

# Poor photos

Interview with Olaf Martens, 2004

## destroy themselves

**S a b i n e R e i h n h a r d** "Olaf Marten's photographs don't leave anyone cold" is how Curator Harald Kunde once described the often heated reaction to your works. While the some discover the highly artificial icon of the spirit of the times, others speak of a lack of artistic character of a commercial kitsch. Do you sometimes feel misunderstood?

**O l a f M a r t e n s** Commercial kitsch is art. Applied and commissioned art has always played a major role. Museums have the so-called "art" monopoly today. A lot of clean trash that nobody needs is collected there. Why do museums exist? To satisfy individuals or really to maintain certain objects for posterity? I hold this artistic dichotomy be-tween elite artification and the mundane for incorrect.

S . R . "That he came from The East is and remains his strength," writes the cosmopolitan, F.C. Gundlach, the preface to your first book and writes admiringly on: "... but certainly not his only." Klaus Honnef speaks of the vehement force of The East's break out, of the fresh air, which you have brought into photography. How do you see the relevance of your heritage yourself?

O . M . I think, this heritage is decisive for me. The wall was certainly also a picture wall. One didn't know of lots of trends at all, and so did not have to direct oneself to these. Es gab This concentrated media power didn't exist. I had more time to think about things. Thus, something of ones own could come about much more quietly and slowly. Curiously, ostensible quotations are being discovered by photographers in some of my photographs of twenty years ago, which I didn't discover until years later. This arrogance, of confusing originality and epigonism is partially grotesque.

S . R . What role does this specific climate in the GDR play for your earlier, partially documentary, but also hyperrealistic, erotic scenes with friends instead of models, through whom you have become well-known?

O . M . The crazy thing about it was certainly: in The East, this whole erotic market didn't even exist. There weren't any examples, no prices, no market. Intercourse, even sexual intercourse, was much less complicated than today. Officially, everything was completely primly regimented. In private, however, there were these great break-outs and adventures, simply to survive. The West, conversely, is however, much more prudish than it would appear at first glance. And this giant market only stands for the attempt to somehow supply substitute satisfaction for all the unrealized wants. I believe that one sees this in my photos.

S . R . In the style of the shooting stars of The East in the 1990s, you have arrived today in the international style and lifestyle world, of a flood of pictures, which only just teem with flawless beauty and sexy beauty. To what extent has the new market imbued your work as a photographer?

O . M . Naturally, it has become much more strenuous today, to make time and money available for ones own "free" projects. Many freedoms are only proscribed. There are new very different constraints to be survived. But this one piques me, too. The really big challenge for me is really to accomplish both: art and life, projects and commissioned works. With each order in the applied area, I can derive something for myself that I couldn't otherwise just have accomplished. Art comes from ability, from doing. This worldly content, this going to the limit without a glass bell, ivory tower or some kind of stipend, is for me, exactly the challenge I need.

S . R . Is there anything for you in this like shame limits and picture prohibitions, taboos or unwritten laws, which provoke you transgressions in your work?

O . M . The trick today consists more of being able to shield yourself from the whole heap, which circulates and select more rigorously with which pictures one has at all to do. Less is more. It's hard to do the simple things. There is a law that applies to this in the broad sense, only photograph the beautiful, pleasing, unimportant things. One would just like to sell: pictures, editions and so on. What I'm certainly proud of certainly, is that the men's magazines at my place are not on line yet, although I offer something of the popular packing pieces: breasts, bottoms, long legs and so forth. The media has an infallible nose for this, where they – and be it through minor deviations or self-ironic reflexes – are no longer served.

S . R . You are known for your perfectionism and sometimes also for a strong desire for pedantic

organization. Which role would you say yourself, plays the apparently accidental, unconscious, that pioneering in your pictures, if you view them yourself in retrospect?

O . M . The things that seem to happen without having been desired, are the important ones. The so-called creative ones, which want to control and plan everything, hinder a whole lot, in order to meet the customer's expectations a hundred percent in every respect. This way one obstructs new paths. It's always life, daily life, which is what is there, is seen, to which one is exposed, or exposes himself. Today, everyone is afraid of coincidences. Everyone wants a hundred percent security and control. The willing-ness to take risk is absent. Even in photography, the person is also the scale of meas-urement for everything. A certain cleanness as a panacea, or human escape into the perfectly illuminated and planned photography is boring to me.

S . R . With this visualization of sexual projection, machismo is often imputed. On the other hand your pictures often brim with strong women, who know how to lustfully domesticate their male counterparts. What interests you in the power play and play between man and woman?

O . M . For me sexuality is the strongest drive, which determines our behavior: eating, drinking or breathing. Birth, death, sexuality. These are the strong forces. Everything is formed there, comes about. That is the mainspring for everything that follows. To somehow make that point is decisive for me.

S . R . Maybe artists will have to be possessed to always be able to produce something new. How would you describe your own addiction, to always have to photograph?

O . M . Already as an extension of consciousness, as a drug. Simply the desire and the chance, to open up another world for itself, to penetrate into another world – a kind of world discovery desire – but also an escape from the world, which absolutely belongs to me: "We are such stuff, dreams are made of." This desire for the visual, was already there as a child. What I had experienced was just visual and was not to be treated in or commented on in any other way.

S . R . For which photos, views, pictures do you long?

O . M . Paintings, classic paintings, Italian mannerism, but also Caravaggio. Simply the concrete form, also materiality, the trades and ability, which surprises one again and again.

S . R . Which pictures would you like to destroy?

O . M . None at all. Poor pictures destroy themselves.