



Performance, 1984

*I think a lot of moments are good  
for taking a photo ...*

*You discovered indistinctness as the principle of your photography in the 80s. How was it accepted by those around you?*

Colleagues and friends were very interested in my blurry photos. At art school and university however I found little opportunity to look into my ideas in depth. I was very often uncertain about my actions. In 1984 I was in Greece for 3 months with a box full of films, camera and lab equipment and among the thousand photos and slides that I brought home, there wasn't one clear picture. And because I was afraid I'd have some explaining to do and I didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, I bought a stack of postcards in Greece.

*So you kept those blurry photos to yourself at first?*

Not at all. I remember clearly one so-called slide night in the 80s. As well as my studies at the University of Applied Arts I was studying art history at the University of Vienna. In the first part of these studies there was a compulsory excursion through Austria. During the one-week trip I photographed one Baroque fresco after the other and after the excursion I was invited to participate in a presentation

evening. I would have liked to discuss the contemporary view of art of the eighteenth century but as I showed my hundredth slide of a motion-blurred photo of Baroque painting, there was so much tension in the room that I decided it was better to finish. I was asked though if I would like to exhibit the photos, something I was naturally very pleased about.

*Did your professors think you would be better off in creative art rather than art history?*

I felt the space in which my work could resonate was missing in the 80s. It was hard to find a teacher. Arnulf Rainer, who I greatly value as an artist, had apparently set up a photo lab in his class and that's where I wanted to go. Rainer leafed through my portfolio and said with complete indifference, 'Go to Weibel, he can't paint either!' And the lab, that didn't even exist. So I studied with Peter Weibel, from whom I undoubtedly profited a lot. It wasn't difficult to come by exhibitions, grants, even collectors in the inspired atmosphere of that time. But discussions on what was being done were rare.



Ilse Haider, „Galerie bois“, 1993; Ines Nikolavcic, „Galerie bois“, 1994

*So you were only looking for a photo lab and you landed at the University of Applied Arts, or had the wish to become a photographic artist existed within you for a while?*

In 1982 I applied at the University with a portfolio of staged photography but I had already had a longer, intense interest in photography. I grew up in a small village in Upper Austria. The most common methods for treating rural depression were, and still are, fast driving and drink. I was lucky because I had an older girlfriend who didn't think much of either. I photographed her on endless walks on the flood plains of the Traun. After seeing an exciting slideshow by a mountain climber, I worked all through primary school on designing my own projector which I was always improving but never finished. When I was twenty I wanted to leave. I'd saved enough money to set off on a one-year trip around the world, taking the camera with which my father had photographed me as a baby.

On my trip around the world I wanted to photograph a living god or goddess. On a Hindu holiday I was waiting outside a palace in Kathmandu with a crowd of believers. There a young girl, the reincarnation of the goddess Kamuri, was to be shown to the people. We waited for several hours during which ritual music could be heard coming from the palace. It was already late afternoon and the clouds of the rainy season were heavy and dark as the gates opened. Borne by many men, an almost black wooden box was carried out and in it, behind tulle curtains, sat the young goddess in a mask of make-up.

My photos turned out to be completely under-lit and fuzzy. Perhaps a more practised, socially-critical photographer could have captured the whole scene better than I with my photos but I was satisfied with the results. Something of human temerity and failure, and the limitations of our existence seemed to me to be adequately conveyed in my pictures. I began to be interested in photos which didn't correspond to conventional aesthetics.

*The idea of indistinctness has a negative connotation, and not only with regard to photos. I don't like using the word with regard to your work but nothing better occurs to me. What can be said about observing and recognising?*

Yes, you're right. The idea of 'indistinctness' or 'blurriness' is a negative concept.. Naturally I could now argue that absolute sharpness in photography is not achievable. An endlessly sharp image would be endlessly dark as it requires a very small aperture, etc. but I don't want to get involved in such formal hair-splitting.

I think we are used to glorifying clarity. We don't have an exact, positive expression for indistinctness other than just this word which expresses a lack of distinctness, a lack which is equated with error, ineptness or perhaps illness. In any case indistinctness always means a reduced ability to control. In our unconscious we know that our vision as a new-born began as blurry and with a high degree of probability, like in a fade-out, in old age it will end up that way again.

*What is it all about for you?*

I'm not in any way interested in atmosphere or painterly qualities. They are concepts, by the way, which give me goose-bumps. I can only say that I'm extremely interested in my subject, or object, as the case may be. Motion blur, indistinctness through movement, is actually not important to me, it simply clings to my subject and to me as the photographer.

Photos in which objects are shown in motion – and only in this way do these exist in the world – are closer to our actual sensual experience. We can only see sharply in a small central area. The greater part of our field of vision, which is responsible for our general impression of a situation, is always unclear and generally in motion.

