

**Serge Marcel Martinot**  
**„un-deux-trois“**  
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Un-deux-trois – urban realities become serial surrealities.

By Dr. Matthias Harder

When a photographer spends half his life on the banks of a river, not only does the river invariably dominate his field of vision, it inevitably becomes a theme. Serge Marcel Martinot grew up on the Île St. Louis on the river Seine, in the very heart of Paris. He began roaming the city streets and the surrounding countryside at an early age. In his teens, Martinot became a telegram boy, and then served in the French Army as a dog trainer. In 1970, after an apprenticeship as a photo technician, he moved to Hamburg where he worked in various photographic laboratories. He became a dye-transfer specialist and later turned his attention to electronic photo processing.

Back in Paris in 1978, Martinot developed the idea of the “un-deux-trois”. The point of departure was his photograph of a long barge on the Seine. It was an analytical approach to photography – the flat boats in the photographic triptych evolving into metaphors for being on the move, for the cross-border back and forth of traditions – and one that was to set the tone for all of Martinot’s work to this day. In Hamburg, where Martinot resettled in 1991, he analyses and photographs in three steps, amongst other things, the pleasure steamers on the inner and outer Alster. Pressing the release three times in a row, he takes sequential photographs of particular boats from an identical perspective, resulting in the perception that the boat in question is out of line with its own axis. The crooked three-dimensionality suggested in these photographs triples back threefold into two-dimensionality.

Martinot particularly likes to observe people going about their everyday business, in the streets, on fairgrounds in parks or in museums. He fits these anonymous characters, his contemporaries, into his three-part patterns of movement like extras, just as he does barges, roller coasters and wind-blown trashbags, motifs occasionally found in the surrealistic feature films of the Twenties. We see people taking strolls, anglers fishing in rivers, people riding escalators, waiters, day trippers, bungee jumpers, skateboarders, window dressers or museum visitors. We see them in threefold separation, the images severed from one another, but moving in unison from real life into surreality.

It was a Frenchman as well, the physiologist Etienne-Jules Marey, who at the close of the 19th Century, created photographic studies of movement. Yet Martinot is not driven by the aspect of simultaneity, a phenomenon that impelled the painters, sculptors and photographers of the early 20th Century, but rather by the succession of the flow of movement; a short little story happening within three frames, but also, because of overlapping pictorial details, between them. The identical vantage points and backgrounds, as well as the simultaneous impression of a slight shift of perspective from picture to picture, make these photos so special and contradictory. Take, for example, the un-deux-trois of the brightly illuminated Eiffel Tower. The dark, angular houses in the foreground slant against the adjacent houses in the neighboring images to such an extent that one would think the pictures were taken from different angles. However, this perception deceives. The sequence of tower lights beaming in three different directions is in accordance with the succession of the three photo frames.

Serge Marcel Martinot, however, is not a photographer of architecture but rather of street life. As such, he continues the legendary black and white tradition of his French colleagues Henri Cartier-Bresson, Izy, Willy Ronis or Edouard Baubat, albeit with a different, singular idea of photography. These mini-reportages consisting of three exposures on a single print are also very different from the urban panorama photographs so popular towards the end of the 19th Century.

The un-deux-trois of hip-swinging women make up a series within a series, the camera zeroing in directly on the hips, very closely, and just behind the object of desire. Like a voyeur, Martinot spontaneously pursues women on the street for a few steps, and then shoots from the hip (to use an expression consistent with the theme) without looking through the lens or checking the angle. As with all un-deux-trois, he develops three negative frames in succession. Not only does the sequence of movement appear to be authentic, it is authentic, the blurred movement reflecting the mood of the image. Photographers must often move quickly to catch a picture, yet Martinot would like the observer to take his or her time when viewing his photos. It takes a while for us to learn how to view the pictures one by one, and then threefold within the sequence.

Dogs and birds are also recurrent protagonists in Martinot's short fables. They prance through his triptychs so naturally, one almost forgets it was Martinot himself who caught the scene by choosing the perspective. The subliminal humour and quiet melancholy found in many of the sequences is especially present in a scene from the "Dom", a fair and amusement park held annually in Hamburg. Several dogs happen to meet in front of a booth that is boarded up, most likely in the early afternoon. The upper part of the booth is decorated with poster paintings of "wild animals" – lions, elephants and rhinoceros – set in an unspoiled, steppe-like landscape. In the bottom half of the photograph, in the everyday reality of Hamburg city life, we see the real animals, domesticated and harmless. The contrast between reality and image serves as an interesting backdrop for the concrete, almost bored encounter of the three dogs. They pay no more attention to one another than they do to the painted animals.

Because of the conceptual stringing together of three images differing only slightly in detail, the eye is inevitably drawn from left to right and then back again. The beholder, in an effort to comprehend the situation, strives to turn back time by glancing to the left, then moving the eyes to the right and back again, thereby reversing the motion. The movement in Martinot's photography takes place in successive jerks, like the frozen stills of a chronologically led life. Another unique feature of his artistic work is the tension between (supposed) repetition and (minute) variation as a form of narrative. These photographic triptychs are much more than everyday voyeuristic themes or tiny reportages. They are brilliantly simple, yet at the same time extremely complex analytical divisions of everyday life into subjective snippets of reality, packaged on black and white silver-gelatine stories.

English translation © Ginny Martinot

The book "un-deux-trois" with over 40 un-deux-trois photographs by Serge Marcel Martinot, will be appearing 4 April 2004, on the occasion of the exhibition. It can be purchased for the duration of the exhibition (4 April - 4 July 2004) in the gallery at a subscription price of 22 € (after that 30 €).

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