

Secret Exposures

Art is to work within limitations
James Herbert in Steff Gruber's film *Moon in Taurus*

The following text is a revised excerpt from an interview that Christopher Jarvis conducted with Steff Gruber on the occasion of a conversation about film and photography. Steff Gruber transcribed this and extracted the passages directly related to his work as a photographer, shortening or supplementing them where necessary. In addition, texts from an e-mail correspondence between Gruber and Jarvis were used.

In 2020, your photographs will be exhibited for the first time in public. Why has your photographic work never been shown before?

The same question could be asked about my films, which were sometimes shown, but with a few exceptions, only shown late in the evening on television and otherwise only to a very hand-picked audience. The reason is that I find the pictures (and films also, by the way) to be intimate creations. I really took the pictures just for myself. I never wanted to be famous. I'm very private about this. How could I compete with «the greats» of photography? The fact that I'm now sharing my work has to do with the fact that I'm noticing that I'm getting older. *Remembrance of Times Past*, could be the title of the exhibition: I'm looking back. At the beginning of the year I said to my long-time assistant: «My God, such a long life, and I haven't done anything!» She only laughed and referred to about 2000 pages, including scripts, short stories, essays, professional articles and poems. All of this material is largely unpublished. When I told her that there were still a few thousand photos left, we decided together to start digitizing them.

How did you get into photography?

From four to six years old, I was often with my father (who designed fashion catalogues for mail-order companies), in the photo studios of the fashion photographers H.P. Mühlemann and E.T. Werlen. I played with empty 120 film rolls of the photographers and watched the models while they changed their clothes. This early «eroticization» shaped me and affected my later life considerably. Even then it was clear to me that I would one day become a photographer.

When my parents were still getting along well, almost all conversations revolved around design; whether something or someone was beautiful seemed to be the only subject of discussion. My father liked to quote Nietzsche with sentences like: «Beauty is the only justification being alive». My role models at the time were my parents' friends, photographers Walter Läubli and René Groebli.

During high school I was a helper at the printing company Conzett & Huber, where the famous culture magazine DU was printed. I saved up enough for my first 35 mm camera. After about 400 hours of cleaning printing press rollers, it was 1968: The money was enough for me to buy a Nikon F1 with a 50mm lens. Then, in 1970 I hitchhiked through Scandinavia to North Cape in Norway, where I tried reportage. My first one was about the life of the Lapps. As a result I got a job at the photo agency Keystone Press in Zurich, where I had to capture the personalities such as Joan Baez, Klaus Kinski, Bruno Ganz and Milva. But when I got the order to shoot a soccer game, I quit. I knew I wanted to make art, not commercial photography.

In your life, photography and film had to be ends in themselves. You never used photography to survive?

Actually, photography and especially my films have saved my life many times. This may sound a bit theatrical, but it comes pretty close to the truth. The camera, used as a tool of personal transformation, certainly replaced the psychiatrist's couch in some cases. I had to and still have to first photograph the environment around me in order to understand it.

You told me before that you would visualize each of your images in a history of photography context that you would think of one of your great photographer heroes, as you pressed the shutter release...

Now I have made a Henri Cartier-Bresson or a Werner Bischof! [laughs] Of course it was never as good as the original. No matter what you do today, someone has already done it. Only rarely do I manage, at stellar moments, to take a picture that I think is as good as that taken by a great photographer in a similar situation. Yet it brings me joy. I had it a lot easier in film-making. In the 1970s and 1980s, the experts had precise ideas on how film was to be made. No one had dared, for example, to realize films that transcended genres. When I showed with *Moon in Taurus* and *Fetish & Dreams*, so-called docudramas (the term didn't exist at that time, it was introduced later by Wim Wenders) at the festivals and in noteworthy cinemas, I found a receptive audience...

You won a prize at the Locarno Film Festival with *Fetish & Dreams*...

Yes, and Werner Herzog invited me to make a film about him and Klaus Kinski in Ghana. The so called making-of did not exist at that time. So I was also one of the first in this genre. *Fetish & Dreams* was also the first feature film in Europe to be shot exclusively on video. I had to invent the process of transferring videotape to 35mm film for theatrical release, because I couldn't afford the prize asked by the single company to offer this service at the time, Imagetransform in Los Angeles.

