

Melanie Martin

L.A. Crash—A city of dreams and reality.

A photo series by Mirko Martin

Once upon a time there was an enchanted hotel...

... built many, many years ago,

at the beginning of the last century

on the corner of 5th Street and Main,

in the heart of downtown Los Angeles.

For a while it was the tallest and most splendid building

in the city.

And it carried the euphemistic name

The Rosslyn Million Dollar Hotel.

(Wim Wenders)

The neon lamps glow symbolically on the roof of the Million Dollar Hotel (fig. 1). This place, where the heart of the US entertainment industry was once located and the rich and the beautiful celebrated excessive parties, is today one of the poorest areas of Los Angeles. In the 1920s the film industry moved to Hollywood and the glamour of the noble downtown area began to fade.

Since 2005, in the course of several trips to Los Angeles, the German photographer Mirko Martin has taken pictures of incidents in the city streets. His extensive series *L.A. Crash*, which encompasses approximately 70 works to date, has been set up as a work in progress project. The individual images are observations made in public space that deal with the American myth. Dream and reality seem to be inextricably entwined. Moments of recognition in the streets of Los Angeles serve as an inspiration for his photography. His photographic practice is oriented towards classical street photography. He very seldom intervenes in a situation, for example by asking someone to carry out a certain action again and he does not make use of additional lighting. Following his spontaneous intuition and with the discrete approach of an impartial observer, he captures scenes from everyday life. Yet to what extent are these scenes really everyday? They tell of urban life permeated by police raids, arrests or accidents in which people are injured and also point to the strong presence of homeless people in the streets of Los Angeles. Absurdities, spectacles and inexplicable situations that occasionally cause moments of irritation for the viewer. The artist draws on print media and cinema as a source of inspiration. Mirko Martin finds his motifs on film sets among other places and these pictures, together with the original street photographs, also contain the promise of a presumed truth. However, the viewer cannot easily gain access to the content of the pictures. Because the individual pictures have not been given a title

and therefore no information is provided with regard to the context of their genesis, one can only guess which of the shots originate from film sets. The actions of the protagonists captured by the photographs can deviate from our day-to-day experiences, however this alone is no indication that the things portrayed are not real. On the other hand, situations that appear quite commonplace can also originate from a movie shoot. With the most recent photographs in his series, Mirko Martin turns his attention more and more to the absurdities of real life, which in his opinion are just as full of theatricality and drama as the events conveyed in a film.

The early representatives of street photography, such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, were very concerned with maintaining a sense of immediacy and placing the focus on a single, unique moment. In comparison to this, Mirko Martin's newer, large-format photographs tend to be in line with visual concepts found in painting. Their composition is not focused on a single visual incident but emphasizes the simultaneousness of several events. The format of the image serves to create a harmonious, self-contained composition and as a result we rarely have the impression that these are documentary shots. Sometimes the people seem to be consciously posing for the camera.

The pictorial space is extensive, often it portrays an intersection or a frontal view of a street. The composition has been thought through in detail, the people have been choreographed with precision and look as if they have been staged. The brightly-coloured advertising lettering on the buildings also has a painterly quality. The setting up of self-contained pictorial spaces without any reference to what is located outside of the picture, is likewise reminiscent of classical painting traditions. At the same time, in these frontal views, the two-dimensional quality of the picture has been emphasized to such an extent that the impression of stage scenery is created. The incidents occurring on the periphery are always given enough space in the picture. The appraising gaze takes in this microcosmos little by little, making astonishing discoveries, especially in terms of the details and the unexpected relationships between them. Particularly in the large-format photographs of arrests, car accidents or other spectacular street scenes, such a visual language can be easily comprehended. In the serial presentation, these photographic tableaux are combined with small-format shots that capture moments in time and have a corresponding snapshot aesthetic. They seem to bear witness to the level of truth inherent in the complex panorama, which subsequently appears to have been staged. In a fascinatingly ambivalent way, reality and fiction are played off against one another.

