

## [ INSIDE PHOTOGRAPHY ]

## SOME REMARKS ON IRVING PENN'S STILL LIFES

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This discussion of Irving Penn's still life photography will be one from an aesthetic point of view. Their formal characteristics will be elicited and interpreted, independent of whether the photos were made for commercial use or independently. Interpreting an image of an object requires two linguistic operations: its naming and description. Only after saying what is represented is it possible to relate it to a particular pictorial tradition and only after establishing which objects are accentuated through the composition can there be grounds for assuming that its author sought to make a certain symbolic statement through these objects. Thus, before the viewer calls on his background knowledge, he must draw from the image formal clues to channel that knowledge. To this extent, the meaning of an image cannot be separated from its form. Form is not simply a container into which meaning is poured; rather, it indicates the path to be followed to arrive at the meaning.

It should be remembered that pictorial composition also houses a potential which does not draw on pictorial tradition; that is, the metaphorical quality of an image, its evocative and poetic power.<sup>1</sup> In order to elucidate this point, we will examine more closely one of Penn's works. *Two Liqueur Glasses* (cat. p. 50), from 1951, presents a love story, told as simply as it is subtly. We see an ashtray at the edge of a marble table with cigarettes in it, and behind it two liqueur glasses, almost monumental in appearance. As the still life is in the form of an isosceles triangle, the impression arises that we perceive the glasses subconsciously. Moreover, because Penn has the white marble table disappear into the background and the viewer cannot see where the table ends, the two glasses tower to an undefined height. These few objects, tightly arranged, create an atmosphere of intimacy – Penn manages to transform the objects into individuals. The two glasses become symbols defining a particular situation. Thus the image relates the story of a rendezvous through clichés. Like a pair of lovers, the two glasses stand close together. Indeed, seen from the viewers standpoint, the two merge, as if they were one glass with two stems. Further details from the image characterize the two people not seen: *She* has only sipped from her glass, while *he* has almost finished his. Only one match was used to light the two cigarettes. The woman used a cigarette holder for hers. In the intensity of the conversation, the two cigarettes burned to an end without being stubbed out. A further element in the staging is a contrast of complements. The fuller glass contains red liqueur, the less full one green – colors which define the image as a whole. Red symbolizes lipstick, also found on the cigarette holder; green defines the entire foreground of the image through the green tone of the shadow.

From the conceptual point of view, this photo seems to have been pioneering for many others, as Penn here uses a staging which he would later apply on numerous occasions: an anthropomorphism of objects. For this, he uses the rhetorical tool of the metaphor. A metaphor is a shortened simile the theme of which is the similar in the dissimilar. In Penn's image, the abstract concept of love is made tangible for the viewer. In the example under discussion, this means that the analogy of 'pair' is referenced through the composition with two liqueur glasses. The two glasses being so close together

1 Roland Barthes: »Rhetorik des Bildes«, in: R. Barthes: *Der entgegenkommende und der stumpfe Sinn. Kritische Essays III*. Frankfurt am Main 1990, p. 28 - 46.

2 »What I yearn for in criticism of photography is a tactile reaction, something more visual, rather than just concepts. The contemporary critics speak around the outside of photography; they speak of it as a social document, all

er then leads to a more precise idea of a ›pair of lovers‹. Finally, the ashtray and table bring to mind the situation ›rendezvous‹. Such conclusions need not be reached in the same order as here, as the contexts of associations are not related linearly, but the optical facts provide logical references beyond themselves and direct our associations. An image's evocative power can, like speech, be described as poetic. It is a precondition for our being able to see more in good photography than simply the objects portrayed. Factual or poetic, whatever the ambience and mood recognized, it is not due to the object as such, but is rather the consequence of a formal arrangement. The question is the extent to which an interpretation succeeds in taking this into consideration, as it is all too easy to lose sight of this elementary point. Penn quite clearly stated his opinion on this point when demanding more sensitive art critiques: Photography should not be used to provide space for the latest art theory, but must show »what is sitting there in front of us.«<sup>2</sup> Unlike many other works dealing with Penn, I do not intend to furnish another overview, but instead to provide exemplary individual analyses of selected works. This will not be done chronologically, although this does not imply that chronology is irrelevant. However, given the current state of research, it seems more worthwhile to approach individual works.

Most of the works discussed in the following section are *editorial photographs* made for *Vogue*. Their place and context is the printed page, and not the photographic print. In a very instructive essay, Alexander Liberman, a former art director at *Vogue* wrote of his work together with Penn and described the efforts required in putting out a fashion magazine. A good photographer, he wrote, would want to have his work published in magazines because it was only there that they could gain the recognition they desired. Indeed, the photographer was the real beneficiary of the »drama of reproduction«; he profited from the tensions created by unusual layouts and interesting typography. Only a variety of photos and texts on a double page spread would create a stimulating whole, a magazine which »jumped out at« the reader.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Liberman also points out that looking at and through a fashion magazine requires a certain dramaturgy. The art director takes on the role of a compère; he needs to visually balance the individual photos and ensure that each group of images is clearly distinguishable from neighboring ones. If we take his words seriously, this then implies that a photo gains its identity not only through itself, but also vis-à-vis its neighbors – an important point, suggesting that fashion magazines can be looked at in different ways. Every magazine exists within the parameters of its visual and text contributions. Apart from reading, it is equally possible to leaf through a magazine – reading the pictures, as it were. Unlike a literary text, a magazine permits various speeds of absorption. These possibilities of more accelerated or slower absorption reflect a contemporary world in which people are constantly faced with demands on their time.

