

PAR HASARD

In France, when people cannot come up with a rational explanation for fateful events, they often make use of the word *hasard*. The word denotes a chance occurrence that is not a product of intent or calculation, and yet still inevitable. In his roman à clef, *L'Étranger*, Albert Camus probes the concept of *hasard* with impressive literary prowess. Alienated man, in Camus's existential metaphor, becomes a victim, blindly responding to a chain of unpredictable events. In addition, any dictionary will tell us that *hasard* also means 'risk', 'danger' and 'luck'. A paradoxical term, therefore, with an ambiguity that entails a balance between good and bad, perilous and harmless, fatalistic and accidental qualities.

The Swiss artist Rémy Markowitsch (*1957) is known to a broader public primarily through his photographs. For seven years he has been making large-format pictures based on published reproductions of landscapes, plants, animals and people. Markowitsch restricts his selection to a single situation that occurs rarely and accidentally—to wit, *par hasard*—when pictures in a book are reproduced on both sides of a single page. If we take the page and hold it up to the light, the motif on the back will shine through, resulting in an effect that resembles a photographic double exposure: 'After Nature', as the series is called, addresses our appropriation of natural phenomena.

As a rule, we exploit nature for commercial purposes. Whether we want to cash in on the plant mania of high-rise tenants or climb onto the ikebana and bonsai bandwagon, an economic motive lurks behind every publication, revealing an obviously limited worldview that can never do justice to the subject matter at hand. Markowitsch's large-format works expose this one-dimensional visual slant. By declaring them to be works of art, he reinvests his motifs with the singularity of which they had been deprived by mass-media appropriation.

The artistic method of 'chance acquaintanceships' is not only cultivated by Markowitsch in his photographs; it is a strategic constant that characterises his entire oeuvre. Actually he follows hazardous paths, quite intentionally in fact, striding through life with his eyes wide open and picking those elements out of its infinite flow that dovetail with his artistic approach. Art critic Justin Hoffmann aptly describes this attitude as 'cunning opportunism' and compares Markowitsch's appropriative activities to those of Andy Warhol (Justin Hoffmann, 'Erleuchten und Erblassen', in: Rémy Markowitsch, *Finger im Buch*, Ostfildern: Cantz, 1996).

Conspicuous is the ceaseless exploration of all the facets of chance, in the centre of which we find the artist. The present publication is no exception. This time Markowitsch draws on a series of videos that he made while travelling in Las Palmas, Peking, Moscow, Lucerne and Berlin. The short takes show the manual work of fish and meat mongers at market. The camera focuses exclusively on the hands of these tradespeople in action. The animal products—pig's

ears, fish, beef, etc.—are chopped up, filleted and dressed with great dexterity. Markowitsch shows these videos in combination with photographs from bonsai and ikebana publications. His installative ensembles underscore the analogies between the two distinct subject matters. They both involve civilised nature, plants and animals processed by the human hand: bred, trimmed, cultivated to satisfy aesthetic or mercantilist criteria. The artist proceeds analogously in his presentation of these motifs: the photographs behind Plexiglas and usually ‘expensively’ framed, and the videos aired on standard TV sets have been domesticated and pruned to obviously middle-class specifications, ready for viewing in museums and galleries.

So much for the conceptual setting of the installations, which is also reflected to a certain extent in this publication. But now *hasard* comes into play. When Markowitsch was discussing his project ‘Handmade’ with publishers Flurina and Gianni Paravicini, they told him about the Italian dandy, journalist and rake, Curzio Malaparte. Shortly afterwards, they gave the artist the first German pocketbook editions of two stories by Malaparte, *Blut* (Blood) and *Haut* (Skin). Markowitsch had tasted blood; he began to immerse himself in Malaparte’s universe. Enthused by the torn ambivalence of the writer’s life—Malaparte philandered with both Fascism and Communism—he read the books and passed his discovery on to a curator friend. The two began talking about Malaparte’s house. Early on, the curator had once studied this architectural self-display in conjunction with his fascination for Gabriele d’Annunzio’s estate on Lake Garda (Vittoriale degli Italiani) and for d’Annunzio’s claim to an aestheticised *gesamtkunstwerk*. Malaparte’s villa, for many years a subject of dispute between the Italian and Chinese governments because Malaparte had bequeathed his property to Mao’s successors, is of consequence not only because of its author but also because of its programmatic name (*Casa come me*). Designed by the Italian architect Adalberto Libera, it ranks among the main works of Fascist Modernism and symbolises the ambivalence experienced by Italian intellectuals between right-wing conservative leanings and technically oriented Modernism or rather Futurism. The symbolic impact of the building also exerted a great fascination on French director Jean-Luc Godard, who shot important scenes on location there for his epoch-making film, *Le mépris*.