References to painting can already be observed in the US colour photography of Stephen Shore or William Eggleston for example. With the aid of the artistic implementation of the medium of colour, in contrast to the sole use of black-and-white film in the classic phase of street photography, both these artists produced photographs that had a painterly appearance. In addition, in the 1960s and 1970s a freer approach to ways of staging a scenario were developed. Today, staged photographs are widespread in all kinds of everyday media and it has become natural for them to be met with a certain degree of scepticism. An increasing tendency to stage a scene can also be observed in contemporary artistic photography, accompanied by an ongoing reflection on the performative aspect in front of and behind the camera.

Since the early days of photography, the medium's function of providing evidence has frequently been made an issue and challenged on a theoretical level. On the one hand photography provides realistic images of reality, which cannot be perceived with the naked eye. For example the early studies of movement by Eadweard

Muybridge from the 19th century. The natural scientists quickly discovered the documentary benefits of the medium. On the other hand, the cultural meaning of film is based on an illusion—the illusion of movement (generated by the quick sequence of individual static images). The impulse to document something and at the same time the urge to call it into question are combined in a productive concept that triggers both astonishment and fascination. At the end of the day, artistic photography has profited from this and makes use of theatrical and scenographic means to generate consolidated images that are characterized by particularly complex and ambiguous qualities.

Martin's concept is based on passive staging. In the everyday life of a not quite everyday city, he keeps a lookout for theatrical elements. The resulting photographs tend to be factual and unagitated, despite the fact that their subject is in some cases rather spectacular. Due to the fact that the artist distances and anonymizes the persons, it is evident that he takes less of a social-critical approach and much more an aesthetic one. This approach is in line with the ideas of the US conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner, who has been working with a particular aesthetic since the 1960s, one that is intended to free art of its social responsibility. For Weiner, topicality and the creation of empathy for art are irrelevant. "By objectifying the actor, one does not create false sympathy or false empathy."¹ The protagonists photographed by Martin have a presence based on this kind of objectification. The image of the homeless person does not aim to trigger compassion. On the contrary, the person lying on the ground is much more an integral part of a visual concept, one which raises questions that go beyond the specific moment itself. The persons sleeping on the pavements, the tents of the homeless people and the shopping trolleys in which they keep their belongings, all tell of an appropriation of public space. Due to their visibility alone, the people excluded from society claim a place in the metropolitan zone for themselves. The photographs indicate where the boundaries between the private and the public become permeable. With what is on the other hand a decidedly documentary approach, the photographer Francis Alÿs dedicates himself in his slide series *Sleepers I–III* (1997–2003), *Beggars* (2003–2004) and *Ambulantes* (1992–2001) to this phenomenon of improvised utilization of public space (fig. 2). In Mexico City, Los Angeles and other large metropolises, these people stand for the other side of the networked, globalized economy and society. In Los Angeles too, the rate of poverty in large sections of the population is constantly growing. This is accompanied by an increasingly strong separation of the rich. Shopping malls and other semi-public spaces have the function of providing the wealthy with a protected space while at the same time excluding society's poor. The mirrored facades of the contemporary high-rise constructions, windowless buildings and sectioned-off sites therefore symbolically represent the interface between the rich and the poor.

Car Crash

"In a real city you ... you walk. You brush past people. People pump into you. In L.A. nobody touches you. We're always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much that we crash into each other, just so that we can feel something."

These are the words of Graham, the protagonist of the film *Crash*, while he sits bleeding at the wheel of his car, directly after the crash. Paul Haggis' dismal drama series *Crash* from 2004—the German title is *L.A. Crash*—provided Martin with the title of his photo series. The themes of the film, which are closely connected to the

city of Los Angeles and its inhabitants, are combined to create an action-filled movie. The car as a fetish and the moment of the brutal crash as the ultimate physical experience are motifs in numerous films in the history of US cinema. In the film *Gone in 60 Seconds* from 1974, the playful cinematic approaches to the car chase and the subsequent car crashes are excessively celebrated for the first time in a battle of chrome and steel. A visual tradition is established, which experiences a further climax in 1996 with David Cronenberg's film *Crash* and finds its contemporary sequel in Haggis' *Crash*.

