



Johannes Gramm

INTO THE DARK

On the Doorstep.

A Conversation with Johannes Gramm by Sabin Bors

Sabin Bors: Your photographic art is marked by a constant reflection on self-definitions and the idea of identity. You always get involved in this process, and you become the subject of your own subjectivity. Why did you choose this approach?



Johannes Gramm: Not all of my works are of such kind. But maybe nearly most of them are. The main reason for creating images is the desire to know what something looks like. Later on you can also start to think, talk or reflect upon it etc. But that's not the actual reason for doing it! In a world without fixed points in space or time – physically, socially or politically – I'm the only constant, decisive component I am able to base myself or focus on. Both these aspects are essential for making pictures. Occasionally, it may be possible to trust another centre. But this is only partly useful for pictorial action: We call it love. And out of that you don't create pictures but something infinitely more wonderful!









Sabin Bors: Self portraits are not an ordinary construction, since the constitution of the photographic subject involves the destitution of the photographer's own presence, observation, and representation. You are the photographer and the subject of your photography at the same time. Do the portraits coincide with the vision you had before taking the photograph? Are you the same you pictured yourself to be, or is it another image of yourself?

Johannes Gramm: As someone who is working with self portraits in a wide variety of forms, you often get suspected to be an egocentric freak. Self-images (I am always careful with the term "portrait", because it describes just one kind of conjuring-trick – a fake) are nothing but a bemused look into the mirror in the morning with either a smile or shock.

But this view obtains a shape by the corresponding work of an artist. Now it has become a designed game: A mise-en-scène in a very general sense. That is why an image will never be a document. The decision of how to compose my pictures is done before I actually gather the components for it, stealing or discovering them.

The idea that a picture of someone or something might accurately depict the person or object itself (at least in parts) as a clearly legible and nameable image, is based upon the fairly naive idea that it is possible to express yourself through a piece of art... But more than 50.000 years ago, we have started developing languages exactly for this purpose. Pictures achieve something else. Barnett Newman put it this way: Angels reveal not the glory of God, but are the revelation of God's glory, and images behave in a comparable manner. Pictures are like angels- just without a God.















































Sabin Bors: Your photography is a constant quest for self-differences, self-errors, self-declinations, self-diversions, self-separations... How many images can one subject have, and where does the subject lie – in the difference instituted through photography, or in the absence that constantly avoids the subject's presence?

Johannes Gramm: Each image is a subject itself. I think this is a slightly erroneous question but will try to answer nonetheless: you do represent a subject as an object in your thoughts. But it is a process: my self is just like a beloved landscape. Images however offer the illusion that a form or an abidance in this steady flow is possible. But they themselves are a process.

Sabin Bors: One of the most interesting aspects of your work is that the body is always very pictographic. Where do you find the difference between pictography and photography, and why did you choose the body as a photographic subject?

Johannes Gramm: To start with, pictography seemed to me very close to our language. Perhaps this assumption tempted me to choose that subject? Photography is a technique which I can use among others. It is not about its content, but a methodical choice. With the possibilities that digital technique has to offer, my photos are often closer to a musical composition than to "clean" photography... The annoying fact is that they are not audible for musicians, not brushed-up enough for painters and not documental enough for photographers. So they very often stand on the doorstep but are not allowed in. These are technical difficulties, which I have to fight here. In paintings of fine art, depicting the body or a person in a specific situation is probably the most beautiful motif you can deal with. It displays or tells so much, because we ourselves are human beings inhabiting human bodies. We are what we are, and we look as we look, so it's the perfect and most beautiful occasion for: "What would it look like if...?"

Erbsen













Sabin Bors: Photography is supposed to unveil the evidential nature of our presence. Many times, this presence is hidden from our own view. Yet your art is never about the evidential. It speaks more about that which deserts the evidence. How does this relate to your concept of art?

Johannes Gramm: The belief in the authenticity of photography is still unbroken. It so often has to serve as the idolized witness, even though we usually return to graphical representations when it comes to important tasks such as building homes or finding roads.

