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Interview with photographer Joachim Borhm before the opening night of his exhibition “Places and Edges” at the Brancolini Grimaldi Gallery in London, 22 March – 11 May 2013  
by Fanny Landstrom, ASX London, March 2013

**So, this is your first UK solo exhibition?**

Yes it is. I’ve been part of some group shows in the past and I had a very small part in a project at the Goethe Institute some years ago, but that’s about it. And I am quite happy to show at such a nice gallery.

**How did you get involved in photography?**

Oh, long story! I actually started shooting in school as a pupil – I shot concerts, rock concerts of friends and colleagues of mine. But basically, I studied something else after that, I studied German and English Literature and I thought wanted to become a teacher. After I had finished and had to work at a school, I knew that this wasn’t a thing I really wanted to do. And then I made a radical decision and decided that I wanted to do photography. I applied to a prestigious photography school in Germany, the Wolkwang University of Arts in Essen, and they took me right away – so that was that.

**That was lucky!**

Haha.

**At that time in Germany, did photographic art as such really exist?**

No, that was the mid- to late 70s and photography was not an art at that time – it was photography. It was advertising photography, and it was journalism. At that time I think everyone wanted to become a magazine photographer.

**So there was mainly a commercial and photojournalist interest in photography at that time?**

Yes, or there was a little bit of human interest as well – like Cartier Bresson’s style of work and some documentary work. But that wasn’t regarded as art either, it was just documentary. There were almost no galleries and no possibility to show the work anywhere. There were maybe two venues in all of Germany where it was possible to show some independent work.

**When you decided to do photographic art then, what kind of response did you get from others?**

This part of the exhibition (*Ruhr*) actually consists of my exam work from the Folkwang University of Arts. It was made between 1980-83 and my teachers, my professors, they said, ‘Well, Brohm, we don’t understand what you are doing. This is not photography because we have no clue of what this is about’. That was it, and I was really happy to pass the exam with mediocre grading. This work was only possible because in the late 70’s, I got in touch with Michael Schmidt in Berlin who ran a very special photography workshop in Kreuzberg called the “Werkstatt für Fotografie”. He invited some American photographers, for example Lewis Baltz, and I did a workshop with him around 1981, but at that time no one knew him in Europe. I also saw work from Stephen Shore, Lee Friedlander, and so on. I was very excited by this and my orientation moved towards American photography at the time.

**Yes, I can clearly see the influences from American photography and photographers in your images..**

Yes, look at the six of these images (from *Ohio*), it is only a small part of the work that I made after the *Ruhr* work. I had also wanted to know about the theory and history of photography which was impossible to study in Germany at the time because Art historians only dealt with sculpture and painting. There were no historians dealing with such trivial matters as photography. I had to go to the US so I applied for a Fulbright scholarship which I was lucky enough to get. So

then I had the chance to study for one year at the City of Columbus, Ohio, and attend postgraduate study at Ohio State University, which was, eh, not so interesting because of Columbus was located in Ohio. Originally I had wanted to attend CalArts in Los Angeles but the Fulbright people told me that this was a private school and they didn't want to pay for it. So I had to pick a state school. I finally picked Ohio because it was Allan Sekula's first teaching job, and also another important person was teaching there – Jonathan Green, who used to be an editor for Aperture Magazine and ran the University Gallery. So I had these two very different characters around me – one that considered himself a Marxist, Sekula, and one conservative photo teacher Greene, and it was great fun for me to discuss work with both of them.

**And, how did they get along..?**

They respected each other, but they had very different views on photography. Green was more about the formal aspects and the aesthetic side, and Sekula, of course, was related to the political side.

**Where you familiar with Sekula's work before you applied to the school?**

Yes, shortly before I got some knowledge about it. Sekula was recommended to me, and then I gained information about his work. You know, we didn't have internet at the time so it was a completely different thing – to find out about books for example. You had no idea what they were about, they were very expensive, you had to order them overseas, it was terribly costly and you didn't know what you would get and so on. I don't think we can even understand it nowadays.

**Yes, now we can just Google it.**

Exactly.

**For your photography – what has been your inspirations, motivations, and maybe even, obsessions?**

Well, in the first place it really was all about the picture making, and also, if you look closer, even at the early ones, they're about composition – integrating small little people in the landscape views and so on. It is all very delicate and has all these tiny things...

**Very subtle.**

Yes, very subtle, that's what I was after. And I felt great satisfaction when I finally took an image with all these qualities – but at the same time it has always been important to me to deal with all the not so obvious things. I don't photograph the famous and the wonderful, or just the beautiful things – I tend to deal with the little things, the remote things, all the things that are accessible, the everyday stuff. And because of that I think that there is a kind of political aspect to the work as well.

