

# ROM PHOTOGRAPHIC DIARY

Christoph Brech

By Arnold Nesselrath

## Eternal Moment

Rome is probably the only modern metropolis in the world where ruins figure among the major attractions. As early as 1100, Hildebert de Lavardin (1056 - 1133 or 1134), a pilgrim to Rome and bishop of the distant city of Le Mans in France, began a poem about Rome with the emphatic verse "Rome, without compare, though all but shattered" or in the original Latin version "Par tibi, Roma, nihil, cum sis prope tota ruina". These are the ruins from which Christianity emerged. No conqueror was ever able to reign over Rome, regardless of how far it contracted within its ancient walls, or how much the glorious Forum Romanum degenerated to a campo vaccino. The conquerors were far more inclined to be influenced by Rome. The tremendous achievements of Bramante, Michelangelo, and Raphael, of Borromini, Bernini, and Pietro da Cortona during the Renaissance and Baroque periods always stood in contrast to the spectacular antique statuary and frescoes found by simple vineyard owners, clever grave robbers, curious clerics, and many other treasure seekers.

While popes and municipal governments wavered between competition and cooperation in their attempts to change the face of the city, the ancient grottos and extensive network of underground passageways under the Oppian, a spur of the Esquiline, one of the Seven Hills of Rome, proved to be the remains of Nero's overwhelming Golden House. Little has been preserved of the ephemeral creations of Roman festive culture, which was not only very elaborate during the Baroque period, but throughout the ages. We are

dependent on descriptions of it. In traditions, however, this culture still lives on and provides us with an opportunity to encounter it. Although towards the end of the eighteenth century the Enlightenment seems to have conclusively dictated a re-orientation of Occidental culture, the fathers of the European Union chose precisely Rome as the place to set down their ideas for a peaceful continent after the gruesome catastrophe of the Second World War. This is where they signed the underlying treaty for the establishment of the European Union just over half a century ago. Mass tourism to Rome in our day, which is currently on the rise, provides a bizarre indication of Rome's undiminished attraction and, at the same time, a danger for Occidental culture on the whole.

The most recent, materialistic manifestation of the conviction inherent in Hildebert's dictum and humanistic phrasing, in the version rendered by the art historian and former mayor of Rome Giulio Carlo Argan (1909 - 1992), sounds, despite his charming Italian diction, like a metaphysical invocation: "Roma è una città eterna, perché la sua decadenza non finisce mai" – "Rome is an eternal city, because its decadence will never end."

How inspiring the eternal city was and still can be, is best expressed by visual artists, few of whom ever actually came from Rome. Most of those whose achievements shaped our image of the city were born nearly anywhere else but in Rome. No other centre of art, neither Paris, nor London, nor New York has ever attracted as many draughtsmen,

painters, sculptors, architects, photographers, filmmakers and now video artists as Rome has over the centuries. Artists from Italy, as well as many foreign countries, often settled here and found patrons. With the photographic diary he produced during his year as an artist in residence at the Villa Massimo, the German artists' academy in Rome, Christoph Brech stands, at least at this moment, as the latest in a long series of artists from north of the Alps for whom the city represented the destination of a pilgrim age for two reasons: as the centre of Christianity and as a Mecca of art.

Christoph Brech characterised every day he spent in Rome through a photograph taken on that particular day. There are only two gaps due to absences. Short excursions to Olevano, Ostia, Palestrina, Frascati or Tivoli belong to the classic programme of any visitor to Rome: "Rome and Environs" is a typical title for a tourist guidebook. These locations appear in Brech's photographs in haunting experiments with colour, distorted compositions, blurred effects or enamoured motifs similar to local districts of Rome.

