

Night thought

The set of often dark, enigmatic photographs by Jiří Wackermann presented under the title of *Contemplations* is as likely to intrigue as to reassure their viewer. Something not yet revealed or explained lurks in images that nevertheless show signs of being made in the most ordinary of environments. Having lived and studied in Czechoslovakia in his formative years between the 1950s and the 1970s, it is not surprising that the world Wackermann documents is familiar from traditions of post-war Czech surrealist photography – works by Emila Medková, Vilém Reichmann or Alois Nožička, for example, similarly explore uncanny, dream-saturated spaces and objects that are also those of the daily urban environment, sometimes caught in unexpected close-up or isolating a troubling detail, overlaying the poetic and the critical.

It has long been noted that photography enables the viewer to see that which ordinary sight is incapable of grasping; that it *brings to vision* something ordinarily held at a distance. In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), Walter Benjamin noted photography's specific ability to 'capture images which escape natural vision.' Photography, he argues, questions the possibility of 'aura', that quality possessed by the authentic artwork or object at its 'most sensitive nucleus' and defined as 'the unique phenomenon of a distance'. As early as 1859, scientist and poet Oliver Wendell Holmes noted the ability of mirrors to capture fleetingly the representation of something removed, so that 'under the action of light [...] a body makes its superficial aspect potentially present at a distance, becoming appreciable as a shadow or as a picture.' The new medium of the photograph, that 'mirror with a memory,' allows a new and intimate intellectual relationship with this captured image: 'The mind feels its way into the very depths of the picture'.

A photographer who is also a scientist – in other words, whose professional concern is with expanding knowledge – Wackermann's visions often pose problems of distance and perception. Framing them in terms of contemplation – in its Latin origins, a term which implies a thinking that is slow and profound, but that also bears the traces of a sacred space (*templum*) – suggests ways in which photography might be used not so much as a means of representation as a strategy of thought. But in this thinking, his eye seems to be drawn above all to moments that have something enigmatic and unknowable about them. Shadows, the darkness at the corners of built spaces, sombre and resistant environments; not the vivid everyday but what the poet André Breton terms the 'unshatterable kernel of night'. So here, perhaps, what was at stake for Benjamin in the 'most sensitive nucleus' of things belongs not so much in specific objects, but in the very notion of the dark that is less an absence of light than a condition of unknowing. The viewer is struck by the quantities of black in Wackermann's work, of its infinite tones, a black whose origin lies in a chemical operation based on the presence of metal, of silver. That darkness might gleam, like an inkling, might glint at the corner of vision and *illuminate* what cannot ordinarily be thought (just as Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* extols the feeblest, fading light as the condition for penetrating the secret heart of things) seems to lie at the core of these troubling images.

— Krzysztof Fijalkowski

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