Do young filmmakers find it more difficult to become established today?

In recent years, the film industry has developed completely away from art and experimentation. Nobody today, except myself [laughs], would dare to complete anything «not for the marketplace». Everything has to follow strict rules. This starts with the fact that directors are no longer allowed to write their own scripts and are certainly not allowed to produce them. *Cinéma-d'auteur* is dead. It will disappear completely with its last living representative Jean-Luc Godard. In photography, however, it's completely different. If, you for example, follow the latest trends in the fashion world, you will see that experimenting is definitely desirable. Recently I saw a photo series of Kipling Phillips in the fashion magazine *Bolero*. He photographed his models in the middle of street life in Marrakesh. It caused traffic jams; women and men twisting their heads to look at the eye-catching models. The interaction is not just a background, it's a theme itself. I got a little envious right away, that he thought of this before me.

Besides portrait and reportage, nude photography became an important part of your photographic work. How do you feel about those today?

In my youth it was my secret dream to become a so-called «girl photographer». I wanted to be better than David Hamilton or Jacques Bourboulon, whose pictures I actually found kitschy. Much more my style were the nudes of Irina Ionesco. The term «girl photographer», by the way, had a completely different meaning or more accurately, a different connotation at that time; no insinuation of anything

inferior, no condescendence. On the contrary, many of the photographers of the period took nude pictures of young girls and were proud of it.

Hamilton and Bourboulon only took pictures of teenagers, not of women such as Jeanloup Sieff or Bettina Reims did. It's not the same...

I agree, today there is a clear distinction between the two. In the 1970s these borders were more blurred and you could elicit pretty much any responses you wanted. At that time it was also accepted that one didn't become an adult suddenly on your eighteenth birthday. It was clear to us then, that some people could decide about themselves when they were 14 and others perhaps only when they were 21. The borders were perceived as fluid and we simply ignored laws that were supposed to tell us what to do. This was not only the case in photography, but also in literature... and other areas of life...

You think of Nabokov...

Yes, for example, or Curd Götz and his wonderful novel *Tatjana*, a book that could no longer be written or published today. And while we're on the subject: I'm nostalgic about that time. The view of things today makes many things utterly impossible. Ultimately, every romantic idea is nipped in the bud. I am unable to understand what could be wrong with taking pictures of a nude teenager - provided that it occurs with the informed consent of all those involved, first and foremost the girl herself and of course also her parents. But today this is a complete, absolute no-go. I am probably already being condemned for my thoughts and reflections in this regard. Today's black-and-white thinking gets on my nerves. Not everyone who would take such pictures is necessarily a criminal and thus a threat to society. According to a study by Dr. Beyer at the Charité in Berlin, images of Hamilton etc. do not lead people to commit crimes against children. This is as absurd as saying that the novels of Vladimir Nabokov or Henry de Montherlant do. By the way: Hamilton's books are the best-selling photo books in the history of publishing. He's the most published photographer of all time. Every one of his book reached millions of copies. Especially in this day and age it would be appropriate to think about why this is so.

A lot of terrible things have come to light in recent years. I'm thinking of child abuse cases in the Catholic Church...

I know all that. Nevertheless, I can still say that we miss something when, for example, we are no longer allowed to perceive the beauty of young girls.

What exactly are we missing about this? There are certainly enough adult women who like to be photographed...

Of course, I asked myself that too. What is the magic of a picture by Jock Sturges or Sally Mann? By the way, both are photographers whose pictures of girls hang in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, among other places. Personally, I think - and I cannot quote anyone because the discussion of this topic alone is the greatest taboo in today's world - that one is really beautiful only once and only for a very short time. And don't give me the tired «old people can be beautiful too», because I know that only too well. I recently had to photograph my friend, the artist, filmmaker and photographer Jürg Hassler (80) for his exhibition catalogue at the Tinguely Museum in Basel. Jürg is a truly handsome man. Only he's falling apart like me and you. This happens minute by minute. With photography, for the first time in the cultural history of images, we have means in our hands to stop this natural decay. In young girls, their peak of beauty is when they are about thirteen years old, if we want to believe Nabokov's theory about nymphs. Nabokov tells us that very few girls have this special nymph-like state. This is a quality which, in the latest research, is also attributed to girls in connection with the so-

called «poltergeist phenomenon». It is beautifully staged in one of the final scenes in Andrej Tarkovskij's film *Stalker*: when the thirteen-year-old daughter of the «Stalker» moves a milk glass across the table without touching it...

