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### **Melancholic Riddle**

Mitch Epstein "Sunshine Hotel" is the psychogram of a nation.

By Andrian Kreye

It's not just since the so-called Trump era that critical minds in America view their homeland with a mixture of enthusiasm and melancholy. When, like photographer Mitch Epstein, they travel to the hinterland, which - whether in the city of New York or in the prairie of the Dakotas - often begins right behind the next street corner, they discover how vulnerable their country and its people actually are.

And yet the Trump era is the perfect time to set Epstein's work in a new context once again. Together with the editor Andrew Roth, he sifted through his entire oeuvre from 1969 to 2018 and compiled 175 images into a psychogram of the nation. They have done so without regard to chronologies, aesthetic, geographical or thematic contexts. There is no accompanying text. Even the captions to the images can only be found at the end of the volume, as if it were a great mystery, the solution to which is unimaginable.

Of course, the images are familiar. One knows the details and scenes from the collective memory of the American century, which now comes to an end with Trump. That's why there's so much new meaning in some pictures. Ivana Trump in 1984 in the circle of euphoric cheerleaders at Trump Tower. A man asleep on the edge of the West Side Highway in 1977 under the towers of the World Trade Center. What were only incidental glances at the time is given a historical context in the poetic flow of time in the book, which can be rediscovered again and again.

It is a country that demands enormous efforts from its inhabitants, which Mitch Epstein has been photographing since he was 16. A country that has still not been conquered, in which violence lurks in every moment and the brute landscapes can be just as repulsive as the glamour and splendour of its cities.

But Epstein has never seen himself as a reporter. The influences of Robert Frank's photo book "The Americans" and Jack Kerouac's novel "On the Road" are obvious. Even if Epstein goes into more detail. The eponymous picture, for example, in which the "Sunshine Hotel" lettering is stuck in standard letters on a freshly painted red concrete wall, puts all America's false promises in a minimalist nutshell.