In our culture the knowledge of how photography works is deeply anchored in us. Because of that we know when looking at a blurry shot that something



has been photographed. He, she or it has left their trace on the film or sensor. In the reduced information content of a motion-blurred shot, a photographic proof of existence remains. In the end only one thing is sure: someone or something was in front of the camera lens. Viewing these traces of existence and perceiving our existence in time means coming into contact with our transience.

*In the 1980s you were occupied with conceptual media-reflexive work. What interested you in that?*

Photographic film is not just a potential carrier of picture information, it is also a light-sensitive haptic material. It's a special feeling to take a film or light-sensitive photographic paper out of its light-proof cover and see how the emulsion changes colour. It is a change process which never completely comes to a standstill and it doesn't differ greatly to other aging processes. In the 1980s I hung up different kinds of untreated photographic paper on the wall of my studio to watch the changes in them over the passing



Herwig Turk, „Galerie bois“, 1994

months. According to the make, the white changed to shades of purple, blue or brown. When I took the papers down a year later, the packaging and instructions I'd stuck on the wall to identify the different papers had also yellowed. Even the paint on the wall itself turned out to have aged after a year.

Exposing unfixed photographic paper to daylight also means wasting a predetermined and unique chance. I used untreated photographic paper in portraits to contrast the visible and photographable aspects of a person with those aspects of personality which can't be captured on film. I called this series "Sad Pictures".

On your webpage I see that you have signed an unopened box of photographic paper. Wasn't the time of ready-mades already over in the 1990s?

I wanted to finally take part in the Römerquelle Art Competition but time and again I saw that my photos didn't fulfil the submission criteria. They were either too large or consisted of too many parts, etc. Then I noticed that the formal conditions corresponded exactly to an industrially standardised format, you could only submit 10 photo pages measuring 50 cm by 60 cm. So I bought a pack of exactly 10, signed it and called it "Original Packaging". As the jury opened the pack and in doing so destroyed the work, Römerquelle had to pay me the price of a piece of art for it. I argued using Duchamp, who said one should strictly limit the number of one's ready-mades.

*Your works became multipartite partly abstract phototableaux. How did that come about?*

As a consequence of Viennese Actionism, narrative and demonstrative tendencies were very strongly represented in Austrian art photography. I took another path. I taped up the viewfinder of my camera with black tape and let several films run repeatedly through the camera driven by the motor. Each resulting photo was then used and mounted at random in a

grid. This produced multipartite portraits, as well as abstract shots. Behind all this was my intensive study of John Cage. I experienced Cage in Frankfurt and was fascinated at how he applied new composition methods in traditional genres. It encouraged me to use randomness and occurrences like scratches and dust on films as composition elements. I went to large photo labs and systematically recovered waste material from the rubbish, using it to create photo series.

*Wilhelm Busch once said 'It's easy to get into painting. The difficult thing is to find someone who's willing to pay for it'. You rejected the idea of producing art on a business basis years ago. You make your living as a psychotherapist despite your success with exhibitions, numerous grants and sales.*

Yes, the art business has something fascinating about it. In addition to grants and collectors I have always sought contact to the world of business for financing purposes. Once a large, international advertising agency bought the rights to one of my blurred photo series and paid, to my mind, a phenomenal price. I couldn't imagine what they could possibly do with my photos but I was naturally happy about it. Another time a pharmaceutical company financed my work for a few months without any instructions or conditions. At the time they were working on a drug to treat tremors (involuntary twitching of the muscles), and I worked with motion blur, took fuzzy pictures. I found these parallels very interesting. The motion blur in my work also represents the limited control we have over our existence.

After I had moved from one experiment to the next, had sharpened my curiosity and desire to know the exact nature of things and searched for a way to express this creatively, owners of galleries wanted to see 'pieces'. For me my photos and my objects too are like sketches, diaries or interim results. It's hard to see them as finished products. It became clear to me just a few years ago that I had too rarely thought of producing anything beautiful, anything finished.



Nepal, 2000

It was only when friends who had bought a large format work said, 'The picture is beautiful!', that I started to think about it. Maybe I should think about it sometimes! (laughs).

*You have not only been occupied with the production but also the placement of art. Why have you done that?*

I was at a scientific congress and first got to know about the internet. That was a few years before the emergence of the World Wide Web. Around that time digital photography also appeared though



„MAK“, Wien, 1984

quality-wise it was still far-removed from analog photography. It was clear that if digital data could flow along telephone lines and photography became digital, photos would soon be streaming along those lines too. In 1992 I began to develop the idea of the Gallery bois with a friend of mine, who owned a software company. From 1993 to 1995 the exhibitions were only accessible via the computer and telephone

line. Today that sounds fairly banal but in those days it was still quite an avant-garde statement.