**They all feel like very personal, attentive, observations...**

Yes, that's really my thing. What you see here is 30 years of work and it has changed a lot but actually it hasn't changed that much. My attention is always on these remote scenes. I think that it is important that this "invisible" stuff is made visible, and I spend time to, in a way, make beautiful images of that.

**Do you think that photographic art today is a more efficient tool for bringing out effect amongst its audience than traditional photojournalism is?**

Yes, I think photojournalism is almost dead now – not many magazines really even employ photojournalists. They get all their images from image banks. Journalism used to be a very quick medium, printed in a magazine one week and then it was gone. I think it already has changed so that photographers who want to work with a specific kind of content find it important to maybe do it as a long term project, and then make books. Or they have websites presenting their works. The media has changed and I think that many people who would have become journalists 20 years ago are running their own self-publishing house today. They transport their content through that media – that has really changed a lot. Which I think is good.

**Let's change topic. The Bechers. When you started with photography their work was really influential and their school of photographers as well. What effect did that have on you and for the visibility of work?**

Well, when I did my undergraduate studies in Essen I studied with Andreas Gursky and for our postgraduate studies he went over to the Dusseldorf academy of art and I stayed in Essen and maintained my relationship with the Berlin workshop. I think that the Dusseldorf school was unique for that certain time, and for the first time someone blew up photography so that it became an equivalent to painting. And luckily enough, I think the market was ready for that. So a handful of people got pretty famous and sold a lot of works.

It didn't effect me actually. I looked and I liked most of the work so I didn't have a problem with that, related to my photography. But the effect was that for the next 10 or 15 years the public was unable to look at any photography other than the Bechers and their students. And that's why I only published the work that I made in the 80's in 2007 and 2009, after 25 years. People weren't really ready to look at these works – but after one or two decades of American photography and the Bechers, people got used to this kind of photography and now it attracts more and more interest. But throughout the 90's no one was really interested in looking at it.

**What did you do then?**

After my studying I worked as an architectural photographer and I also taught. That developed further and eventually I became a professor at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst/ Academy of Visual Arts in Leipzig, Germany, where I still am. I did a lot of teaching, I made my own projects, and occasionally I had a show somewhere.

**When it actually started 'to take off', was it in Germany or in the US?**

The first shows were in Germany and the German speaking countries, Switzerland, and Austria. Occasionally I was part of a group show in the US, and since some years I have a gallery, Luisotti, in Los Angeles.

**Have you exhibited somewhere else in Europe?**

Not in England, (laughter). Not in Eastern Europe, not in Spain, and not in Scandinavia. No I haven't.

**Would you say that your work has changed much from when you started with photography up until today?**

Yes, I think that the systematics of working has, of course, changed. I mean, from the Culatra work on the left which is from 2008-2010 I tried to accumulate an archive of things in different categories. That's a difference from the early works where I didn't think of a concept like that. And images look different, they have different size, and the formal composition is different. Yes, of course things have changed – but they didn't change radically I guess.

**Are all work in the exhibition shot on film?**

Yes, all these are photographed with medium format film and printed under my supervision. And these (Culatra) are analogue sequences – the prints have no glass in front of them. That's why they look a little different. I really like the surface like that.

**Yes, it makes it look more matt and textured. Almost multi-dimensional..**

Yes, exactly.

**You have said that you used 'one camera, one film , and one single lens for about ten years'...**

... I think for more than that...

**How come?**

Well, I try to not make photography so complicated. The work for me is really not about changing lenses or choosing film – I focused on the things that I wanted to photograph and the situations, and that's the work for me. I try to find the best technique possible and I really look for quality, but, it's not a thing that I elaborate on. I need to first find the right film, and the right equipment, but once I find it, and I almost only do long term projects, I just use the same. The

good thing is that once you know your equipment you don't have to think about it really, it corresponds with your movement, and that's important to me.

**How come that there are so many tractors in this series (Culatra)?**

(Laughter) Usually, I try to have some cars in my images. I really like the effect of looking at cars. I mean, just by looking at the colour of cars or different types of cars you really get the feeling of what that time was about. And I find them very characteristic for our culture and the society, the way vehicles look. And in the Culatra work, what was so funny was that on this little island there were no streets and no cars anywhere because there's just sand and boats. I was surprised to find so many tractors there, they are the only vehicles that can move heavy things and drive in the sand, they just stood around. Even that yellow tractor right there (points at print) stood in that spot for three years. It wasn't in use anymore so they just left it there as it was. They are kind of sculptures in the landscape. Some get used some not, and I think they are very much a characteristic of this island. The island is very small but I guess you could find dozens of tractors there. Maybe 10 still in use and the rest just sit there.

