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The perfect caption for your selfie



Untitled, by The Cool Couple.

As the years go by, I find my faith in photo-graphy increasingly challenged. I've never been a total convert to the whole conceptual photography thing to be honest. I've always preferred a good fashion shoot, to a tin in a metaphysical space.

At the same time, much-hyped events like the Fotografia Festival in Rome never fail to spark hope in me. "Maybe this time around..." I found myself murmuring to my curator friend on our way to the opening. "Forget it," he said bluntly. "If there's such a thing as a socially acceptable form of ritual ennui, we're walking right into it."

Now in its 14th year, Fotografia is becoming one of the most anticipated events of the new art season. It was founded by photographer Marco Delogu and is held at Macro, Rome's contemporary art headquarters.

As the last surviving, comprehensible art form in the impenetrable contemporary art jungle, it attracts a diverse crowd. After all, a camera is the coolest gadget for hipster millennials, but also for 40-something dudes whose self-worth is measured by the length of their telephoto lens.

This year's theme for the festival is 'The Present'. My friend and I skim-read the exhibition panel in the first room: "In a world of constant and relentless acceleration, photographic practice – whose mechanisms of production and distribution are now almost immediate – presents itself as art privileged to fix, observe and define the present. The spread of technology, the global sharing thanks to the developments of social networks have all given us the chance to 'save time'. This indulgence is a sort of self-abandonment that creates the premise to cultivate histories, stories, geography and everything connected to life."

"Awesome!" said my friend, perking up. "He's basically inviting us to take selfies!" And so we did. We positioned ourselves in front of two huge photographs, which we deemed the perfect background: they presented a miniature version of Rome with the aqueduct and the Piramide Cestia as white shapes.

The definitive version he posted on Facebook didn't even end up including the full photographs in the background. "Let's leave it like that. I'll just add a caption to let people know where we are," my friend said. We looked at each other for a moment, musing on the best caption. After all, we were art curators attending the vernissage of a photography festival, not just some besties pulling duck faces at a One Direction concert. We had to show we owned the medium and were able to use it with irony and self-control.

"I guess the caption is the hard part," I pointed out after a few idea-less moments. Looking around, we found that this didn't only apply to our own narcissistic efforts, but also the pictures surrounding us. The difficult part wasn't to take photographs but, rather, to justify them.

"Well, we at least have Facebook followers to keep posted," argued my friend. He pointed at the photographs on the wall: "What's their excuse?"

I speed-walked through the first room, which was busting at the seams with conceptual photographs, but then stopped for a bit in front of some black and white pictures with more of a storytelling aura to them. Of course, displaying Paolo Pellegrin's pictures – of the everyday life of a Roman family – is a guaranteed winner. The human element never fails to attract, especially if paired with Pellegrin's mastery of working with light and shadow. Sharp rays bring out the different times of day and the



Aqua Claudia, by Hans-Christian Schink.

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varying moods shown in the family members' faces and bodies.

Next to Pellegrin's series, Hans-Christian Schink compares the contrasting architecture of the EUR (residential and business area) of Rome, built under Fascism and the ancient Roman ruins. He then concentrates on a part of the city called Aqua Claudia, where 1930/1940s buildings lie in close proximity to the Roman aqueduct.



Sevla, by Paola Pellegrin.

"I see a lot of past, but I can't really see the present here," said my friend dismissively.

Among the numerous series at Fotografia, Approximation to the West by Niccolò Benetton e Simone Santilli – dubbed the Cool Couple – stopped us in our tracks. Only a minimal part of the series involves actual photographs. Posters, postcards and images of various kinds analyse the cultural landscape in the northeastern Italian Alps.

In this area, people's sense of belonging has been challenged by rapid industrial development and land reclamation. This has resulted in their being torn between a western Italian identity and a more eastern, Soviet one. This tension is exemplified by a pink poster in a Sex Pistols-like graphic style (the Cool Couple had to live up to their name) which reads: "Never trust the West again."

"It seems that the most startling work at this photography festival is the non-photographic one," said my friend snootily. Indeed. Walking to the last section of the festival we were greeted by Rachel De Joode's Metabolism. These were weird, bi-dimensional installations mixing indistinguishable body parts in a photographic collage with rocks. It was the last straw of nonsense.

"What the hell?" blurted out my curator friend, throwing his hands in the air in despair and finally giving up on finding a cohesive narrative for the festival. "You know what? Let's take a last selfie in front of this horror and then we're out of here."

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