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“One can have a surprising effect
when one is basically simple and true.”

Miklos Gaál

In the hands of creative photographers, photography, this medium of reproduction which is bound to a technological apparatus, is constantly able to open up new formal possibilities, new perspectives and surprising contents. Its function consists of nothing other than copying a found reality onto film—or, better said, an image carrier. What we see is a photograph of something that once existed in reality but which now has long been a part of the past. It renders only a specific instant of the past. At the moment the photographer releases the shutter, he stops the time that is constantly flowing away from us. Images of memory. People, times, spaces, testimonies of cultures from early history to the present, events, catastrophes, strokes of fate, landscapes, still lifes, images of people who leave behind traces in our collective memory. Abstractions of lived realities.

But the material character of an image itself, a single photograph, does not belong to the past; as a real object it belongs wholly to the present. This ambivalence between the function of the image as an abstraction of reality and the material presence of the photographic body plays a changing role in the history of photography. In the 1830s and 40s photographic reproduction was dependent upon the metal and glass plates used for Daguerreotypes, but progress in chemical development later allowed for the transfer of exposed negative film onto paper as a positive reproduction. Technological progress in the science of photography fascinated generations of photographers and spectators as a welcomed space for artistic experimentation. This progress also fascinated up into the 1960s and 70s with its unbroken unity: the unity between the photographic body and the reality of that which is depicted, the view of and into the image which was spread out before the spectator. The spectator's perception has always been focused on the images' immanent formal principles and content and thus on the artistic intentions of the photographer. Their autonomous media context as an instance of critique hardly played a role. This is even more astounding if one recalls that artists such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque had already developed the technique of collage as early as 1910, Marcel Duchamp had defined the readymade as an artwork in 1913, and the Dada artists had been integrating parts of or whole photographs into their image concepts since 1917. The above were associated with interventions into the body of the photograph itself. The heterogeneous formal elements of the photographs were employed beyond the various aspects of their individual content and its particular references in service of statements that challenged the spectator to think and thus to find new interpretations in a changed context.

In his photography projects, Miklos Gaál is concerned with a method of making images in which the technological apparatus allows for variation in the depth of focus within a single photograph. He applies relations of focus to everyday situations. This is nothing unusual in and of itself; since the invention of photography both photographers and artists have recognized and thematized this phenomenon as a means of composition and interpretation. But these efforts were and still are related singly to the context of the image itself. That is, they are related to the function of producing a copy, which engages the object and its relation to different depths of focus only within the context of its immanent spatial disposition. Andreas Feininger and Alfred Stieglitz had already begun to work with relations of focus in their New York cityscapes in the first decades of the last century. After the Second World War in particular Richard Hamilton, the spokesperson for pop art in England, studied and visualized in detail the relations of focus in his experimental photo-analytical projects, in which he employed the whole range of possibilities for reproduction and printing, including classical painting. These aspects can also be seen in the work of Anna and Bernhard Blume, who create photo-performances with dramatic and dynamic series of movements that are contrasted with different focused and unfocused levels, or in the work of Astrid Klein and Rudolf Bonvie, who use found, already published material to create completely abstract images – this is made clear structurally.

In his photography projects, Gaál reverses this principle. At a superficial level, this is about creating surprises. “Surprises put the given into question!” he explained in an interview in May, 2003; surprises undermine our habitual ways of seeing. He hides his own motivations behind this idea, because he lets himself be surprised by the possibilities offered to him by technology in his search for a photographic image that will allow him to resist a world of flooded media and visual innovation. He is not interested in competing with electronic or digital media and developing his own concepts for images. Gaál methodically counters the subversive pull of the suggestive language of these media, which purports to obey traditional ideas of images in order to better manipulate the spectator. He does so by offering seeing as a process which leads the spectator of his work to playfully learn to consciously confront the reality of our lives, particularly as it appears in everyday events, using his own strength and ability, and his own eyes.

For this, Gaál begins with two premises, which form a common basis for all his photography projects to date. As a basic condition for his work, he chooses a position for his camera that allows a view—of a coastal landscape, street, demonstration, construction site, port,

sports field or airport—from a great distance. He also sets the lens' focus on a particular point, creating a sharply focused diagonal area through the image. This optical point of focus moves forward from the surrounding scene, which itself recedes in an unfocused blur; the point of focus is elusive but unmistakable to our eye as it searches for an anchor. Once this point is found, the eye feels its way through the relations of focus in the photograph, searching for the "image" within it, initially without noticing that this category of photographic image becomes elusive just at the moment when seeing as process of perception becomes apparent. Gaál's understanding of photography thus reveals itself as a school of seeing.