The diary not only views monuments from a highly individual perspective, the author has also observed people who live in Rome, who change the city and therefore its monuments consciously or unconsciously, noticeably or unnoticeably, but in any case inevitably. We encounter them all: the greengrocer and the butcher, the dedicated teacher and her class, and the lonely demonstrator, the policemen, the member of the guardia, on foot and horseback, the

restorer and the beggars and homeless, the tourists and the newlyweds, the passers-by and all ranks of clergy. Despite the many spontaneously recorded moments, including the mood captured before an impending thunder storm (21 April) or under the oppressive weight of the yellow Scirocco (18 September), the laconic captions, which reveal only the street or the place where the photograph was taken - and of course the date - always ensure that a certain distance is maintained to the subject depicted. The observer is expected to puzzle over the individual pictures, to make discoveries in them, to read them, to continue the stories they tell, to interact with the people, to perhaps be reminded of a personal experience in Rome, to be inspired or irritated, or to simply be affected by the light, colours and shapes. It is impossible to comprehend everything, only those who have carefully watched life and people in everyday Rome will be able to understand many of the allusions (such as on 19 August).

Christoph Brech's kaleidoscope of Rome follows his ramblings through the city. Conceived as a photographic diary, the artist tells us about himself through his work. Unlike the globalised tourist, or those who travel for the education - if there still are such people - he initially only risks a furtive glance at the Capitol: from the rear (14 March). His Rome, however, revolves around the Villa Massimo, which is alone the subject of 19 pages in his calendar, including a photograph of the participants of the sundrenched Palm Sunday Procession, staged annually on the grounds of the estate, in complementary hues of light green and red (9 April). This tradition is upheld by the neighbouring parish with the permission of whoever is the director of the villa at the moment. Christoph Brech leaves the Villa Massimo to take his first steps into the Eternal City on sunny spring days (15 March), passing under the blossoming trees that lend a festive air to many of the broader

streets and piazzas beyond the historical centre in Rome at this time of year. In doing so, he looks into the architecture of an urban landscape from the first half of the last century which, despite the anonymity of its hybrid stacking, is still reminiscent of the sight-lines drawn by Benozzo Gozzoli for Fra Angelico in the private chapel of Pope Nicholas V at the Vatican around 1450. On six different days of the year Christoph Brech takes us with him to Santa Maria Maggiore, where he has also come to feel at home, even singing in the church choir on Sundays. He gives us a personal tour, he needs no guide, no canon or monsignor to unlock anything for him. On the contrary, Brech demonstrates a familiarity by differentiating the views he provides: the pull of the seemingly endless abyss as seen from Bernini's hidden spiral staircase, in which square bronze rods seem to bite through marble (3 August), is contrasted with the metaphysical light that flooded the decorated basilica like an apparition on the day before the celebration of the church's consecration (4 August). Naturally, Christoph Brech also quoted some of the creative work from his Roman video installations within this year: on 31 March, his film "Punto" which like the photographic diary deals with colours, shapes, sounds, and motion in the city, and on 4 April, 24 July and 16 November, his major portrait project at the Campo Verano Cemetery "Ritratto Romano" the theme of which is the people who lived and died in Rome 100 years ago. He was particularly affected by the children's graves he found in the expansive cemetery of the metropolis in nearby Prima Porta (5 June and 11 October).

He completed commissions for German institutions like the German Historical Institute in Rome and the Bibliotheca Hertziana (30 May and 23 September). He recorded the dynamics generated by different ages and cultures, which in turn came together in a unique museum symposium during the 500th anniversary celebration of the

Vatican Museums and which he sensed in the encounter between the antique statues of the Laocoon Group and Okwui Enwezor, the Nigerian curator of the Documenta XI in Kassel, together with a friend, the Ethiopian video artist and film director Theo Eshetu (13 December). On this same occasion he came into close proximity with Pope Benedict XVI (16 December).

