

Sarah Frost

Where is the Cinema?

Like a hunter, Mirko Martin roams the urban landscape of Los Angeles, looking for images to represent the different facets of a city that has become a projection screen for grim dystopias.¹ He stops and waits in strange, hybrid places, until his camera finds what it has been seeking: dark underpasses, empty bridges, barren yards, artificially lit parking lots, alleys where tents occupied by homeless people mushroom, or downtown's busy boulevards—places that are as heterogeneous as the megalopolis of Los Angeles itself.

On foot or by car, Martin kept moving along the streets, from Venice Beach to the Hollywood Hills, from downtown to East L.A., creating a portrait of the city that has become a hologram of the film industry. Martin's photo series, *L.A. Crash* (begun in 2006), cryptically subverts the established clichés and images streaming out of the flood of media: panoramas of burning high-rises, uniformed cops handcuffing African-American gangsters, graffiti-covered courtyards, or lethargic homeless people on the sidewalk. The photographs seem to come from a bank of cinematographic memories, in which glossy optics are celebrated fetishes in an inexhaustible world of pictures. "It's about getting into the fiction that is America, America as fiction. After all, it is as this fiction that it rules the world."² Martin intensifies the effects of simulation (in Jean Baudrillard's sense of the word) by adding another layer of motifs to *L.A. Crash*. He mixes shots of actual streets with motifs from film productions (including costumed actors and staged disasters), which he happens to come across in public. However, the question of what is authentic and what is constructed always remains open. This blurs the line between documentary and staged photography.

Fertile, disturbing moments are created on the threshold between document and construct. Martin does not want to abandon the causal relationship to reality. When looking at the pictures, one does not so much wonder what reality is like, but rather, what kinds of methods are available to depict it.³ The artist wraps his photographs in the cloak of the documentary, which is solidly anchored in the American genre of

street photography.⁴ The images are equipped with a “momentary emotion.”⁵ All of the scenes captured are fleeting: the car accidents are rapidly cleaned up, the suspects are soon in jail, the people on the streets are quickly passed. Especially the motifs of accidents or victims embody the past.

Compared to the way cars are presented as icons in his photos, Martin’s pictures of people play with the effects of authentication. Body parts are frequently cut off; sections of the image are out of focus, making the pictures look like snapshots (see figs. 1-3). As a series of single shots related by narrative, *L.A. Crash* features fragments of Los Angeles, yet its many layers suggest that it is an essentially complete image of the city.

Martin’s scenarios unfold to their fullest in formats that are often between one and two square meters in size. This allows the viewer to perceive ambiguous details, while at the same time stories are set in motion: the bags of chips scattered around the crash site involving a Jeep (see fig. 4), the Mexican girls eating ice cream as they ignore the accident, the bus going to Chinatown, or the posters of the Body Worlds exhibit flashing like signs of the zeitgeist, offer “a glut of narrative details . . . a plethora of references and meanings.”⁶

Martin, who lived for a year-and-a-half in L.A., takes in his environment as if he were a flaneur. “. . . [F]or the passionate observer, it becomes an immense source of enjoyment to establish his dwelling in the throng . . . the fleeting . . . to see the world, to be at the very center of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world . . .”⁷ writes Charles Baudelaire, describing the character of the urban wanderer. In his search for the city’s visual potential, Martin covered a great deal of territory at first. Over time, he discovered clues and signs that helped him to proceed more methodically. He realized that bright yellow signposts often directed him to the nearest film set.⁸ The artist followed the clues, even if he was never quite sure what he would find at the end of the trail: frequently, it would be the interesting, hoped-for film shoot, which he would then generally observe for days at a time, but often it would simply be the remains of a production that had been wrapped up long before. Gradually he came to recognize the places favored by filmmakers, and at some point, he also figured out which “no parking” signs were announcing an upcoming shoot. Moreover, he discovered real accident sites, and watched to see where arrests frequently occurred, so that he could be on the lookout for them in poverty-stricken areas.

By being constantly on the alert, Martin’s method recalls the one used by Weegee, the New York photojournalist, from the late nineteen-thirties on. He sat in his car listening

to police radio, so that he could quickly get to the scene to take snapshots right away, many of them of brutal scenes. Quite a number of Martin's photos also feature threatening, claustrophobic scenes, which make viewers shudder, while at the same time playing with disasters and voyeuristic desires.

In *L.A. Crash* the artist reflects the gaze of both the *flâneur* and the paparazzi.⁹ He wanders through the city, discovering myths on the streets, because, "actually, the cinema is not where one thinks it is, certainly not in the movie theaters . . . Where is the cinema? It is everywhere, out there, in the whole city, in uninterrupted, wonderful films and scenes."¹⁰ So it is no coincidence that Martin encounters the protagonist of his most recent video on one of his forays through downtown L.A.