I love unbeatable evidence of existence, pictures, my friends, music, lemon-flavoured ice cream, games, my family, tricks, clowns, butter noodles and the sea... but the fact that I love them doesn't necessarily mean I have to "believe" in them. But my art is not about misleading the viewer, to rise above them as a know-it-all. In any case, for me, the effect is less important than satisfying their curiosity.



Sabin Bors: Would you say your photographs relate to subjective expressions/states, or subjective acts? I sometimes see your images as lost acts, missed chances, missed roles...

Johannes Gramm: I can't tell. In the manufacturing process that might not even matter. I guess that the "what, if..." feels so incredibly similar to the "What would it look like, if..." and so that is why this question comes up. And the images change according to preferences (language, images, cooking etc).

Sabin Bors: There is a strong and profoundly personal approach to the "attributes" of your subjects. In the *Betteri* series, the King, the Queen, and the Jack reveal a multitude of facets and expressions. You explore every reaction and try to understand the inner state of your subject...



Johannes Gramm: Yes, at least as far as the outer appearance of this approach is concerned. It is tricky to show the difference between a work of art that displays sympathy for the outer circumstances and an artist who creates images and understands the circumstances as a human being. As an example: A person thinks or acts in awareness of a political state of affairs AND creates art that may or may not be politically influenced.

Sabin Bors: A defining element in the Betteri series is that power and strength are always wounded. How did you reach this vision, and how do you see this outside your work?

Johannes Gramm: Power and strength combined with responsibility make one vulnerable. But not every scar gives evidence of strength and sense of responsibility! But this "being responsible for something" can be a reason to lose out – sometimes even a whole arm. And how do I conceive



these ideas? All you need to do is to grow older and more experienced.

Sabin Bors: How close does reality come to our ideals? How real can our self-images become?

Johannes Gramm: I am convinced that all we want is really possible – all what we opt for under will... An ideal that is independent of the will is worthless to me and merely tolerable if at all. Our self-image determines our reality and is shaped by it. But pictures are always authentic, always reality because we create them!

It is difficult for me to answer questions about life with my pictures ... I think it is impossible.