Three ordinary carpets have emerged as a result of Markowitsch’s involvement with Malaparte: two of them each showing a cover of the first pocketbook editions in German of *Blut* and *Haut*, which the artist received from the publishers, and the third showing the monumental staircase leading up to the top of the villa. On one hand, the carpet with its circle of three TV sets evokes recollections of bourgeois interiors. However, the Malaparte motif points in the opposite direction as well, for it cultivates poetic individualism and the unbounded tendency to seek self-fulfilment. Moreover, the traces of use still visible in the reproduction—the so-called dog’s-ears, indicating the used nature of the books—draw our attention to the biographical aspect, to *hasard*. And finally, this essay has been translated into several languages: into the English version that you are now reading because of the title, ‘Handmade’; into Italian because of Malaparte; into Romansh because the exhibition venue of Poschiavo lies in the Canton of Grisons where the fourth language of Switzerland is spoken; into Chinese, Russian, German and Spanish because the ‘Handmade’ videos were shot

in these language regions; into Japanese in deference to bonsai and ikebana, and finally into French in honour of Jean-Luc Godard and *Le mépris*.

All of these aspects of *hasard*, which crop up in the process of working on a new project, are woven by Markowitsch into complex and intricate installations that can only be fully appreciated by means of multiple cultural decoding keys. Film, literature, science, art, cuisine, architecture—these are the fields to which viewers must apply themselves in order to find out what Markowitsch's universe is about. While working on the concept for this publication—to come to the concluding link in the chain of 'hazardous' associations—we discovered a publication on the Casa Malaparte, edited by Michael McDonough: *Malaparte: A House Like Me* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1999). The title, set in a very special typeface that we had never seen before, recalls the aesthetics of the thirties. On leafing through the book, we found the following remarks by designer Yolanda Cuomo: 'The typography of this book was inspired by the Italian Futurist artist Fortunato Depero and by the local typographers of Sorrento, Vico Equense and Capri, whose extraordinary work with woodtype on street posters announcing everything from a sale, to a death, to cinema listings are such objects of beauty. I have collected street posters over the years and they became the main vocabulary for this book's type design. The "Armida" type was hand created for the book and made from a poster found in Sorrento for the cinema Armida.' The decision to use Armida lettering for the cover of *Handmade* is *par hasard* but, in the context of Markowitsch's strategy, most certainly not an accident!

Indeed, no matter how accidental the impression of his work may seem to be, Rémy Markowitsch resolutely studies our relationship to the visualisation praxis of the mass media. His works address precisely those fractures where visual (source) images, mainly from books, meet up with our perception, where the phantom of the subject matter set up for pictorial reproduction collides with the phantom of the viewer. The artist toys with a paradox awareness, for although we know that the picture is artificial, we are constantly being caught out by our own gullibility. The growing dominance of the new media as the focus of perception leads viewers to assume that the photographs are digitally manipulated, which merely adds to Markowitsch's delight in *hasard*. Here are revealed the grey zones of the human capacity for cognition; here is made manifest that perception is defined not by the exception but by the norm. However, by cultivating the exception and appealing to *hasard*, Markowitsch demonstrates in his art that the supposed individualism of the Western world—so energetically promoted by the imagery of the mass media—is in fact a collective trap. The artist's sampling, ironically practised with analogous means, exposes this mechanism, presents it for debate with loquacious wit, and generates images of bewildering beauty with a bizarre and even faulty aesthetics. *Handmade*?

Christoph Doswald

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Rémy Markowitsch

with an essay by Christoph Doswald

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Romansh

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