Christoph Brech's photographic diary was created out of a digital sketchbook. The first painter whom we know by name and who undertook a journey to Rome was Master Bertram of Minden. We know about his sojourn because he took the precaution of drafting a will before departing from Hamburg in 1390 in case anything happened to him during the long trip, as was indeed the case a century and a half later, in 1537, when the young Hans Cranach, the son of Lucas Cranach the Elder, died in Bologna at the age of 24. Most artists came to Rome at an early age in order to gather impressions and to further their training. For many the city was the important final destination of their years as an apprentice or journeyman. We encounter their enthusiasm in numerous sketchbooks in which they collected their visual impressions as fleeting notes, as precisely drawn vistas, or by capturing a statue accurately, some detail of an architectural element, or whatever else roused their curiosity. While only a few of the sheets produced in the wake of a visit to Rome in 1508/1509 by the Dutch Painter Jan Gossaert, known as Mabuse, have been preserved (fig. 1), a whole book and a number of individual drawings still exist by one of his compatriots a generation later, Maarten van Heemskerck from Haarlem. Since so many of his works were created in the first weeks of his stay, one can imagine how Heemskerck hungrily went off after his arrival in May 1532, swept along by his spontaneous enthusiasm for everything he saw (fig. 2). Another Dutchman, Hendrik Goltzius, in 1591, apparently approached his

ramblings with more forethought. When he arrived home he published his renderings of Roman statues as engravings, offering them for sale as a modern art publisher might do with photographs today.

Artists' memories of Rome were not always just documentary in character, despite all of the information that can be garnered about individual corners of the city from their depictions. There is the nearly abstract, uninhibitedly analytic approach taken by the bronze sculptor from Nuremberg Hermann Vischer in 1515/1516 when he was studying great structures from antiquity like the Pantheon and the Colosseum. Peter Paul Rubens, who experienced the discovery of the Aldobrandini Wedding, one of the most famous frescoes of Roman Antiquity, in 1606, a work now at the Vatican, almost immediately received commissions in Rome and took such pains to record the Laocoon Group at the Vatican from so many different perspectives that the numerous drawings are almost like a 3-D scan. And in his delicate watercoloured vedute another Flemish painter, Bartholomeus Breenbergh, created highly idiosyncratic yet subtly, suggestive renderings of ancient buildings on site roughly two decades later.

Northerners' views of the Eternal City were not always ephemeral. The Flemish brothers Paul and Matthijs Brill (fig. 3) settled just as permanently in Rome towards the end of the sixteenth century as the Frankfurt artist Adam Elsheimer did a few years later. One of the greatest French painters, Nicolas Poussin, adhered for only a short time to the pressure put upon him by his king and Cardinal Richelieu and finally returned to Rome where he died in 1665 as did his compatriot Claude Lorrain in 1682.

The establishment of foreign academies in Rome, particularly the Academie de France à Rome founded by King Louis XIV in 1666,

increased the focus on the city and the people who lived there. While in earlier times Maarten van Heemskerck, his contemporary, the Nuremberg painter and engraver Georg Pencz, the Brill brothers, their friend Jan Breughel, and Peter Paul Rubens, had to find their own way around in Rome's urban milieu, artists in residence like François Boucher, Pierre Subleyras, Honoré Fragonard, Jean-Antoine Houdon and Jacques Louis David remained in French surroundings in the academy where Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres served as perhaps the most important director and creative figure, from 1835 to 1840, along with Balthus, from 1960 to 1977.

The interaction between the city and the artists who visit it is always an individual matter. While Fragonard's friend Hubert Robert created his own fantastic image of Rome during the second half of the eighteenth century in pastiches based on his studies of the city (fig. 4), the Swiss artist Johann Heinrich Fussli, confronted with the monumentality of antiquity, expressed his despair in works like the famous drawing of himself sitting in front of the fragments of the colossal statue of Emperor Constantine on the Capitol (fig. 5). Picasso, who spent time in Rome in 1917 along with Sergei Diaghilev and his "Ballets russes", visited the famous sites and viewed the great masterpieces in the city and at the Vatican, but seems to have drawn direct creative inspiration only from the Lazian flower girls on the Spanish Steps. With his modern architecture, the American architect Richard Meyer has gouged the city; to him, Rome is completely alien.

