Hand-Made Aesthetics

Gary Schneider's *HandBook* is published by the New York-based Aperture Foundation together with the artist and the print-on-demand press, Blurb. The book forms part of the series "Aperture Ideas: Writers and Artists on Photography" and is released in a limited edition of twenty-five signed and numbered copies accompanied by a print. A later edition of two hundred and fifty copies released

Gary Schneider, *Tony, Pianist*, 2000

without a print will be available online. *HandBook* was premiered in November at Paris Photo 2010 with its theme of "Spotlight on Central Europe," and fittingly so, as the craft, scale and beauty of the object aligns it with the best of the European photographic classics displayed around it. Among these, a stone's throw from Schneider's displays at the Aperture and Steven Daiter booths, some jewel-like Polaroids from André Kertész's final body of work glow on a wall at Bruce Silverstein. Kertész used the relatively new medium of Polaroid to experiment with still life in contemplation of the recent death of his wife. Decades later, Schneider, a South African of Jewish Lithuanian descent, whose work is never far from questions of mortality, also turns to new technology to keep the precious métier of the photography book alive through online publishing. The recording of his work in book form is of utmost importance to Schneider. The photography book replaces to some extent the importance of the exhibit and compounds Roger Hargreaves's comment in his essay for the book that, "The truest photobooks are the authentic expression of a photographic artist's work, the primary site of expression, mediated through a collaboration of artist and designer, print and page." Schneider made the inevitable jump from film to digital, but upholds the precision and materiality of the old darkroom alchemies, swapping his chemical baths and washes for papers and inkjets. His attention to surface beauty and tonality, to the colour in his blacks and whites and to the process of printing itself honours the masters of the analogue tradition. This sets him apart from much of the weakly printed, outsized digital works seen in many of the booths at the Paris Photo fair.

HandBook comprises a grouping of handprints pulled from Schneider's close circle of friends, critics, dealers, colleagues and their partners and children, beginning with the first studies made in 1996. Subjects are identified simply by first name and occupation. The handprint is a form of portraiture that Schneider finds as "expressive as any portrait of a face, more private and more revealing." Using the photogram technique, the hand is placed directly on the photographic film in the dark room and exposed. Sweat, the oils in the skin and the body's natural heat determine the imprint; the palmar muscles, the broad pouch of the thumb, soft padded fingertips, webbed skin between digits and the extension of wrist delicately inflect the nature of the owner. The sensitivity of the photographic emulsion registers the skin's roadmap of crevices and fissures that encases the vertebrae of the hand. The pressure points forge dark tonal passages dusted with astral flecks, while the cupping of the palm raised off the paper gives up the brightest luminescent tones, almost phosphorescent. The range of character, presence and personality delights: five-month old *Alexa* reaches up like a fragile sea anemone, blanked out in midtones, too young to press down onto the paper. *William, Museum Curator*'s handprint squarely fills the page. *Tania, Anesthesiologist*'s hand is bleached out to whites, flowering above a slender wrist. A tiny baby's finger curls against the paper. The intimate nature of the handprints evokes the fragility of our life histories. A series of studies of couples closes the book. Marriage, divorce, loss and new pairings are spread over the pages with the artist discerning physical links in the imprints and gestures shared between partners.

Schneider masturbated naked on stage in homage to Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1971) for his degree show presentation at Michaelis School of Fine Art in the 1970s, and performance remains latent in this work. The darkroom dance between artist and subject is ritualistic. Schneider counts down the exposure time out loud and guides the subject's hand to press down on the paper. The moment is confidential and secret. The audible pulse of the voice counting over the participant's breathing is the only sound. The magical, transformative powers of the dark room are sepulchral in nature. Something in these chiaroscuro handprints on their black black grounds provokes thoughts of Spanish Counter-Reformation painting, relics and later experiments in "spirit photography." For years, Schneider ran the Schneider/Erdman laboratory, earning himself the reputation of New York's most exacting chemical black-and-white printer. The Erdman in question is John, Schneider's partner in art and life, whose face and body are a continual muse to the artist. *HandBook* is dedicated to John and to Helen Gee who founded New York's first straight photography gallery, *Limelight* in 1954. Schneider describes Helen as his mentor. John and Helen's handprints open the book. Schneider's own handprints from the "Genetic Self-Portrait" series (1997) sit on the front and back covers. This triangle of old love and friendship is just one indication of the *closeness* of *HandBook*, the thoughtfulness inherent in Schneider's work, and his belief in the traditions of books and sitters.

Schneider moved to New York in 1977 where he now lives and works with John Erdman.

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