

Martin Engler

The Schizophrenic City

It could be a ballet. Adolescents, about a dozen of them, move about in front of the camera. Their heads, sometimes their hands, torsos or arms are caught by the camera: gold chains, fashionably uniform short haircuts, a baseball cap, tattoos – the t-shirt monotony interrupted only at the very beginning by a striped polo shirt. Heads communicate, albeit in a strangely ritualised manner by gesture and glance. There is little talk, and when something is said it looks like screaming or a form of singing. The brief, banal moments of action, the martial gestures, the juvenile mimicry are theatrically stretched in extreme slow motion. The seven-minute video loop renounces all sound; nevertheless, the hard beat that fills the room can be almost physically sensed.

The setting, an interior space – as we discover only incidentally – offers no clue about the action or its purpose. The background, in both the concrete and figurative sense, betrays nothing: alternatively black and white surroundings, distinguishable from a stage only by the brick-coloured shoulder of an arch and a red fire extinguisher sign. For this is the key question in the video **Flow** (2007) (fig. 1-4) and generally in the works of Mirko Martin: What is being performed and for whom? What is the event the camera is trained on? Who is the addressee of the communication? And, above all, is the camera and hence the artist part of what is happening or an observer? It is a question of proximity and distance between life and aesthetics, between the artist and the subject of his art.

While **Flow** consistently plays with the absence of any narration, reducing communication to a sequence of abstract gestures, the photographic works composing **L. A. Crash** (2006–2008) provide an over-abundance of narrative detail. It is not the emptiness of a supposed stage that is evoked but a profusion of indications and meanings. The stage is downtown Los Angeles. The action plays with the cinematic love of disaster and the everyday catastrophe of the Moloch city, its homeless hordes

and urban non-places.

At first glance, the setting is idyllic and anonymous in classical Cinemascope format (fig. 5): well-kept, well watered lawn, high palms, in the background a blue strip of distant ocean. At second glance, the foreground is the scene of an accident, attack, crime, or some other catastrophic event. Several people are lying, lifeless victims, on lawn and sidewalk. The protagonists, barefoot and in everyday clothing, are cut by the camera to make them part of a larger, enormous whole. But immediately beside the 'crime site' another reality begins. The picture and its action begin to come apart: the uniformly red backpacks lying directly next to the supposed bodies tell another story. They disturb at least the unconjugated juxtaposition of disaster and idyll, background and foreground. In the middle ground, too, there are people lying. But they are not lifeless, felled by some higher power; they are stretched out asleep, relaxing in the Californian sun.

What we are looking at is a picture of a filmset in Los Angeles where 100 shoots can take place per day. A second shot of the same set seems to confirm the finding, perhaps even revealing the cause of the puzzling happenings, but making the surreality even more apparent (fig. 6): this second shot suggests that a weird alien has killed the young people (Martin fortunately never informs us about the quality of the films; in this case a B movie is doubtless involved). In the background an elderly woman is sitting legs apart in the shade. In contrast to ourselves, she takes no notice whatsoever of the action in the foreground. It is this sometimes scarcely perceptible, sometimes constitutive dislocation of reality levels that makes Martin's works so intriguing and in a positive sense peculiar: an invisible fissure traverses these stagings, separating urban spaces from one another without it being legible on the surface of the pictures. It is more the way in which the – more or less voluntary – protagonists behave towards this space, how they occupy it and act in it, that shows we are concerned explicitly with the sociological properties of this public space.

This moment in the political organisation of our urban lifeworld comes even more strongly into focus when Mirko Martin suddenly takes us into completely different areas of action. With him and his camera eye we leave the Hollywood dream-world to encounter completely different faults in the urban environment. Only some of the shots from downtown Los Angeles taken during two visits in 2006 and 2008 are located on filmsets. A parallel line of action develops along the real faults of the old

city centre, which utterly imploded in the aftermath of massive population shifts, racial riots and the exodus of the original white residents to suburbia. A highly interesting sociological process, which has not least inspired American literature from Don de Lillo to Jeffrey Eugenides, expressing the problems of American society with rare clarity. Skid Row, one of the biggest concentrations of homeless people in the United States, where thousands of people live on the streets in an area covering about 50 blocks, exists cheek-by-jowl with most of the famous filmsets. The common denominators in the two cases are disaster and the juxtaposition of diametrically opposing realities. That the places of fiction and reality are the same is programmatic; if they are indistinguishable it is not by mere chance.