Initially, Martin's photographs were dedicated to the car crashes that he constantly observed in the metropolitan area of Los Angeles. The first shots that were created for the series *L.A. Crash* inevitably trigger memories of images from films. At the same time they are an artistic adaptation of the live reports of car chases that are typically broadcast in America on a daily basis. When Martin takes up these motifs and presents them in a very different way, he is aiming less at achieving psychological empathy and a subsequent sympathetic response on the part of the recipient in the way cinema does. From a distance, meanwhile taken from a slightly higher position, the photographs resemble pictures from a surveillance camera. They initially appeal to the viewer's curiosity, however they also disappoint it with a rather unspectacular portrayal of the moment after the crash, when only the debris is being cleared away. These images emanate a strange sense of calm. The streets, which are in some photographs devoid of people, are reminiscent of apocalyptic scenarios. The few passers-by seem to scarcely take any notice. The broken-down car bodies appear almost like sculptures.

Ambivalent facial expressions

Police on duty, paramedics clearing up the scene of the accident and passers-by—we seldom see them close up and it is rare that one single person dominates the scene. Frequently the face is covered or can only be seen from a distance, a person is often shown from behind. These are strategies used to avoid making a clear statement about the picture, ones that create room for the viewer's imagination. In the *L.A. Crash* series, one can search to no avail for the so-called proverbial movie smile, which Americans are often said to have. Instead, there are constant scenes in which there is a focus on the gestures, facial expressions and body language of people. However, their meaning is often hard to decipher based on the photographs, as knowledge of the context is often lacking. Because in order to interpret a facial expression or gesture, it is necessary to have some knowledge of the current situation. Martin does not embed the image in a narrative and he therefore triggers a certain degree of irritation in the viewer. This also applies even more to the photographs, in which the protagonist contorts his or her face to a grimace. "The grimace contradicts the primacy of what is speakable [...], by extracting the unambiguousness and as a result the distinctiveness of the effect."² A snapshot such as that of the man in the brown leather jacket, who cramps his body and his facial expression as if in response to a sudden loud noise, initially shows the ironic approach of the photographer (fig. 3). The grimace forms a contrast to the aesthetic norm and serves as an indication for a naturalistic, non-idealized portrayal. It is possible to interpret the facial expressions as a sign of surprise, shock or even fear. The dynamic of the gestures and facial expressions inherent in the picture is a reference to a sudden incident occurring outside of the picture, which however cannot be more closely defined. A burst car tyre might be perceivable just as much as an exchange of shots or an explosive device. The strategy of breathing life into the picture at the end of the day manifests in the choice of the moment in which the face has frozen to become an undefinable grimace. The face as a surface for expression is a sign of imaginary movement. Yet the latter remains unreadable as it

has lost the unambiguity of the effect.

Many contemporary photographers working in the field of street photography have developed methods of manipulation in order to achieve very special shots of the gestures and facial expressions of a person. For example Philip-Lorca diCorcia photographed his series *Heads* (2000/2001) in Times Square in New York by mounting a hidden flashlight close to the pavement, which was synchronized with his camera (fig. 4). The use of the flashlight has the effect that an individual is separated from the crowd by the beam of light, as if he or she were suddenly standing on a stage or in a TV studio. These pictures have an almost religious appearance. The special aspect here is the fact that some of the faces give the impression that the protagonists are lost in their own thoughts.

Martin also takes a similar approach when he photographs on film sets. He captures the illuminated moment when the big floodlights are turned to one side and normal passers-by walk through the beam of light. With such a passive method of lighting control, passers-by are cleverly lit up and are given the glamour of a prominent personality. "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."³

"to protect and to serve"

The Los Angeles Police Department unit with the slogan "to protect and to serve" belongs to the face of the city. In one of the nightly arrest scenes in Martin's *L.A. Crash* series, the words are visible on the building of the L.A.P.D. headquarters downtown, which is located in the heart of a district characterized very much by homeless people (fig. 5). It seems the lack of space has forced the latter to strike up their tents directly next to the police headquarters building. In the city centre of Los Angeles both the police and the private security firms have a very strong presence, to make the inhabitants of the city feel safe. Another photograph depicts a moment in which two uniformed officers with their motorbikes are standing at the side of a street looking at an incident that is only hinted at in the background of the picture as it is very blurred (fig. 6). It is a moment of calm, of waiting, until something happens or the next assignment is announced on the walkie-talkie. The body language and facial expressions of the police officers abound with power and self-confidence. The lighting, which although it has not been actively staged by the photographer, has been precisely observed and implemented, is reminiscent of a film and lends the picture an ironic undertone. The nocturnal, almost romantic setting of an uneventful scenario does not represent the familiar cliché of the corrupt, brutal, even racist police officer in action. Yet this image, which established Film Noir in the cinema, has an effect on the way in which the picture is viewed and interpreted.

