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Homesick

When are people actually at one with themselves? In multicultural individualist societies the vast amount of different life scripts makes it difficult to find a general answer to this; in fact, the answer varies with each single person's preferences, dreams and ideals. Yet it is not only the lack of uniformity that makes this question so problematic, but also the understanding of what it actually means to be at one with oneself.

The large number of promises for self-realization made in our society is contrasted by an equally small number of promises actually delivered on. The reason for this is not so much a lack of possibilities but a matter of what we are like as human beings; after all, people have great difficulties in finding out what might truly meet their needs.

Roland Iselin's artistic work traces situations where people are at one with themselves or at least try to be; situations that make them feel safe and secure and at the same time permit self-realization and joy of life.

### **Leisure time**

Work environments are subordinate in Roland Iselin's photography. A young man posing in front of a Landini tractor and a banker type smoking a cigar are among the few exceptions. Similarly, the young girl posing in a t-shirt with "timbersport contest" printed on it holding a chain saw in her hand – she probably has a job to do with sawing timber and is now taking part in a contest in her spare time. A place to feel at home is rarely provided on the job, the reason for this being that the job is a place where the demands of *others* are supposed to be fulfilled. Feeling at one with oneself under these conditions is obviously difficult.

Average employees work about eight hours a day, Mondays to Fridays, excluding travelling to and from work, and according to Swiss legislation a journey time of up to four hours each day is acceptable. If you add the time for basic needs, personal hygiene and eating and drinking, daily leisure time shrinks down to maybe four hours a day. The very fact that we spend most of our time pursuing a gainful occupation has made leisure time an extremely valuable good. No wonder then that immense importance is attached to these rare hours and to weekends and holidays.

Roland Iselin meets people in these precious hours, a time when it is entirely up to them what to do with it. However, the situations he captures are less those of obvious recreation or sweet idleness, but rather a Panopticon of diverse leisure time activities that combine a longing for familiarity and feeling safe with an evident urge to be active. In view of people's recreational activities differing to such a large extent, it is striking that the recreational potential can obviously only be developed in the form of activity. In this, the model aircraft enthusiast seems fairly contemplative, especially compared to sports activities such as boxing or ice hockey. Thus, the focus is not so much on free time as such, but on leisure time as a colourful round dance of various possibilities of how to spend free time.

All these different activities have one thing in common – the prominent role played by the aspect of contest. In these times, where working life is characterised more than ever by competitive structures, where people have to prove themselves anew each day and assert themselves against possible competitors, it is all the more surprising that people chose to turn their free time into a situation of constant contest as well.

Ultimately it is difficult to say whether competition is simply man's nature or whether it is not perhaps part of the present societal paradigm. The introduction of performance-based benchmarks in private and intimate spheres of life has long been a fact, similarly the rationality of so far emotionally organised spheres. Almost all former islands of retreat have turned into places where we have to prove our worth, and leisure time no longer seems to form an exception.

Sports activities always imply the notion of playful trials of strength, be it a marathon, boxing, football or ice hockey. A more subtle expression, however, is found in ballroom dance contests or at the Swiss Miss Italy elections, in sports activities requiring no team or at the debutantes' ball. Although these are either jolly occasions or trials of strength performed with oneself, the idea of competition and championship always plays a part. This applies even to situations that are declaredly designed purely for pleasure. In the early 1990s Iselin repeatedly took pictures of the Zurich techno scene that met in Kaufleuten nightclub each Saturday. The mixture of techno music, alcohol, drugs and naked skin is not what you would associate with a contest at first sight, but with relaxation and collective trance. But even here some people started sewing new outfits for the coming weekend even on the Monday following their Sunday hangover; after all, the craziest gear got the most attention and credibility. In addition, the techno culture was accompanied by a body cult which made people think about the state of their bellies and upper arms and prompted them to spend their scarce time at a fitness studio. This implication in societal structures is what distinguishes

Iselin's pictures from those of photographers like Nan Goldin, for instance, who also portrayed the party scene, but is more interested in extreme situations and the abyss associated with it. In Goldin's pictures the portrayed are depicted as people on the outer edge of society who have found a kind of last resort in the flashy physicalness of the party scene; Iselin shows intact members of society who celebrate a temporary breaking out of everyday life and otherwise continue to lead a perfectly mundane life.

## **Adolescence**

Not only his pictures of the Zurich techno scene feature young people. In fact, the depiction of youth and adolescence runs through all of Roland Iselin's work like a leitmotif. Moreover, the act of seeking a partner plays a major part in this. And suddenly all those different leisure time activities turn out to have something else, something quite unexpected, in common: they are all social formats for finding a date – the techno party, the debutantes' ball, the sports club and even a church service. Yet it is not only the search for a partner that is characteristic of adolescence, but also all those other important decisions that are made in this phase of life. What purpose do I want to give my life? What should be important in my life? Where do I ultimately want to belong?

Youth no doubt symbolises a state of freedom and unlimited possibilities; the world is their oyster. They wonder about a number of questions for the first time, they discover new activities or drop the ones they had so far pursued with little enthusiasm and mainly because their parents had wanted them to. They join sports clubs or other clubs, sons decide to do boxing, daughters decide on cheerleading. For the first time in life, there is the opportunity of free choice, albeit only seemingly. After all, the range from which they ultimately pick is usually one predetermined by preceding generations.

