

Exhibition Guide

Beat Streuli

New Street

21 November 2012 – 3 February 2013

First Floor Galleries

Second Floor Galleries

Tower Room

IKON



Beat Streuli *New Street*

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Swiss artist Beat Streuli uses photography and video to make striking imagery that often mirrors the visual language of advertising. He shows figures in public spaces, part of a generic anonymous mass, but at the same time caught up in private thoughts or reflection. Concerned with ordinariness, undramatic moments and the mundane, his work is 'showing people in their everyday lives'.

For Ikon Streuli is showing new work made in summer 2012, depicting the city centres of Birmingham and Castellón, Spain, alongside work produced in a number of other cities around the world.

The following text is taken from an interview with the artist, October 2012.

Your work features figures in urban spaces. How do you capture these images?

I work in a somewhat unintentional way, not looking for something I want to prove. What I do is record what is happening around me almost in an automatic way. The Surrealists had what they called 'écriture automatique' [automatic writing] which means writing a lot of stuff and there will always be something there which is beautiful or makes sense. When I work in the city taking pictures I feel a bit like that.

Then I have all the images which I can draw from to create a picture which is at the same time anonymous, general, generic, but shows individuals. That contradiction is not only in the work but also in reality as we are very much unique human beings but also just very small parts of a much bigger thing.

Your images show everyday life, seemingly without the 'decisive moment' of classic photography. Is that a conscious decision?

I would say yes and no. You are right that these are not Cartier-Bresson's 'decisive moments', I am not coming from a photographic education but purely from a contemporary visual arts background. I simply started using photography at some point. But on the other hand I don't feel so far away from someone like Cartier-Bresson, because he was very much about plain observation and narration about given situations and given places and people.

I like the straightforwardness of a classic street photographer, but I also like the complexity and the sophistication in the language of the visual arts which has many more ways of expressing things than just simple photography.

Why is it important to you to use video as well? What does video allow you to do that maybe photography doesn't?

If you work with the mechanical reproduction of reality, nowadays I think you just have to work with both. As

everyone knows, most cameras now shoot film as they shoot still images, and to me this is a pretty exciting moment because I always worked in that in-between space of moving and still image.

When it's about drawing a picture of reality you want it to be as three dimensional as possible, mentally speaking, so from the still image and from the extra dimension of time-based media you get a much richer picture of life going on around you.

Why is the city so important as a context for your work?

To some extent it is a question of personal affinity. I didn't grow up in a big city, but in a small suburban Swiss town, and as soon as I could I left Switzerland and went to live in Berlin and other big cities.

It seems, at least since industrialisation started, the cities have become the spearhead of modern civilisation and they are the places where you can see people from everywhere. That is also why for a long time now I have concentrated on taking pictures of people in the centre of cities rather than the suburbs.

I like taking pictures of people from all types of backgrounds in that setting of the modern 'forum Romanum', where everyone comes to shop and gather, because there I can photograph them in a neutral setting, not just as figures in their usual social and cultural context.

Your use of a telephoto lens means that often your subjects don't know they are being photographed ...

Public space in cities really is that amazing stage on which everybody is in total public view but it feels amazingly private in some ways. You don't really feel watched. What I love about this way of working – snapshot photography rather than posed portraiture – is that in my view you get a much more open image of these people surrounding you than when someone poses.

Why do we love people watching? Why do we read novels about all kinds of characters that have nothing to do with us? I think it's to do with natural human curiosity. We want to know more about all these different ways of life, different kinds of people who in reality you will never have an occasion to meet. The only way to get underneath the surface perhaps is by looking.

What is your approach to architecture and other aspects of the built environment?

More and more, almost abstract details of the urban space, architecture, logos and so on are becoming part of my work – in these new projections they make up the majority – 'showing the world we live in'.

On another level, from quite early in my career I got opportunities to work with billboards, surfaces in public spaces which were a great opportunity because they allowed

me to bring these images back to where they had been created. You can create some sort of short circuit where people who were hanging out in these neighbourhoods are reflected back, not like a mirror, but more like a flashback to the immediate reality where they were situated.

You are echoing the visual language of mass media, in a way that your images feel familiar, but somehow different at the same time ...

Yes, when I did the billboards for the Bullring in Birmingham [2000] I'm sure a lot of people thought that was the publicity for a sports or fashion brand or something, but after a while they figured out there was no logo. Then there is a moment when it becomes more than just enjoying beautiful images.

Maybe you start to think about a few things. What are billboards, what is publicity, what is branding, what is corporate and personal image and so on, which are all very interesting questions. In my art and in my way of thinking I feel that the visual experience has to come first though. Then if that is really working well, people can begin to discuss and have ideas and reflections that start from such a point of departure.

Some of the contexts you have used are points of departure, literally, such as airports. These are very 'democratic' spaces with an incredible mix of people moving through ...

In some ways it's true, you get a bit addicted to all these masses of people from all kinds of places. It's wave after wave and every wave is the same but at the same time different, and so to me it's a never-ending story. These crossroads where people from global destinations meet can be mesmerising places.

On the other hand, I'm not an unconditional lover of human nature or admirer of ideas of utopia. It is more about exploring reality, especially global reality which is an extremely complex matter. The reality around us is also visible in people's faces, in different ways in different places.

Why *New Street*?

The exhibition is called *New Street* which is a little bit ironic because it refers to both the actual New Street – Birmingham's high street – which I always find a very interesting place to work in, and the street, which is always the same but at the same time, always new.

For this exhibition I also worked in Castellón, which is a smaller city in Spain. I've worked recently in a suburb of Milan and in Mannheim in Germany, both of which are not very spectacular places. I've recently started to do that because it shows you people in their unfiltered daily lives even better than in the big cities where many things are distracting and many things are more beautiful on the surface than they are in reality.

You cannot really compare Castellón and Birmingham but one floor of this exhibition is a juxtaposition of projections from both places, in similar formats. The same is true for the book we produced for this exhibition. It contains about 200 images each from Birmingham and from Castellón. Immediately that looks like a comparison which it is and it isn't. People have to make up their own minds and sift through all these images either projected or in the book.

It is also interesting to realise that Castellón and Birmingham share the same latitude, and they are two cities which are affected by the financial crisis in different ways. I said before that I'm not a photojournalist but I think I can sometimes reflect realities in a more true and subtle way.

Associated Events

Beat Streuli in conversation and book signing

Wednesday 30 January, 6.30–7.30pm – FREE

Join artist Beat Streuli as he discusses the inspiration behind his photography. Streuli also signs copies of the new exhibition catalogue, produced exclusively by Ikon. Places are free but should be reserved by calling Ikon on 0121 248 0708.

Ikon Shop

A full colour catalogue accompanies the exhibition priced £20, special exhibition price £15. Approximately 700 pages, it illustrates recent work and includes a text by writer and cultural theorist Sadie Plant. In addition Streuli has produced a limited edition print.

Visit Ikon's online shop www.ikon-gallery.co.uk/shop for the full range of catalogues and limited editions.

Exhibition Supporters

Beat Streuli's exhibition *New Street* is supported by the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Cultural Fund in Britain, The Stanley Thomas Johnson Foundation and Mirage Associates.

Access

Please note the Tower Room is only accessible via a number of steps.



For more information about this artist and our off-site programme please visit the Resource Room where you can find a selection of books, audio and film.

If you have any questions about the exhibition please ask the Visitor Assistants in the gallery.

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