



Jonathan Monk | LA AIR | 2020 | Inkjet print on high gloss paper | 29,7 x 29,7 cm | 400 unique prints with signed certificate.

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LA AIR  
JONATHAN MONK

Jonathan Monk's publication comprises a full-size slide printed at the centre of a square sheet of paper. The square format is neutral, referring neither to landscape nor portrait. Rather, it emulates the dimensions of the slide frame, enveloping it, and detaching itself even further from the photographed man at the centre. Self-assured and smiling, he poses against the railings lining a Southern European pavement – is he standing in the foreground or in the background of the work? The motif with the slide frame is inextricably linked to the paper void, embodying a statement and an echo at the same time. Aug 75, it reads in faded lettering on the right side of the slide frame. We're looking at a

reproduction of a forty-five-year-old image and, as the years go by, the man on the holiday snap will seem even further removed. Made in England, written in red, further enlightens us as to where this 35-mm slide was once developed, sharing its place of origin with the artist behind the work, who was born in Leicester on 4 February 1969.

Jonathan Monk was six years old when he took this picture in front of the casino in Saint-Raphaël on the southern French coast. The smiling figure posing against the white railings and looking into the camera is his father, Owen Monk. It is the first photo

Jonathan remembers having taken in his life – but other than that, the memories attached to the motif are scant.

Precisely the idea of memory and its fickle nature is vibrantly present in the work. Monk has manipulated the sky section behind his father in Photoshop, gradually changing the colour – albeit very slightly – from one print to the next. If we line up all four hundred inkjet copies next to each other, the sky will slowly glide across the colour spectrum away from its blue beginnings. Suddenly, all the colours appear plausible, as our brains adapt to changes faster than we imagine. Likewise, memory is not a static entity. Brain research has demonstrated that memory and emotions are linked – our recollections are adjusted every time we recall the past and thus biased relative to our emotional state. All holiday snaps are unique and, at the same time, unbelievably alike. Like performative travel rituals, they spring from a shared 'Kodak culture' revealing more about us at the macroscopic rather than the individual level. All things unique face an imminent risk of disappearing. That's why we make copies – to 'certify' the original or the moment. 'Is there repetition or is there insistence?', Gertrude Stein asks her audience philosophically in *Lectures in America*, 1935.



LA AIR is the title of Jonathan Monk's publication. It probably references Bruce Nauman's artist book *LA AIR* from 1970, comprising monotonous snapshots of the polluted skies of Los Angeles. Nauman's idea of disclosing a limited view of an infinite space is in keeping with the ingenious employment of appropriation and humour in Monk's practice generally. The title of the publication should perhaps be read as l'air – thus recalling the air above the palm trees and the casino in Southern France. The dual title makes good sense from the perspective of the tourist where words that seem familiar may have radically different meanings across national borders – pain in French and English being an apt illustration of this.

Like the publication title, Jonathan Monk's art is not based on a defined language. It is a conceptual practice refusing to be pigeonholed by a distinct form or signature. The range of his collected oeuvre includes text-based works, drawings, paintings, objects, photos, video, and slide projections, etc. Often, his works reference the works of other artists; in particular, he re-examines elements from minimalism, pop art, and the heyday of conceptual art during the 1960s–70s. Adopting an informal approach, he examines central topics on originality and artistic origin. What is a copy, exactly? How does our view of originals change when a volume of copies comprises the core of the work rather than the individual picture? Monk once said about the photo that he is 'more interested in the possibilities of reproduction than in the pictures themselves.' He demonstrated this, for example, at his solo show *Exhibit Model Two* in 2016. Here, Monk obliterated the gallery walls by plastering them with photographic wallpaper on which were printed black-and-white installation photos from

his shows over the past twenty years. The result was a retrospective installation format merging with the gallery space, thereby dissolving the framework of the physical experience of viewers. It might be somewhat misleading to call an exhibition without works retrospective. As always in Jonathan Monk's practice, it is the concept behind the approach that underpins the work. Retrospective may be more accurate.

Regardless of which format the copy may assume, it will contain possibilities continually explored by Monk in his work. The copy is a stand-in – you don't see it – you see through it. Just how far the eyes can see is up to the viewer, however, as there will often be more than one vanishing point in Monk's graphic works. A 'generation loss' could easily be understood as a group of people having lost something. In reality, it's a technical term for a 'cumulative loss of quality occurring when making a copy of the copy'. For Jonathan Monk, however, each new displacement becomes a picture in its own right to be placed in a family tree of antecedents. Man's genetic material is the result of replication. Our DNA is structured to copy itself with meticulous precision. In this way, the DNA facilitates a stable passing on of the genetic material from one generation to the next. But just like the chromosomes in our cells, human culture is based on continuation. In contrast, the DNA of culture consists of rituals and guidelines, which may appear to supersede our own biology in complexity. Like father, like son – and, then again, perhaps not.

Family relations are present in the work *Replica I*, which toys with the idea of children following their parents. Here, Jonathan Monk has used the original slide of his father, also the motif in this publication. *Replica I* comprises two rotary trays, both containing eighty slides with the same motif. Each slide in the tray is a duplicate of the previous one, which makes the projection of the photo degenerate slowly during projection. In the end, the series of slides deteriorates into an unrecognisable abstraction, before starting all over again and Monk's father, once again, appearing – like a distant memory slowly taking shape.



*Replica I* | 2000-2001 | Media: Slide projection | dimensions variable | Courtesy: Lisson Gallery | Credit photo: Jonathan Monk

'(...) The photograph of the missing being, as Susan Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star', wrote the French theorist Roland Barthes. Representing a peripheral past is the common denominator of photos and constellations. One of the brightest stars in the northern hemisphere, Capella, lies forty-two light years away – roughly the same distance measured in time as the photo of Owen Monk in Saint-Raphaël.

- Andreas Albrechtsen