If you want to get a quick overview of a magazine or have little time, you quickly flip through the pages – and in doing so, only full page or two page spreads will really stand out. Thus a photo will be the reason to rest on one page and perhaps even to read

kinds of things except what is sitting there in front of us. For me, photography is nothing new. The machine is new, but photography is just the present stage of man's visual history. What I yearn for as a photographer is someone who will connect the work of photographers to that of sculptors and painters of the past. I don't think we get this from contemporary criticism.« Irving Penn, in: *Photography within the Humanities*, ed. by Eugenia Parry Janis and Wendy MacNeil, Wellesley, Massachusetts, p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Liberman: »Ein Mann der amerikanischen Moderne«, in: *Passage. Ein Lebenswerk*, ed. by Irving Penn together with Alexandra Arrowsmith and Nicola Majocchi, Munich etc. p. 5–9, here p. 6.

the related article. For this, however, it has to lead into the article and to be of high quality. Such a photo gains a high level of autonomy.

Penn's *editorial photographs* arose from editorial decisions. They were made in close cooperation with the Art Director in order to emphasize important textual contributions and provide the magazine with a high visual profile. In *Vogue*, his still lifes enjoin the reader to look more closely. They are full page spreads used to introduce a subject. They provide an optical introduction to the article, and indeed can be a sort of quintessence of the story.<sup>4</sup> Penn's photographs do not illustrate, containing instead their own visual messages: They can be understood without the text they are followed by.

For my interpretation of the *Liqueur Glasses* I should point out, retrospectively, that the photo was placed in front of an article presenting seventy recipes. The full page photo has no direct relation to the article. The photo's caption. »Liqueur Glasses: study by *Vogue's* photographer, Irving Penn« is placed directly under the image and not on the text page opposite. Text and image are not bound together: instead the photo is clearly given a certain autonomy – one also expressed in the word *Study*.

Penn's still lifes are images in a classical sense – in spite of the modern environment of a fashion magazine – which cry out to be taken individually. The American photographer expressed a range of opinions on this point. Early on, he emphasized photography's modernity<sup>5</sup> and defined the printed page as the supreme aim of the photographer – that is, he gave preference to the form of dissemination. Later he returned to the tradition of painting and sculpture.<sup>6</sup> In *Photography with the Humanities*, published by Eugenia Parry Janis and Wendy MacNeil, he wrote: »As a photographer, the realism of the real world is something almost unbearable to me. There's too much accidental painfulness in it. [...] The photographic process for me is primarily simplification and elimination. It's that simplification that I need in a picture that really relates more to old painting and old sculpture.«<sup>7</sup> For the following interpretations this means doing justice to what is visible in the image through a close reading.

#### PENN'S POETRY OF IMAGE METAPHOR

The conception of the image as a metaphor can also be found in his early work *Salad Ingredients* ( cat. p.46) from 1947. By breaking down a salad dressing into its component parts in front of our eyes, a form of definition occurs. Lettuce, vinegar and oil, lemon, garlic, herbs, sea salt and a few black peppercorns are spread across a marble platter which extends beyond the photograph. In his mind, the viewer can put together the ingredients shown. The formal point of the image is, however, that the light background soon becomes a diffuse space in which the objects seem to float. Thus an upward movement is placed in the image: An intentional diagonal line leads from the spoon at an angle to the salad. This upward movement is also underlined by the colors. The dark yellow of the lemon becomes ever lighter and brighter as it passes through the oil to the bright heart of the lettuce. In the simplest manner imaginable, the whole-

4 From a structural/temporal point of view, *editorial photographs* are comparable with pre-credits in films, which have two readings: On the one hand, they introduce the film and establish a mood in order to make us more sensitive to certain motifs. On the other hand, they summarize the salient points of the film, something which we, however, only understand at the end.

5 »Modern photography is probably nothing more than the work of a good and creative modern photographer. [...] It is not a style. The modern photographer is greatly respectful of the fact that an issue of *Life* will be read by more than 24 million people. He is well aware that never before in the history of mankind did anyone working

someness of this dish is presented and lightness, as an abstract quality, is transformed into a visible metaphor.

However, what is the context of Penn's photo in the magazine? His *editorial photograph* serves as an introduction to the article »Essentials – to taste« by Sheila Hibben in the *Vogue* number 77 from 1948. The photo was published as a full page spread. Printed in capital letters on the text page opposite is »Essentials of a Salad« followed by a brief description of the salad ingredients shown, together with an ironic remark on how they can be varied to allow for a »chance for self-expression«. Although Hibben's article does not really deal with the photo, she does use it in the introduction when she writes: »You will not, of course, catch the editors of *Vogue* in any tasteless moralizing about the handsome still-life on the opposite page. I, on the other hand, perhaps with too little of their admirable restraint, can not forebear using the classic simplicity of the photograph to preach a little sermon on the large and general dilemma in which housewives find themselves today.« Hibben then goes on to contrast the advantages and disadvantages of various philosophies of cooking and Penn's photograph no longer plays a role. In other words, even if the author borrowed the photograph's praise of simplicity in her introduction, the image and the text are autonomous, juxtaposed. The formal quality of the photograph, which creates space from a surface, remains untouched by the text. The image thus gains its own cognitive function which can in no way be substituted linguistically.