The film *Crash* tells of this type of anti-hero. A film still, published for advertising purposes, shows the police officer, played by Matt Dillon, in the moment of heroic action (fig. 7). What happened previously is well-known: he saved a woman's life following a car accident. The woman has been carried away by paramedics while the police officer—bathed in the warm light of the evening sun—gazes after her. This example provides a good opportunity for observing the similarities and differences between the still of a cinema film and an artistic photograph. The officer on the right is looking out of the picture towards the left, as is the hero Matt Dillon in the commercial photograph. However, while if one is familiar with the film it is clear that the officer is gazing after the woman who has just been saved, Martin's photo offers no clues about the context. As a result,

the absolute 'off' of the photograph only has points of reference in the viewer's imagination, while the 'off' of the film still is relative in as much as the viewer can watch the film and therefore find out what it is referring to. Because film stills are used for advertising purposes, other specific features apply here too. The complex action of a film that occurs in a time sequence must be captured in a film still in such a way that as much emotion and informative content as possible is transported.

Artistic photography seems to frequently imitate this typical visual language of the film still and at the same time undermine the expectations of the viewer. This is very evident in the completely staged photographs of Jeff Wall. They "portray extended moments and pursue the goal of depriving the incidents occurring in the picture of their time sequence, extracting them from the overall narrative and textual relationships and instead strengthening the autonomy of the image."⁴

Thus Wall's photograph *The Arrest* deals with the theme of the discriminating treatment of Latin Americans in Vancouver as a fundamental problem (fig. 8). The scenario is illuminated like a film set. However, the poses of the three men do not indicate a specific context for the action. One of Martin's photographs, which in its constellation is similar to Jeff Wall's photograph, shows two white police officers leading away an Afro-American (fig. 9). While they are visibly focused on keeping the strong man under control, the two police officers look into the camera. The characteristic documentary style, the reserve of the photographer and his subsequent goal of upholding the belief in the truth claim made by photography, becomes very evident here. Both photographers deal with the theme of racism in their own way. They both share a critical approach.

Narrative strategies in photography and film

To a much greater extent than photography, film has been a medium of illusion and story narration from the very beginning. While photography's function of providing evidence contributed from the start to its importance in the fields of culture, science and society, it is first and foremost the moment of entertainment, the triggering of shudders or laughter and the surprise effect that are significant for film. However, photography too is able to express a certain degree of ambivalence between dream and reality. As opposed to film, in photography, which makes a visual incision in space and time, narration in the sense of an event that follows a time sequence can only ever be implied. This occurs among other things when several photographs make reference to one another. One of the earlier photographs in the *L.A. Crash* series shows a man who a couple of years later becomes a protagonist in a work by Martin again. The recognition effect certainly causes the viewer to pay special attention. Because "[...] in the same way that one immediately associates stills of existing films with the cinema, one could ultimately also extend other images found in art to non-existent films."⁵ In the end, the extension of the images to create an imaginary film is subject to the imagination of the recipient.

Each of the two pictures mentioned transports a story in itself. In the photograph that was initially produced in 2008, the man is seated on a kind of wheelchair at the edge of the pavement, his upper body burnt by the glaring sun, while on the right a person is lying stretched out on the ground next to him (fig. 10). With his sublime, demonstrative stance, the man draws all the attention to himself, although there is a strange scenario behind him. (Someone is lying on the ground, passers-by are going past without helping.) In the second photograph from 2011 the same man is also the main focus of attention because of his unusual behavior. Photographed from the other side of the street, we are given a panorama view of events occurring simultaneously (fig. 11). One can see the driveway of a public parking deck. Due to the similarly grey colour of the asphalt and

the facade, the street and building positively merge with one another. The pictorial space seems to tilt forward, thus emphasizing its two-dimensionality. The luminous signs and the yellow sunshade are lively spots of colour in this setting. The man is standing directly in front of the driveway leading to the carpark. Here he also has a bare upper body and is pointing to his own shadow. What does this picture tell us? What secret profession or obsession is this person following? And what might the two pregnant women on the right edge of the picture be talking about? Questions arise, which an attentive walker might pose in a similar way while walking through an unfamiliar city.