That's fiction...

Maybe... [laughs] I didn't know Jock Sturges and Sally Mann's work back then, otherwise they probably would have become my role models. Why I never realized this dream of becoming a girl photographer, I don't know exactly. Probably because a dream that comes true is no longer a dream, as Georges Bataille in *Saint Eros* remarked in my year of birth. In any case, I didn't become a «girl photographer» and from today's point of view this is perhaps a blessing... I also think that my film *Passion Despair*, which portrays the Swiss photographer Daniel Leuenberger, who lives in Moldova and photographed young girls there, sobered me. The idea of taking pictures of young girls photography had to do with the idea of travelling into my past, to the girls of my youth. This is according to the motto: «To reach the origin is the goal», as Karl Kraus once put it. My perception of the girls of my youth has changed in retrospect. I would feel strange today, to say the least, if I had to do Hamilton-style portraits... [laughs]

Besides my childhood experiences in the changing rooms of my father's photo studios, my interest in nudes had above all to do with a key experience I had at the age of about twelve, on the occasion of a train journey with my mother from Zurich to Milan. During the whole three-hour journey, I sat opposite a beautiful young woman. It was the first time I really fell in love. The woman, who had the figure of a girl at my age, wore her blouse open and so I could see her small breasts during the whole trip. She noticed my fascinated stare and from time to time half-heartedly, adjusted her blouse. She also started a conversation, but in English, which I couldn't speak at the time. So, I answered in German and the journey flew by. She got up in Milan, grabbed her bag and kissed me on the cheek. Then she hurried out of the railcar. On the platform several photographers waited and wrapped my dream woman in a storm of camera flashes. The next day my mother showed me a newspaper. «The English mannequin Twiggy visits Milan» was printed in large letters. The cut-out newspaper with Twiggy's photo hung in my room for years until it was replaced by pin-up beauties from the German magazines *Konkret* and *Twen*.

How important is technology to you?

For a long time I followed in my father's footsteps. I admired his drawing and painting skills and thought that painting could also become my means of expression. But I soon found out that I wasn't nearly as gifted as he was. Unlike myself, he had great resistance to technology. He couldn't even replace a light bulb. By contrast, as a child I had already repaired the vacuum cleaners, radios and hairdryers of half the village. It was obvious that photography and film would become my medium. The understanding of optics, mechanics, electronics and chemistry in the photo lab were in me in the cradle. I didn't need any schools or courses. I just had to look at things and I knew how they worked and how to deal with them. In the course of my life I owned every camera I could find: from the Nikon, Leica, Hasselblad, Rolleiflex, Mamiya, and Polaroid to the large format cameras from Sinar and also homemade pinhole cameras. In the 1970s I was probably one of the first to take colour pinhole photos and in the early 1980s the first to take digital pinhole photos.

Photography is first and foremost technology. Nevertheless, the pictures of pure technicians are mostly boring. They lack the «punctum», as Roland Barthes would say. Or if anything, it just happened by accident. The moment you take a good picture is a magical one. Yes, you could also say an erotic one. And I'm not just talking specifically about nude photography. Eroticism begins with the relationship I have to the camera. A camera must not only be technically good, no, it must also be beautiful. In fact,

I have quite some technical fetishism about my equipment. Without it I don't enjoy photography. Then «the knowledge», and the excitement associated with the instant when I have to pull the trigger, is quite an erotic moment. I am amazed that neither Susan Sontag in *On Photography* nor Roland Barthes in *La chambre claire* have come up with this in their wonderful essays. The act of taking a picture always has something voyeuristic about it, even if you photograph a landscape. Or as the French master photographer Jeanloup Sieff once described:

