



Interview with Jonathan Tomlinson, Then There Was Us
www.thentherewasus.co.uk, May 13, 2019

Born in 1959 in Vienna, Austria. Robert Rutöd has pursued a career in what most people dream of as a creative. An early pursuer of painting eventually led to working on short films, where he wrote and directed various films over nearly a 20 year span. With an internal passion for photography, Robert had been working on different projects throughout his whole career. In 2004, he returned to photography full time and began working on both short and long term projects. We got to chat to Robert around his career and his latest long-term project, Fairy Tales.

How did this project first come about?

One day, a curiosity for interesting locations led me to visit various trade fairs. Over time, such an astounding number of good photos accumulated in doing this that planning a project based on them became an obvious choice. Since there is no area which does not also involve organisation of a trade fair, it was possible to depict a whole parallel universe in this way – an exciting challenge!

The project has been ongoing for 10 years. Did you envisage it to be this long when you first set out?

I knew it would take a long time to complete the project. Trade fairs often take place only at intervals of a few weeks and, to cover the whole spectrum, it was frequently necessary to attend events in neighbouring countries as well.

I've seen you mention some funny stories surrounding the project, but what is the strangest thing you've come across over the past 10 years? (whilst shooting this series)

In that respect I'd like to mention the fashion show with a coffin on the catwalk at the funeral business trade fair, but erotic fairs are always good for unusual encounters too. I remember a gagged, half-naked woman with a head harness of black leather straps and with her upper torso bound, such that she could barely move her arms, handing out flyers to the visitors for a bondage workshop.



Have you found that committing to a project for this length of time has distracted you from other potential projects?

Not at all! Strictly speaking, I don't work on projects or series, but on individual photos, which gradually grow into a collection. That is, a lot of things are going on in parallel — pictures are added to one album, and maybe later they get moved to another, where they are better off. One day, the collection will get a name, such as Shit Happens, namely my new project, which will be opening in the fall of 2019.

However, not all photos need to emphasise a collection's title — a photo can also be an antithesis. I like this interaction with the thoughts of observers, which has brought the accusation of cynicism upon me from some people: for example, a photo from Less Is More, in which a leg amputee war veteran contrasts with the firm calves of brass band members, was interpreted as me mocking the man's handicap.

I've read you quote "the more simple the picture, the more direct effect it has on the viewer". Has this grown as an idea surrounding this project in particular, or was this always in your mind from even before you started this series?

That has always been the aspiration with my photographs, a design principle. The faster I get to the point, and without disruptive image elements, the less observers need to guess what they are meant to see in the picture. If I want to illustrate something to someone with a sketch, it's better that I do it with just a few pencil strokes.

For 15 years of your life you wrote screenplays and directed short films. In your earlier work, Less is More, I see the images as almost film stills due to the sheer simplicity. Was this something you feel you had to break free from or do you feel film inspired you photographically?

Simplicity is a virtue that I generally value, including in everyday life. Film and photography are fundamentally different from each other, and so the sources of inspiration are different. In non-staged photography, my source of inspiration is the motif at the scene. A film first comes into my head before it can become reality. Although the term „visual storytelling“ is on everyone's lips today in the context of photography, I believe that film is much better able to tell stories using its own means. The photographic medium always needs textual help to do that.



In my opinion, good photography is silent and doesn't need long explanations. Viewing a good photograph is like the punchline of a good joke: it clicks, and in just a split second it affects you. It doesn't need verbosity! Recently, I flipped through

a photo book where the author justified his maybe 30 or 40 photos on 70 pages of text. What a waste!

I read somewhere that none of your work is staged. Was it this that attracted you to photography over film?

That has to do with photography; the films were always staged based on a script. I've never preferred photography over film. In the 1980s I did both. I devote myself more to photography now solely for economic reasons. It is very difficult to raise money for film projects. With short films you almost always have to shoot using your own capital, which wears you down over time. On the other hand, photo projects can be realised with far less financial outlay. I like that, because I'm completely independent.

In 2009 you shared your first ever major work in photography to the public and you've been pursuing this ever since. How do you feel documentary photography has changed over the past 10 years?

I really don't see myself as a documentary photographer in the true sense of the term. My motivation is not about documenting a fact. On my

photographic excursions I am more in search of the mysterious, the contradictory.

The proliferation of smartphones is creating more pictures than ever before. Always and everywhere, that little device is there to make copies of things. Even children are enthusiastically getting behind the camera now, which was unthinkable before. Trillions of photos are slumbering on storage media, waiting to be discovered. Festivals and galleries are paying increasing attention to this phenomenon with their own exhibitions for mobile phone photography. Some refrain from taking their own pictures, letting machines do the work for them. A few years ago, a photographer who compiled Google Street View stills was nominated for the prestigious Deutsche Börse Photography Award. Last week I received a call for submissions to the Drone Awards. All that is fascinating!

Do you have any plans for any future long or short term projects?

Shit Happens!

Artist's website: www.rutoed.com/fairytales

