

Project Talk: Bernd Arnold - Macht und Ritual

Interview Peter Feldhaus (Sonic Blog), 2009

In his cycle of work “Macht und Ritual” [Power and Ritual] the Cologne based photographer Bernd Arnold examines the rites of power from Catholic Church to politics.

Bernd Arnold, born 1961 in Cologne, studied Photography and Design at the University of Applied Sciences in Dortmund. Since 1998 he is a member of the photo-agency VISUM. Bernd Arnold lives and works in Cologne.

Peter Feldhaus (PF): Bernd, the first Part of the Cycle “Power and Ritual” shows photos from the Night Life and the Half World Environment in Cologne. Compared with later work from the cycle, these photos are more open and friendly. Why is it like that?

Bernd Arnold (BA): Well, honestly I have never seen that. Perhaps the friendlier and opener effect comes from the people in the environment. That is their role as powerful people to exercise their power more directly. In other words, cause and effect are immediately comprehensible. A misdoing in the environment, similar to, for example, in crosswalks it is justified to cross immediately in “a nice and proper manner”. The hierarchy is clearly set and transparent for the members of the group.

This seen throughout religion, politics, economy and the media in completely different ways. In these areas the networking of the rituals and power is unclear. Incidentally, there shouldn't be a final plea for the direct exercise of power. I am there rather in the search of structure. The protagonists in Half World Environment are not easily recognizable, since they were also part of the “General” nightlife. Maybe the pictures are more open because I was closer to the subjects. In the politics or religion photos this closeness was manufactured but it was more difficult. Nevertheless I found myself in the observers role.

PF: Did you already have the idea with “Nacht im [Night in the Environment] to expand your work to include the large cycle or were you only concerned with the gestures and positions of the half world? How extensive were you?

BA: First I worked with the theater. There I coined and shaped my view of things. I did theater photography at the beginning of my studies in Dortmund. Here I could move around and try out different aesthetics freely and peacefully. But this pulled me into the real world. And this was when the catholic rituals and election campaigns first presented themselves. But I was still unable to see the connection. I then took an interest in social gatherings, events and other guided stagings that were already part of my life. This work would later be the impulse for the topic “Night in the Environment.” The first photo in this series was titled “Kölscher Barock” [Cologne Baroque] which referred to the flowing hairstyles of the late 80s. Interestingly enough was the allusion of the title to past social structures.

The deeper sense, which later summarizes the different half world scenes under the term “Eros,” originated later with a few color photos in the cycle. Eros is the connecting element within these power fields.

I first became aware of these connections in the mid 90s and put together a small exhibition. In addition I put together a limited edition titled, “Sakrament and

Suende" [Sacrament and Sin] which contained groups of 6 photos from the Catholic rituals and the half world environment. At that time it was a daring experiment because Cologne was a major Catholic center.

But the thought of comparing these two rituals did not leave me and I looked for more concurrences between the systems and the connections within the two different power fields. That was actually the starting point of the cycle "Macht und Ritual" [Power and Ritual]. Another part of the cycle was quickly found and I began working on the Television as a substitute for religion project titled "Ist die Erde eine Mattscheibe?" [Is the Earth a Flat Screen?]. At the same time I was busy with the Election Campaign and also the Catholicism, which developed into "Das Kölner Heil" [The Cologne Welfare].

I started the last part of the cycle which was over the economy with the economic peaks. With the title, "Macht und Ritual" [Power and Ritual] I united for the first time in 2001 a portion of the pictures into the group exhibition, "Denk ich an Deutschland" at the international photo festival in Herten.

Later 77 pictures as the completed cycle were shown with the exhibition at the Prager Castle.

PF: The figures in "Kölner Heil" [Cologne Welfare] and also in "Wahlkampfrituale" [Election Campaign Rituals] are petrified and dehumanized in a hard black-and-white contrast. Why this strong denial of the human in the institutions from the church and parties?

BA: I think, for me it started out around the structure within social groups, my relationship to this and at first it was less focused around the human proximity. I was around humans who were functioning as part of the ritual to stay in power. In addition, the abstracting and reducing effects of black-and-white photography is actually well suitable. The authentic traces of the time remain despite the abstraction.

I am really inspired by Roland Barthes's, Camera Lucida, and the semiotic Umberto Eco's. The connection of „punctum“ with the meanings of the signs (semiosis) plays a large role in the cycle for me. One can experience a lot from the indication of the movements, body attitudes and hands, along with the emotions of the human. And also in the faces there is a particular relationship towards the power each person holds. A good example of this are the pictures of the German chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who in 1998 was the sunny guy in the media. He was celebrated and published again and again for his slogan (somewhat similar to Obama's slogan.) For me I had a very different picture of him, I saw a eager and determined fighting politician, who wanted absolute power. And in his face one is able to see this emotion. Thus the body motions and the human face are a central aspect of my work. What is also interesting is that the pictures over the years and the starting of a new part of the series has brought darker and darker pictures.

