

## **The Via Emilia. Roads, journeys, borders**

On 1 February 1986 Reggio Emilia saw the opening of the exhibit titled *Esplorazioni sulla via Emilia* (Explorations along the Via Emilia), a project that brought together photography, literature, music and film under the common theme of this historic road running “from the river to the sea”, the Aemilian Way, interpreted through a plurality of approaches and readings. The exhibit fell squarely into place with the social and cultural climate of those years and became a point of reference - along with *Viaggio in Italia* (An Italian Journey) held shortly before it - for Italian landscape photography. One of the project's principal features was that it was developed in several cities in the Emilia Romagna Region, from Reggio Emilia to Bologna and all the way to Rimini.

Today, thirty years after that event, *Fotografia Europea* takes its cue from the countless suggestions offered by that exhibit and the books associated with it, to start a reflection by images on both the Via Emilia itself and on the concepts and issues relating to roads, transit points and border areas.

*The Via Emilia. Roads, journeys, borders* purports not only to update the images from thirty years ago - and in this respect it will include an exhibit with historical materials and new specially commissioned works on the Via Emilia - but especially to underscore how both the world and the ways of representing it have changed during the last three decades, and in particular how change has affected the theory and practice of photography, namely the language through which all those who use a photographic tool express themselves today - the “roads” thus also simultaneously refers to those of photography, its borders, frontiers and transit points. All this, with the awareness that such an epochal transformation - set in motion by the world's processes of globalization and digitalization, and thus also of the ways to try to understand and represent it - can still glean useful keys of interpretation from the reflections of those who preceded us and tried to imagine the future as well as to interpret the present.

Two sentences from back then, taken from two introductory texts to the 1986 exhibition, can act as ideal guidelines for the programme of this edition of *Fotografia Europea*. The first is by Italo Calvino and draws upon an analysis of the writing mechanisms associated with perception and the memory of places: “Thus, since a landscape is fraught with temporal qualities, its description is always a narrative: there is a Self in motion describing a landscape in motion, and every element of the landscape is fraught with its own temporal quality, namely with the possibility of being described during another present or future time...”. The second is by Luigi Ghirri, a central figure in the development of the project *Esplorazioni sulla via Emilia*,

and it describes the state of photography in a way that is of extraordinary relevance today: “Photography can be a significant moment of pause and reflection, a necessary moment of reactivation of our circuits of attention

tripped by the speed of the exterior. It would be naive and wrong to consider photography as the static image of a particular sunset, viewed in extreme *slow motion*, or as a way of stopping time. Instead, I think that photography today can be an *image of balance* or of pacification, between known representations and the representations that will be, between the saturation of the exterior and the vacuum on which our gazes increasingly fall upon”.

Clearly such reflections, which are universal in character, need to be set in a specific context, such as today's, with its peculiar facts and features: how can “roads” be narrated today through photography? Can there still be an individual description, a Self that narrates a specific landscape with a specific language? And what role can this narrative play within the narrative of the contemporary world's movements, ways and roads? The walls, frontiers and borders that used to constitute road blocks in the past seemed to have been torn down, but they are now being reconstructed. At the same time, there is nothing that can block today's digital roads, and hold back the monetary and information flows from running immaterially, including photographic images shared in real time.

Thus the road becomes a text on which to train our gaze, and to practise in Ghirriian fashion our ability to reactivate our circuits of attention, and also as a pretext, a starting point, a trigger for a journey between memory and current reality, between individuality and collectivity, between oneness and difference within the interconnected society and its inhabitants, often members of the “global families” discussed by Ulrich Beck. While also keeping alive the relationship between images and writing that is one of the key features of *Esplorazioni sulla via Emilia*, in which the written narratives are as valuable as the photographs in the overall definition of the project. And where such powerful lines as these, written by Corrado Costa, can be found, providing a fitting caption to this edition of **Fotografia Europea**: “The road marks borders, the way cuts through them. The way is shared. The road is our own. Like words. The language is shared, but the words are our own”. Thus we move from the Via Emilia to the other roads of the world.