Iselin sometimes refers to the American photographer Larry Fink as one of his idols. His photographic representation of specific forms of human socialising conveyed a notion of man that reflects the brittleness of one's own existence. Iselin's focus on young people and the gap between self-determination and commercialised offers, which they are so strongly shaped by, is a continuation of his indeed similar interest, yet in a different time, namely ours. This shows an affinity to entirely different views of contemporary photography, e.g. that of Rineke Dijkstra. Although her portraits seem to virtually lift people out of their usual surroundings and although she plans even the tiniest detail of her photo shootings, the portrayed, too, are always in a

conflicting field of diffusely formed identity and some first identifiable traits of individual self-awareness. The protagonists, on the one hand, copy - some of them still insecurely - idols prefabricated by the entertainment industry, but on the other hand, they choose these idols themselves and have real, authentic feelings for them. If at all, it is probably reserved for a later phase in life to realize how restricted all those important and seemingly free choices made at the threshold to adulthood were. A particularly impressive example is perhaps the act of smoking cigarettes, something you start when you are young to demonstrate freedom and independence from social expectations. The truth is that this not only makes people victims of a treacherous advertising strategy that is unethical enough to correlate an addiction with notions of freedom, but that by servicing the tobacco industry, they in fact support something far more corrupt than that which they think they oppose. In Roland Iselin's photographs, the grand drafts of youth collide, as it were, with the small successes of adulthood; on the one hand, they depict all the great dreams and ideals of young adults, and on the other, the small world in which you might become Miss North Stonington or the winner in a timber sport contest, a member of the Swiss Scirocco Club or a cheerleader for the Seaside Vipers. The village beauty will of course never have even the slightest chance to become Miss Universe, the local muscle man will always be narrow-chested compared to Arnold Schwarzenegger, and the lascivious night owls will always be cheap Tally-Weijl copies of Britney Spears or Christina Aguilera.

## **Identity**

Whenever people are in search of something, be it an activity they enjoy, be it something that makes them feel at home and safe, offers will not be long in coming, especially if there is money to make. Small wonder then that the majority of this kind of offers is totally commercialised. Without Adidas or Reebok, sports activities even for private purposes seem to have become completely unimaginable, the paragliding equipment should best be from Paratec, the braces worn at the timber sport contest will ideally be from Stihl and the drink at the bar should be mixed with the brand Absolut. Meanwhile, an extensive leisure time industry has developed which regularly invents and launches completely new activities, e.g. various kinds of fun or extreme sports bearing exotic names such as Rap Sliding, Heli-Body Flying or Wakeboarding. Traditional 'home' formats such as patriotism and religion, or a house and family are still booming all the same. Religious motifs and insignia of national affiliation appear in Roland Iselin's photography in the same way as the houses of average American

citizens. Evidently, the material aspect of 'home' is ideally represented by a house and family, religion by contrast symbolises the spiritual and ideological dimension. The depiction of a crucifixion on a cemetery, the small self-made recess for the figure of Jesus in a garden or the procession in a Catholic church indeed convey a contemplative rather than commercial impression; and yet they are nothing but different possibilities taken from a broad range of offers designed to sell a feeling of 'home'.

Like religion, patriotism too is one of the few remaining possibilities to become a member of a large community, to become part of a comprehensive collective identity. Especially in recent history, multicultural societies have learnt that there are not only unbridgeable cultural gaps, but far more subtle and graduated differences between countries that feel they belong to the same culture. Due to their democratic organisation, Europe together with the USA might well be subsumed under occidental rationalism, and yet there are profound differences not only between the two continents but even within Europe that cannot be dismissed. As a result, nationalistic slogans have recently become popular on both continents, even if they differ in the way they manifest themselves. Presently, there is no European counter-part to the insignia of USA national affiliation showing in seemingly omnipresent stars and stripes or cowboy hats.

Young people have not just lately been rebelling against the host of commercialised activities and occupations that are generated by the consumer industry, or against the traditional 'homeland' formats. And yet, there is nothing else they can do but develop their own, individual self-conception: no sports club then, no choir and no national pride, but self-realization based on individual lusts and desires. To punks and pleasure-seeking techno kids, for instance, the reason for being seems less likely to be found in the adoption of an existing ideology, but quite contrarily in activities that need not fit in with any existing behaviour codex. Finding safety in the world by dealing with oneself is indeed not easy since the fulfilment of a longing for 'home' remains dependent on people who share certain ideals and world views. Nevertheless, it works now and then, and for a short time a new lifestyle emerges as the result of collectively rejecting the prevailing social conditions. The techno generation was surely an example of this; it was also an example that made very clear how soon this view in turn generates codes of affiliation and, what's more, is turned into a sellable offer. Instead of cowboy hats, ravers simply dye their hair, and instead of paying church tax, they pay the excessive entrance fees to nightclubs.

## **Serenity**

The young peoples' sense of 'get-up-and-go' in Roland Iselin's photography is regularly complemented by their state of being monopolized by social and commercial offers; on the one hand, these young adults exhibit the desire for self-determination, on the other, they seem to be a shuttlecock of predefined life formats. Virtually symbolic of these conflicting forces is the picture of a young ice hockey player posing in her team outfit. She is dressed in high-tech equipment which is covered all over in logos and sponsors' advertising. All in all, her gear seems to be slightly too big for her and to weigh her down a little. It seems as though she will still need to grow into these clothes, in the same way that she will still need to grow into the world of all those advertising contracts, sponsoring and product placements printed on them. Yet she defies precisely this world, which has seemingly begun to engulf her without an option for escape, with self-confidence and serenity.

The broad spectrum of different insignia of affiliation exhibited in Roland Iselin's pictures does not constitute a judgement on a social status quo; it is an unjudging Panopticon of life scripts that are possible today. Despite all the pre-formatted activities, gestures, pieces of clothing and brands, the portrayed appear to present a serenity that is beyond all commercial or ideological labels. People often say that a person's individuality comes out best against the background of external similarities. However, the opposite is just as true. The differences between people, all their different activities and insignia of affiliation unexpectedly make them seem the same - human beings in search of feeling at home and a meaning of life.