Penn's *Italian Still Life* from 1981 makes its point in an equally elementary manner. In it three objects are brought together in a composition. A tomato and a green olive are lying on a mozzarella. On the cheese we can see the lines left by the cheese-cloth. The different surfaces of the tomato and the olive reflect the light. Almost the entire lower half of the image is filled by the mozzarella, reflected on a smooth surface which cannot be readily defined. Here too, Penn reduced the background in order to increase the presence of the object. In *editorial photography*, this gives the impression that the object is placed directly on the magazine page and the object presented seems more monumental than it really is. The defining impression in *Italian Still Life* is one of the simplicity of composition. By repeating round forms and reducing the range of colors, Penn's image gains an abstract quality. Simplicity in the sense of extreme reduction is its defining quality. However, the objects presented are also metaphors. Olives and tomatoes refer, metonymically, to the Mediterranean culinary culture. At a figurative level, that is metaphorically, the colors of the objects are a reference to those of the Italian flag and thus represent Italianità.

Even more laconic is his work *Croissant* from 1982. It shows only a croissant, the end of which points towards the viewer. On the pastry we can see darker surface on which egg white had been spread. Many small crumbs are lying around the croissant, as if this pastry wanted to reach out in all directions simultaneously. A sense of perspective is created through the sharply focussed crumbs in the foreground and the blurred ones in the background. Here it is noticeable that the contour of the croissant is quite distinct

in the visual media have such a broad public. [...] Whatever medium he chooses, for modern photographers the aim of his efforts is the printed page, not photographic prints. The technical limits of his medium are not the limits of light-sensitive materials, but the limits of reproductive technology. [...] Modern photographers do not see photography as an art form nor their photos as works of art. But this medium has just as many artists as any other. Art in modern photography is more the side effect of a serious and useful work, done with loving care.«

This early statement is quoted, in German, in Wolfgang Kemp: *Theorie der Fotografie*, 3 Vols., Munich 1983, here Vol. 3, p. 70 – 71.

from the background, giving it a spatial presence and monumentality. This croissant is bursting with self-confidence, something underlined by its closed circular form. The croissant is certainly vivid, supporting the related text on the success of the croissant in the United States.

The image *Cracked Egg* from 1958, made as an advertising photo, also speaks of the magic of an object. In fact, the photo does not show a broken egg, but rather one in the process of breaking. It seems as if the egg itself was trying to break out of its shell. The egg white flows from a broad crack. Slowly but surely, its outer form is being destroyed by an inner force. Its outer form is retained to demonstrate to us the effort required to break an egg and to reveal that, as thin as its walls are, an egg is amazingly stable. Penn succeeds in capturing the sense of process in the event. The crack in the eggshell is broader below than above, showing that the break occurred from bottom to top and fine cracks in the shell indicate that the explosion of energy taking place here has not yet run its course. Even though we know that the yolk is inside, the image allows the viewer a certain room for association – its orange-yellow color is so bright that we are reminded of the sun. A primary phenomenon is being staged here. The egg seems illuminated from inside. Penn uses the light to dramatize the event. It is as if an aureole of light surrounds the egg. Although photographing a broken egg, he did not take its almost proverbial fragility as his subject, presenting instead the egg as elementary force and symbol of life. The light glistens in the flowing egg white, showing us how full of energy the substance is. What we are seeing here is not an accident but a natural phenomenon.

His *Theater Accident* (cat. p.45) from 1947 is an especially interesting work. On the ground we recognize the contents of a lady's handbag, which indicate that its owner is attending an opera. The objects lie, together with the golden bag, next to the black patent-leather shoe of her companion. Penn's color photo is defined by olive, brown and golden tones, which contrast with the black. Only the rose colored pills provide a highlight. Both muted colors and top view accent the flat, graphic impression: Diagonal lines and curves define the composition. The elegant shoe itself suggest a special occasion. But now the chaos of a woman's handbag is pitilessly presented to public view. Cigarette case, lighter and holder, a filterless cigarette broken in two, glasses, earring, hairpin, opera glasses, keys, pencil and pills. To this extent, this a staging of disorder. It seems as if we are looking down upon it, that we have just discovered the accident. Moreover, the photo plays with our curiosity. What are the objects in the handbag and what do they say about their owner? The photo stages a prying glance. While the objects presented seem mundane, they recall Penn's earlier surrealist work. His many photos of street signs, shop windows, shoemaker's shops and tattoo studios from the late 1930's were for him déjà-vu events. It seems we have seen these images before, that we are not describing an individual visual experience, but a collective one.

In Penn's surrealist phase in the late 30's and 40's he was interested in showing that seeing is not an objective event in which a subject has absolute control over an

6 On the conflict between printed page and photographic print see Colin Westerbeck: »Ein Mann mit vielen Interessen«, in: *Irving Penn. Eine Retrospektive*, ed. by Colin Westerbeck, Exhibition Catalogue Deichtorhallen Hamburg, Munich 1997, p. 9 - 21, here p. 16.

7 Penn: *Photography within the Humanities*, p. 135.

object, but that various means of seeing and being seen exist. Perhaps no other work makes this so clear as the photo *Optician's Shop Window* from 1939. The subject of the image gazing back at the viewer belongs to the leitmotifs of surrealist art.<sup>8</sup> It calls into question the sovereignty of the thinking subject, in as far as the viewer feels caught, if not commanded, by the eyes staring back at him. At first we perceive the objects in the image: the shop window, the stand and the model glasses with the staring eyes. Then the view moves from the objects and remains fixed on the eyes, their gaze seemingly ever more penetrating. Even if we turn away from them, we feel their stare, never blinking, fixed on us.