While for centuries it was virtually unthinkable for a great European classical painter, sculptor, or architect to never have been to Rome - indeed, it is an often discussed question in Albrecht Dürer's biography - today, having visited Rome no longer seems a

special merit of an artist, at least not at first sight. Other centres of art and the dynamics of biennales have more influence on stylistic development. In earlier times Rome as a city was not just a topographic reality, Rome was also an ideal in terms of Christianity and world culture. The effect of such a city is based not only on its extraordinary attractions, but also on the sense of distance experienced through the difficulties connected with a long journey. This is seen over the centuries in the sketchbooks of artists ranging from the Flemish Renaissance painter Pieter Breughel through to his colleague from England and representative of Romanticism William Turner. In an age where the jet set, cheap flights, and mass tourism, attempt to negate time and distance to as great an extent as possible, only the ordinary is prized so that destinations which have become completely interchangeable can be compared. Since the ravages of time do not progress with the same speed as the Internet, globalisation must demystify the magic of anything that is extraordinary in order to achieve the highest possible degree of compatibility. Hence, Christoph Breeh does not simply go off searching for monuments that serve as manifestations of the origin and transformation of the Occidental artistic tradition. Instead, the monuments are often embedded in activities, such as the Colosseum, for example, when a large screen is being taken down from its scaffolding. It had been mounted in front of the Colosseum as an ephemeral festive structure. Some evenings before it served as a projection screen so that the Pope could be viewed during his procession along the Stations of the Cross by the huge number of pilgrims (20 April). Without the screen, the few bays that were restored years before become visible again, lighter than the rest of the ruin and with no chance currently of the work being continued. Breeh chooses not to show the antique

bronze equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius on the strange launching ramp in the Capitoline Museum, on which it has recently been installed to protect it from the air pollution to which Romans are subjected every day. Instead the detail of the horse's head against the illuminated glass ceiling creates an intentional feeling of discomfort (6 April), as in an operating room.

Inevitably one or the other of Christoph Brech's photographs in his Roman diary will be used now and again for documentary purposes, like almost all of the sketchbooks that show impressions of Rome. But that is not the author's intention. He appeals to aesthetic sensibilities by experimenting with trees in an ornamental manner (16 and 28 March or 18 July), by taking time to notice the dynamics of divergent forces in the structures of a pavement marking when he glances out of a window of the Vatican just before entering the Sistine Chapel (20 July) with its famous frescoes by Michelangelo, or the pavement marking's tranquil flow during a walk along the banks of the Tiber (11 January). In every photograph he works with compositional criteria. In contrast to a classical, monumental Rome photographer like the Swiss artist Leonard von Matt, who masterfully tells epic stories in black and white analogue photographs, Christoph Brech uses digital colour, which lends his pictures something of the joy of storytelling and playfulness evident in miniatures and illuminations.

Brech follows the old tradition of awakening associations and formulating statements by contrasting pictures on the pages on either side of an open book. On 9 and 10 December, two obelisks are the topic addressed. The one, in front of the Church of Trinità dei Monti, above the Spanish Steps, is enclosed in open scaffolding and looks like an absurd Christmas tree, the other sticks up out of draped scaffolding, behind which the Nativity scene in St Peter's Square is actually being arranged. On 7 and 8 May the

classical symmetry of the antique oculus, the round opening at the top of the Pantheon's dome, is contrasted with the modern square of a window in Richard Meyer's contemporary enclosure for the Ara Pacis, which attempts to hold the Baroque dome of the Church of San Carlo al Corso prisoner, like a picture frame from a design store might frame a poster.

The comparisons are not only made side-by-side, but sometimes in succession, as with the graffiti; many visitors to Rome have attempted to inscribe their own lives into that of the Eternal City by naively carving their names into marble monuments. This lasts a little longer than acrylic paint quickly sprayed on the lorries which are racing past the imperial palaces on the Palatine Hill (12 and 14 June).

