

Jörg Schaller - Machine portraits

Art, in addition to everything else, has always helped the imagination and memory. It shows what does not exist, never was, perhaps never will be. At the same time, it serves and has served to take stock, to bring to mind and to make aware what otherwise unnoticeably slips into disappearance or repression.

Jörg Schaller's emblematic photographs, his "machine portraits" from the former state-owned EAW Elektro-Apparate-Werke "Josef Stalin" (from 1961 "Friedrich Ebert") - one of the largest metal-processing factories in the former GDR - open up views into layers of time that evoke ideas about the future, precisely because of the origin of the apparatuses from the past: of course the present future will one day have to give way to an even more distant time.

The function of the artefacts shown - to produce components of power plants in the former Eastern Bloc - is a thing of the past. Now, their "portraits" expose these machines, blowing them up out of their usefulness and, precisely because of this, suddenly also illuminate their past and the social changes that have taken place since then: The once powerful "VEB" has become an outdated fossil with no meaning on the markets.

Jörg Schaller encounters these objects with a calm yet loving gaze, giving them their dignity and history (back). His medium, photography, corresponds precisely with this layered, open-ended work of memory.

Photographs are remnants and memento mori. They are always fragments of the world, survivors and relics. As recurrence of something that no longer exists, they preserve this Something and link it anew with us and the world. Photography is a trace of an absence, but at the same time it offers presence, authenticates existence: the Past, the Now and thus also an After. Break and continuity are interwoven in a complex way. Photographs bring us into contact with something that has disappeared. But by seeing it, the disappeared penetrates our Now again. In photography, the past becomes an imaginary possession; at the same time, it is a tool in the attempt to understand the uncertain, ever-changing world. Photography means taking part in the vulnerability, changeability, fleetingness of things and phenomena. Precisely because the photograph picks out and freezes an object and a moment, it bears witness to the flow of time. The subtle melancholy that often accompanies the viewing of photographs is probably due to this transience.

In Jörg Schaller's brittle yet affectionate inventory, the machines and their history become alien. And yet, through the alienation and through this different viewpoint, their history and work is wrested from oblivion, tipped into the Now - a gliding between suspension and return. The inaudible eloquence of things becomes form. The machines tell their own story, which, condensed in the traces of use, is one of remodeling and transformation of materials. Without false pathos, Schaller's photographs show the hard work, the hardship as well as people's joy and the noise of production, which can be guessed at as a miraculous resistance of steel to its conversion into products. The photographs open up the space and its history: In the metal skin of the machines, over time, the oily smell, the sound, the rhythm of the work is palpable and visible.

In contrast to the "anonymous sculptures" of the pioneers of industrial photography, Bernd and Hilla Becher, who documented their monuments with distant objectivity and neutrality, Schaller's photos show the protagonists of industrial production, the machines themselves. The form of a portrait lends the objects individuality and personality. On the one hand, the portrait is about grasping reality, appearance, but then the inner being should also become visible in the portrait. In the term 'portrait', which comes from 'protrahere', this duality is already present: an invisible thing is to become visible. It is precisely in the representation of reality and through it that it is interpreted, its essence illuminated. This essence shoots into the photograph as an irritating surplus. Schaller always maintains a balance between proximity and distance, between empathy and conceptual form. Jörg Schaller not only documents, he portrays. In this way, the photos trigger emotions almost imperceptibly, activating the senses. The viewer is suddenly drawn into the past world of first modernity and industrial production. Everything is there: the noise, the oil, the steel - and also the sweat.

It is as if, in contemplating the now useless machines, we are building ever new bridges between seeing and hearing, experiencing and suspecting. In a discreet and at the same time abysmal way, these pictures play with proximity and distance, with gain and withdrawal. And they bear witness to history as a context that is also based on forgetting. In renouncing false puzzles, the photographic protocols stimulate our memory and a new, altered perception, without pretending to reconstruct the connections or even to cure possible losses. The intangible trace of the past as a pictorial minimum - in a further turn and transformation - changes into the minimal pictoriality of these photos. In the gaze and counter-gaze between the reality of the object and the experience that transcends all materiality, a concentrated and clear-sighted reflection on art, artificiality, memory and loss is set in motion. What we see is always a complexly interwoven network of times, spaces, images, memories.

Jörg Schaller's photographs are Denkbilder ("thought pictures"), a term coined by Walter Benjamin. They produce and carry out a vivid insight and, in their contemplation, poesis and reflection, touch each other and yet do not fall into one.

And every photo becomes a passage, besides its presence and unassailable beauty, it is also a warning against the Outside of forgetting.

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