Penn provides another surrealist staging in his photograph of the dirty surface of a Venetian canal. In 1944 he arrived in Italy with a volunteer ambulance unit and was in Venice at the end of the war. While some of the objects in the photo are recognizable – a dead fish, the cork of a wine-bottle and an onion – very quickly we switch to a way of reading which favors its abstract quality, allowing its interpretation as an abstract structure. It is difficult to decide how to gloss this image. Is this one which appeared naturally, a sort of *écriture automatique*? Certainly the photo suggests an abstract image. Brighter spots and short lines are evenly distributed over its dark surface – it is, in fact, an allover structure; i.e. the image could continue as is beyond its borders and any detail of its structure is an arbitrary cut. The temptation arises to treat this as an anticipation of Penn's later still lifes of cigarette butts and litter. It is difficult to judge whether there was a continued interest in the staging of the ugly and the lowly, but there does not seem to be, of necessity, a connection. And why, indeed, do early works always need to be seen as precursors of later ones: as if we developed along fixed lines? His view of the canal reveal, above all, an attempt to stage a collective visual experience, to show what we would see if we looked in that direction. The image creates a sense of confusion, turning reality into an image, an unreadable cipher.

#### THE PLAY OF THINGS – MULTIPLE READINGS

Our interpretation of some of Penn's *editorial photographs* has shown that his works often tell a story. Usually an abstract term or a special insight is written into them. The photographer's desire to purify his message, to formulate as exactly as possible, leads to an elegant pictorial language. However, how complex and deep can an *editorial photograph* possibly be? In the following, one work will be more extensively analyzed in order to reveal how many possible readings it offers the viewer. That formal interpretation of Penn's still lifes can be extremely complex is demonstrated by *After Dinner Games* from 1947. In this color photograph, a few objects illustrate a scene full of allusions. Grouped around a coffee cup are playing cards, dice, chips and a domino, items seemingly arranged by chance and, at the same time, staged. A card is lying on the edge of the saucer, on it a yellow game-piece. To the left we can see a burnt-out match and cigarette ash. An ace of hearts is standing between the cup and liqueur glass. A domino is bal-

<sup>8</sup> Penn himself underlined the influence of such artists as A.M. Cassandre, Man Ray and Hoyningen-Huene, to whom he was introduced by his teacher Alexey Brodovitch. If only for reasons of cinephilia, it should be mentioned that Ingmar Bergman, whom Penn photographed in Stockholm in 1964, opened a dream sequence in his film *Wild Strawberries* with the leading actor looking at an optician's sign with eyes painted on.

anced on the glass and a die is lying on the saucer like an oversized sugar cube. To the right we recognize a black knight. Further objects, all relating to games, are placed around the cup.

Only slowly does it become apparent how intentional the photo arrangement is. A horizontal and vertical axis has been placed into the composition, structuring the apparent confusion. Moreover, the photo as a whole has the form of a rhombus, i.e. all the objects are placed either inside or outside this ideal geometric form. For the viewer this creates a delicate balance as the diagonals lend a dynamic to the still life, while the above-mentioned center axes stabilize the composition. Color highlights enliven the composition. Thus, for example the red chips and red game pieces on the saucer correspond, as do the color of the liqueur and the red of the ace of hearts. The black eyes of the domino match those of the die in the bottom right of the photo. The yellow chip in the foreground is the sole highlight which has no equivalent. Only now does it become clear the care Penn put in to constructing a composition which at first appeared to be quite accidental.

Space and surface provide a tension as from bottom to top there is a shift from three-dimensional space to a two-dimensional plane. If we examine the respective ordering of objects, we discover that those in the lower half are staged in space, with those in the upper half appearing as a surface. While the playing card below seems to measure out the space between the coffee cup and the edge of the image, the cards in the upper half are placed on a plane. This is equally true of the die bottom right and the domino on the glass. In this transition from three-dimensionality to two-dimensionality, pictorial illusion itself becomes the subject. The lower half shows the illusionary space of a photo and the upper half its presentation surface. It would seem that Irving Penn sought to contradict a naive prejudice which only requires spatial illusion of photography. His photographed still lifes can be clearly placed in an art history tradition in which the form of still life takes on the task of reflection on the medium. On the one hand, this offers the chance of contemplating on the character of pictorial illusion; on the other hand it is a form of contemplative image, a reflection on human life.

It should again be underlined how strong the initial impression of apparent accident is, which would speak against a deeper interpretation. However, uniting all of the games is their expressing the duality of human life. Especially the fact that people play against each other leads us to the two poles of human existence, the I and the We. Equally, the various games reflect different strategies for mastering life. Chess, as the epitome of strategy, bears witness to the desire to master life intellectually, while card and dice games refer rather to risk and chance. Common to all games is, moreover, an attempt to thwart the opponent's plans and, in order to do so, a need to think ahead. Even individual objects can be interpreted. Thus the domino can be read as a symbol of a search for the fitting, the equivalent. The chip in the foreground can be seen as representing the investment to be risked in life. Penn's still life concentrates these symbols, transforming the still life into an image for reflection or an allegory. The photo subtly

points towards the questions of life – those of the luck necessary to survive in life as in a game, and those of the risks one is willing to take.

