

## Press release

### Larry Sultan – *SF Society*

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Salutation.

Whoever approaches the pictures of Larry Sultan, who passed away well ahead of his time, enters a circle with the most varied references. In light of other pictures this is not fundamentally different. Yet in Sultan's photographic color pictures invisible lines run, which connect the pictures with things in the visible world and with other pictures from another era, often into a vacuum. And suddenly references open that are of a similar negative type. Sultan discards the widespread notion that photographic pictures should directly offer that which transpires in front of a camera, so to speak verbatim. What we see is not identical to that what is visible.

Even though the eight monumental pictures of his "SF Society" series show certain people; singly and in groups, they do have names, as the picture legends announce. This leads one to believe that one recognizes them, and feels on familiar ground. But we find out nothing about them, other than that they are presenting themselves in front of a camera. The sparsely written information at most only discloses that they are representatives of the SF high society, and some of them hark to the name of Getty, a name well known in Europe. Thereby SF stands for San Francisco and Getty for immeasurable wealth. The former is immediately understood, the latter a cliché. How do we know of the riches of the Gettys presented in the picture? One answer would be the atmosphere. But really??

Let us examine the pictures more closely, and the longer we look at them, the greater the anxiety we feel. How do we know that the legends and the pictures are in actuality compatible with each other? Could the written hints not lead us astray in the same manner as the pictures depict beautiful phantasmagoria? Gisèle Freund mentions a series of snapshots, which she took on the floor of the Paris stock exchange, in her still very readable cultural, sociological study entitled "Photography and Society". She was very surprised about the publication of this series in a Belgium magazine under the title "Bull market...stocks are quoted at fantastic prices", and in a German magazine with the headline "Panic...wealth was destroyed, thousands have been ruined." (page 172 et seq.). Conflicting economic and political interests sprang from the reception of the contradictory statements. Headings and subtitles of pictures, contradicting Bert Brecht and Walter Benjamin, are not necessarily to be trusted. In the end they remain a matter of faith.

Returning to Larry Sultan's "SF Society" series, do the scenes in the gigantic colorful pictures not give the impression of being backdrops for stage settings or for film sets that have been pressed together? Since everything that they contain seems to be geared toward being seen - the people as well as the backdrops. Especially for a camera, the channel to the public, everything, the dead as well as the living inventory, is set up for us, the audience. And does Hollywood not lie south of San Francisco, for American dimensions just a stone's throw away, where illusion is sold as reality and figuratively speaking, actually is? Would it not be a possibility that these pictures are scenes and personalities of a remake of Douglas Sirk's great melodrama, "Written on the Wind" (1956), which embodies the end of a billionaire dynasty that had become prosperous through oil?

Such thoughts do not accidentally surface on the face of Larry Sultan's pictures. Rather he has provoked similar ruminations time and time again with his 1970s photographic projects that he realized with his friend, Mike Mandel. Therefore it is helpful to briefly touch on which preceded, the meanwhile better known groups of works such as "Pictures from Home" (1992) and especially "The Valley" (2004). Pars pro toto the series with the significant title "Evidence" (1977) should be mentioned. In actuality it has enormously sharper contours. Namely how: it is self-evident or it jumps into one's face; it is simply evident! Sultan and Mandel combine the "Evidence" group of works of 89 black-and-white documentary photographs. They found the pictures in the archives of university laboratories, space aeronautical companies and police precincts. Thanks to the financial support of a scholarship from the National Endowment of the Arts, they were able to gain access to almost all archives to which they wrote. This is completely inconceivable nowadays. Within two and a half years they viewed around two million pictures and made their selection. They especially concentrated on photographs of a strange, a bit eerie character. It was simultaneously unique and a challenge that they presented their work for the first time at an exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco by placing the selected pictures in accurate reproductions of identical size of 20 x 25 centimeters at eye level and strung like pearls on a string with no written explanations for this exhibition initially shown.

Because they erased all external indications of the pictures, avoided picture legends and explanatory notes, which could have helped to categorize them and enlighten the senses, the pictures were evenly short-circuited and left the exhibition with the viewers having had no clue. Nobody was able to make rhyme or reason of it. How could they? What should an arm that is holding a rope loop into the camera from the right, what should a space suit on wall-to-wall carpeting, what should a collection of brand new furniture sitting on a green pasture tell us? What is evident in "Evidence"? What is the connection the pictures obey? An artistic one? It is apparent that the necessary aesthetic plausibility is completely lacking for this, except maybe a bent to the absurd.

