



I AM FLESH

WORDS **Adriano Zamperini**

Human bodies have long been photographed and described. Many have been seen and read about. And every community, through its institutions and leaders, has always espoused certain body-types and shunned others. Showing off the desirable ones, and hiding the undesirable. All those who might be perceived as excessive or upsetting. Roger Weiss, donning the role of a visual ethnographer, involves himself in every body-type of contemporary society. Almost adopting a “naturalistic” approach, he isn’t scared to get his hands dirty. To breathe somebody else’s breath.

“The inner self, usually held back as opaque and inaccessible, becomes open and displayed on the skin. So, it’s not about somebody else’s body that conceals a self. Rather, it’s about bodies that reveal a self.”

Accepting that our own images are never fully under control. Rather, he allows them a certain margin, opening up ever-changing and unlooked for perceptions. And with project 35, he invites us to continually switch between the general and the particular, setting in motion a systematic alternation between interior and exterior. He undermines the comforting idea of an established aesthetic of anatomy and takes us on a journey of the body that turns its revelations of intimacy into an exercise of democracy.

The essence of human rights, a key element for any society to call itself democratic, is that the autonomy of the individual rests on the inviolability of the human body. The body, that in past ages was in the hands of God and the ruler. In war, sent to the slaughterhouse by the generals. In the fields and in the factories, abused and deceived by the cheating bosses. Today, instead, our bodies belong to us. Admittedly, even under democracy, politics retain some control over our bodies. Always ready to regulate, to forbid and to issue permits. And yet, political control struggles with bodies reluctant to hand over control of their own fate. There are plenty of scenarios for control – and plenty of dilemmas – from procreation to living wills. One of these scenarios relates to the expressive materialization of the self in the appearance of the body, in the visible identity of the individual. This is the drift of Roger Weiss’ argument.

As phenomenology shows, if the self exists in the world via the body, it can be experienced in two different ways: objectively and a subjectively. Bodies that by their functioning test the limits of their own reality. Shards of the drama of the human condition. In daily life, the body is the self, the dwelling place of my feelings, where I move, the frame for my perspectives. And I can even adopt a perspective of examining my own body. But there are innumerable social occasions where a separation exists between the self and the body. Medical discourse, for example, with its ability to turn a person into a patient. Or, at its most extreme, into a corpse. On which one can operate without any resistance. But even then, the self remains as it were, trapped. Because not only do I have a body, I am a body.



And, today, living as we do in a body-crazed society, individuals are always being called on to “work on” or “look after” their bodies. And if individuals know what they can do – within certain limits – with their own bodies, the problem remains what to do with this freedom, because the body expresses an established rapport with the surround-ing world. Thus becoming an existential option. A topical theme for contemporary democracies.

Roger Weiss’ photographs are life forms that speak by means of the body and not about the body. They relate setbacks and aspirations, weaknesses and strengths, pain and joy. Of rights achieved and rights trodden down. The flesh that exposes itself, calls for others’ perception. Obliging these perceptions to pause on its appearance. A place where the self and the world intermingle and relegate the realm of ideas to second place in order to deal with the realm of the visible.

The inner self, usually held back as opaque and inaccessible, becomes open and displayed on the skin. So, it’s not about somebody else’s body that conceals a self. Rather, it’s about bodies that reveal a self. And, being able to follow every fold, it is possible to feel emotions that become stories. Moments that become history. The photographer, just as he enlarges faces, expands the feelings experienced. In other words, he enables us to “reach within”, putting people in touch with themselves and others.

And thus, these oversize photographs rub up against us, creating the friction that is typical of the human encounter. Every body, though forming and representing defined individuality, is turned outside itself, and is set in a relationship. Not an absorbing empathy but rather an invitation to live a relationship of differences. In which reciprocal differences are a pre-condition for understanding. That is project 35; that is what democracy should be about!

Text translated by Bob Lowe and Marco Sonzogni