What seems like a coincidental impression, a spray-painted traffic sign on the Piazza Mincio in the Quartiere Coppedè, the Roman art nouveau quarter (17 August), is in fact an expression of the still lively old Roman enthusiasm for celebrating, in this case the Azzurri victory in the Football World Cup in Berlin in 2006. The sign still stands today on the same spot and, like many ephemeral creations in Rome, it will be visible for a long time to come, testifying to the joy of the people.

Christoph Brech also paraphrases classical themes from other illustrated books about Rome: the spiritual and the secular encountering each other in the form of two Dominicans and two city policemen in front of the Pantheon (22 April). The shapes, structures, and the forces of attraction in the pavement in front of the Pontifical Basilicas already inspired Leonard von Matt (20 August). Just as the confessional secret unites Germans and Italians with one another (21 February), the grandeur of an antique monument separates two people, unsuspecting of how greatly they resemble one another in

posture. In films from the 1950s, such as those with Audrey Hepburn, the happy end would be right around the corner (22 February). The sight of motorcycle taillights at the crossing near the Quattro Fontane (3 November) reminds one of the final sequence of Federico Fellini's film "Roma". Although the maestro often included in his films figures from the streets of Rome, the little peddler of angels and saints (17 December) never actually appeared; he has, however, been a part of the Roman landscape for over 30 years. Precisely when Christoph Brech is not aware of it, his sensitivity as an observant photographer and the fascination of the irresistible phenomena in the streets of Rome become most evident.

The photograph of the Pope's Christmas blessing, *Urbi et Orbi*, in which the Pontiff appears in an aedicule in the distance, above a Nativity scene in the foreground (25 December), unconsciously adopts compositional principles from Raphael's fresco "Fire in the Borgo", painted almost 500 years earlier from the same view, at a time, when the old Church of St. Peter's still stood. Christoph Brech respected the intimacy of the very particular spirituality at the Dominican Generalate in Santa Sabina on the Aventine Hill (2 May). Anyone who experienced the memorable days in Rome after the death of Pope John Paul II in 2005 will perceive the piles of mineral water bottles in front of the Papal Palace in St Peter's Square (3 June), even though they were photographed a year later, not only as an homage to the deceased head of the church, but also, to the Roman mayor and his municipal government, since the authorities provided water for the many millions of people who made a pilgrimage to the coffin of the dead Pope. The pilgrims had caused the number of people in Rome to double within a few days, yet the city ensured the perfect organisation of this unusual display of respect. The perspective from which

Christoph Brech observes Rome throughout the year remains Northern. This is reflected in the romantic colours in which he bathes a veduta of St Peter's on a late November day (29 November). His dramatic view of the narrowing Via Nazionale in back light shows no trace of Southern atmosphere (12 January). As a German, Christoph Brech cannot resist a reference to past dictators, even if - or perhaps just because - it is reflected in a display window across from the parliament building with the European flag waving out front (31 January). His interest throughout the year in the Roman rubbish phenomena (27 April, 26 July, 22 November, 3 February) also betrays the Northerner. The blue bags (7 November) do not contain rubbish, but rubble from a building site that has been packed up for transport according to regulations.

In recent years Christoph Brech has mainly been noted for his video installations. While his films glide in front of the viewer in a short time, in his Roman diary, time passes behind the images almost unnoticed. Indeed, the book attempts to hold time fast, to make it stand still. The creative medium in which Christoph Brech usually works is an ephemeral, transitory one. To create his image of Rome, however, he chose a static medium. The speedy motorino rider, who is not real but exists only as a life-sized painting on the van he seems to be overtaking (which is really driving across the Pons Fabritius, from the Tiber Island to the city) is both a paraphrase of time and illusion in Christoph Brech's art and an allegory of Rome's eternal nature (26 August). A nature which is changed daily by people and light. Both people and light are engaged in a continuing dialogue with the monuments from antiquity or from later periods, even when they are not visible, deteriorating or being created. Christoph Brech has offered us his dialogue so that we can continue it.