Of course, Sultan and Mandel rejuvenated Marcel Duchamp's ingenious trick of exchanging framework and reference. With this the Frenchman transplanted objects of daily use into the sphere of art and disrobed their actual functions. In museums and similar institutions the pictures of Sultan and Mandel also unfold their actual purposes irrelevant of their aesthetic qualities. Nevertheless they exercise an increasingly unsettling effect on the viewer. The reason: despite their incomprehensibility, it is "evident" that at one time they must have fulfilled a concrete communicative purpose. But which one? Their aesthetic qualities exhaust themselves in a perfect mechanism. When one intensively views the pictures, the feeling creeps up that one is traipsing without orientation on the upper deck of a ship that is swerving around and whose railing, which normally provides security, has been blown away by a storm. The consequence is a shake of the head and irritation. In order for us not to turn away from the pictures in complete frustration, it is necessary for us to seek our own orientation points and to make our own unsubstantiated speculations. Art critics, such as Carter Ratcliff, have offered a cornucopia of possible interpretations. It stands to reason that they all miss their mark. But that does not matter because they provide space for fantasies.

For the realization of the later „"SF Society" series Larry Sultan trod along a tried path and restricted content to a concrete topic. Although Mandel and he had expanded the horizon of the meaning of the pictures as they wished, Sultan is now focusing on an independent area with precisely marked relations for each picture, which fed in their special history and refers back to themselves simultaneously. Concretely: the pictures of the „"SF Society" vary the genre of portraits, individual and group portraits. They move within the cosmos of pictorial history and their own conventions. One of the consequences of the decision is that the question of what the pictures want to achieve has been deferred.

At the same time the pictures of the „SF Society“ have served a certain purpose. They are the results of a photographic assignment for the American magazine, “W Magazine”. Sultan was, according to him, supposed to produce a representative series of pictures of some of the members of San Francisco's high society. The photographs were publicized in the “W Magazine” in 2008. What the pictures were intended to do in the magazine (and what they were supposed to do at the time) is readily apparent.

Yet their earlier purpose is not only concealed in the presentation in another surrounding such as here in the gallery rooms of focus21, but in being encased in the pictures of “Evidence”. Thanks to irrefutable thematic guidance, that which they present is not lost in approximations. The portraits of the people remain. Although their former purpose is singular, the pictures do not experience complete oblivion through their being transported from glossy printed products into the sphere of art. The people who gathered before the camera did not have only one reason for letting themselves be photographed; this also explains why they were photographed in the format of these pictures.

With the transformation of the functional background of the pictures from the pages of a magazine to the walls of a gallery, the relationship between the pictures and the viewer also changes. The greater the distance one has away from this Californian city, the more the interest and the attractiveness of the obvious informational content of the pictures, which (from the point of view of the magazine) counts as the “who is who” in the elite of the society of San Francisco, is relinquished. The content dimension of the pictures pales when the previous requirements fall by the wayside. The what of the pictures disappears behind the how.

Pried away from the surroundings of their former obligation to inform and idolize, the pictures seem as if they are the visual results of a project that Sultan gleaned out of nowhere. As if the assignment were only an excuse to churn up questions of principle on photography and how it is received. Yes, the pictures appear to go against the original objective of the assignment and to infer his critical intent as an after effect. This cannot only be attributed to the enormous magnification of their outer dimension. Moreover the changed transparency generates an attitude of changed expectations, which promotes a modified awareness and rather imposes a different type of interaction with the pictures - more distinct than that of looking at the pictures while busily paging through a magazine.

What in the face of the “SF Society”, the pictures immediately attract our attention to the formal strictness of the structure in contrast to the capricious colors. The numerous verticals give them a clamorous ceremonial impression. At the same time they deprecate the curtains draped over the entire picture field in view of the ambitious tendency of the spacial vectors, since they stretch across the area of the pictures with one exception. The rare horizontals are generally only delivering to the upper and lower picture margins. The controlling verticals also do not have an aura of superiority. They do not lift the importance of the models, as occurs in the portraits of the baroque nobility or the pictures of the bourgeoisie in the infancy of photography. In the portraits of Robert Mailer Anderson, Stanlee Gatti, Jo Schuman Silver, two vertically ambitious plants even set an ironical accent and undermine the apparently relaxed dignity of the presentation. The verticals mostly give rhythm to the picture surface through a monotone staccato and transform the prominent persons of society into silhouettes.

