

URS STAHEL IN CONVERSATION WITH NADINE WIETLISBACH

On Impatience, Curiosity and Photography as a Bastard Medium

Nadine Wietlisbach: What began with Robert Frank, a disagreement in Romandy and a group of self-starters is today the twenty-five-year history of Fotomuseum Winterthur. In 1987, the Musée de l'Elysée held a Robert Frank retrospective. George Reinhart and Walter Keller set their minds on keeping the photographs featured in the exhibition. The situation escalated after Frank fell out with the director of the Musée de l'Elysée. Reinhart subsequently mobilised a group of people to buy the photographs and find a home for them in Switzerland. Is this anecdote the initiatory moment of Fotomuseum Winterthur?

Urs Stahel: In summer 1990, we sat together for the first time in Walter Keller's office in Quellenstrasse 27 in Zurich. In June of that year I had devised the exhibition *Wichtige Bilder* at the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich together with Martin Heller. Initially there was a three-page concept paper containing ideas for a photography museum that Keller had written a few months earlier and discussed with Andreas and especially with George Reinhart before sharing it with me. After the concept had been developed further they asked me if I wanted to be the head of this photography museum.

Can you outline how the concept phase took shape, especially in view of the location?

Many different ideas were considered during the conception and planning stages. At first, the circular Gebrüder Volkart building, now home to the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW), came up for discussion; Villa Corti in the villa district of Winterthur was another option. For each place I drew up a new concept tailored to the individual building. We knew that the Volkart company

Urs Stahel (*1953) is an independent curator, writer and lecturer. Since 2013 he is curator at MAST Bologna. From 1993 to 2013, he was Fotomuseum's founding director.

Nadine Wietlisbach has been director of Fotomuseum Winterthur since January 2018. From 2015 to 2017 she was director of Photoforum Pasquart Biel/Bienne, following her post as a curator at the Nidwaldner Museum in Stans. She founded the independent art space *sic! Raum für Kunst* in Lucerne in 2007.

was about to move to Turnerstrasse and could envisage this option on the basis of its proximity to the main station, but it soon became clear that all these scenarios would have taken around three years to implement.

That's actually not that long if you think about the time it can take nowadays between the initial idea and the foundation stone being laid. You were pretty impatient!

I was sure that we had the energy for it at exactly *that* time. There were three of us, we had a concept, there was a proven demand and I knew that after three years everything would be completely different. Andreas Reinhart then told us about the building he had bought in Grünenstrasse in Winterthur in order to establish the "Kultursagi", a new cultural centre that was initially used as a rehearsal space for dancers, among other things. In 1991 he presented a *Richard Avedon* exhibition there, featuring the fifteen works from the series *In the American West* (1985) that he had bought from Kaspar M. Fleischmann. Avedon himself was present at the opening; people sat on the floor, smoking—it was a party. I looked around the building and knew that even if we were to move in temporarily we'd have to invest about 300,000 Swiss francs. Without further investment it wouldn't have been possible to put on decent exhibitions there, in this half-cleared out former carpenter's workshop, whose original buildings dated back to around 1870 and which had previously housed the Ganzoni hosiery factory. It seemed crazy to me to invest so much money in a temporary solution. In the end we decided to adopt this factory building as the permanent home of Fotomuseum and, after a relatively quick renovation period, we were able to open the doors of Fotomuseum Winterthur at Grünenstrasse 44 on 29 January 1993.

You were a founding member of the Kunsthalle Zürich. Did the Kunsthalle serve as a model for the museum?