### PENN'S STILL LIFES IN ART HISTORY TRADITION

At no other time and in no other place were so many still lifes painted as in Holland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Many painters were specialized in one special form of still life – be it flower or hunt still lifes or magnificence or vanitas motifs. Many of the compositional measures which Penn employs for his photos can be placed firmly within this tradition. Here we must mention, on the one hand, close-ups – when a number of objects are ordered parallel to the edge of the image from the viewers point of view – and on the other the use of a diffuse surrounding, which serves to amplify the illustration, as the object appears more spatial. In Dutch still lifes, as in many of Penn's images, the objects create space, radically strengthening the illusion.

Let us examine *Still Life with Watermelon* (cat. p.42) from 1947 with reference to art history traditions. Although we know that the objects are staggered one after the other in space, they appear to be on top of one another. In the foreground we recognize a napkin, which leads into the image from bottom right and to its right the rest of a baguette, as well as a mushroom, a cherry and a melon seed. In the center is a large piece of watermelon. Above it is a fruit bowl with grapes and a lemon, which has a fly on it. The image shows us a moment just after a meal, as indicated by the remains of the baguette.

Once again, the defining formal impression arises in the provision of spatial and surface elements in the image. The piece of watermelon has been shot so that it appears as a pure plane. Only the napkin leads diagonally into the image from the bottom left, thus opening up the depth. The ripe fruit suggest dessert. The presence of the fly heralds, in some respects, the state of decay. For those who know still lifes well, this is a familiar motif, suggesting the context of illusion. Painters often painted flies in their works which were to appear as they had landed on the painting and could be shoed away. Already with this discretely staged motif, Penn is giving a little nod to the viewer. Furthermore, the leaves standing out on the left and right of the fruit bowl, re-localizing the fruit on the surface, recall Caravaggio's famous still life from 1596, to be found in Milan, which is quoted by Penn – as if it was Caravaggio's still life and not the fruit which, as a sensual pleasure, provided the crowning conclusion to the meal.

Penn's still life from 1976, made as an advertising photo for *Vivitar*, seems not to be just a play on art history motifs, but also a quotation of a form of presentation. On a relatively limited surface we see flora and fauna – fruits and animals directly next to one another. The light shines at an angle from above onto the objects, creating dark slanted shadows which tell us about the position of the light but also about the surface quality of the individual objects. While, the plum, egg, blackberry, cherry, strawberry and mirabelle reflect the light from their smooth surfaces, it is absorbed by the mushroom,

III.1

Caravaggio, *Basket of Fruits*, c. 1596, in: *L'opera completa del Caravaggio*, ed. by Renato Guttuso, Mailand<sup>2</sup>, 1968, plate XVI-XVII.



almond, raspberry, feather and moth. In my view, Penn's work is a reference to a famous series of still lifes by Georg Hoefnagel: the so-called *Archetypa* published by his son Jacob as copper engravings at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This could also explain why Penn decided against color photography in preference for black and white. As Christian Klenn recounts, in Hoefnagel's works there are flowering twigs, fruit, insects and other small animals carefully arranged next to one another. Shadows provide a decisive physical reality to objects quite individual in their position and deformation, but do not create a general spatial sense.<sup>9</sup> Hoefnagel's artworks speak of death and resurrection, interpreting objects against a Christian background. This can only be applied to Penn to the extent that development and passing are subjects in general, as both chicken eggs and feathers, as well as seeds and fruits suggest different phases in the life of a being.

It is not rare for Penn's still lifes to contain ironic elements, such as the *Still Life with Mouse* from 1947 shows.<sup>10</sup> At first view, the photo presents an almost old-master composition. Various objects are placed in the corner of a room, recalling a classic kitchen still life from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In a basket we see fruit, on the table next to it there is a loaf of bread, garlic and a pitcher, as well as a cauliflower and a pot, the handle of which extends out well beyond the table. Various sausages are hanging on the wall as well as a large piece of meat, a pheasant and a cleaver. In a window niche, hardly visible in the brightly lit wall, hangs a metal basket with chicken eggs. Penn placed the objects in the corner in a way so that they form a diagonal line rising rapidly from the lower right to the upper left. This is all the more interesting as still lifes are normally presented in the framework of compositions paralleling the image. This allows a better presentation of the objects in their spatial order. Penn ignores this possibility, composing his still life as a succession of objects, consciously indifferent to space. It is very difficult to judge the distance between individual objects on the table or the wall. In *Still Life with Mouse* every object in the total composition is subordinated to the rapidly rising movement.

Only upon closer examination do we notice the use of various sources of light, as the room initially appears evenly lit. However, behind the pitcher and the loaf of bread on the table there is a source of light, highlighting the silhouette of these two objects. A spot shines on the cleaver to the right. The strongest lighting effect, however, comes from the window in the wall. From here an evenly bright light spreads through the room. With this, Penn has been able to achieve a lively effect. Indeed, the loaf of bread and the pitcher seem almost to have a corona. Furthermore, he allows himself a little joke – on the floor two guests have entered into the room, in order to enjoy the opulent meal in the pantry. In the right foreground we can see a mouse next to the fruit basket eating something which has fallen from the table, and in front of the left leg of the table a bird is perched in front of some crumbs. To ensure that we do not overlook the animals, Penn placed a source of light here, too, highlighting the rear half of the bird's body. Once the viewer has discovered the bird, he continually looks to it and his view is distracted from the other objects – unlike a conventional still life, which constantly invites us to enjoy

### III.2

Jacob after Georg Hoefnagel, *Archetypa studiae patris*, 1592, in: *Stilleben in Europa*, exhibition catalogue, Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte Münster, Münster 1979, p. 175.

