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GALERIE

Jay Mark Johnson

El Anarquista y el Automóvil

Zwischen Don Quijote und Rattenfänger

9 September – 10 December, 2011

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In order to understand the large-format photographs of American artist Jay Mark Johnson (*1955) it is crucial to grasp their underlying paradox: while the images are created purely photographically, without digital manipulation or staging of a scene, and therefore depict actual events, they still create a perfectly illusory pictorial world. Johnson employs a modified camera which over a set period of time keeps recording the same narrow vertical strip in front of the camera lens and combines the successive photographs into an uninterrupted image that flows evenly from left to right. The vertical axis thus retains its spatial dimension, but the horizontal axis is dedicated to a depiction of the passage of time: "x = time." Immobile elements appear as a homogenous background of horizontal lines, only elements (figures, vehicles, etc.) that move through the recording plane assume a life of their own as recognizable if stretched or squashed shapes (depending on their speed).

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Johnson's hybrid combination of spatial and temporal dimensions links back to art historical precursors, above all the chronophotographic studies of movement of the late 19th century (Eadweard Muybridge, Étienne Jules Marey, Albert Londe et al.), as well as Italian Futurism (alluded to in the title with its mention of anarchism and automobiles). But Johnson both visually and methodologically goes beyond a purely technical experimentation by consciously exploiting the permutations and shifts effected by his recording process to examine, on a level of content, the nature and limits of our modes of perception. While his earlier works depicted dancers as amorphous shapes whose complex movement patterns were recorded in a kind of "action painting," his newer photographs play with the illusions brought about by a visual approximation of his time-images to conventional spatial images, while purposefully retaining a remnant of their comical distortions. For even a precise understanding of the creation process will not keep us from perceiving the temporal axis as spatial, for in the image it *is* spatial.

A remarkable effect of the recording process that combines the image from successive individual photographs is the fact that the figures in the image always move in the same direction. This is the result of the camera writing the image in one direction: a figure would only appear to move in the opposite direction if it moved *backwards* through the recording plane. The camera thus effectively imposes an order and homogeneity onto the depicted reality that was never there in the first place. Johnson's subtitle for the exhibition, "Between Don Quijote and Pied Piper," is therefore not coincidental. The famous literary figure of Don Quijote lives in a world of appearances shaped by the idealized rules of a bygone era. Both the comical as well as the tragic moments of this figure are due to the clash of his conceptions with the harsh reality of his time, and to his contemporaries his stubborn insistence on his ideals seems like a form of insanity. The same goes for the anarchist who does not want to accept the reality of urban motor vehicle traffic: he, too, is fighting proverbial windmills. At the same time, however, we cannot do without the visions of people who break through established patterns of thought and perception, in order to lead us to new shores, no matter how absurd their visions might at first seem. For we ignore them at our own peril and might have to suffer the fate that befell the citizens of Hamelin in the story of the Pied Piper: that the price we ultimately have to pay for our blindness is higher than we can afford.

[Text: Martin Oskar Kramer]

J.M. Johnson was educated at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies and has worked as an assistant to Peter Eisenman, as well as for Rem Koolhaas and Aldo Rossi. Works of his are in the permanent collections of the MoMA in New York, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., the Art Institute of Chicago, as well as the Collection Frederick R. Weisman and the Langen Foundation, Hombroich. Johnson's varied and prolific career spans theatre and performance art, photography, live musical performance, and journalism. He co-founded three different alternative television collectives first in Manhattan, and then in Mexico and El Salvador during the eighties at the height of political repression and unrest in those countries. After his return from Latin America he started working in the movie industry and is now a film director with broad experience in visual effects production, having supervised, directed or otherwise contributed to the computer generated imagery for nearly a dozen major studio films and television series, such as *Outbreak*, *Matrix*, *Titanic*, *Tank Girl*, *Moulin Rouge*, *White Oleander*, and music videos for the Red Hot Chili Peppers and others. Jay Mark Johnson lives and works in Los Angeles, USA.