Architecturally, yes. After my trip through the USA I knew that it was crucial to regard photography in a contemporary manner and not treat it like a nineteenth-century salon piece. And just like Fotomuseum Winterthur, the Kunsthalle was originally located in a factory building. In terms of content, however, it didn't serve as a model. It was extremely important to envision the Fotomuseum as something different from a "Kunsthalle" for photography. When you open a Kunsthalle, you are automatically operating in the field of contemporary art. If you then limit yourself to the medium of photography, you find yourself in a dead end. So, from the very beginning, it was of great importance for me to consider the whole

spectrum of photography and to expand the definition of it. Imagine a long, outstretched cord. At one end there is the pure document, the depiction of reality; at the other end there is the autonomous image, which is also produced by photography but which considers itself a work, an artwork. One can playfully move back and forth across the whole range between these two poles—I've always loved playing with this conceptually. And today we are aware that this outstretched cord is connected to a dense, ramified media network. Both sides have always interested me greatly: the friction of artists with reality and their contemplation of it, as well as those types of photography that were perhaps made unintentionally, for a private purpose or in a specific contractual relationship, by people whose names are perhaps no longer important but who contribute to an overall visual sociology of society. If you only concern yourself with photography that is perceived in an artistic context, the definition becomes narrow.

These poles were also crucial in the question of whether it was worth it—or if it was right—to found a museum for photography at exactly the time that all other contemporary art museums were beginning to exhibit photography. There was a boom: photography found its way into the museum and was discovered by the art market; museums began collecting and exhibiting it. All the galleries at Art Basel had a photographer in their booths. What's shown there, though, is just a tiny percentage of the world's total photographic production. A photography museum can only come to life when it embraces photography as a bastard medium and addresses it in its entire variety: then it can play a definite, vital role in the examination of the world and its media.

Even so, you had intense discussions about whether it should be a Fotohalle or a museum. You came to the conclusion that there wasn't an adequate collection of photography in Switzerland, because at the time art museums were paying little or no attention to photography.

Yes, that's true. More specifically there was the Schweizerische Stiftung für die Photographie, founded in 1971 and based in the Kunsthau Zürich, which almost exclusively focused on Swiss photography, and the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne, founded in 1985 by Charles-Henri Favrod, which for a long time concentrated solely on reportage photography. Besides that, there wasn't much. The Kunsthau itself still has a problem with the subject of photography. That's why we were convinced that it made sense to establish an institution whose primary purpose was to be a central,

attractive place for a contemporary examination of photography but which would gradually build up a collection at the same time, an international collection—although we quickly agreed that we couldn't do that actively to start with. At the outset there were two-and-a-half of us and we had to use our energy first of all to get the institution up and running. Despite this, after just five, or rather five-and-a-half years—in the exhibition *Five and a Half Years of Fotomuseum Winterthur*—we were able to exhibit many works from our collection, a large number of which could be traced back to generous donations.

You clearly positioned yourselves with regard to the temporal trajectory of the collection. How did you come to this decision?

In the early nineties, through Andreas Reinhart's connection to Kaspar M. Fleischmann and the Galerie Zur Stockeregg, the Canadian collector Frank Kolodny offered to sell us thirty or forty key works from the 1920s and 1930s. So we were confronted with the question of whether they were of interest to us and also if someone would be willing to raise the money needed to buy them. At the time, prices for photography were relatively low, but it was still a matter of around half a million Swiss francs. I then proposed that the collection should have its starting point in the year 1960. I wanted to avoid collecting retroactively—it didn't seem to make sense to me to cover the whole history of photography and have a collection from 1839 to the present at our disposal. We were too late at the table for that anyway. However, with a contemporary collection and references reaching back to 1960, we were able to establish our own profile more successfully. It also meant we could collect with a sense of breadth and depth instead of just purchasing a few rare pieces. We wanted to acquire, step by step, the most important contemporary positions and, if possible, as groups of works or series of photographs that represented the photographer's language and not just individual images. The images from the 1960s also represent a turning point when the understanding of photography began to shift dramatically.

The first archive numbers in the collection are assigned to works by Paul Graham.

The first exhibition we put on was with Paul Graham and we bought a diptych and a triptych from it. They are certainly our first purchases. George Reinhart also donated a few pieces by Robert Frank. The works by Richard Avedon found their way into the collection a bit later through Andreas Reinhart, but mostly as depos-

its, as permanent loans. In a programmatic text on our collection policy that I wrote for us and the board of trustees, I formulated the idea that, on the one hand, we should reflect the most important positions in photography from 1960 onwards and, on the other, that the collection should chronicle our exhibitions. Only in this way would it be possible to create a collection that was different from other collections. After ten years we realised that we had a strong stock of conceptual documentary photography—from Lewis Baltz to Paul Graham and beyond—but the transition of photography into art, the conceptualisation of photography within art, was under-represented, with only one or two works and a couple of ephemera. We were able to make up for that in part with the purchase of the Jedermann Collection, which was hugely important for us.

