

Ralf Schmerberg

RALF SCHMERBERG - BIOGRAPHY

An activist is someone who finds purpose in action. Not carelessly or haphazardly but favouring firsthand experience – and the lessons to be learned from it – over futile arguments. This attitude requires decisiveness and a readiness to take risks. For rarely can one foresee where experience may lead. Both, the willingness to embrace the new and the ability to make clean-cut decisions, define Ralf Schmerberg's personality – making failures and unexpected turns inevitable.

He grows up in Korntal, near Stuttgart – a “romantic” outpost, he reckons. But once puberty hits, smalltown suburbia creates a sense of confinement. He graduates with a high-school diploma even though he could have pursued an academic career. Instead he opts for an apprenticeship as a butcher. A strange world that is not his, though he loves the artful handling of the knife. Watching the musical HAIR, he realizes what he is longing for: freedom. But in the early 1980s the golden age of the hippie movement is over. The next best thing are the Sannyassin, the followers of the popular but controversial Indian Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, whom he meets in Stuttgart. He follows the guru to his newly established ashram Rajneeshpuram in the State of Oregon. Schmerberg works on the ranch for free, adopts a vegetarian diet, and lives in a large international community. Bhagwan does not teach his own doctrine but a remix of spiritual world knowledge combined with a comprehensive therapy program. It is an ascetic existence in a contemporary context – and a radical contrast to Schmerberg's previous life. But he ends up finding what he was searching for: a way to his inner self. At the same time he starts to notice signs of – what he now calls – religious fascism: brainwashing, manipulation, abuse of power. The allegedly socialist model of a new society shows totalitarian traits. What makes him leave after 5 years however is a simple question asked by a Vietnamese woman: whether he ever tried – he's only in his early twenties at the time – to live a life of his own. For until then, he had only managed to leave one family for another. He leaves the ashram a couple of days later to return to Germany, equipped with a bolstered self-confidence and the knowledge that a vision – even if it ultimately fails – can make a difference.

In Germany, he supports himself with odd jobs, before crossing paths with a fashion photographer and his entourage, and deciding to give it a go. During a test shoot Schmerberg quickly realizes that he has an eye for this. Intuitively he grasps the concepts of framing, composition, selecting angles, and arranges his models accordingly. Now he knows what he wants: to become a photographer. After Oregon, where he was at the bottom of the hierarchy, he suddenly becomes the puppeteer. But after two years, during which he financed his photography with various jobs, he considers the results of his work life- and soulless. He has had enough of the artificial compositions. Once again, he decides to make a radical cut. Not only does he intend to make a living from his photography in the future but he also wants to change the way he sees. Not to play god, master of the image, but to observe, to let himself be guided. He starts to trust his intuition, lets his feelings and instincts take control. He seeks to understand the world through his photography, without preconceptions or reservations. Without a coherent theme, he

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photographs everything and anything that inspires and excites him. Thus collecting a plethora of material, which only makes sense upon review, as themes start to crystalize through the random recurrence of motifs. The latter Schmerberg uses for his projects: installations, exhibitions, books, films, happenings. The choice of medium and subject matter emerges from whatever draws his interest. Schmerberg considers himself a contemporary and looks at himself as a role model, which he consistently questions with a critical voice. Taking his camera on all of his journeys like a diary, he collects impressions: close-ups as well as large panoramic views. In the mirror of Schmerberg's subjective view the world appears like a slipstream of simultaneous events, a never-ending play of chaos and order, creation and destruction. Yet – despite the dissonance – he conveys the impression that everything belongs, and fits.

His authentic and candid gaze gives his artistic work a distinct character, helps him to a rapid rise in advertising for the vision he has is rare and sought-after. Unlike many of his peers, Schmerberg does not approach his commissions any differently than his artistic projects: associatively, playfully and drawing on unexpected ideas. He shoots more than 200 ad campaigns for Nike, Lufthansa, Levi's among others, for which he is honoured with various awards in Cannes. His works WIND for HP and UNDER FIVE, an Aids awareness campaign for the United Nations, are included in the archives of the Film Department at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Whereas the advertising world is fast-paced and impatient, Schmerberg allows himself time to complete his personal work. For the series DIRTY DISHES, he portrays the leftovers he encounters in the numerous restaurants he visits all around the world: empty plates, ravaged table decorations, remnants of food. The wait staff is marginalized as mere peripheral figures, shown but through an anonymous arm or gloved hand. Many associations arise: of the relationship between waste and hunger, poverty and wealth.

A recurring theme is the environment. An installation in Berlin's Tiergarten and an accompanying book are dedicated to the tree: HOLY WOOD. FLOWERS IN EXILE is another long-term project for which he documents cut flowers and how they function as signifiers when we are overwhelmed by our feelings: in love, in death but also as a demonstration power. Schmerberg is incessantly examining our everyday life with critical introspection and finds metaphors for crucial questions concerning our societal system.

Time and time again he confronts his own shortcomings, also in film. For HOMMAGE À NOIR he addresses common prejudices – including his own – about Africa. In the black and white film he discovers a fascinating, vital continent full of contradictions. UNESCO honours his portrayal with an award nomination.

In POEM he analyzes society's lost relationship with the German language, its power and beauty. He succeeds in casting renowned actors such as Klaus Maria Brandauer and Academy Award winner Luise Rainer and compiles 19 poems into an associative array of images. For each text he chooses a different

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cinematic approach, creating his own nucleus for film. Today, POEM is one of the most popular educational films in German schools.

Big questions need big answers, Schmerberg believes. He is convinced that the time of the individual is over, that pressing issues can only be solved in a community. As part of his project DROPPING KNOWLEDGE, the artist and his team collect a series of questions, which end up being answered by 112 dedicated representatives from various disciplines and backgrounds at a grand round table on Berlin's Bebelplatz. Artists, NGO delegates, revolutionaries, philosophers and many more gather to answer the 100 most crucial questions of the time in a discussion that is broadcast around the world. The answers are personal and rooted in experience. Even though THE TABLE OF FREE VOICES may not solve all societal issues, the dialogue created by the platform dropping knowledge reinforces the awareness that many are working on solutions and that they are able to communicate. This strengthens the sense of community and may even unlock dormant potential. It is the latter that Schmerberg seeks to provide with a space for growth through such interactive projects. Taking the 11200 answers to the 100 most urgent questions, he creates the film PROBLEMA, which can be downloaded for free at droppingknowledge.org.

Currently Schmerberg works on his long-term project INDARELLA. A total of 216 days of shooting spread over numerous trips over several years. To create a poetic and cinematic journey through India: a portrait of the subcontinent with its multiple facets, a frenzy of images.

As an artist, as an activist, Schmerberg uses a myriad of strategies to chase a vision that evolution, change, is possible. This is a life-long game of trial and error with an uncertain outcome.

NORBERT SERVOS (translated from German)