The simultaneous portrayal of several individual incidents proves to be a dramaturgical trick, which prompts the viewer to look at the image intensely and for a long time. While cinema is characterized by an exciting dramaturgy comprising of the element of surprise and narrative continuity, in photography this continuity is transformed into an aesthetic standstill, the quality of which on the other hand is set in the dramatic alignment of people and objects to one another. Here, the timeless aspect becomes an advantage for the recipient, who determines himself how long he looks at a photograph in order to comprehend and interpret the events portrayed. Martin makes use of the photographic 'off', in other words the area outside the picture, to systematically conceal significant clues that could shed light on the situation. Where the Hollywood film fulfils its promise to clarify little by little what initially seem to be mysterious incidents, Mirko Martin's photographs do not trigger any hope of this. The viewer is inspired to discover possible relationships himself. A closer look can surely clarify several questions, as can looking at further photographs in the series, however the entirety of the image will not be conveyed to the viewer.

Following his journey to the US in 1986, Jean Baudrillard describes how he perceived the country as a European and in doing so emphasizes the artificial nature of a utopian society. "When I speak of the American way of life, I do so in order to emphasize its utopian character, its mythical banality, its dreamlike quality and its size."⁶ For him, as a foreign visitor of a culture that is young compared to Europe, the focus is above all on the experience of moving in an artificial world of simulation: "Fiction is not imaginary. It anticipates the imaginary by realizing it."⁷ Therefore the talk is of a fiction that is already reality. Baudrillard describes America as the only country in the world where this utopia is lived, where actors perform for a film out on the street, without anyone noticing. Where helicopters encircle a fire above the city in order to report on it live and become part of the dystopic scenario themselves. Mirko Martin's choice of subject is reflected by linking it to the media image of Los Angeles.

In order to mutually pervade the worlds of dream and reality, as is visible in many places in this city, Mirko Martin has found an appropriate pictorial language, with which he sometimes makes subtle reference to the film industry, for example when Angelina Jolie winks at the camera from a street poster (fig. 12). Or perhaps by systematically incorporating media clichés into his pictures and making them an issue, for example in the case of the police officers. With Film Noir the prototype of the racist, corrupt American cop was introduced—a cliché that still holds its own today, not least because the L.A.P.D. law enforcement officers have often reinforced this image in the history of the city. By constantly turning his attention to police officers and showing them going about their everyday work, the viewer is given the opportunity to compare these clichés with Martin's images and to thus challenge them.

In addition to circumstances observed in reality, the photographs taken on the film sets can cause confusion as they seem to originate from another world with its own rules and laws. With their ambivalent relationship to the depiction of reality, the photographs point to the fact that reality and fiction are not mutually exclusive terms. If one wants to believe in the pictures completely, some amount of confusion cannot be avoided. Due to the constant presence of America in the mass media, Baudrillard experienced it as a simulated world, a simulacrum. The media experience superimposes the perception of reality. This dialectic of fiction and reality creates a field of tension that serves as fruitful inspiration for Martin's work. At the same time, the reality status of the pictures remains uncertain, the stories are in limbo.

1 Lawrence Weiner, quoted in *Jeff Wall: Szenarien im Bildraum der Wirklichkeit: Essays und Interviews*, Hamburg 2008, p. 20.

2 Nicole Wiedemann: "What happened to your face? Zur Grimasse in der Fotografie", in: *Fotogeschichte 119* (2011), p.17.

3 Mirko Martin in an interview in this catalogue.

4 Valérie Antonia Hammerbacher: *Jenseits der Fotografie: Arrangement, Tableau und Schilderung - Bildstrategien in den Arbeiten von Jeff Wall*, Weimar 2010, p. 145.

5 Michael Althen, quoted in: Winfried Pauleit: *Filmstandbilder. Passagen zwischen Kunst und Kino*, Frankfurt am Main 2004, p. 175.

6 Jean Baudrillard: *America*, Berlin 2004, p. 130.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

Figures

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