When you look at the collection from the outside you notice that it is quite eclectic, which corresponds to the museum's exciting exhibition history. You can sense your interest in human and social interactions through the definite visual choices but there are also very conceptual works. Fotomuseum Winterthur has also become world-renowned for its exceptional thematic exhibitions, like *Industrial Image*, *Trade*, *The Ecstasy of Things*, *Darkside I* and *II*, for example. Thematic exhibitions can be challenging: they allow for an increased complexity and promote a reflection on realities and social situations.

What you perceive as eclectic could also be described as an openness. I didn't come from a specific field of photography and I didn't choose a particular path—other than that of the quality, density and gravity of the works. This is probably related to my background: I studied German philology, history and philosophy, not art or photography—it wasn't even possible to study photography at the time. So I was something of a newcomer to the field. At the beginning I found this burdensome—being an outsider meant I had to work hard to find a way in. I come from a working-class family, so finding and gaining access to the university world wasn't easy either. In retrospect, though, I see that as a real opportunity; also, the fact that after studying at a maths- and science-oriented high school, I chose to study humanities at university. From the very beginning, I was something of a strange figure in the 1980s photography scene, a kind of *enfant terrible*. This also manifested in the way I wrote about art and photography. When I curated the exhibition *Wichtige Bilder*, I was criticised by the artists be-

cause I had included documentary photographers in the exhibition. Simultaneously, the documentary photographers asked me what business the arrogant artists had in the exhibition. So, I was stranded in a kind of trench between art and photography and, apart from Walter Keller and Martin Heller, I was pretty much out there on my own, because I always liked both sides and basically didn't want to exclude anything. If the work is interesting, I don't care if someone calls themselves an artist or a photographer. For a long time, though, I was alone in this opinion.

This background certainly fed my interest in daring to exhibit thematically as well as presenting individuals and groups. I wanted Fotomuseum Winterthur to make a name for itself with strong, pivotal, important solo shows, on the one hand, and thematic exhibitions on the other. But large thematic exhibitions often take up to two years of preparation, while a solo show, if we were in a rush, could be realised in a couple of months. After *The Ecstasy of Things*, for example, we had a substantial break, as Thomas Seelig and I were absolutely exhausted. There were around 170 different loan items from around the world and the museum was positively buzzing, but a small team reaches its limits at some point.

To what extent are your passion and interest for specific subjects—which have appeared in various exhibitions—connected to the practice of collecting?

From the vantage point of the present, I would answer that as follows: we couldn't spend our small budget on unknown and sometimes anonymous images. We had to define a few criteria clearly and, therefore, limited ourselves to photographic "authors". Collecting is quite different to exhibiting. The decision to buy something has much more far-reaching consequences than exhibiting a work. Accordingly, the thematic exhibitions are represented much less in the collection than work groups by individual photographers and artists such as Hans Danuser, Robert Frank, Nan Goldin and so on. I am currently learning about collecting and the acquisition of industrial photography—anonymous photography—at the Fondazione MAST in Bologna. There, a clear focus has been placed on the topics of industry and work. Collecting in this field of photography is only interesting if you have a broad scope: if you see, on the one hand, the photographs of the anonymous factory photographer or the commissioned photographer who always reflects the ideology of the factory owner and, on the other, those of the social documentary photographer who goes into the same factory

and focuses on the dirt and the dire working conditions. And then there's also the artist who might fly a drone above the factory and create a video work on the topic of industry and society or industry related to urban expansion. Especially in situations where the focus is very narrow—as is the case with MAST Bologna, which focuses on industry and work—you have to open the collection and collect anonymous photographers, famous industry photographers as well as art. Interest in this world of production and its related images is still quite low, so such photographs can be bought and sold relatively cheaply at auctions.