The two lines of action in **L. A. Crash** deal with accidents and calamities, destruction and violence. And, naturally, the cynical tension between enacted tragedy and its real-world counterpart in the streets alongside is all too painfully present in every moment. The scenes that Mirko Martin presents resemble one another very much more than is apparent at first glance. Not only does the subject matter converge astonishingly; the inner structure of the pictures, in addition to the topographical proximity, contributes greatly to the indistinguishability of the completely opposing image worlds. One picture, which, unlike the works discussed above, was taken during the second visit, confirms this. (fig. 7). Although, as we suppose, it was not made on a filmset, it shows exactly the same schizophrenic split in reality that we have described. Albeit under completely different auspices.

In the middle ground a man is crawling across the sidewalk. The setting is small-town, dilapidated: downtown L.A. A warm evening sun illuminates a distressing scene: the man on the ground is surrounded by three further protagonists. While a woman wearing a strange mask (the only moment that recalls a filmset) passes by unimpressed and a man in a wheelchair takes no notice at all, the third passer-by seems to be taking at least a fleeting interest. However, the strongest contrast is between the man in the wheelchair, sunning himself with bare torso, and the helpless figure on the ground behind him.

As on the filmset of the previous works, an invisible split passes at this point through the seemingly congruent reality of the picture. With the fatal difference that the protagonist in the picture is "acting" his own life and cannot cheerfully jump to his feet when the take is finished. A both fascinating and irritating scene from David

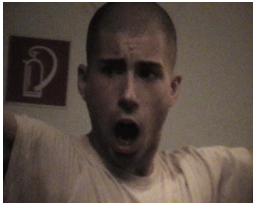
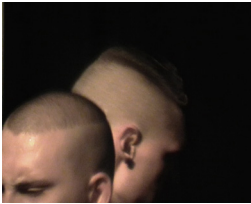
Lynch's sophisticatedly yarn-spinning cinematic epic **Inland Empire** seems to have been the model: at the end of a long take, a conversation between two homeless people, following which one of the two protagonists dies. The second actor gets up and goes. But the film continues, the liberating "Cut!" is called off screen, only the character who had died after the end of the dialogue remains lying. The camera zooms farther and farther away from the scene of the outrageous event. The cinema seems suddenly to have lost its key ability: the illusion machine is dead! All at once, fiction and reality, art and life coincide, albeit with a disturbingly appalling connotation.

The photographic works of Mirko Martin thus develop a quality of reflection on the media that goes far beyond the play between film and reality, between Hollywood and the causes of urban decay in Los Angeles described, for example, in Mike Davis' **City of Quartz**. The here-and-now of documentary photography, this, as minimal art would say, "What you see is what you get" of the photographic image, is finally lost. It is no longer a matter of capturing and preserving a transitory moment. The only marginally shifting viewpoints of Mirko Martin reflect above all the perspective of the viewer. How we deal with, how we look at what happens outside art is soberly dissected. In the conflict between identical disasters, in the juxtaposition of identical settings that point to completely separate levels of reality, a bewildering analogy appears: what Martin presents us with is a parable on the possibilities and contingency of an art that gives its attention to moments of social and political reality.

The parallelism of viewpoints makes the real homeless just as much as the filmset protagonists objects of our sociological scrutiny. The artificiality and voyeurism of the Hollywood camera perspective is doubled by Mirko Martin's digital camera, placing our position as viewer and that of the Hollywood film in parallel. This is not to say that the two camera perspectives adopt an identical attitude, but that they are equidistant from their object. In both cases the levels of art and politics, fiction and reality are kept neatly separate. The end of the here-and-now of photography also means that the documentarily involved photographer's eye no longer operates; the photographer is both (digital) choreographer of his pictures and actor. In a strange play between distance and proximity, the artist, like the viewer, remain disinterested observers, who themselves embody the split in reality levels. And, as in Lynch's **Inland Empire**, one figure remains behind in the picture at the end – and it is not the viewer.

Figures

1-4



5



6



7