9 Christian Klenn: »Weltdeutung – Allegorien und Symbole in Stilleben«, in: *Stilleben in Europa*, Exhibition Catalogue Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte Münster, Münster 1979, p. 140-216, here p. 174.

10 The photo exists in different versions. It is printed with the title, *Country Kitchen* in the catalogue brought out by Alexander Liberman – *The Art And Technique Of Colour Photography* from 1951. Unlike the print mentioned above, there is a young woman sitting on the other side of the table kneading dough.

the compositional harmony of the image. In this glancing back and forth we discover that our view for something alive or seemingly alive is different from that for pitchers, sausages or hunting trophies. This psychological ›trick‹ was already known among the still life painters of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, who put in, more or less hidden, flies, beetles and butterflies on fruit rinds, bread and bouquets of flowers. Penn, however, uses this trick as an ironical comment on old master gestures of composition.

Penn's work *Red Apples* from 1985 is not only ironic, but indeed paradoxical: Its autumn range of colors – red, yellow and brown tones – is due to the fact that the apples have begun to rot. Lying close together, they form a rectangle. The tension between the geometric framework and the natural process of decay is emphasized by the photographer. Nature itself becomes a ›creator‹ in producing this arrangement of colors. Simply through the use of a rectangle, Penn suggests to us a comparison with a panel, as the rectangle corresponds to our cliché of an image. Penn's image is simultaneously concrete and abstract – concrete to the extent that it shows a certain number of apples and abstract to the extent that relatively quickly we begin to perceive the harmony of colors – detached from the rotting apples – as the concrete message is redundant. Once again, we are dealing with an allover. Its point is Penn's showing us decay as a flourishing of colors – as if transitoriness and beauty need not necessarily be understood as contrasts.

A separate group within Penn's body of work are still lifes of flowers. The artist shows the flowers neither in their natural surroundings nor intentionally arranged. Quite the contrary, Penn captures them standing alone, which leads to a special effect to the extent that we can no longer estimate their size. The flowers in his still lifes do not seem to be plants, but instead appear arranged and artificial. One of these flower images from 1970 shows a rose in full bloom.<sup>11</sup> It has reached the peak of its beauty, the outer edges of its petals are beginning to curl and those at the back have already begun to wilt. This, however, allows its delicate pinks to develop their full potential of nuances of color. The edges of its petals are almost translucent and whitish, turning to brownish and yellow tones on those at the back. Part of the beauty of a rose is its wilting and its passing. In this image, the rose becomes the symbol of absolute beauty and transitoriness in one. A photo from 1968 showing a *Lavender Glory Poppy* is a good example of Penn's monumentalization of flowers. We see the flower rising above its stem: The petals' glitter and form recall pleated silk. At the same time, this ›Flower-Dress‹ appears translucent, and its material especially delicate. For his other works, as well, Penn uses a similar staging technique. When Penn shows wilting poppies in another photo, its last remaining petals glitter in pink and yellow tones and seem like a scarf blowing in the wind. Once again, the petals recall the luxurious materials of a woman's evening gown.

The photo *Ginkgo Leaves*, from 1990 can be seen as an epitome of those of Penn's still lifes which focus on a single object. It shows a male and female Ginkgo leaf arranged in parallel and pointing in different directions. One of the leaves is green-blue, the other red-yellow. The contrast of color indicates their difference – one is green and full of life, the other yellow and dying. The upward movement of the one and the downward

<sup>11</sup> *Passage*, p. 186.

movement of the other also indicate, metaphorically, life and death. In showing the same thing in different states, the composition stages the enigma of life, which ranges between the becoming and the passing. It was not by chance that Penn selected Ginkgo leaves. The split leaves of this tree are a metaphor for the contrasts arising from united origins with a single root. The Ginkgo leaf is a real allegory for the unity of contrasts of life and death, becoming and passing. In its laconic tone, it is a commentary on life which cannot be surpassed.

#### THE CLINIQUE FAMILY

Most of the interpretations to this point dealt with works which arose as *editorial photographs* and which demonstrate Penn's editorial work. In the following, some examples of Penn's work as advertising photographer, his *advertising photographs* for *Clinique* will be dealt with.<sup>12</sup> Since 1967, when *Estee Lauder* introduced the brand *Clinique* onto the market, Penn has been creating advertising photos for the cosmetic market. For more than thirty years, he has been responsible for the product image. In a short essay, Kristina Feliciano underlines the elegant and direct pictorial language of his photography.<sup>13</sup> She points out that it was Penn's task to give the product an identity. However, the *Clinique* photos do not contain any aesthetic strategies that cannot be found in his earlier work. As we will see, in these works too, the rhetorical tool of the metaphor and the anthropomorphizing of objects are central to Penn's compositions.