Acceptance of the project developed very slowly. Because nobody could receive emails, we sent out printed invitations and instructions on how to find our gallery out in electronic space. We were told we had forgotten to mention the house number and street the gallery was in. Some accused us of a kind of technical racism since hardly anybody had a modem for their computer. We were ready to give up the whole project just as the breakthrough came in the form of an interview with the newspaper 'Der Standard'. Then I found one message after the other on my answering machine from acquaintances saying they had bought a modem and asking if I could tell them how to install it. Finally there was a fax from the ORF [Austrian Broadcasting] asking me to demonstrate how one could visit the Gallery bois via computer and telephone line, live on one of their culture programs.

Compaq supported the Gallery bois generously from the beginning and we received funding from the Ministry of Culture. I wanted to show the work of Austrian photographic artists and not simply digitalise their work so we lent computers to artists and paid for them to take computer courses. In return their work was exhibited in the Gallery bois. It was enormous fun to take part in the acceleration of photographic development, though once the web seemed accessible via the screen to more or less everyone, it was clear to us that our small contribution would soon dissolve in the great sea of data.

*You don't seem to make much of the nineteenth century's idea of the genius. You produce your photos alongside your work as a psychotherapist but for you they aren't necessarily products determined for sale in order to finance your living. Is your biography something like an antithesis of the typical artist's biography?*

Well yes, in our society there are rather romantic ideas about the personality of the artist. The ideal of a

genius satisfies a variety of longings, entertaining for the onlooker but generally not for the artist. There is the longing for uniqueness, for distinctiveness, as well as the wish to achieve immortality through a work of art. The romantic ideal of a genial, perhaps mad artist suffering because nobody understands him is a picture which doesn't really do much for me.

I value the humanistic concept of art which appeals to an enlightened audience. I see myself above all as a person who would like to develop himself. That means I see curiosity as an impetus, I want to know the exact nature of things and find creative expression for that. I'm interested in the combination of art, philosophy and psychology and always have been.

When I was young I read a book by Kant but I didn't understand him at that time. Then I discovered Freud, and I thought he understood me. I was interested in Surrealism and I painted in the Surrealist style. And then there was music. Apart from the deaths of Hendrix, Joplin and Morrison, the thing that pained me most as a young person was that Freud didn't like the Surrealists. Later when I was interested in John Cage and found out that he always ate mushrooms, I was afraid that he would be the next musician I admired who poisoned himself.

The interaction between photography and painting has a long history in the meantime. Your later works, especially the 'paths', with their painterly qualities, raise the question regarding your relationship to this medium.

That reminds me of something which brings me back to the theme of the art market. A few years ago a collector came to my studio who knew my work from reproductions. He was sure that my pictures were paintings. As he only wanted to buy paintings, not photography, he went away disappointed. I watched him go, disappointed.

But back to your question. I was at first surprised when I realised that the photographic viewpoint had influenced paintings for several centuries already,

initially through the camera obscura, then through portable equipment, the pictures from which were at first drawn, and only since the nineteenth century has it has been possible to fix them

I think that taking motion blur in photography and associating it with words such as 'painterly' is a common mistake. I see motion blur as something specifically photographic. Neither film nor painting can depict movement like photography can. In the end every photo shows a trace of reflected light although through short exposure times that trace of light is so short that we can not perceive it. We believe while looking at static photos that we are looking at the actual people or objects. The same is true of photography however as it has been of painting over the past millennia: photography and painting do not reproduce reality, they help create new realities. The discovery of a central perspective had a critical impact on our culture and was made possible with the help of optical instruments, the precursors of today's cameras. As there is a great culturally-determined need for 'frozen' shots, static photography is the synonym for photography in general. This dominance means we no longer perceive how it differs from our own view. We think we can simply use media to perceive and conquer the world. But the media colonise our perception and change it.

A dynamic photo can come very close to our experience of something. Then we don't see an indistinct photo but something in the picture appeals to us directly instead. Such a proximity to experience was something painters tried again and again to achieve. William Turner had himself strapped to a ship's mast in the wildest gales in order to gather impressions for his paintings.

*Is there an interaction between your work as an artist and that as a psychotherapist?*

As a psychotherapist I am in dialogical contact with my clients. We look at the client's experiences.

In the course of psychotherapy subjective experience becomes more clearly expressible until it finds a very precise representation; one could also say a depiction. The experience cannot be interpreted objectively however, or measured in a scientific sense. The encounter with another individual offers us the opportunity for concrete participation, a clear examination and a nameable personal development. The authority to interpret one's experience and to evaluate one's values remains the responsibility and within the autonomy of each one of us.

