

“how to show”: A possible explanation of Michael Schmid’s photography

The streetlight is illuminated. This should, of course, be an unremarkable occurrence, if it weren’t for the image’s blue background.¹ The objects depicted in Michael Schmid’s photographs can be identified immediately: They are everyday objects such as a lamp, a stove, a rubber glove. And yet these “experiential objects”² are isolated in the center of the space, in the space given our undivided attention. The images are imbued by the unwavering interior focus on the essential – yet, as is always the case for photographs, this interiority is located only on the surface, on that “conspicuous site for comprehending the predetermined conditions governing media.”³ On, or even in, this image, light and chemistry merge on the page to form a photograph. All represented objects are subsumed by and on this reduced surface; here, physical space is transformed into the background, bodies into flat shapes, even Schmid’s exterior shots look like they were created in the studio, as though reality has briefly turned into and been photographed in front of an infinity wall. That’s why the light is illuminated in front of a blue background.

The same image: The streetlight shines on a bright summer day. With its strict formal composition, the image contains a contradictory message: How can the light be visible on a bright sunny day? After all, photography must depict reality, with its traces of the material world! And yet, montages and retouched images have always been part of photography. Each photographic fragment shows only one part of a continuum. Moreover, thanks to the advent of digital photography and post-production, it is possible to create any paradoxical image on the computer screen. In the same way, this streetlight can shine on a sunny day, and yet anyone familiar with Schmid’s photography and methods is well aware that his photographs are not chimerical images created after-the-fact; it’s true that our reality is filled with paradoxes, so we don’t need images to create them; instead, they belong to our reality. Photograph can illustrate this fact, even in our “post-photographic”⁴ age.

“Seeing in a visual sense always entails seeing the representation as well as the medium, whereas to show in a visual sense entails showing something that is to an equal extent the representation showing itself.”⁵ “Untitled” is a vertical image from 2014 that takes up the entire frame. There is no colour, but variations on the photographic grey scale, spanning from white to black. The viewer simultaneously sees an abstract shape and a photographic print, which in turn provides the materiality necessary to see the image. The creator of this arrangement is a photographer standing both behind the camera and in front of the event that will soon become an image, one whose arrangement is not an incidental abstraction, but one which depicts something concrete through its abstraction, that is: photography’s specific ability to show something. This is often achieved in the dedicated space created for it, in the infinity wall, which the viewer only knows as a surface. This monochrome background, either white, light blue or some other colour, neutralizes every spatial and temporal reference to the represented object, erasing every context. In front of this background,

¹ Michael Schmid, “Light”, 2015

² Rosalind E. Krauss: Introduction. In: *Das Fotografische. Über eine Theorie der Abstände*. Munich 1998, pp. 14–17, here page 15.

³ Steffen Siegel: *Belichtungen. Zur fotografischen Gegenwart*. Paderborn 2014, p. 34.

⁴ Igthaut, von Amelunxen, Cassel (Pub.): *Fotografie nach der Fotografie [AK]*. Munich 1995.

⁵ Martina Dobbe: *Zeigen als faire voir. Für eine Bildtheorie des Fotografischen*. In: Boehm, Egenhofer, Spies (Pub.): *Zeigen. Die Rhetorik des Sichtbaren*. München 2010, pp. 159–179, here 159.

everything and everyone becomes an object removed from space and time through this photographic gesture of showing. The infinity wall serves as a kind of white cube of photography.⁶ In this regard, photography offers a double exhibition: It arranges the shown elements in line with the medium's requirements, while the finished image exposes in a kind of schizoid state⁷ both the photographic motif and itself.

The viewer encounters the photographic image, either in an exhibition, within the realm of art, or "within the structure of an intellectual field that in turn can belong to the political field and in which the intellectual and artistic faction is assigned a certain position."⁸ Schmid's 2015 image "Opening" appears to approach this field from the outside, clothed in a distant, seemingly documentary kind of photography. It is not only a social event that is depicted here, but also a union created with the intent of conducting invisible negotiations about value judgements, and about the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that write art history. A field in which photography is or is not art, depending on the position and subject to the vagaries of history.

Finally, by way of conclusion, another double: let's consider the word "show", in the sense of "exhibition" and "to show", and which also contains the word "how", becoming a question without punctuation. Time and again, Schmid depicts writing in his photography. While the 2014 work "real.-" unabashedly makes a statement about the complex relationship between photography and reality, his doubled duplicate of the two-part series "s/how" can be read as a reflexive twist: "how to show" is thus a question that permeates Schmid's oeuvre and always produces new answers in the purely visual form of photography.

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⁶ cf. Brian O'Doherty: *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space.* Berkeley 1999.

⁷ cf. Geoffrey Batchen: *Post-Photography.* In: (Batchen) *Each Wild Idea.* Cambridge (MA), London 2000, pp. 108–127, here 114.

⁸ cf. Pierre Bourdieu: *Feld der Macht, intellektuelles Feld und Klassenhabitus.* In: (Bourdieu and Schultheiß, Egger (Pub.)) *Kunst und Kultur. Kunst und künstlerisches Feld. Schriften zur Kunstsoziologie 4.* Karlsruhe 2009, pp. 89–110, here 90.