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Mirko Martin. Roles and Mysteries

Taut biceps measure someone's degree of coolness, excited voices on cell phones blend into a whirl of little nothings, lightning storms of camera flashes illuminate people we never see face to face. Mirko Martin's visual world isolates, limits, edits. He uses the camera lens like a knife to cut out what is supposed to be the main event of a given situation, and in the process, he also eliminates the stereotypical ways we see and perceive things. In this respect, we could call Martin's artistic method a surgical one. However, that would only describe the fundamental sociological or psychological interests that form the basis for many of his works. The precision of his editing and the mercilessness of his gaze—occasionally intensified by the reduction of speed—frequently mix operative technology with dramatic aesthetics. Continuing with the medical metaphors, I might call it a kind of plastic surgery. Yet unlike plastic surgery, Martin rarely invents anything extra that would make whatever is being filmed or photographed more beautiful or interesting than it already was. He doesn't start with the object, but with the viewer. The operation is staged to alter the gaze itself, not the object it sees. Here, we are right in the middle of Mirko Martin's field of study.

Especially as far as his video works are concerned, Martin's experiments begin with roles: the roles that people take on, whether consciously or unconsciously, in order to consciously or unconsciously make statements about themselves or their social and aesthetic surroundings. In the process, both the artificiality and the flexibility of roles come to the fore and are tested in performance. Several facets of his work show this.

In the videos, it becomes clear that Martin's basic interest runs closely parallel to human behavior, which is not always immediately comprehensible. This can be seen in works such as *Eine Rede*, for instance, where bodies are employed to test verbal content, or in *Javi* or *Flow*, where sociological assumptions are derived from physical conduct, which in turn invites the viewer to start speculating on them. Even though the people in the videos usually come from a specific milieu, the work of categorizing

and assessing them is first completed in the minds of the viewers. In doing so, Martin does not force the viewer to judge one role negatively and another one positively.

The artist at work here always seems to wield his scalpel with extreme precision in pursuing his fascination for "others." He is very specific in the way he goes about filming people and situations in order to open up narrative space. He uses various reductive techniques (the edit, the zoom, the loop, the erasure of sound) in an almost scientific way, so that he can follow the least pretentious method of observation. His visual aesthetics are a result of two things: one, the interplay of the different types of roles his protagonists try on and live out; and two, the clash of the natural and the artificial. The aesthetic moment is created when it is perceived that roles have been changed—roles, which, in reality, can only be experienced individually, as a rule, but in the work of art, are experienced together. This brings different levels of behavior into the field of view, as if a doctor were testing a body, first by feeling it, and then by employing ultrasound and x-rays.

The predominant multiple perspectives of the videos are also achieved in a series of photos entitled *L.A. Crash*, in which the individual photographs are very different. Some parts of this work are based on fictitious events, while others are based in reality, and hence the viewer encounters situations that are as ambivalent as those in the videos' sociological studies. Still, the work is specifically photographic in that the tense, but frozen moments captured in the images are deeply preoccupied with the mystery of what has occurred before the pictures were taken. This generates a strange sense of timelessness, something between coincidence and the deliberate set up. Each individual image captures a moment that seems to be incidental, but upon closer inspection, the viewer realizes that it can never be placed in a specific context. What remains is that sense that something has happened, although the event itself eludes us. What is unsettling about that is that it does not matter to us if we have missed the big event, because Martin knows how to use the magic of these moments to ensnare us.

Looking at Martin's work, it is clear that he is not interested in a homogenous visual language, but rather, in multiple forms of expression. In his works, which often employ reporting techniques, he tries out unusual perspectives, in order to achieve an alternative, peripheral perception of events. *The Legend of Zorro* works with a double projection, in an attempt to isolate secondary settings and thus provide a more com-

prehensive description of the premiere of a Hollywood film. The same sort of peripheral observation of events occurs in *Javi*, where the protagonist is the central focus in a stream of people, so that every glance, every gesture becomes a word that can be read in his face. Careful editing detaches his behavior from any sort of purpose (actually, he is trying to entice passersby into a bar), so that we are left with mere surface—his facial expressions—as the substratum. Once again, as in a medical treatment, the element requiring testing is isolated. This technique opens up room for speculation, room for stories, room for us to confront the clichés and stereotypes of our own ways of thinking.

In a humorous work called *Traffic*, this method of exposing patterns of behavior bounces back to the viewer, because naturally, it is amusing to watch the truck drivers in this video making what appear to be synchronized, choreographed telephone calls. At the same time, you can't help wondering if you would also seem to be operating on "remote control" in the eyes of others, if you happened to be filmed in a group of people doing the same thing you were doing.

In *Flow*, Martin uses slow motion to visually analyze the way that teenagers put on masculine poses. Mainly, he slows everything down in order to make it easier to interpret the physicality of the teenagers. The series of images creates a subtext involving issues of gender and society. The display of muscles, commonly considered the ultimate in intimidating behavior, seems to be less crude and aggressive when it is experienced as the playful reflex of group dynamics. Two needs—one for self-assertion, and another for the careful preservation of a peer group—permit a bicep to be interpreted in a variety of ways. The individual and the group, the unconscious and the deliberate, display and camouflage, the tough guy and the buddy, seem to form a network of signs covering the body on film.

Eine Rede functions in the opposite way: the starting point here is not the exploration of the textuality of the body, but rather, the collision between a text and bodies. Traditionally, the President of the Federal Republic of Germany gives an annual Christmas speech, and in this film, one of these speeches is recited by ordinary people, "like you and me," in their own homes. This turns the film into a visual test of how the official words apply to their recipients. Well-intentioned words become partly funny, partly ironic, but sometimes they also seem serious or sad. In both works, we experience the interplay of verbal and visual texts. Here, the audio-visual medium makes it possi-

ble to obtain an otherwise impossible view of the “physical” aspect of words, because one sees that the meaning and plausibility of what is spoken are not proved simply by the speaker’s rhetorical competence, but also by the realities that are brought to bear on the words. Nevertheless, the living situations of the people speaking are reflected in the president’s words and in the expectations of social reality they express. Here, the aesthetics are a result of interweaving observation, expectation, and confrontation, so that viewers can make their own diagnoses.

Martin’s clear focus on secondary spaces and the details of human behavior makes it obvious that, in distancing himself from startling effects, he creates room for nuance and allows subtleties to develop, instead of relying on the greatest possible visual impact. By selectively intervening in the visuals, he guides the eye in the direction he wants it to go, without making himself a dominant element in the set up. His works are also convincing because their contents can always be experienced through the senses, not primarily through cogitation. His detached, surgical approach makes it clear that the impetus at work here is a fundamental, human curiosity.