There's a part of the collection that is jealously eyed by other international institutions—can you tell me the story of the Jedermann Collection, which was acquired in 2005/6?

I don't know the whole background story of the sale at length, which was actually only a partial sale. The Jedermann Collection was much larger and we could have bought more works at a later date but we didn't have the necessary funds. We weren't the first to receive an offer, but it was quite extraordinary that through a combined effort we managed to scrape together two million Swiss francs—the board members under the chairmanship of Thomas Koerfer contributed a significant portion. Ulrich Gebauer, a gallery owner from Berlin, got in touch with me one day and told me that an American collector wanted to sell his collection of conceptual photography. As I mentioned earlier, at the time our collection was missing something: we hardly had any work by artists who used photography as a means of creative expression. And in my opinion, if the collection was to begin in 1960, this had to be rectified. I still remember that Thomas Seelig was new at Fotomuseum and had begun to suggest that we include ephemera in the collection: posters, brochures, etc. He went to New York to look at the works—you can't just spend two million not knowing what you're buying—and in the end we stated our interest. But the quoted price had a specified time limit, so we began an intensive search to try and find the money. And in the end we managed it. That was a crucial moment for Fotomuseum Winterthur, or the FMW as we sometimes referred to it then.

You mentioned Lewis Baltz—he's an important figure, generally speaking, but especially for you and the history of Fotomuseum. Would you agree?

If you want to single out one Swiss and one international figure who have been important for the museum, then for me it would be

Hans Danuser and Lewis Baltz. Speaking about Hans Danuser also brings us back to the collection—over the years George Reinhart had bought his works and later donated them to the collection. That's the reason Fotomuseum has one of the best collections of Danuser's work. I still find *In Vivo* (1980–1989) quite amazing today. I can't understand why it didn't lead to him becoming world famous. If he'd been American and had worked in New York that would have happened.

The fourth of five exhibitions in the first year was *Lewis Baltz – Rules without Exception*. We started with *Paul Graham*, parallel to which we showed *Illegal Camera*, then *William Eggleston*, and in summer *Real Stories*, an exhibition that we put on curated by Jan-Erik Lundström, the then director of the photography department at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. Lewis Baltz was already an important figure for me at the time, but he became pivotal for me when we met. We became friends, he became a valuable dialogue partner for me and I learnt a great deal from him. Baltz and Danuser are two key figures who played a major role from the outset. Later, Nan Goldin, Roni Horn and many others became important.

If you reflect on collecting, and I find that essential, you might talk about the “richness” of a collection. It's extremely fortunate having so many fantastic pieces you can work with in a collection, ones you can pick out again and again, recontextualise and put up for discussion. Being new here, I see it as both a richness and a challenge. Surely from your perspective there are omissions; works that, for whatever reason, it wasn't possible to purchase, or people you didn't exhibit. Thinking back, do you have a “phantom pain” in this regard? Something that would have allowed you to expand the collection, but it wasn't possible for certain reasons?

At some point I heard that Jeff Wall apparently had his sights on Fotomuseum. After an exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Luzern in 1993 it wasn't possible to show him again in Switzerland for the next four or five years. I would very much have liked to have put on an exhibition with him—he was such an important figure and I was a huge fan of his. If I could change something about the twenty-five-year history of Fotomuseum, I would definitely add a Jeff Wall exhibition. If we had managed to work with him, it would also have been possible to have secured funding to buy a large-scale work of his for the collection. At the time, his works were extremely ex-

pensive, far more expensive than those of other contemporary photographers—probably around half a million US dollars. It's a pity that it didn't happen.

With around five to six exhibitions per year, the selection is firstly made up of lots of omissions; in the end you only choose a fraction of the available photographic production from the present and past. This makes it all the more important that the selected works make sense, that they can convey something pivotal. Looking back, I wouldn't change that at all. There are hardly any exhibitions which I think were unsuccessful and no one whom I would now omit. While there are photographers who are now less important, their exhibitions at the time were relevant and exciting. Jean-Louis Garnell has almost completely disappeared from the scene, Henry Bond gave up his artistic career and now works as an academic. I wouldn't change anything regarding the programme but there are many things that we didn't manage to do or couldn't do, either because it had already been exhibited nearby or we just didn't get around to it, or perhaps we didn't get the opportunity owing to financial requirements. Once you start talking about omissions, you open up a huge field.

