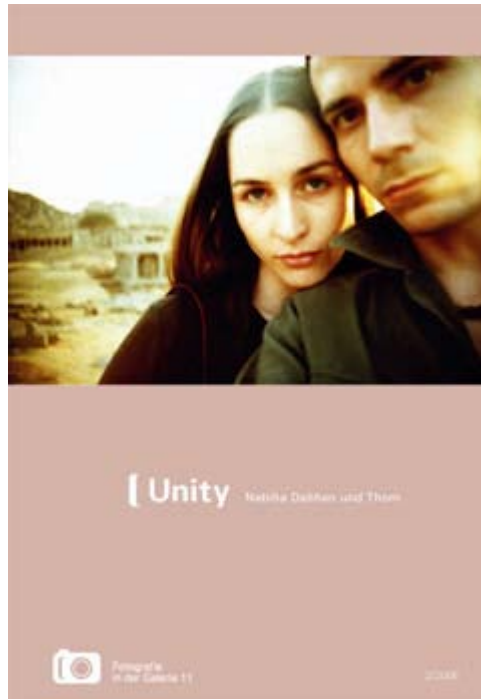


UNITY ART Nabiha + Thom Est. 1997 AD

photographic artworks from over 14 years of mutual inspiration and collaboration in limited edition
www.unityart.eu • mail@unityart.eu • + 49 (0)173 1935204

UNITY – Interview taken from the exhibition catalogue
UNITY Solo show Galerie 11, Gruner + Jahr Hamburg March 2006
300 images 1997 – 2005



Galerie 11 - Short

In 1998, the Gruner + Jahr publishing company set up Galerie 11 with the aim of providing young photographers with a space for presenting works from beyond their day job. Since then, Galerie 11 has evolved into a popular platform for young photographers from all over Germany, with a profile focused on positions at the intersection of art and photography. And so, beyond promoting young talent, this unconventional gallery also makes a vital contribution to the Hamburg art scene.

Apart from this, it serves as a workplace enhancement for G+J employees and a valued forum for our photography experts to share their ideas with others in the photographic trade.

The present brochure is part of a series that documents the exhibitions hosted by G+J.

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UNITY Nabiha & Thom | Solo Show March 10 – May 2006

The idea of self-portraiture in art has changed powerfully over time. Artists' examination of their own self - from classic self-portraits to self-staging and self-alienation - has been a major topic for many centuries. Likewise, Nabiha Dahhan and Thom observe the continual evolution of their joint „self“ using the means of photography. The two photographers are fascinated by the process of ongoing change in their relationship as a couple. In the 300 self-portraits from the UNITY project on display at Galerie 11, they systematically track this process by way of a visual diary. The passage of time and its influence on the couple is expressed in changing hairstyles and clothing. Because the facial expressions also vary considerably, often it is not immediately obvious that the pictures are all of one and the same couple.

The small-scale photographs on exhibit - of Nabiha Dahhan and Thom on vacation, in everyday life or at parties - appear very familiar. Taken out of context, they could be snapshots from anyone's photo album, but the systematic diligence that the couple has brought to photographing each other since 1997 condenses them into a very direct series of self-reflection. Especially the pictures in which a mirror appears - as a symbol of self-recognition - bring this transition from self-portrait to self-reflection to a head. The documentary of the peripatetic couple is noteworthy above all for its experimental treatment of angles, fuzziness, colours and details. A conscious use of the snapshot aesthetic, as is also found in the photographs of Nan Goldin, contributes to capturing a given mood.

The immediacy of the situations - whether the couple are window-shopping, brushing teeth or relaxing - infuses the pictures in UNITY with honesty and authenticity. Nabiha Dahhan and Thom usually look directly at the camera, and the photographs don't appear staged. In fact the camera itself is seen on some of the „mirror pictures,“ further underscoring the importance of photography in the couple's relationship.

At Galerie 11 in the G+J Pressehaus, UNITY, an ongoing project, is being presented to a broad public for the first time, and is at the same time being brought to the attention of industry professionals at Gruner + Jahr.

Ulrike Klug

A Closer Look

Galerie 11 is showing 300 self-portraits from the UNITY photo project by Nabiha Dahhan and Thom. Ulrike Klug and Katrin Schramm interviewed the two artists about their work. The artist couple answered the questions in unison.

In your UNITY photography project, you take pictures of yourselves and of each other. Do you always carry a camera with you?

