Heinz Schütz – Two Conversations with Katharina Gaenssler – The Rectangular Eye

Heinz Schütz is a freelance art theoretician and critic based in Munich.

Translation: J.B. Robinson

Conversation One

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HS: Here in front of us is a block of paper 13.5 cm wide, 30 cm long and 35 cm high, a block with two cardboard covers and 5,552 bound pages. It's one of your books that bursts the limits of standard book sizes, a one book tower that forms a helix at a slight touch of the hand and makes leafing through it a matter of balancing weights. The pages inside have no text, but 16,656 photographs of New York. The series of photos capture motion sequences that guide us through the city. The photos are static, so they don't depict this motion with motion itself, like film. Yet even movie cameras compile films from individual pictures. How does our perception work in comparison? What do we actually perceive when we stand 'on location'? Do we see isolated pictures in the same way as a camera? Or don't we? At the risk of sounding a bit odd: when we move a camera rapidly during an exposure, the picture may be nothing but a blurred streak. But nothing like that happens when we turn around while looking at something.

KS: I think we always focus on a particular spot, much like a camera, and balance out the hard and soft focus

subconsciously in our brains. But we really do see individual pictures.

HS: We think we see pictures ...

KG: I'd say we also started reading in the book. Sometimes there are long stretches between pictures, but the eye creates a connection. The bridges between shots are built in the mind. The path between the photos – the story that connects them – must be constructed by the reader. That's the wonderful thing about the book: the film takes place in the mind. In this New York book, three to six pictures are juxtaposed per double-page spread without any white space between them. They blend into a broad panorama with the aim of creating a sense of impenetrable density, of continuous overlaps in the cityscape. The result is a constant, never-ending flow of pictures with the object of making us feel the city's magnetic power, the need to keep walking.

HS: The narrative contexts in your book are determined by the order of the pictures. What's the relation between eye and camera as you walk through the city taking thousands of shots?

KG: In Genoa, where I began to photograph, I set out to follow my eye with the camera. I always tried to take a shot the moment I fixed on something with my eye. The result was 4,200 impulses to shoot within the space of four-and-a-half months. That's basically the way I've

worked ever since.

HS: So you don't kneel down? You never zoom in and out? In other words, you don't compose the photographic rectangle?

KG: I don't claim to be a photographer and never set out to make a good picture. As I said, the impulse always proceeds from what my eye fixes on and what catches it. If I see some sort of photographically composed picture anyway, it may be from force of habit, from the fact that I'm almost always taking photographs. Maybe it happens subconsciously that the eye always sees a 'picture'. The eye anticipates it automatically.

HS: In that light, the photographic rectangle has migrated into your eye.

KG: That may well be.

HS: So today, in an age of digital photographic excess and cell phone displays, we ourselves increasingly tend to see things like a camera.

KG: Perhaps we perceive more and more rectangularly.
(laughs briefly)

HS: What's the background intention of your photos? When you walk through the streets of Genoa or New York taking pictures, what motivates you to press the shutter release?

KG: In my everyday life I take relatively few photographs, and then usually for the purpose of making notes. But I have a veritable compulsion to take pictures when I travel. Whenever I talk about my beginnings as an artist, I tend to get psychological. But I can say this much: Before Genoa I was fairly out of contact with myself. In Genoa I began to show myself what I actually see. It was a terribly important moment, to perceive my own perception.

HS: At what point does this perception of your own perception take place? When you shoot your photographs, or when you look at them?

KG: It's the repetitive processes, whether taking photos on my travels or working in rooms. I look at the photos over and over again, from the shot itself to its placement and printout to leafing through the book. The photos allow me to digest the world, the things around me, so to speak through the body. The things I photograph literally become internalised, subsumed, assimilated.

HS: Photography is always a physical process, not only in this sense but fundamentally, and the relation between photographer and camera plays a role in this process. Changes in camera technology have had an impact on this relation. You started with analogue photography. How did the transition from analogue to digital affect you?

KG: First of all, it's basically irrelevant whether I take analogue or digital photos. Back in the analogue era I

already photographed with unusual intensity in increasingly large quantities and never shunned expenses. Photography en masse was in the air, of course, but only with digital photography could it undergo a 'genuine' explosion. My activities continued to intensify with the emergence of digital technology.

HS: The digital camera tempts us to take endless series of photographs.

KG: Digital photography supposedly boosts the number of photographs, but it can be devastating. When I change the focal length in my room photographs, I simply turn the lens a couple of millimetres to the left, thereby increasing the focal length and shortening the field of view. That's reason enough to create multiple images. A twist of just a few millimetres literally multiplies the number of photos I take. That I have to take. The possibility of photographing another room or location from a different position is just as tempting. The storage space for the files costs almost nothing, unlike analogue film with development and enlargement. So it's easy to say "I'll take just one more". But this multiplies the time I spend at a location with such decisions, and I feel under a huge compulsion, as if more photos were better than less.