In an essay on the last group portraits of Rembrandt and Frans Hals, Max Imdahl differentiates between directing pictures and structuring them. Directing links the people portrayed with the aid of narrative elements to the innards of the picture and builds a bridge from the picture to the viewer. In contrast, a structural presentation regulates the formal organizational system of a picture. "This means that directing affects the scene of a picture, while structure affects the picture field." ("Max Imdahl, Directing and Structuring in the Last Group Pictures by Rembrandt and Frans Hals", published in *On the Art of Tradition, Collected Writings, Volume 2, Frankfurt/Main 1996, page 385*). If one applies this set of terms to the eight huge formats of Larry Sultan, it becomes apparent that the directing of the photographer is exclusively concentrated on demonstrating the pictures' structure, which in other words, the content of the pictures only exists thanks to the proximity, cooperation and contrasts of the formal factors. Just like dead inventory waiting on stocked shelves, the persons portrayed also subjugate themselves to the organizational scheme of the picture field. The scene is overwhelming.

In the six group pictures the impulses for action are therefore limited to a minimum, to an economical minimum of movement such as lighting candles in a candleholder, to holding a child's hand or a newspaper. The relationships between the individual models have been cooled off to zero degrees centigrade. And it is not rare that the persons portrayed pose in separate picture fields. The atmosphere is chilly. Also the warm colors change to cool ones. Since a picture figure is shot in profile in almost every picture, this additionally underscores the voluminous area of the pictures in harmony with the illusion of prohibiting the artistic avant-garde and locks the pictures away from their viewers. The viewers' looks ricochet back.

Trevor Traina and Alexis Swanson present themselves in front of an orange curtain, whose folds can be associated with bars on windows. Both of them seem to be loitering on the same picture level, although he is situated behind her. In the extension they describe a triangle with an acute angle. He is standing erect as the master of the house in a private photographic portrait of the 19th century, slightly askew left of center; she is sitting on a bed with her back toward us viewers. Both seem to be about as lively as the room decorations - the bright lamp, the cut flowers and the pillows in white patterns to the right of the picture. The singular line of intimacy is spun between the glance of the young woman and the glance of a dog in the lower left hand of the picture, as well as between another dog, which the black-clad man is carrying in his arms, and the dog that is looking up to the woman. The sharp borderlines and the light that turns a soft cloth into metallic matter, leave the portrait pair looking like a montage cut with scissors.

Everything is surface, façade. The artificial world of society is reflected congruently in the picture facility. The „Vanessa und Bill Getty" picture group with the blind windows in the concluding wall, which does not open any perspectives and leads to nothing – just as the individual portrait "Gavin Newsom" – does not reveal any surreal undertones. The naturalistic horse head, which protrudes from the picture zone in the lower right hand corner, the headless cat, partially concealed by the horse head, and the pillow rolled up on the sofa placed at right angles; originate from the inexhaustible repertoire of surrealism. Vanessa presents herself as if on a tray in a white bathrobe and red curlers, supporting herself on her left hand in the bent over posture of an upside down "L". In contrast, Bill is wearing jeans and a T-shirt with a portrait printed on it. He has taken a loose "watch-out" position. The informal clothing achieves a contrast to the sophisticated picture style, but no intimacy.

In some pictures there are inferences to iconographic standards of Dutch group pictures, such as the uninvolved viewer. In the past it was a servant who had a frontal view of the figure arrangement from afar. The usual status symbols are also not missing, tender reminders of the social rank of those depicted. In "Gordon and Ann Getty" it is Gordon himself in a loose pose, who from the left-hand margin of the picture observes the act of being photographed, so that the role of the observer and the observed melds together.

The ambience in all of the pictures is the backdrop. It does not matter whether it is the actual surrounding of the local members of society being photographed. And they themselves seem to be portraying themselves. That they are not actors in reality is displayed by the friendly smiles that Robert Mailer Anderson and Jo Schuman Silver give each other at the breakfast table. It is too stilted and artificial to have been produced by actors. In comparison remember how natural and real the smile of the unforgettable Cary Grant was in his movies!

The exhibited photographs are on loan from the Fine Art Invest Fund ([www.FAIF.ch](http://www.FAIF.ch)).

Vernissage: 22 August 2013, at 6 p.m.

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