A Street Story (2009) is a portrait of Phillip Saffell, a homeless person who is the homodiegetic character telling his tragicomic life story. In the beginning sequence, which shows Saffell waiting for the bus, as he does every night, Martin focuses for several minutes on the homeless man's careworn face. These first few minutes give the viewer enough time to read his mien. Almost meditatively, the eye scans every wrinkle, every little gesture, in the attempt to categorize the main character and deduce some information about him. In the next scene, Saffell starts his narrative in his own, unconventional way. His tale of himself as an urban nomad begins in New York, on September 11, 2001, when the twin towers fall, and he loses his daughter, Ivana, and his wife, Adela. "Oh, Hollywood!," says Saffell, commenting on the collapse of the towers, which he claims to have witnessed in person. His description of the surreal images resonates with disbelief, doubt, and a little bit of gallows humor. With Saffell's words, Martin reminds the viewer of an icon in the visual memories of American media history. Then, a sudden break in the flow of what seems to be a documentary video triggers some confusion: music from an action movie is heard, and, in fact, the intro from a film follows—an aerial shot that moves from the skyscrapers in downtown Los Angeles to the notoriously crowded freeway; the footage is from *Rush Hour 3*. Martin exaggerates the strong images Saffell evokes in his narrative by adding a collage of scenes from popular Hollywood movies. Unlike the situation in *L.A. Crash*, however, the viewer here can definitely tell the difference between film set and documentation.

The downtown Central Library, the setting for many films, is also the crucial element in *A Street Story*. Several narrative strands, all of which have to do with Saffell's life story, are intertwined with the imposing art deco building. Every day, Saffell goes to the library's reading room, where he does research and draws his own crime

noir comics, which he then tries to sell to passersby in front of the building. Here he also meets Jackie Chan, who is scouting a location for *Rush Hour 3* near the library, and promptly hires Saffell as an extra. Martin has the homeless man talk about the film shoot. Again and again, the artist alternates images from the movie with his own shots. Loud, action-filled excerpts from the movie are contrasted with still, slow images from a digital camera, as if fiction is being confronted with reality. Yet each of the elements of this composite sequence is, in its own way, staged. "Film and reality always cancel each other out; one might actually define reality as that which is not film."¹¹ As in *L.A. Crash*, Martin also experiments here with different ways of presenting narrative, involving the audience in a "game between distance and proximity."¹² Saffell's riveting, endearing way of talking gets under the viewer's skin. The fictions told by the movie images blend with his ambiguous narratives, which may or may not be true—Martin does not provide a resolution.

Martin accompanies Saffell over a period of several weeks, trailing him throughout his carefully planned, yet very isolated day. In terms of structure, the one-hour film has three themes: the monologue scenes feature Saffell talking to the camera about his modest everyday life, but also shed some light on the conditions under which Hollywood films are made; found-footage elements are edited in, as are Martin's wordless observations of Saffell as he walks dogs and draws. The rhythm of the interview sequences stands in contrast to the other passages. The active, frontal, face-to-face scenes are full of words, animated and intensified by the exciting movie excerpts, while Martin's descriptions of Saffell's works develop slowly and quietly, leaving viewers more mental space to make their own associations.

The second section of the video contains quiet images of the homeless man walking the dogs in suburbia. Martin directs his gaze to marginal things along the edges of the street: a jogger on the streets, between rows of look-alike houses; warning "neighborhood watch" signs, or sprinkler systems for the perfectly manicured lawns. Once again, these are signs and symbols that mark the image of American culture, and at the same time, they sketch out a place in which Saffell is a stranger.

In the third part, Martin spends several minutes watching his protagonist drawing. Saffell talks about the futuristic novels he claims to have written. "All my stories are based on a real event," he avers, presenting his drawings, which refer to a fire at the library in 1986, when suddenly, sirens can be heard and thick smoke emerges from one of the neighboring high-rises. Crowds of people form, to indulge in some gawking. "It is real!," Saffell comments. Things have come full circle. "Where is the cinema?"¹³

1

See, for instance, Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*, New York: Vintage/Random House, 1998; or films such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Terminator* (1984), *Strange Days* (1995), etc.

2

Jean Baudrillard, *America*, London/New York: Verso, 1989, p. 45. The French media theorist, who left his mark on the concept of the simulacrum, writes episodically and in fragments about his impressions during his travels through the United States. From a European standpoint, he describes his observations and reflections, which oscillate between fascination and irritation.

3

See Michael Köhler, *Das konstruierte Bild: Fotografie – arrangiert und inszeniert*, Munich: Kunstverein München 1989, p. 8

4

In: *Prestel-Lexikon der Fotografen*, Munich/Berlin, 2002. "Street photography" describes a genre that can be about snapshots, as well as essayistic series and milieu studies; for example, in the late nineteen-fifties Robert Frank traveled through America to create an image of *Les Américains* (1958). In his photographs, he establishes "things that, as everyday icons, determine our image of America," p. 92.

5

Timm Starl, "Dokumentarfotografie," in: *DuMonts Lexikon zeitgenössischer Kunst*, Cologne, 2006, p. 73.

6

Martin Engler, "Die schizophrene Stadt," in: *Mirko Martin - Tales from the West Side*, Bielefeld, 2009, p. 7.

7

Charles Baudelaire, "Beauty, Fashion, and Happiness," in: *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, P.E. Charvet, transl., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

8

Production companies put up coded signs on the edges of streets, to direct film crews to locations.

9

See Matthias Harder, *Pigozzi and the Paparazzi*, Berlin 2008, p. 1. Martin inverts the paparazzo's pictures, which demystify the stars by showing them engaged in their ordinary, everyday activities, because his photographs and videos intensify the cineastic image of the city.

10

Baudrillard 1989 (see note 2).

11

Lorenz Engell, *Sinn und Industrie. Einführung in die Filmgeschichte*, Frankfurt am Main, 1992, p. 180.

12

Engler 2009 (see note 6), p. 11.

13

Baudrillard 1989 (see note 2).

Illustrations

1-3



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