

Gold
European Photography 2001

by Ian Jeffrey

Gold, retailing at SFr 38,- is an enticing concept by photographer Peter Tillessen and publisher Lars Müller. I am only assuming that Peter Tillessen exists, for those of us familiar with Joan Fontcuberta and the Barcelona School of Deception know that we should not take everything for granted in today's world of photography. There is one quite suspicious item in Tillessen's brief biography; it claims that he was awarded „the Swiss Prize for Professional Photography“ in the year 2000. The Swiss, on the evidence of *Gold*, must have a very expansive idea of the professional, certainly wide enough to take in the non-professional too. Photographers of the old school - hard, experienced men in black leather jackets, fresh in from Afghanistan or Kurdistan - would more than likely be nonplussed by *Gold*, for its contents, 222 pictures in all, arranged in sets of 10 or 12, look as if they could have been taken within easy reach of the photographer's front door, within the space of a few days and at absolutely no risk to himself. Old world art lovers would be sceptical too, for there is no sign here of what you might once have called talent: no acutely observed forensic details, no frissons, no cathartic moments, no visual tropes of the kind we once adored. Nor, I think, would postmodern curators warm to *Gold*, for it seems almost content-free: no pathos-rich snapshots from forgotten villages in the Balkans, no ulcerated Ukrainians in the style of Michailov.

There are, however, others who should be readily drawn into Tillessen's world. Think of them as connoisseurs in a special sense, as archaic aesthetes from the 1970s, when taxonomy was all the rage. *Gold* is, in fact, something of a quiz or test for the learned. Here then are some of my responses, which you might like to compare with your own. In one set of 10, called *Gold Piece* (or *Goldvreneli*, which must be a term in Swiss dialect), the photographer follows a young woman shopper through a number of relatively prosperous streets on a bright day. I recall that Sam Samore, the American, did similar sleuthing in the 1990s. And then there's Sophie Calle, and more recently the Swede, Ulf Lundin. You might add to the list. All these though liked to think of themselves as undercover agents dealing in secrets to which you would like to have access. Tillessen's, on the other hand, is the most sophomoric stalking imaginable. Likewise in *Suspects*, which features 12 individuals idling or waiting in cars, in shop doorways or on railway station platforms, as if they or Tillessen had vaguely heard of Philip-Lorca diCorcia's semi-staged street scenes from L. A.

If most of us put ourselves to listing near-contemporary photo-modes, we could think of any number: car-window, landscapes, giant epidermal portraits in the German style, distant car parks, casual encounters in Russia or the Philippines. We would exhaust ourselves just thinking about it, whereas Tillessen has gone out to make his own versions, maybe just to see what might be involved in, say, „detective“ photography in the style of Calle. It is also as if he has deliberately not tried very hard, although this might be a false impression on my part. It was enough, it sometimes seems looking through *Gold*, to find ten or so pictures with a theme: the 10 covered trucks, for instance, which make up Form and Content. Anyone could do that, you think if they took the categories with a pinch of salt, as Tillessen appears to have done. But surely, the transcendental sense mutters, ART should be about something more than this? Isn't *Gold*, the same sense goes on, user friendly to an embarrassing degree? Well, yes it is, and in this respect is part of a current tendency towards what you might call do-it-yourself-art. A few years ago it was, I think, called „bedroom art“ amongst observers, and it often took the shape of things arranged on shelves or of framed pictures put out on table tops. By now it has gathered momentum, and the last I was of it was in the Spring of

2001 in the Old Tate in London in the shape of a 63-minute film by Tacita Dean of cows grazing on a coastal landscape.

Why this sort of renewed arte povera development now? At a guess, I would say that it is because new art in the past few decades has been heavily patrolled by curatorial staff, to the point that art-going has become an oppressive business involving any number of special arrangements and curatorial palaver. It is interesting that Tillessen's introductory essay, by Ulf Erdmann Ziegler, discusses gold with respect to jewellery and dental repairs, but makes hardly any reference to the artwork. It is also worth remarking that a postscript to *Gold* lists 48 small volumes by Tillessen in a series called Serial Killers, from which *Gold* has been selected. These were published in „tiny runs of 5+2“. Looking through the titles you might get the impression of someone who has, maybe from the beginning, just given up on the posh art world and decided to suit himself, as a kind of one-person homemade avant-garde, a poor-man's Picabia. More power then to Tillessen's elbow, in the certain knowledge that there is a lot more to come - maybe tomorrow.