For the *Clinique* product tubes, bottles and jars, the company drew on basic three-dimensional geometric forms, almost always uniform in color. The *Clinique* logo is printed in a sober, modern typeface and the letters are generally silver, causing them to glitter as they reflect the light. Naturally, this opens up interesting possibilities for photographic work. One can already see in the «C» of the *Clinique* logo the basic concept of formal rigor and structural reduction. Unlike in most other advertising work, this fundamentally aesthetic nature results in Penn not having to introduce foreign objects in his composition of the *Clinique* images. The product range already has a look which can be crystallized and presented.<sup>14</sup> Penn's *Clinique* photos may be seen as variations on a theme, purity and beauty as essentials are their consistent message. To this extent, the real problem of composition is not to find new metaphors for purity, but to extract secondary characteristics and virtues from this basic ideal.

What, for example, could an image for freshness and relaxation look like? Let us look at an advertising photo (cat. p.26) showing a bar of soap standing vertically under a stream of water, suggesting a person taking a shower. Water drops are flying through the air, and against the dark background, we can easily see the flying, glittering drops. A similar concept appears in a photo (cat. p.32) advertising a moisturizer. It is being uplifted by a jet of water and seems to be floating on its vertex. The cover of the jar has just opened, allowing us to see the pink cream inside. Penn creates an analogy between the fresh water and the cream, the surface of which is lightly wavy. Once again, the range of

12 Roland Barthes: »Der Werbespot«, in: R. Barthes: *Das semiologische Abenteuer*. Frankfurt am Main 1988, p. 181-186.

13 Kristina Feliciano: »Penn. And The Ultimate Product Shot«, in: *Photo District News*. The International Publication for the Professional Photographer, November 2000, p. 66-69.

association is very precise. We are directed to equate the refreshing effect of the water and the cream – thus underlining the lightness and delicacy of the latter. Both photos stage the moment. With the naked eye it would be impossible to see this fraction of a second. Employed here is not, however, the aesthetic of the snapshot – rather we are watching a film in slow motion. Thus the moment of freshness seems to stretch to eternity.

III.3

Advertisement for *Clinique Laboratories*, New York, 1996

Penn's long-term involvement with *Clinique* even allows him to quote himself – established motifs can appear in other contexts. Thus, for example, we can find the soap under the shower in another advertisement showing three *Clinique* products simultaneously. Next to the soap are cleansing cream and moisturizer. The products are organized in a pyramid so that they can be seen to belong together. Just as all three objects are part of an upward and downward movement, they are also part of the same cleansing process, beginning with washing with soap, then cleansing with the lotion and finally treatment with the moisturizer. Moreover, the flowing water, the unscrewed cap and the cotton-wool pad present both the activity of the objects and their use by the readers of the ad.

III.4

Advertisement for *Clinique Laboratories*, New York, 1993

Finally I would like to discuss an ad which – compared with the works presented above that demonstrate Penn's tendency towards the essential – appears atypical. On a set of shelves, together with other things of every-day use, there are various articles from the *Clinique* range. The pastel green tubes and plastic bottles, standing and lying, lend the order of the objects a relaxed rhythm. All the objects shown here illustrate the life of a woman. A pair of swimming glasses and a yellow tennis ball, as well as sunglasses, a towel and bar of soap tell of her sportive activities. The sunglasses suggest she enjoys outdoor life. The swimming glasses and sunglasses correspond, as do the tennis ball and the bar of soap, which share a light yellow color. The tennis ball and the sunglasses also point to its being summer – the cosmetic products are all sun screens of varying strengths. Given the idea of protection, the interpretation of some of the objects in this photo changes. Like the First Aid cream, the liquid in the two brown bottles could also be medications. All of these things protect from the damaging effects of water and sun.

The objects on the two shelves can also be related temporally, thus providing information about the woman's daily routine. Read from top left to bottom right the report of the ›morning sports‹, swimming and tennis in the morning followed by her morning toilet – soap, towel, brush and comb – and then departure, where driving in the summer's sun requires sunglasses. In any case, it seems to be a pleasant life with its fluid transition from social representation to private pleasure, things which generally cannot be kept apart.

In a nutshell, the reduced, brief pictorial language of the *Clinique* advertising corresponds to the modern profile of the product. Each photo presents secondary virtues or characteristics which reflect the ideas of a modern woman in western industrial society. She is as fashionable as she is sportive and elegant. Beauty in the *Clinique* ads is not a superficial quality in the sense of layers of makeup, but rather binds interior and exteri-

14 »The success of the campaign is rooted in how well matched Penn and *Clinique* are. *Clinique's* pitch was that it was makeup for women who wanted a clean, healthy look. As paradoxical as it sounds, they were cosmetics for those uninterested in artifice. Penn, never a fan of artifice, could not have chosen a more suitable advertising client.« Feliciano: »Penn. And the Ultimate Product Shot«, p. 66.

or. Wellness is the basis of this concept of beauty – it is a physical pleasure to be one with oneself and to feel at home in one's own body.

#### SERIES AND FORM

Colin Westerbeck has pointed out that the still lifes can be seen as the key to Penn's entire body of work. He refers especially to the three major series, done independently, which Penn worked on between 1972 and 1980: Cigarette butts, litter and photos as memento mori, which show one or more skulls. This series was supplemented in 1986 when Penn photographed animal skulls which he found in the Národní Muzéum in Prague. For the still lifes in general, Westerbeck favors the aspect of the memento mori and sees Penn's works as a »meditation on death«. <sup>15</sup> Moreover, they could be placed within the Baroque tradition of the vanitas still life. At first glance, this interpretation seems plausible. Death is all too clearly spoken of. However, is the memento mori the only possible interpretation?

