

Mirko Martin in conversation with Melanie Martin

You came to Los Angeles for the first time in 2005 for a one-year study scholarship at the California Institute of the Arts. Why did you decide to study there?

I had taken photos and made videos during my studies of art in Germany in which I was interested in what one perceives to be authentic about a person or to be the expression of a certain role or cliché. For me this was an artistic form of sociological or ethnological study. To pursue this goal I travelled to places in Spain and Morocco that I was familiar with from earlier travels and in which I encountered a combination of conflict potential, eccentricity and artificiality. That was for example a meeting point for long-distance truck drivers near Gibraltar, a street full of discos in Benidorm and a market place in Marrakech. Here I often saw people presenting themselves in a very theatrical way. I was particularly interested in the moment between authentic self-expression and self-staging. In the end it was these considerations that had a strong impact on my decision to go to Los Angeles for a year as this is a place in which role models are generated and disseminated. I was curious to see how the fictions created by the film industry would make themselves noticeable in everyday city life.

Since then you have visited the city several times and it has inspired you to create numerous works.

What is it about the city that fascinates you so much?

I was impressed by its size and the diversity of its inhabitants, the muddle of different forms of expression, languages, lifestyles. Life there seemed to me to be very open, intense and rich in contrast. I also value the skill in staging a scenario—the fact that many people make a show out of very everyday situations. In addition, the streets in some districts appear strangely familiar because we know their aesthetic qualities from films and for me this was a kind of *déjà-vu* experience. Nevertheless, many things that I initially thought I had understood remained foreign to me, above all the way people interact with one another. To me, the US culture feels very close yet at the same time very distant. I find that very appealing. And of course the light is wonderful there. In the morning it is often diffuse, during the day really severe and towards evening it becomes soft and golden. However in the long run the city can be very stressful—and at the end of the day it is a very materialistic world.

Your photo series *L.A. Crash* prompts the viewer to think about reality and fiction as well as about documentary and staged photography. How did this project come about?

It took a long time before I was able to photograph in Los Angeles and before I knew what I wanted to direct my camera at in all the hustle and bustle. When walking downtown I frequently came across film sets. In L.A. people are constantly filming everywhere. However, because there are not many urban-looking areas there but the films are mostly set in cities, the scenes are very often filmed in the narrow streets between the high-

rise buildings downtown. The scenarios are often full of action and initially I took tourist souvenir photos of them. When I looked at the pictures again after some time had passed I thought it might be interesting to photograph the scenes in such a way that the viewer is not aware of the fact that it is actors playing for the camera who are being portrayed. In the course of time I noticed that some of the film scenes reflected real incidents that took place there. I found that bizarre. I saw both real and acted car accidents, arrests and fires all in the same area. In addition, the behaviour of people in the street was so expressive that real situations sometimes resembled a play. So I took photos of them too and in this way the project developed into a kind of charade between reality and fiction, during which, over the course of time, the focus became more and more directed towards real situations. I have photographed in many districts however downtown there is the highest concentration of incidents.

How do you go about searching for your motifs?

I always look for situations that are very dense in terms of atmosphere. As a result I often find myself walking through very lively streets in order to find motifs that provide a lot of narrative details and meanings and therefore make a very filmic impression. I also find the peripheries of incidents and locations interesting. Downtown L.A. for example consists of several very different districts. There are residential areas with expensive lofts, areas in which homeless people live, large shopping streets, an industrial zone etc. Different social and ethnic groups live in these relatively separate areas. One can often observe interesting interactions on the peripheries. That also applies to the peripheries of film sets. Sometimes for example a floodlight is turned to one side and briefly illuminates the pavement. Passers-by then walk through this light and are lit up as if they were suddenly standing on a stage. Then I wait and see what kind of people walk through the light. Downtown there are a whole lot of extraordinary people whose variable lives have made a mark on their faces. Sometimes a theatrical expression flickers across a person's face for just one brief moment and vanishes again the next. I try to capture this moment in the picture.

Do you see your work more as classical reportage photography or street photography, or as staged photography?

I'd say it is a mixture. In terms of practice and motivation, street photography is more or less what I do: I walk through the city with my eyes open. I do have a concept in the back of my mind but first of all I like to just wait and see what the day brings. Without this element of surprise the work would be no fun. Absurd things constantly slip into the picture, things I would never have thought of myself. Because I also use staged scenarios from the film industry as a picture source there are—also on an aesthetic level—obviously references to staged photography, although I do not set up the scenarios myself.

How did you come to choose the title *L.A. Crash*?

In 2006 I had to choose a title for the first exhibition of what was approximately a 20-part series back then. Sometime previously I had seen the film *Crash*, which was shown in the cinema in German-speaking countries as *L.A. Crash*, and had won an Oscar as the best film. I noticed some parallels to my photo series. The film is also about situations of conflict in Los Angeles, and the episode style of its narrative structure reoccurs in the way in which the individual images in my series are consolidated like a mosaic to form a longer narrative.

If I had envisaged back then that my series would grow into such a large project with what now encompasses about 70 pictures, then I probably would not have chosen a title that makes such a strong reference to another work. Today I would also be more inclined to choose a more subtle title. But I can live with it.

With your choice of title you also make an explicit reference to cinema. What significance do star-cult and glamour have for you personally?

