

Zeitschrift: Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am
Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Herausgeber: Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Band: - (2022)

Heft: 41

Artikel: Fuori fuoco

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1037216>

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Fuori Fuoco

Annamaria Prandi

This shaky image that is ever so slightly out of focus was displayed as part of the exhibition «Building Images. Photography Focusing on Swiss Architecture» in 2013 at the SAM Swiss Architecture Museum in Basel. Surrounded by photographs celebrating architecture, this particular one chose to relegate the far-off building to the background, allowing the scene to be stolen by an extreme close-up of two people, with the horizon closed off by white, wooded mountains.

It is a photograph taken by Robert Frank of the Church of San Giovanni Battista by Mario Botta.

This image has long stayed with me, seeming extraordinarily expressive despite its imperfection. But what was it about this photograph that so attracted me? Where, if anywhere, was its beauty? If, as Sontag says, photography is about attributing meaning to things, what was Robert Frank trying to photograph, and to whom, or what, was he trying to attribute meaning?

It is my belief that the allure of this photograph lies in its use of proximity and distance.

The photographer and the architecture are at a distance from one another, on opposite sides of a valley. The building appears but it doesn't enthrall. Instead, it is the space left empty, leaving space for a story, that engages the observer. But what is the story's object? Contrary to what we might think, it isn't the day spent in the mountains around Ticino, which was closely documented by Frank and of which this is nothing more than a fragment; the real object of the narration is Frank himself.

A



A Robert Frank, Chiesa di San Giovanni Battista, Mogno, 1996. Image: Hubertus Adam and Elena Koosovskaja S AM (ed.), Building Images: Photography Focusing on Swiss Architecture, Basel, 2013

At the time, 1995, Robert Frank has distanced himself from «The Americans». He is an artist marked by dramatic personal experiences, who chose to retreat to an isolated house on the shores of a bay in Nova Scotia. His work becomes intimate, so intense that it seems hermetic and more distant. In 1979, he wrote: «These are less pure photographs, they are moments in my life – in which I try to express something about myself at that particular time and place. I wish that they would be happier.»

It could be said that this image is obtuse, in the sense bestowed upon this word by Roland Barthes. The obtuse, unlike the obvious, cannot be described using words, it sits outside language: it is pure image. Words are rendered impotent when faced with the obtuse. We find ourselves before an image that tells a story that cannot be told, it must be seen.

«In the classical and romantic tradition of Europe, love was supposed to be kindled by beauty; perhaps moral chemistry may be able to reverse this operation, and in the future and in America it may breed beauty out of love.» (1)

Mario Botta keeps the contact sheets of photographs taken by Robert Frank from the day they spent together in Ticino. Following a talk I had with him a few years ago about that meeting, he kindly sent me the scan of the photograph I wrote about. For this I deeply thank him.