

TIME 0

“DON'T UNDERTAKE A PROJECT, UNLESS IT IS MANIFESTLY IMPORTANT AND NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE.”

Edwin H. Land

The “time zero” title of Paul Kirps’ exhibition refers to a Polaroid film marketed in 1980, which considerably reduced the time needed for a photo to materialise. Above all, it marks a beginning, a beginning of a new era. Does this mean that Paul Kirps, whose works can be found in the collections of the MoMA in New York, the Museum für Gestaltung in Zurich and the Mudam in Luxembourg, is doing a reset?

For those who follow Paul Kirps’ work, his choice of the photographic medium might seem surprising. This is after all an artist who systematically explores the boundaries of minimalism and design through an abstract approach, be it in his paintings, installations or vast creations in the public space. Could the use of photography mark a turning point in the ways the artist explores various artistic means? This would presuppose continuity in the form of expression that has not yet been used by Kirps. Does the procedure of instant photography illustrate his new fascination for technologies that have characterised the development from mechanical and analogue to digital–technologies that have been a recurrent theme in his work since the early 2000’s?

What kind of artistic vision is the artist seeking to convey through the use of his instant camera, he who, for years, has been using geometric graphic language to establish a distance between the world and his creations? How does someone committed to long, meticulously planned and controlled processes transpose his visual language to an instant image of reality without distance and without a backup? A transcription requiring that all decisions be made in the moment, each shot generating a unique original copy?

The Polaroid SX70 instant camera used by Paul Kirps to create the pictures for the “Time 0” exhibition is a legend in its own right. Invented by the scientist and founder of Polaroid, Edwin H. Land, it was the first instant single lens reflex camera ever made, allowing to capture exactly what could be seen through with a viewfinder and with a glass lens offering a high photographic quality. It quickly achieved a cult following in the art community and was used as a creative tool by artists such as Chuck Close, Walker Evans, David Hockney, Robert Mapplethorpe, Helmut Newton, Andy Warhol, David Lynch and Nobuyoshi Araki.

Polaroid filed for bankruptcy in 2001 and stopped producing instant film altogether in 2008, but just before the brand and its know-how was about to disappear, its last working factory was reclaimed by The Impossible Project led by Florian Kaps, allowing the company to be resurrected.

This story of technical genius and providential revival captivated and inspired Paul Kirps, who takes a great interest in camera technology, special and limited editions, beta test programs for film, film chemistry, expired films...

The iconic SX70 was designed as a “one-step process camera”, requiring nothing more from the user than to point and shoot. The handling of the camera is reduced to an essential minimum, but so is the visual rendering of the instant shot. These effects of simplification are clearly exploited by the artist, who adds no further treatment to his original prints. The camera’s optics tends to clarify the forms and lines of the urban motifs in the “Time 0” series, depth effects are replaced by an almost ornamental flatness and modulations are simplified, becoming stylised masses. In order to meet the requirements of the grid—a central piece of his vocabulary of forms—Kirps uses an original telephoto lens to correct vertical distortions.

As it’s the case with his paintings, Kirps’ Polaroids call on a shared urban visual culture. To construct his images, the artist deploys his usual extreme formal rigour. Even though the medium is different, the approach remains as meticulous as ever: an almost scientific study of materials and technology, detailed preparation and reconnaissance, rigorous construction of pictures and serial work, archiving. Compared to his usual graphic productions, huge in both size and duration, the instant Polaroid procedure allows Kirps to condense the creative process and be more spontaneous, which can have a liberating effect. The spontaneity of a shooting session, however, remains controlled. The subject matters are carefully identified and studied beforehand, as are view angles and light.

Instant photography—which Paul Kirps has been experimenting with for two years—takes the artist out of the studio and into direct contact with the world. “Time 0” presents a series of Polaroids taken in New York, Barcelona, Lisbon, Palma de Mallorca, Arlon and Brussels. Other pictures show Merl, Differdange, Esch-sur-Alzette or Kirchberg and the city centre during the Lockdown. Though the emptiness seen in these last-mentioned pictures is not surprising, it should be noted that the pre-pandemic photos show the same kind of deserted spaces. Their objective character is intentional and the rigorous composition of the images and the serial work reminiscent of the Bauhaus and Düsseldorf School of photography. Devoid of people, these spaces highlight all the more forcefully the traces left by human activity through elements of architecture, infrastructure, construction and transport.

Kirps depicts the architecture but not the buildings. His images show the spaces between the buildings, the interstices that connect every structure with another. In this way, the “Time 0” series provides an unspectacular inventory of glimpses behind the scenes of the “smart city”: gates, quays, terminals, frameworks, ducts, cable and ventilation shafts, makeshift fencing, loading ramps, modular containers, scaffolds... Temporary structures often overlap in urban space. And when they are dismantled they quickly resurface elsewhere, a few hundred metres away, to support other constructions. They may not be permanent but they occupy and shape the urban landscape—our living space—in a rather definitive way. If the urban space were a living organism, these elements would be its orifices, its scars, its amputations, its grafts, its ulcers... Through them, Paul Kirps’ pictures exude a contradictory and fierce beauty.