**It seems like many of the buildings, and the items, in these images should be temporary, but have become sort of 'permanently temporary'...**

Yes, you could say that. I was very fascinated by the high degree of improvisation on this island. People tend to be poor, and they built their own houses, and shacks, and so on, from whatever materials they could find or afford. It's a DIY place – if one house breaks down – after years it's remains get picked up by somebody else who is using it for another thing. They don't throw anything away – it's all there in different states of progress. Part of my fascination is that all of these things gets moved around, renewed, and changed all the time but mostly it is the same stuff.

**Do you think the lack of new materials makes you more creative?**

Yes, I think so. They import some stuff from the mainland of course, but that's a lot of work, cost money, and has to be brought by boat.

**When you think about the future of Art photography – do you see it as bright, or are you worried..?**

Of course it's bright! But I have to say that I think that the history of photography as a medium is finished. That was what I was referring to in these works – of course you refer to history and you have precursors, and compare yourself to what has been done already. I think we have entered a new age in that regard because since digital media took over there are far more possibilities to work with photography than ever were before – and that is something I can see amongst my students. They use video and photography with the same machinery so these mediums combine, and the internet is another platform that allows for multiple uses and today we don't really know what awaits us and many things are possible but certainly not oriented towards the history of photography.

**Yes, but hasn't there been an upswing in the use of analogue techniques as a reaction to the digitalization?**

I think that those are the nostalgics. They exist and they have the right to do his of course, but I think that in the whole culture, the digital is unavoidable.

**So, your next body of work will be digital?**

Oh, I already have been working with digital cameras since two years. I already produced a body of work after what you see here that is all digital.

**Why isn't it here?**

I have produced work for 35 years – this is just a very small show compared to that. I really like this gallery and we really had to concentrate on what to show and I already think that it is a lot of images that are in here (laugh). The Culatra images are in a grid because it is supposed to be seen as an archive – as many possibilities of combination.

**Speaking to you as a professor, how important do you think it is that a practising artist is aware of the theory for his/her chosen artform? Do you think it is more beneficial than it can be restrictive?**

Well, of course it can be restrictive – I mean, the more you know the more restrictions there are. Especially since everything already has been done – but if you see it in a productive way it can also give you ideas. So it works both ways I guess. If you feel intimidated by it it doesn't help you, but it can also encourage you. I encourage my students to look at theory and history – and our students have to write a theoretical part for their graduate work. It's very common nowadays and I think it's good.

As an artist nowadays you really have to know where you stand and exactly what type of work you are doing, what impact it has, and what your context is. Every artist has to talk about their work today.

**How does your day to day look? How much are spent on your own practical work and how much on other things?**

It's about 50/50 I think. I have classes 2-3 days a week and 2-3 days a week I go out and photograph, or work on projects, or whatever needs to be done. And that's my week basically. Of course the two interfere sometimes. And then I have to prepare shows, and books, and sometimes my photo sessions are quite intense. In Culatra I was there about 8 times, 4-6 days each trip – and when getting back home I made contact sheets, selected and archived. That's the work.

**How did you find out about the island (Culatra)?**

It's an interesting story. I have a friend, a painter, and I one day saw some of his paintings of some shacks and the coastline and I asked him, 'What is this? Where does it come from?', and he said, 'Well, I have some snaps from this weird little island that I had the chance to visit two years ago'. He showed me his holiday snaps, we looked at them on the computer, and I found it so interesting because of all the improvisation of stuff which was there and I decided I wanted to pay this place a visit. So we both went down there and I started to photograph, and came back several times after that. And since things changed continuously I arranged a schedule which allowed me to go every three months for a few days at the time .

**Did things change much from the first to the last time you were there?**

Oh yes, they did. Because of the EU a lot of money is coming in so now they build plenty of serious looking housing projects and things are really changing there.

**Are there any businesses on the island?**

Oyster fishing (laugh), and maybe two or three bars and small restaurants mostly for tourists. I think for most people who live there it is just cheap living, warm weather, and beautiful beaches.

**What are you working on right now?**

Some architectural projects. And one about urban development. I have done that for over a year now and I think I can show some of it next year.

**Do you get nervous before you have a gallery opening?**

No, I am too old for that! (laugh)