His approach goes much further, however. The character of the relations of focus within the body of one of his images brings about a paradigm change in relation to the medium of photography as well as in relation to the function of a photographic image as a reproduction or copy. Gaál employs photography as a form of language able to make transparent its own appropriateness as a medium over other artistic media that lend to clarity and discussion about specific content. For Gaál sketching plays an important role; he likes to draw and works with a sketch book. Each sign drawn with a pencil on a surface categorically embodies something real and autonomous, an idea. Relating this specifically to the medium of photography, it is not the image that we see but the act of seeing that corresponds to the relationship of each idea to reality—and this relationship is methodically brought to consciousness in his photographs. The spectator is not overloaded with the content of an image. Instead he is liberated to his own seeing and understanding of what is philosophically real, what it means; and he is left to his independent responsibility in this matter. Gaál thus gives photography a completely new perspective. This new perspective directs attention away from the character of the image as reproduction and toward the process of the spectator's perception of reality—which is the true reference point of Gaál's work.

Another thought should be added to this consideration of the medium of photography as practiced by Gaál. The essence of a computer-generated image is that a computer depicts digitally generated images on the surface of the screen with millions of electronic pixels, which, as Vilém Flusser has analyzed in detail in his book *Ins Universum der Technischen Bilder* (1985), are projected onto the eye and the brain of the spectator and not onto the deep-space horizon of our traditional understanding of space. It is a technically generated image which places the fantasy of the spectator in touch with reality and thus teaches him to understand. In a methodologically comparable fashion,

with the help of photographic techniques Gaál projects seeing onto the spectator in a painterly way, such that he learns to understand seeing as a form of insight. This insight is elementarily linked to his existential reality. Gaál's photography thus gains a new quality in comparison to computer technology, which in terms of methodology works with the same arguments, though with different resources, and in the case of photography with a "reference to the world."

Gaál's choice of standpoint from which he carries out his photography projects defines in a new way our relationship to reality as concerns the relations of focus. Works such as *Beach life* (2002) or *Airplane, Demonstration day, Morning walk* or even *Construction site* (all from 2003) show landscapes and architectures, ports, and crowds of people during different seasons and times of day, mostly in uniform light, all of which are enveloped in a distinct atmosphere. Simple but effective formal means contribute to this effect. The total view effects distance. The character of the real becomes alienated and takes on an artificiality that distances the events depicted in such detail from the reality found by Gaál. The spaces and everyday situations he chooses are spread out before us like playgrounds that seem to emanate from the building block sets of our childhood bearing forth landscapes, seas, trees, houses, figures, airplanes, ships. But these associations are deceptive. The point of sharp focus turns this harmless image into the opposite: that which we believe to see as a reproduction of a familiar everyday reality stored in our practiced and preprogrammed eye, in our brain and our subconscious, confronts us anew as a materialized, i.e. a physical and object-bound autonomous reality of our perception.

Gaál intensifies this experience of ourselves by making us conscious of a dialectic of perception methodically dictated by him which oscillates between the poles of being and seeming. He accomplishes this in terms of form through the large format of his photography projects, and in terms of content through the specific atmosphere that permeates every individual work of his to the point at which the realities of the material body of the image and the process of the spectator's perception meet at "eye-level." At this metalevel of perception we find access to a generally valid, autonomous reality that is directly related to our lives. And every spectator of Gaál's work experiences this reality differently because it relates to his very own life and being. Gaál's attention as an artist is first of all directed toward himself, but secondly toward the spectator. The subjects and motifs Gaál looks for and implements in his photography projects are an occasion and not the final goal; ultimately, and for him very importantly, he doesn't want to lose the sense of fun in his work, in which humor and wit always play a significant role.

This distinguishes him from most of his artist colleagues. Andreas Gursky undertakes comparably large installations, in order to uncover and make visible the sculptural as well as abstract structures in his chosen subjects: landscapes, architecture, or interiors. In his model-bound architectures, Thomas Demandt suggests realities which through their apparent artificiality undermine our belief in that which we usually accept as real and true. While the Canadian artists Jeff Wall or Ken Lum enact social conflicts and everyday situations in a complicated manor and represent them in lifelike large-format photo installations, Gaál approaches his subjects from the opposite direction, proceeding from found realities. Reality is his material in his search for and on his journey toward new directions for photography that will free it from the dead-end street of mere reproduction and thus open up a view and an understanding of reality on a new level that corresponds to the changed paradigms in twentieth century art.

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