HS: Do the technological innovations specifically affect the way you handle the camera?

KG: Let me give you an example. I have a relatively new camera with a so-called 'live preview'. Although it's a single-lens reflex, you can see the viewfinder image on a display. That hasn't been around very long. I photograph with great physical and temporal intensity. With some positions in my room photos – pointing the camera at the ceiling from a crouch, for example, or aiming at the floor on tiptoes – it was quite literally a struggle to look and focus through the viewfinder. Now all I have to do is tip a display. It's a great physical relief. But I notice that I scarcely have contact with the photos any more, owing to my detachment from the camera, and I know that I used to take each photo with much more intensity. Perhaps this reduces the process of internalisation, or even makes it disappear.

HS: The image one sees on the display is a small component of the rest of the world. The viewfinder, in contrast, turns everything you see into the picture. The world one sees is a picture, and the photographer's eye becomes the pictorial view. We could go back further in history. In the early box cameras the photographer became part of the photographic system and vanished beneath a dark cloth into a sort of photographic Nirvana.

KG: Yes, the level of representation lies so to speak in the photographer's eye. I actually used to feel it that way.

HS: When did you stop shooting analogue?

KG: In 2006. I still shot analogue in Genoa in 2001. While taking the photographs of my walks that I later collected in my Genoa book, I began to make composed panoramas. As I said before, Genoa was a watershed for me. Before I took that trip I studied jewellery and utensils at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts. In Genoa I realised that I wouldn't return to my studies. When I got back to Munich I continued to make 'panorama pictures'. I began by shooting my surroundings across my own body, above all in my own atelier. Later all that could be seen in the photo was a toe, and at some point the toe disappeared, too. What was left was the room. It was a slow process of letting go. The result was my first three photo installations for the Kolosssaal (by then I'd enrolled in Pitz's course at the Munich Academy). These 'atelier transports', including my black-and-white thesis, were still based on analogue photographs. So was my 'transport' of the single-room flat of a 'Film Devotee and Avid Reader' in the Barbara Gross Gallery in 2006. Then I kissed analogue goodbye. By then I'd taken my first digital journey with the Trans-Siberian Railway in 2004.

HS: Today your work falls into two main areas: your impulsive and spontaneous travel photographs, and your systematic and conceptual spatial photographs. Do you handle the camera differently in each case?

KS: I never photograph programmatically or mechanically on my journeys. I make hand-held shots while walking or

riding, usually with one or another small digital pocket camera. The equipment is irrelevant. Photographing in a room is completely the opposite: the shots are extremely complex and elaborate. I work my way macroscopically through a room using a tripod, often with focal lengths over 1,000 millimetres, and take photos from various predefined positions – from left to right, from top to bottom – in countless isolated pictures. Both areas emerged from my work in Genoa.

HS: Your photographic log of your daily walks through Genoa provided the material for your first book. And the panoramas compiled from the postcard-size pictures later evolved into 'room transports'. In your Genoa panoramas the distinct differences of colour in the photographs, taken consecutively at rapid intervals, already strike the eye. A single-colour building seems composed of different colours.

KG: That depends on where the camera measures the lighting. But the passage of time can be equally visible in the colour of the pictures, namely, the natural change of light in the course of a day, during the time I spend at a particular spot.

HS: The camera's automatic features react differently from one picture to the next. In this way the motif also reflects the auto exposure of the camera.

KG: I use automatic exposure with aperture priority. I

also keep the depth of view as shallow as possible. Everything else I leave to the camera.

HS: Often there are white gaps in the Genoa panoramas.

KG: In Genoa I shot everything analogue with a hand-held camera, so there were bound to be 'gaps'. I couldn't control what I photographed or neglected to photograph. The longer you do something, the more you perfect and master it. My technique has changed for intrinsic and temporal reasons. Unlike my time in Genoa, I now limit my photographing almost entirely to interior spaces. I also use a tripod owing to the often dim lighting and the very heavy lenses. So there are no more gaps. Every point of transition can be relived, every picture controlled.

HS: The contours of these early panoramas are irregular, sometimes stepped or even dynamically curved.

KG: At first I found it exciting that each shot gave rise to a special random contour that was immune to influence during processing. Later I realised that this is very distracting for the observer. On the other hand, trimming or passe-partouting the contour line into a rectangle creates a sort of peep box where the picture, or rather the photographed object, is perceived much more spatially and distinctly.

