could talk even about an indecisive moment. Also the remote view could be seen as detached, whereas the classical documentarism is often associated with empathy and bears serious commentary.

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