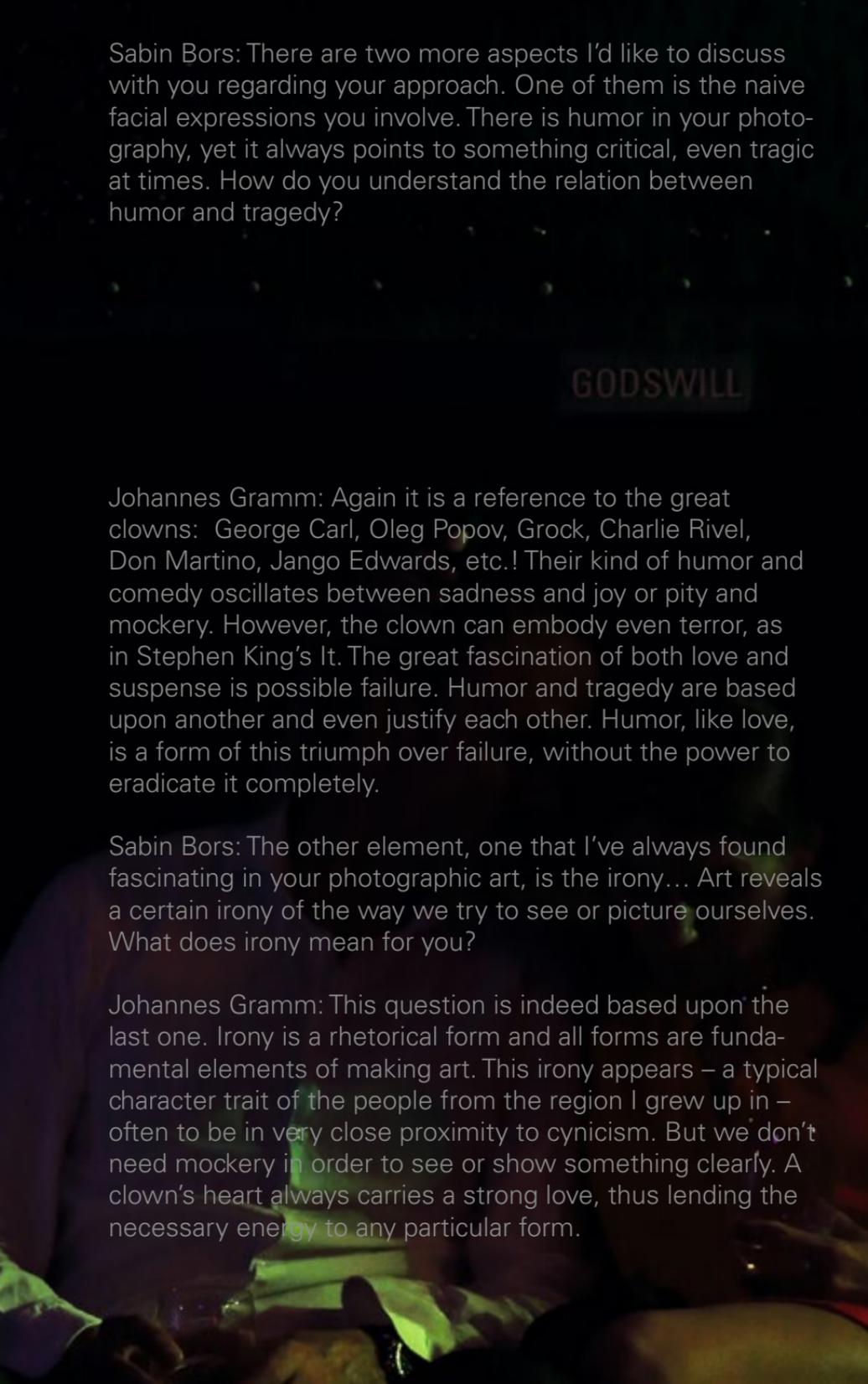






Sabin Bors: You see the subject as playing out various scenes. We play a role. We hide behind an imagistic mask. Do you see this as a role play, or rather infinitely reflected images of ourselves? Do we come to understand ourselves by playing this role, or do we get lost in the mirrored reflections of ourselves?

Johannes Gramm: This is another question is directed towards the pictures, but ventures clearly into the realm of my private world. Every individual will find a different answer to the question in order to evaluate his or her own personal masquerade, not really revealing any more truth behind the masque. Masks can withhold or reveal the truth, depending on how they are used. Masks in the world of art are wonderful though, which is probably why I love clowns so much.



Sabin Bors: There are two more aspects I'd like to discuss with you regarding your approach. One of them is the naive facial expressions you involve. There is humor in your photography, yet it always points to something critical, even tragic at times. How do you understand the relation between humor and tragedy?

GODSWILL

Johannes Gramm: Again it is a reference to the great clowns: George Carl, Oleg Popov, Grock, Charlie Rivel, Don Martino, Jango Edwards, etc.! Their kind of humor and comedy oscillates between sadness and joy or pity and mockery. However, the clown can embody even terror, as in Stephen King's *It*. The great fascination of both love and suspense is possible failure. Humor and tragedy are based upon another and even justify each other. Humor, like love, is a form of this triumph over failure, without the power to eradicate it completely.

Sabin Bors: The other element, one that I've always found fascinating in your photographic art, is the irony... Art reveals a certain irony of the way we try to see or picture ourselves. What does irony mean for you?

Johannes Gramm: This question is indeed based upon the last one. Irony is a rhetorical form and all forms are fundamental elements of making art. This irony appears – a typical character trait of the people from the region I grew up in – often to be in very close proximity to cynicism. But we don't need mockery in order to see or show something clearly. A clown's heart always carries a strong love, thus lending the necessary energy to any particular form.

Johannes Gramm works as a photo-artist and stage-designer in Essen, Germany and in Walcheren, the Netherlands. He uses a combination of different digital materials in montages – like a remix in music:

Photos (made and found), scanned drawings and paintings, generated pictures etc. The complete visual remix will be printed in the end as an inkjet-print.