HS: One might say that the rectangle becomes invisible.

KG: The form is accepted as a frame, as a given.

Conversation Two

Beer Garden Muffathalle, 18 June 2015

HS: In our atelier conversation we briefly touched on the extent to which photographing is always an action, a physical act, in which the relations of the camera to the body play a part. One might, for instance, mechanise and automate your systematic shots of a wall with the help of a small motor. But you obviously don't want to do that.

KG: Suppose I were to photograph this beer glass in two shots. I might, for example, take an upper shot with a focus on the background, then a lower one with the focus on the foreground, the glass itself. The result, in montage, would be a glass that is out of focus in the upper half and in sharp focus in the lower half. It would look far more uniform and homogeneous if photographed mechanically. There are certain decisions which have to be made over and over again, but which I don't want to leave to the camera.

HS: Not only do you take your own photographs, you mount the photographs on the wall yourself in days and weeks of work. Why don't you at least use an assistant?

KG: My concern is the action itself, the process, not the creation of a product. In the space of a year I create on

average no more than four installations. The work not only takes time, it also takes energy. But it feels right.

HS: When it's all over, do you photograph the installation yourself or have someone else do it for you?

KG: I take photographs myself at the building stage for documentary purposes, but I let someone else photograph the finished exhibition. Always the same person. I think that's crucial.

HS: Why don't you photograph it yourself?

KG: As I said, I'm not a photographer. I'm not interested in technique, and I avoid the strain and pressure of making a good picture. But the documentation is the only thing left after an installation, apart from its décollages. Even though it's never my own picture, no one can manage to photograph the room as I see it. Ten photographers will make ten different pictures of the same motif. But I feel that the 'filter', the perspective of another person, is beneficial.

HS: Photographs suggest that the world looks as it appears in the photo. They also suggest that the point is the photo itself and not the act of photographing. In this way it differs greatly from painting, where ultimately the act of painting is always in the viewer’s mind.

KG: To repeat, the photo, the isolated picture, doesn't

interest me. It's an element in a plot line. My activities fall into various stages: taking the photographs, sorting them and mounting them at the computer, printing them out, setting them up (meaning attaching them to the wall), tearing them down and later reorganising and storing the décollages, the 'remnants'. All of these are virtually equivalent parts of a system. I have the feeling that what applies to the isolated pictures in a project also applies to the works themselves: they're part of a whole.

HS: You insist on physical involvement and give the work as a process precedence, so to speak, above the resultant product.

KG: There's a nice saying by Hanne Darboven: “I don't read, I write”.

HS: By emphasising the process, including the temporary 'entrance' of one room inside another, performative aspects come into play. The systematic shooting and installation of photos are based on repetitive actions, though the construction and dismantlement are not specifically done in public.

KG: The repetitiveness, the monotony, is important. Most phases in the working process are extremely tense and exhausting and require full concentration. There are rarely any moments of relaxation when the action becomes completely monotonous. It's a matter of luck when this state arises. Those are the moments, or periods of time in

the best cases, when I can think freely, when the 'things' and connections become clear to me. It's a sublime, euphoric state in which everything opens up.

HS: Monotony produced by repetition is also an important part of religious rituals. When consigned to an assembly line in a factory it becomes a compulsion. In our society, which calls for constant efficiency and celebrates leisurely well-being, it's disturbing to see an artist voluntarily attaching 8,000 photos to a wall. When you set up your installations, people are always saying sympathetically, “That's a lot of work”. Does it make you feel angry? What happens when you see other people's labour reflected in their art works?

KG: Personally I find it unbearable when the amount of labour becomes the main issue when viewing a work. I ask myself: why are two days or three weeks considered a lot of work? Do four days or five weeks mean more work? How much time would be little work? How much would be enough? I could even spend two years in a room making photographs. Time is a luxury. Perhaps it's my capital. Viewing a work only in relation to time says nothing about it. When I set up my installation in the Museum Folkwang, I looked at the guards standing around and asked myself why no one says to them, “That's a lot of work you've got here”. The gentlemen stand in the museum for months and years on end. What does it mean when someone says to me, “That's a lot of work”. Does the difference lie in the physical exertion? In the money involved?

HS: Surely labour as a means to an end can be unpleasant. Sometimes the effort vanishes, as when a mountain climber reaches the peak, or a work of art leaves one transfixed. It is also memorably eliminated in sports when the tiniest fraction of a second determines whether years of labour were in vain. But you're not speaking of exertion so much as the luxury of investing time beyond the dictates of economics and high performance. Time plays an important role in your work as a whole. Your travel and urban photographs document motions in space, and thus in time. Your panoramic installations are spatial photographs leading from one detail to the next. The camera is moved across walls, whereas on your journeys it moves through cities and landscapes. Both the travel photographs and the spatial photographs wind up in books.