In fact, Penn seems more modern: His photographs have the same relation to Baroque vanitas still lifes that a Samuel Beckett text has to a tragedy by Andreas Gryphius. Westerbeck overlooks Penn's sense of irony and the grotesque. Let us examine a few of the works from the series. The still lifes with skulls are all black and white photographs which, on the one hand, could relate to Penn's being especially interested in gray tones and black and white contrasts. On the other hand, it could be a conceptual decision in which colors are reserved for life and living motifs. In general it can be said that Penn's uncommissioned work is much more oriented towards the problem of abstraction. Even when objects are shown in these still lifes, nonetheless, the works are not oriented towards them.

The work *Poor Lovers* from 1979 shows two human skulls, placed one on top of the other like in a charnel-house. The lower jaw of the one skull fits exactly on the skull below it. They seem to have been created for one another – something which explains the ironic title.

Penn selected two skulls which differed in color and the state of the bone and teeth. The upper one seems darker, the bone porous and cracked, the top of the skull and a number of teeth are missing. The lower one is lighter in color, it is smoother and has a complete set of teeth. Their empty eye-sockets stare in opposite directions. The still life shows that skulls provide witness of a life lived, a certain type of death and not least a burial place. In Baroque painting, such a still life with skulls sought to call on the people to change their ways in view of omnipresent death. Behind these Baroque pictorial concepts is a humility of finite nature and a recognition of the frailness of everything earthly. However, the Baroque concept of vanitas need not necessarily provide an explanation for a photo with skulls from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Much more significant than the iconographic tradition seems to be for Penn the question of »poor« or »authentic« material. Moreover, skulls cannot be surpassed as representation of the grotesque. Although we

<sup>15</sup> Westerbeck: »Ein Mann mit vielen Interessen«, p.15.

know that the skulls are simply relics of human life, with their bared teeth and sardonic grins they seem to mock the human face. The skulls give rise to various reactions. They frighten people, make them melancholy or even raise a life. Without being art, they are intensively expressive!

A lack of art is also the leitmotif for the cigarette photos. Penn's series seem a conscious contrast with the sophisticated aesthetic associated with names such as *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*. The sight of dirty gray, crushed butts with bits of tobacco hanging out, the ash and crumpled paper initially recalls the 'poor' material in the *arte povera*. Penn's way of presenting the cigarettes removes them from any context. Neither are they burning in an ashtray, nor do they provide any clue to their owners. They are presented extremely soberly, almost with understatement – crumpled, burned out and crushed. However, the photograph enlarges them extremely, alienating their form and transforming them into individuals.<sup>16</sup> To us, they look like photos from a catalogue of mug shots! Taken together, the series appears to be an extended attempt to explore the relation between perception of form and individual appearance. The curious result of these works is that, although in commonly held ideas of the cigarette – not yet smoked – as *the* standard object, where individuality appears impossible, Penn shows that in fact the opposite is true. No cigarette butt resembles another. The photographer confronts us with their optical diversity and in doing so underlines the limits of linguistic expression. We speak quite easily of a cigarette butt but are forced to recognize the range of nuances which are shown here. In order to portray this difference between language and visual appearance, Penn needed to use the series as form. One can almost jokingly speak of a character study of cigarette butts. The images give the impression that there are strange worlds and forms to be discovered, ones which we can not even imagine.

Irving Penn called *Collapse* from 1990, a still life of steel blocks, with the title indicating their chaotic arrangement. They seem to have fallen from somewhere and have landed by chance, supporting each other in their extremely precarious positions. Depending on how the light strikes the surface, the steel appears lighter or darker, dull or shiny, lending the already turbulent composition an extra dynamic. In a fragile balance, standing on the tip or slope of another block, each one has found its center of gravity and an almost unbelievable resting place. They appear – hardly touching one another – to be about to fall again. The paradoxical point of the photo is in a chaos which is simultaneously static: Because everything is about to fall, they hold each other in place. Delicacy and stability are one and the same in this photo.

Like the images of skulls and cigarettes, these compositions also belong to the context of a series. For this series, Penn uses both steel and wooden blocks, but also leg bones, which he piles next to or on top of one another, as set pieces for motifs. His series is not without points of reference in art history – recall, for example, the paintings of Giorgio Morandi. Like the Italian artist, who painted still lifes throughout the various phases of his career, Penn also appears to want to plumb and to explore contrasts and the transition between objective and abstract appearance.

<sup>16</sup> On the very complex technical process for which Penn uses a banquet camera see Rosalind Krauss: »Eine Bemerkung über die Photographie und das Simulakrale«, in: R. Krauss, *Eine Theorie der Abstände*, Munich 1998, p. 210 – 223, here p. 221.

That which distinguishes the later still life series from his other work is not only his preference for 'poor' materials but also a general renunciation of compositional measures in relation to space. In the later series, Penn simply piles the objects on top of each other, the photo studio becomes a stage for objects: whatever remains standing is form! To a certain extent, he had already tested this in his applied photography as part of his work for *Clinique*. He lays cigarettes next to one another or dumps them into a pile. Chance as a principle of organization is acceptable. Nonetheless, none of these works lacks a vivid form. Moreover, it would seem that Penn wished to provide an artistic commentary on the problem of form with these series. Form has always been there, it is not invented.

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