

No Documents

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The young adults, adolescents, and gang members Tobias Zielony takes photographs of do not participate in social activity consisting of work, family, and economic and social recognition. A precarious and tense social situation forms the subliminal and conflict-ridden basis of their social status. Zielony works go beyond a commitment to an analysis of youth culture and sociality. He augments documentary photography by adding a framework comprised of content and aesthetics, and by means of conceptual composition he makes repeated reference to the fictitious shares, the projection and interpretation of the medium. His works follow a global track of youth culture and confront the viewer with adolescents and young adults who all reproduce similar modes of behavior, social codes, and self-images. This is all the more surprising, as there are great cultural and social differences between a youth in Chemnitz, Los Angeles, Trona, Marseille or Winnipeg. Without making any ostensible reference to the persons' biographies or the specific context of those he takes portraits of, Zielony succeeds in creating a feeling of closeness and intensity. The ambivalence between personal portrait and the simultaneous display of a sociopolitical phenomenon prevents a spectacular and compromising pictorial language. The title of his book, *Story/No Story*, succinctly expresses this approach: no stories about violence, sex, drugs, abuse, crime, or self-destruction. These provocative subjects and themes may be latently incorporated; however, they only become visible in details, in gestures, so to speak on the periphery. Zielony may take up the hard reality or the personal story of a person, but it is then condensed by means of a stringent pictorial concept of the distribution of light and angle, closeness and distance, dramaturgy or text montage. A narrative is produced out of atmospherically condensed fragments which blends fact and fiction. These are not documentations of living conditions that would in some measure satisfy a need for sympathy and voyeurism, but works that first develop in their overall formal aesthetic context and call for the viewer to complete them.

Tobias Zielony's oeuvre has a convincing relationship to works by Larry Clark and Jim Goldberg, both of whom take photographs of the life and distress of adolescents in an intense, unveneered, and existential way.

The works *Tulsa*¹ by Larry Clark and *Raised by Wolves*² by Jim Goldberg are key works in a personally tinged, provocative, socioanalytical photography that makes do without moral evaluation and categorization. While in *Tulsa*, Clark choose a direct pictorial language and speaks of death, drugs, sex, desire, loneliness, and emptiness in his unpretentious images produced between 1963 and 1971, nearly two years later, Goldberg extends the narrative repertoire by means of handwritten texts, collages, and reproductions, which he mixes with his own, mostly black-and-white pictures. Zielony enhances this sequence with a further, independent variant by clearly and coolly transporting controversial subjects into a discursive presentation. Like William Burroughs in *Junkie*,³ Clark exhibited a previously unknown openness: he shows men and women, girls and boys having sex and taking drugs, broken worlds full of filth, aggression, and desperation and an occasional trace of corrupt gentleness. From 1985 to 1995, Goldberg pursued the lives of several street kids and shows their personal and social destruction, but also let them make their own comments and produced collages of their lives out of images and texts. For him, photography is a means of documentation, yet it also supplies the material that can later be painted over, glued over, scratched, and arbitrarily combined, quite as if the intensity of the events and biographies could not be depicted in a mere photographic image. Zielony finally extends the subject of youth and youth culture by a global perspective and in his mostly color photographs speaks less of a *specific* city, *specific* place, or *specific* group, but rather of an international and in part commercialized iconography of gestures and modes of behavior, and presents specific social phenotypes. Individuality, cultural background, economics, and urbanism thus become visible as a sociological and almost universal continuum.

There is little activity in his images; the bodies, faces, and gestures seem frozen, as if they correspond with the protagonists' limited framework of action. However, by doing without a spectacular depiction that would satisfy voyeurism and false sympathy, the places and circumstances become comparable. This opens up an underlying layer of unresolved conflicts, both personal and social, in an interplay between tension and repression, which can be found Naples just as well as in Zielona Gora in Poland. Zielony's work is thus less documentation in the field of tension between urbanism and sociality and more a conceptual interpretation of social reality using photography and film. In his films *Big Sexyland* and *The Deboard* (both 2008), clear and radically formal decisions dictate the

statement being made, and intensity is generated through the absence of ostensibly central events that would capture the viewer's attention. *Big Sexyland* is part of a work about male hookers in Berlin. The young men prostitute themselves for little money and at high risk to their health. The meeting place is a theater where blue movies are shown that is both a pick-up spot and retreat for prostitutes and johns. In the film, Zielony shows a young man who is asleep, slumped down on the dirty but ample upholstered furniture in the theater. One sees the blurred projection on his body of the porno film that is being shown on the screen and hears the stereotypical moaning that accompanies the mechanical fucking in the film. Lulled and enshrouded in this projection of sexuality and corporeality, the flickering lights of the image seem like the perfect analogy of a social, sexual, and economic codification the male prostitutes cannot escape from. Even in his sleep, a moment of privacy and intimacy, of rest and dream, the young man remains a purchasable body onto which johns project images and desires that are far from liberating desire and sexuality, respect and dignity.

The film *The Deboard*, which was produced in Winnipeg, Canada, deals with ostensible hopelessness and a strict hierarchy. Zielony worked there on a series about Canadian street gangs with indigenous roots who localize their social and cultural origins within the context of the First Nation. As Native Canadians, they reclaim for themselves the land and cultural claims denied them to this very day by the Canadian government. Crime and economic hardship frequently characterize the everyday lives of street-gang members. In *The Deboard*, Zielony portrays the former gang leader Cobby, who wants to leave the gang before he is released from prison. Most of the prisoners in the Stoney Mountain prison have a First Nation background. The prison gangs are in part brutal competitors. Acceptance into a gang is often coupled with an initiation rite: potential members have to prove their ability to withstand pain, cruelty, and doggedness. But those who want to leave the gang are also subjected to a ritual: the deboard. For five minutes, three men rough up the one who wants to quit in a cell. He is not allowed to defend himself but has to literally try to survive the beating. If he succeeds, he is free. There is hardly a more radical form or a more haunting image of participation, coercion and overcoming, hierarchy and violence. Zielony does not show the violence. He lets the gang leader, who survived this gruesome ritual, talk and painfully shows him for brief moments. A filmic fragment evolves that,

cautiously and oppressively, is a portrait of the person *and* the sociocultural situation. Zielony shows everything at once in in part unfocused, coarse-grained images and sequences: the here and now, the personal review and cultural history, and an uncertain future that still needs to be specified.

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¹ Larry Clark, *Tulsa* (New York, 1971).

² Jim Goldberg, *Raised by Wolves* (Zurich et al., 1995).

³ William S. Burroughs, *Junkie* (New York, 1953).