KG: The six days and 7,622 kilometres of the trans-Siberian Journey are compressed into a 13-volume bookblock half a metre wide. The spatial cube of a photographed flat ('München, 13. – 22. März 2006', for example) is folded out onto the walls of the exhibition room. Or its spatial volume is compressed into a book, a massive five-kilogram tome 18 cm wide, 27.5 cm tall and 13 cm thick to be opened up and leafed through. In the book, the room becomes a chronological succession. It unfolds as a process in space-time when you leaf through it.

HS: Rooms are usually perceived statically. They become 'temporalised', one might say, when photographed in

chronological succession.

KG: Each photograph is a moment in time, and I think the viewer can feel this when it is displayed on the wall. Even when an overall view can be seen at a single glance, the eye is literally forced to jump back and forth between photos. In this way time – photographed periods of time – becomes directly perceivable. The viewer of a photo installation has to traverse these time periods just like the reader of a book.

HS: The individual moments of time are perceived as an addition to the photos on the wall, which brings us back again to the rectangle. But besides that: Anyone who shoots 10,000 pictures and has them bound into a book knows in advance that no one will ever look at all of them. With your books, we're faced with something like Walter De Maria's 'Vertical Earth Kilometer'. We know that a huge wealth of photos lies buried beneath the cover, but we can't actually perceive them.

KG: I don't think about whether someone will actually look at the book. The book is there, and I know that the pictures are in it. It's my archive, my memory. I'm happy, of course, when someone leafs through it, but that's not the purpose.

HS: Here the claim of an isolated photograph to represent the world is offset by the sheer quantity of photos and the impossibility of perceiving them all. When you have

20,000 pictures in front of you, you realise that it might just as well be 200,000 or two million. The inexhaustibility of possible pictures and the impossibility of capturing the visible world produce a certain sense of powerlessness and throw us back on ourselves. Do you ever feel a sort of longing for the representative individual picture standing vicariously for all the others?

KG: I can't take an individual picture. It doesn't interest me. You can see that in the picture section of this catalogue. The designer asked me for one photo per project; my response was to include all the 407,954 pictures I'd photographed to date in the catalogue. In other words, he had to photo-reduce them to roughly 1800 pictures per page, which in turn meant that practically nothing is recognisable. But I have the feeling that everything is there.

HS: What function does the individual photo have in the context of a wall installation and in the context of a book?

KG: The details of the pictures result from the grid that underlay them when I photograph. Otherwise, I wouldn't shoot these photos at all. But they often take me by surprise, look unexpectedly funny, beautiful, sometimes painterly. When the individual photo is placed on a wall, it contributes to the construction of the overall image. But it only becomes visible in the book. The book is a

basis. Perhaps it's like a musical score and the wall is its performance, a temporary entrance. Lawrence Weiner put it this way: 'They are two different things and two different places. There's no before or after. The gallery is a sort of ‘mise en scène’ or stage; a book is a book. It's not the same thing. [...] It's not two different versions of the same content.'

HS: What's the role of book design?

KG: These books are something like files, storage media. That's why the formal decisions are often based on the desire to treat archiving or depositing as a subject, i.e. to quote formats and features of notepads or registries.

HS: The scraps from the wall installations are a left-over residue. Their rectangular form vanishes and is replaced, so to speak, by the physical qualities of the paper. What's their meaning to you, apart from the fact that they’re also saleable objects?

KG: The dismantlement of an installation has a liberating effect on me. There's no feeling of destruction. Rather, the exciting thing is that I have no control over it: the forms and formats of the scraps lie outside my sphere of influence. Décollages are random results over which I have no control, and that's exactly as it should be. Nevertheless, I always have the feeling at the end that I wasn't sufficiently rigorous.

HS: What would be sufficiently rigorous?

KG: To descend into madness, to never stop working my way archaeologically through a room, to photograph molecules, where each part is only part of the next larger detail. To stand in a room for years. But that would be dreadful.

HS: Would it actually change anything? One insight your work gives me is that the visible world lies before us, and while we look to the front everything behind us is falling apart. Wherever we look, we do so with ourselves as the midpoint. We can have at best only a partial memory or awareness of things existing outside this line of vision. But they vanish. Even in the line of vision it becomes clear, when the camera partitions it into photographic rectangles, just how limited our perception actually is, and how inexhaustible the perceivable world.

KG: Where to begin? Where to stop? I'd put it the other way round: namely, that a potential infinity of perceptions is made visible, that the limits of perception have to be broken down. And that's still a lot!