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Milan, 1978-80

Photograph by Gabriele Basilico

Annalisa Sonzogni, March 2019

This image included in the photobook *Milano. Ritratti di fabbriche* (1981), makes me think about the note by Gabriele contained in the volume, in which he explains his technical approach to taking photographs, something almost unheard of today. The note not only gives us tools for understanding the series of photographs in the book, it also conveys the amazement of a photographer who has found a way to capture his subject. It describes the process of 'generating a sort of alphabet', which includes the use of a specific film and set of lens, as well as a keen attention to light. This alphabet is in constant use throughout this series of Milanese portraits, playing a fundamental role. And I believe it has all the right ingredients to take a perfect photograph.

Thinking back on it again and considering the note, I realise the extent of Gabriele's influence on me and other Italian photographers. I first met him while I was studying at the Riccardo Bauer School in Milan. At the time, all of us students mainly used black and white film, in particular the Ilford FP4 superimposed by one stop. We used to call this film "the queen" because it was perfect for every situation. In his note in the photobook, Gabriele describes using the FP4 much in the same way. It is as though his method was passed down to us instinctively, without pressure.

This photograph shows Gabriele using his alphabet. It portrays a factory half in shadow and half in light. The juxtaposition of blacks and whites is perfectly balanced: the white lines of the pedestrian crossing are off-set by the series of black windows on the right; the white light pole on the left is contrasted by the black one just next to it; the shadowy façade is in opposition to the bright one. The darks and lights are reinforced by the use of a wide-angle lens. Using the 20mm, the perspective is accentuated, and it seems as if the factory wanted to escape from the rectangular image, providing an impressive sense of space.

If we half-close our eyes, the photograph appears divided into two matching shapes – one encompassing the black asphalt and shaded portion of the building, and the other comprised of the starkly lit building and the milky-grey sky above it. They seem to fit together like a puzzle. It is this balance that, for me, makes the photograph perfect.

What is more, the pedestrian crossing also plays an important role in accentuating this perfection. In all of Gabriele's Milanese portraits, such urban elements are used to help frame the composition.

Considering this balance, I can see why Gabriele chose to take photos at midday when the sun is at its highest. Light was fundamental to him, he said, as the 'element of my way of photographing the city'. Light shapes what we see; it directs our attention, delineating what is noticeable and what is hidden. It offers a simple way of making both large, dramatic changes, as well as small, subtle ones in a landscape. Light can emphasize form or dissolve shape and solidity, creating ambiguities of depth and scale. In Gabriele's images there are no ambiguities, he used the light in order to accentuate the volume of the buildings, materials and, most importantly, space.

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Annalisa Sonzogni is an artist and lecturer based in London. She completed an MA in photography at the Royal College of Art (2008) and PhD by project (2016) at Kingston University. Working with Photography and Moving image she explores how memory and remembering reconfigure the way we understand and represent iconic architectural buildings. Her site-specific installations are immersive environments that create a bridge between functional and imaginary spaces. Her multidisciplinary practice is often framed by the visual lexicon of modernism. Sonzogni's work has been shown at *Casa del Fascio* in Como (2010); *Pinacoteca di Brera* in Milan (2014), *Old Lillian Baylis School* in London (2015), *Italian Cultural Institute* in Mexico City (2017) and published in Camera Austria, C20 Magazine and Afterimage. She is currently creating a new series of photographs at the Vittoriano in Rome, Italy and developing a body of work at the *Visvevaraya Towers* in Bangalore, India. She is also co-convenor of *Ph The Photography Research Network*.