PF: "Nacht in Milieu" [Night in the Environment] shows pictures from a half world, which normally remains invisible. On the other hand, "Ist die Erde eine Mattscheibe?" [Is the Earth a Flat Screen?] presents the television world in a manner which overwhelms us with a flood of artificial pictures. "Das Kölner Heil" [Cologne Welfare] and „Wahlkampfrituale" [Election Campaign Rituals] reveal age-old principles of power. Put together, this gloomy cycle looks like a request to put the functioning way of our world or

our state in question. How does the world of Bernd Arnold work? Does he believe in conspiracy theories?

BA: No, not at all. I see rather the interaction of different currents, which form at certain times depending on the people and then fall apart. Rather like the flow of rituals and power. For this reason Christoph Schaden had placed a beautiful quotation of Michel Foucault in front with the description of Power and Rituals: "Power is something that one acquires, takes away, divides, which one retains or loses; power is something that carries out itself from innumerable points from and in the play of unequal and mobile relations."

It is no coincidence that this cycle developed when it did, it was when the communist system broke down, which then became the unrestrained western government system after the loss of its antipode and it is now in the middle of these radical changes. It is actually a very exciting time and it already can be that the functionality of our world and its states is in the position of answering the questions. Thus, I see myself rather as an attentive and critical observer of my surroundings and the appearances of power. It is interesting to see how it will change with only a surface deep perspective.

PF: Can you tell us a little about how your work is perceived? When I read in the exhibition list that "Macht und Ritual" [Power and Ritual] was shown in 2007 at the Federal State Representation Rhineland-Palatinate in Berlin, the question about how effective your work is, arises. What can photography still achieve?

BA: That was very exciting for me. Because it was rather improbable that "Macht und Ritual" [Power and Ritual] would be issued there. But in the mean time the suspicion struck me that the cycle looks for places by itself. Because I find the Prager Castle, a center for power and the arsenal museum in Cologne, a former weapons chamber, a remarkable similarity. The second thought is that it is a relief that this sort of thing is possible today and part of the reason can be due to today's society.

Another important experience during the work was shown in Tokyo and in Prague was that the visitors understood my point of view. This is probably the advantage of the cross-cultural characteristic of the picture.

I am unable to say how effective my photography has been. But I am able to talk about the effect other photographers have had on me. They leave traces on me. They share new perceptions that affect my views on life. And pictures from the mass media have a much greater effect. The interesting part of this is the connection of the unintentional synchronizing of the pictures which occurs today in the mass media. In the course of the financial crisis and the extensive economies of the publishing companies that come along with it, the contemporary social-political developments are only depicted by a hand full of photo agencies that use very similar pictures.

PF: You work as a freelance photographer in the fields of News/Portrait/Travel/Reportage and you represent the agency Visum. Is there a place of contact between your contract work and your freelance work, or are these separate worlds?

BA: There is and will always be points of contact and these have been always important to me. Many of the photos from the cycle cover the same topics as the contract work for the Stern, the Taz, or DIE ZEIT, but some parts I have commissioned or did freelance

work for the exhibitions. For example, "Wahlkampfrituale" [Election Campaign Rituals] and "Wirtschaftsgipfel" [Economic Summit]. These were exhibited at the Kölner Van Der Grinten Gallery and it was updated with new photos throughout the exhibition duration. I wanted to put the editorial thoughts into a gallery. The idea was to put recent news photos into a gallery shortly after they were taken. And it was exciting to see the invitations for the private showing sent out, even though there were no photos. That was when we felt the pressure.

I move between the worlds of art, journalism and advertisement. And the paradox was that this opens a certain freedom on the view of things to me. Throughout this perpetual change of starting situations, I am again and again placed in situations where I must consider my work. I was forced to keep only photos that fit with my photographic style. It is exciting to see how the utilization connection affected my work. It also sharpened my point of view.

PF: You are still continuing to work on the cycle. In this super election year of 2009, it is naturally a year for your "Wahlkampfrituale" [Election Campaign Rituals]. Is the range of topics of this cycle enough for you, or is it conceivable that there are still further topics to cover such as something in the range of economics?

BA: I had found all the topics for the cycle in 2004 - or at least I think I have. But however, there are an innumerable amount of topics that can be covered. The economy will be an emphasis for me, I already have pictures of it and new ideas are already crystalizing. In 2005 I photographed the election campaign again and 2009 I will do so as well. Surprisingly, with this year's election campaign I will have photographed over 25 years of elections, from Willy Brandt to Angela Merkel. This is an exciting journey due to the changing rituals of the campaign.

In the 80s, as it was in the first decades of the German democracy, one was able to get very close to the politician. Standing on stage to photograph a speech being given for example by Oskar Lafontaine, would be almost impossible to do today. Nowadays there are many obstacles in the way and a photographer standing next to Angela Merkel on stage would only be a distraction. It is nearly a manner of feudalism, when the politicians and their gang move into the hall and the reporters as representatives for the mass media adore and idolize them.

And there is still another cycle, which is very similar to the "Macht und Ritual" [Power and Ritual]. The series is over the pedestrian zones "Die Zone" [The Zone], which is the second part of the series "Das Portal" [The Portal]. The third part is still on the horizon. I don't know exactly where the journey is leading me, but it is an extremely exciting journey none the less.

PF: Thank you for the interview.

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Translated by Scott Hudson.

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