We have almost always carried one with us for years at this point, and it has come to affect us as much as, say, wearing glasses: It hones our perception. It does hamper us when we don't have a camera. The worst is when you're not allowed to take pictures, as at palaces, temples or on bridges. There are special moments or moods that we want to capture. Knowing that this is impossible sometimes leads to a sense of loss, because we know that at this point, we remember some things only because we have pictures of them.

At heart, the exhibition is an homage to your love. Will you share with us the story of where and when you first met, and how you hit upon the idea of creating a photo documentary of being together?

We first met on Monday, January 20, 1997, at an „Independent Night“ at the Goldene Krone in Darmstadt. I was wearing my blue wig when we first met, and also the next three times we saw each other at a party. Thom didn't know what I looked like without the wig until our fifth meeting, a party at the Zauberberg in Würzburg.



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It was very thrilling to be waiting there without makeup and with my real hair. Of course I was wondering whether he would like me the way I really am. Each one of us had done self-portraits even before we met. So it was only natural to continue doing so as a couple.

The title of the exhibition, UNITY, implies both „union“ and „agreement“ - are you always in agreement?

Yes, in nearly all matters which affect our lives. Disunity between us only arises when things can't be perfectly coordinated even though we have the desire to do something together. Basically, we both want the same thing - but it's not always possible to reconcile this with the challenges of the outside world. As we see it, many relationships fail because the two partners aren't willing to resolve a conflict completely. This requires an ability to reflect, without running from the dark sides of your own inner being - because the other person is a mirror of your own soul. This mutual mirroring inspires you to keep recognising yourself anew.

Did you always intend to exhibit the pictures?

UNITY didn't begin with the intent to publish, but only with the aim of capturing special moments in our life. UNITY is our visual diary.

Your exhibition shows „typical couple pictures“ as well as staged shots, for which you get dressed up, for instance - can you tell us something about how you approach these shots?

The moment determines the picture rather than vice versa. We don't dress up in costumes for our photos - all of it was real, and the pictures are less staged than they may appear. Our preference for coloured lighting and playing with a situation may create the impression that the pictures are staged, but usually we don't change the setting and the light.

The way you two look in the photographs varies so immensely that viewers may only realise at second glance that they are always looking at the same couple. Do you deliberately play with observers' perceptions?

We are delighted that viewers may get this impression. It shows that our constantly changing ideas are reflected in our outward appearance. We do not deliberately play with observers' perceptions, but merely try to map our changing self-perception. Change is the only constant in life. Of course UNITY causes us to observe this process in greater depth. The concept of self describes a lifelong process of change: the assumption that a person always remains the same doesn't do justice to any human life. The seeds for recurrent conflicts are sown when, deep down inside, you insist that you or others always remain the same.

What is the meaning behind the mirror, which appears as an element in many of the photographs?

The mirror first and foremost represents an additional level. Each one of us is trapped in himself and can only ever view others from the outside. A mirror cancels this out. It shows a momentary facet and has many faces, like our pictures. Sometimes the image in the mirror doesn't match the one in your mind which may serve to inspire you, especially if you haven't looked in one for a while. Apart from this, of course we are influenced by the usual interpretations of mirrors in literature.

You work with a range of photographic techniques - which technique is used when?

Most of UNITY was shot on analogue cameras. Even though we now work with digital, we still always keep two analogue cameras at the ready for this. We use a variety of cameras, films, experimental and distortion techniques like pushing, cross-developing, and overexposure, but no tripods and only rarely flash because that leads to a loss of spontaneity and lighting-based mood. We tend to move around a given space instead of placing light as needed, and take pictures manually, using long exposure times. The resulting fuzziness and distortion will often highlight the spirit and vibrancy of a moment. Nor is our choice of colour based on a compulsory concept - we have both colour and black-and-white films in various cameras and will follow our feeling in each case, although colour does tend to predominate.



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Have you developed a joint „trademark“ or „signature“ over the course of „Unity“? Has your photographic joint venture resulted in other joint projects?

UNITY documents an important part of our life. We are changing and developing together, and so is our photographic aesthetic. New influences originating from either one of us are quickly mirrored, adopted and developed further by the other. Our joint „signature“ is evident in the fact that it isn't immediately obvious who took which pictures. Based on „Unity,“ we have jointly planned and realised various works since 1997, such as „Wonderland,“ an abstract work done in the year 2000 in London about the perception of light and colour, and „Is a self-portrait a portrait of the self?“ in 2001 which consists of staged double self portraits. In 2004, we did „The Dream“ in Hamburg, which tells the journey of a young woman to her true self.

Will you be continuing UNITY?

The series shown here is only an excerpt. Of course we will continue to document our change and evolution.

Thank you for the interview.



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