The myths surrounding the film stars have more of an indirect significance for my work. While photographing on film sets I have seen a lot of well-known actors and actresses. The bigger the star, the more vehemently the film teams usually try to prevent people from taking photos there. Naturally there is a certain amount of appeal when you suddenly see people that you know from the media standing in front of you in flesh and blood. However, in principle it is a banal experience when you see the stars as small wheels in the great production machinery. It is on screen that the magic takes effect.

Do you watch a lot of films?

Oh yes, all the time. I watch all kinds of films, as long as they are not romantic comedies. I also rarely watch German films because they are usually staged in a way that is pretty rigid and unrealistic—*Tatort* is probably the only case where I am sometimes able to overlook this fact. I also like to watch US television series. I was fascinated by *The Wire* because of the themes and the authenticity of the characters. However, as a viewer I do not only have an analytical gaze. The video artist Douglas Gordon once said that he could no longer enjoy a visit to the cinema because the conventional forms of narrative seemed to him worn out and ineffective. That is not true of me, I am usually quickly drawn in by a story.

In your L.A. Crash series you make strong references to myths and clichés affecting specific groups of people. In your works these are almost without exception male protagonists, for example police officers, criminals and homeless people. Do you intentionally aim to negotiate male role models?

Yes, that is an issue which is present in almost all of my works. In the beginning I was not so aware of the fact that I had automatically been drawn to male-dominated milieus. There are no doubt several reasons for this. First of all, men are more present in the public spaces that interest me, which are very conflict-laden. In addition, I find it easier to photograph men. If I observe women through my lens, I quickly feel like a voyeur, and confusion can soon arise regarding the nature of my interest. I find it easier to build up a relationship to men. I myself am more reserved and perhaps this is the reason why I am interested in very masculine characters. My parents' home was characterized very much by the movement of 1968, during which traditional role concepts were consciously challenged. I think a sceptical distance towards myths surrounding maleness can also be found in my works, in which I am more concerned with deconstructing role models. However, over time I have noticed that a certain amount of fascination is mixed in with the scepticism. Someone who appropriates a space self-confidently or even aggressively demonstrates a self-assured access to the world. Here I am interested in the view behind the scenes—I want to find out what this self-assuredness is based on.

Are the photographs that you took in the poor districts of L.A. linked to a moral or political message in your opinion?

That is an interesting question. Initially it is not a moral impulse that drives me to downtown L.A. and its homeless district Skid Row but rather curiosity. I am fascinated by the characters and lifestyles one encounters on the streets there. It is a world of its own, which has its own laws of communication and in which the situations are more intense, colourful, absurd and of course often more shocking than one is used to in the western cultural context. However city politics and sociology are very complex themes, especially for outsiders. I am certainly interested in marginalized groups and also want to convey a certain amount of hardship and rawness that I observe there. However for me the emphasis is on the staged qualities of the forms of expression. I search in particular for scenarios that are ambiguous. As a rule, I seek to avoid allowing the viewer to develop a clear emotional relationship to the figures. I therefore attempt to withdraw the expectations that a viewer may well have when looking at images from a particular milieu. The people portrayed should be able to maintain a kind of resistance and not always be completely readable, they should not merge completely in the role one may have attempted to ascribe to them. In addition, the pictures taken on the film sets have no real origin – as a result not only individual gestures and persons but also the overall picture can be called into question. I am interested in playing with clichés, the allocation of roles and images that the viewer is familiar with from films and news media. However, I think that social statements can also be conveyed by many visual details without any conscious effort on my part. The beautiful thing about photography is that different things are able to exist alongside one another in a single shot.

What is your approach to digital post-production?

That is different for each of the single pictures in the series. Many of them have not been edited at all. On the other hand I have put together motifs taken from several photographs in order to create a larger picture. I photograph with a 35mm camera, in order to be as quick and inconspicuous as possible. In the case of very small motifs the camera does not have sufficient resolution to portray all of the details in a way that is clearly visible. Then I help myself by photographing all aspects of a scene quickly from the same angle, in terms of both height and width. Later I put the individual shots together on the computer, in order to have a bigger print made.

You also work with video. How do you decide which medium you want to use?

I use video for more comprehensive sociological studies—if I want to convey a more complex picture of a person or a location and photography does not have sufficient ability to capture this moment.

For your video work *A Street Story* you had very intense personal contact with your protagonist. In the photographs on the other hand there seems to be a distance between you and the persons in front of the camera. Do you avoid direct contact here?

Both methods of working have their own appeal. It is simply that a situation changes as soon as you have made contact with someone. In principle however I like to capture a scene in such a way that it unfolds without me having to do anything and as a result I usually try to avoid contact. Sometimes however I am not able to go unnoticed. Then I simply risk making a shot and then wait and see what happens. There have also been situations in which I have approached someone and asked them to repeat a specific action. This functions best with very extroverted people who basically do not care whether or not a camera is directed at them in

that moment, however that is rarely the case.

You live in Berlin. Is the city a source for interesting stories in your opinion or will you set off travelling again soon?

I am more familiar with Berlin and therefore I am unfortunately not as curious. In addition, during the past years I have been busy with post-production at home and therefore rarely had the time or leisure to visit potentially interesting places over a longer period of time. If it does happen, it will probably be districts located more on the periphery.