Our perception of our experience is clear and unclear at the same time. That which can be clearly named always has a limit, a horizon beyond which the unclear and indistinct appears. There is always a something that first has to be sorted, felt, considered and named and there are different horizons. As researchers and explorers we like to direct our attention to the unknown on the furthest horizon but there are horizons too in the midst of the familiar and there are blurry spots in our pictures. There is always something perceived subliminally, something that we have either forgotten again or have never known. Freud called this region the unconscious.

My photography is between the poles of the clear and unclear, the nameable and indistinct, stretched between the objective and the subjective. The photos are taken through an objective instrument, through the photographic objective and at the same time show the subjective conditions of the process through which they originate.

*Is the working method of the artist related to that of the therapist?*  
The artist is not a therapist but reflects their environment and thereby gives others the opportunity to see the world afresh.

*Could you compare your work in this sense; are there points of contact or are there, to a certain extent, two people at work?*

I always begin to work in places in which I can't be sure of finding something. Sometimes the thing I find is redundant or inconsequential and then an idea, a thought is worked through and I can quickly move on to the next. Those works which remain are an offer to the viewer. Feedback, like a successful dialog, can close the circle and influence new formulations. The artist who reflects his surroundings and makes something visible is the embodiment of a stroke of luck, sometimes it is also an ideal which is difficult to attain.

Work in psychotherapy is similar but hopefully more on target. Here dialog is immanent and it always directs and carries the process further at the same time. The greatest similarity I see between my work as an artist and as a psychotherapist is the fundamentally dialogical approach. The process always goes from the as-yet- unnameable to the nameable, from the unconscious to knowledge, from the private to the societal. If, as an artist, you give someone the opportunity to see something new you have really achieved something.

*One often has the feeling that your pictures are photo stills from films. There is a narrative freshness accompanying your pictures. Are the photos staged or do they come directly from real life?*

At the beginning of the 80s I spent some time looking into staged photography, after that only rarely. Most of the time I simply have my camera with me and diary-like sequences just happen like that. I don't actually wait for the so-called right moment. I think a lot of moments are good for taking a photo, especially when I'm together with other people.

Sometimes long series develop when I'm out walking. I shoot things at short intervals, maybe every few steps or seconds. Those series have very different qualities depending on whether I'm out in the wild or walking in the city. Meditative sequences emerge on hikes in the mountains or through forests, with a more abstract pictorial content.

In the city I focus on the people streaming by, passing, not greeting, not encountering each other, as can only happen in a city. We see each other otherwise we would collide but we don't look at each other because we don't know each other. Only when a familiar face appears do we greet that person and stop for a talk. When we walk through the city for half an hour, our gaze scans hundreds of faces like that. I've called this phenomenon the 'urban encounter'.

*Dream sequences are often shot indistinctly in films. It seems then that it is an associatively accepted visual interpretation. There is a close relationship between psychoanalysis and dreams. Is there possibly also a connection here to your artistic work?*

The parallels to indistinct dream sequences in films naturally exist. Dreams arise through working on memories, among other things. Until digital photography appeared on the scene, photography was solely a reminder of the moment of the actual shot so in that respect it was always a kind of feat of memory.

Photography's ability to record moments with enormous accuracy and detail exceeds our human capacity to take it all in and remember it. The 'how' of an object can be well described through all the details in a photo but when viewing such a photo one doesn't reach the point of wonder over the actual existence of objects.

*Is that because the 'how' of the object isn't interesting to you?*

I try to work towards an essence that doesn't lie in the details of a photo. In the end my photos only prove the existence of an object.

*In order to understand more about a person?*

I'm also interested in the proximity we have to our experience. We aren't conscious that our vision is predominantly unclear. I've looked into the physiology and psychology of our perception and memory but I don't look for a simple reflection of this in my



One Day Only (Wanda), 2012

work. Indistinctness and transience are aspects of our existence that are difficult for us to accept.

*What are you working on at present as a photographer?*

I'm doing portraits – blurry portraits. With that I'm in contact with an anthropological constant which is also a fundamental theme of photography: the need to represent that which is absent.

The art of portraiture did not emerge in the Renaissance as many believe. Visual studies can tell us much more. For many thousands of years we have known pictorial techniques, employing them to maintain the presence of those who have died. Pictures still have the same function today; they are an answer to the threat to our existence. Portraits should prevent the dissolution of identity. Every photo downloaded on Facebook stands up bravely to the facelessness which ultimately threatens us and says: I'm still alive!

ROBERT WALDL IS INTERVIEWED BY THOMAS KUSSIN.