Two years after you left Fotomuseum Winterthur, in an interview with Martin Jaeggi, you said that in future you were going to do projects of “chamber-music dimensions”. Instead you went headlong into a project of symphony-like scale, the Biennale in Ludwigshafen, Mannheim and Heidelberg. Seven museums, a 4,000-square-metre exhibition area: *7 Places – 7 Precarious Fields*. Some time has passed since then and you are still working at the Fondazione MAST in Bologna. Twice in your long professional life you have found yourself in the position of coming across an empty vessel and being able to set its course. In comparison to twenty-five years ago, how has your situation changed, primarily in terms of your curatorial habits?

I co-founded the Kunsthalle, co-founded Fotomuseum and I can also cautiously say that, in some small way, I co-founded MAST. Either way, I was involved in the planning from an early stage and, in the field of photography, there are structures that were implemented because of my ideas. I was asked in advance to be a kind of consultant. And I started the collection there from scratch. Since then I have put on fifteen exhibitions and realising them is getting more demanding and complicated, as the subject is always the same—industry and work—while at the beginning I just knocked

out the easy exhibitions. I'm putting more and more focus on Bologna. My curatorial habits? In a way I'm becoming freer, bolder and more open in the way I deal with photography in relation to space, despite the limited subject area.

I still believe that in this vast, rich and plenteous world we live in, projects only have a chance if you really fight for them and put your mark on them. This doesn't need to be as an individual, it can also be as a group, if everyone involved takes full responsibility for it. I've always been more of an individual. Of course, I had the Fotomuseum team, but in my curatorial practices I was a lone wolf, then later a duo with Thomas Seelig, if only temporarily. And now I'm solo again, even though it's not entirely voluntary—MAST doesn't really allow time for team building at this point. But I still hope that I'll finally find the time to sit down and write those two or three books that are floating around in my head. To do that, though, I'll first have to shift down a gear or two.

THOMAS SEELIG IN CONVERSATION WITH NADINE WIETLISBACH

Eyes Wide Open. The Possibilities of Collecting

Nadine Wietlisbach: How did your involvement with Fotomuseum come about?

Thomas Seelig: I've been at the museum on a constant basis since 2003, but three years earlier I worked on the exhibition *Trade – Commodities, Communication, and Consciousness in World Trade Today*. It was curated in two offices; I was in Cologne and Urs Stahel was in Winterthur. We met four or five times beforehand in the planning phase. But I've known the museum itself since the very beginning—in 1994 I wrote a review of the exhibition *Industrial Image – The Eastern Swiss Economic Region from 1870 to Today* for *PAKT* magazine.

You have a very interesting CV. You studied photography after completing an apprenticeship at a printing company.

How did it develop from there?

I originally wanted to be a photojournalist. But in the first semester I realised that such a career choice would probably lead nowhere, as magazines had already started dying out—for example the German daily newspaper *FAZ* had just stopped printing its magazine. So from an early stage it was quite clear to me that I'd have to reorient myself. Then, with three other students, I was fortunate enough to be able to do an internship in New York where I worked as a picture researcher in the editorial department of the Aperture Foundation. The most interesting thing about it was that for the thirty or forty images that I had to research, I had to contact galleries, publishing houses and a huge range of other partners, and I realised that there were so many other jobs beyond the classic path of the photographer. I then completed my photography studies, but in the knowledge that my graduation would also be my farewell from being an author of images.

You also gained experience with off-spaces and galleries relatively early on.

Thomas Seelig (*1964) is head of the Photographic Collection at the Museum Folkwang in Essen since September 2018. From 2003 to 2018 he worked as curator/collection curator at Fotomuseum Winterthur, followed by a co-directorship from 2013 to 2016 and an interim directorship until the end of 2017.