«As the cafe «Flore» is closed for holidays, I sit on the terrace of the «Deux Magots». With all the women who pass by, I experience brief but fulfilling romance. If I recognize her from afar and like her silhouette, our dalliance begins immediately. The closer they get, the more I love them. Ten meters to go: passionate desire, six more: painful jealousy, four more: I can no longer stand it, now the pain of separation has begun, and when they pass by near me, relieved and relaxed, I can laugh at them calmly, we have become friends and can exchange this winking agreement of those who have experienced many intimate things together and remember...». [Jeanloup Sieff (diary, 1986)]

Sieff did not photograph this experience...

Exactly! But that's what happened to him and probably happens to every photographer. I didn't take some of the best pictures I had the opportunity for! I remember some situations in which I saw the finished picture in front of my eyes, but had no camera with me and even if I had had a camera, for some reason I could not have taken the picture.

The first picture of the «unmade pictures» is of course Twiggy. Then I remember (and still curse today) a girl named Nadja (André Breton sends his greetings) on Lago di Viverone, about 1980. Nadja was between 13 and 15 years old, a blonde Italian, the most beautiful girl in the world. Not only the men stared at her, also all the women were captivated by her. My girlfriend at the time was also completely enraptured. I had my Nikon with me. Why didn't I take a picture of her? It does exist, this photographer's block, much like the writer's block. I just couldn't. Nadja was somehow holy.

And then there was this gigantic lying golden Buddha being pulled through Phnom Penh on a low-float. I didn't photograph Him either, although I had the camera with me. I felt a similar situation at one of the water festivals that I visited every year in Cambodia: In the midst of the crowds a person was exhibited on a stretcher. The person had a head the diameter of about one meter and stared at the people with a silent gaze. Most passers-by took out their mobile phones and photographed the poor person mercilessly. I had my camera in my hand and couldn't take the picture. It would have said so much about Cambodian society. But, like I said, I couldn't. I also didn't record the executed Tamil Tiger fighters tied hands to feet in Sri Lanka, who were lying on the roadside the next day after the invasion of the Indian army in 1987. I could never have taken the disturbing pictures of dying and dead refugees that Sebastião Salgado took in Rwanda in 1994. It is probably a blessing for humanity that he was there then, did this work, and captured this tragedy forever on film and snatched them from the collective oblivion. I could never have become a war reporter either...

Many of your pictures would be called Street Photography today. How do you feel about this movement, which is currently making a comeback in the photography scene?

Yeah, that's right. But in 1970 we didn't use this term yet... Also, my movies are real «Street Photography» movies. Especially the last ones where I was the cameraman. Historically, the first photographers were street photographers and not just portraitists, as one often reads. Nadar, Alfred Stieglitz, Walker Evans, Diane Arbus, to name a few. On the other hand, I'm not really a street photographer. I prefer to work in the streets of big cities, but I rarely take snapshots. Since I almost

never have a zoom lens with me, i.e. I only use (mostly wide-angle) fixed lenses, I have to get close to the people. Without asking questions or interacting with those to be photographed, nothing works.

Paul Watzlawick once said: «The so-called reality is the result of communication». I take that statement literally. Most people like that; I put them in a state where they want to be photographed by me. They can also put themselves in the pose where they think they look best. For example, in 1975, when I drove alone to Watts, the Black Quarter in Los Angeles, and told my roommates in the evening, everyone was surprised that I was still alive. No one believed me that I had captured the people there on camera. So, what was my technique? First of all, I had nothing but the Nikon with me, not even a watch. Secondly, I had a very conspicuous red mane of hair to below my waist. So pale and bright red I must have seemed extremely exotic to the black community, so that they accepted me as an outsider. No problem. Of course, this cannot be reproduced and it cannot be done deliberately. In my films, people who normally never talk about themselves, especially not in front of the camera, they open up to me. I think that people feel that I'm not manipulating them and, very importantly, that I don't want to make a profit with my work. They feel that I am genuinely interested in them, their fate and above all that I have to do my work; out of an inner, almost pathological urge. No point in arguing, they give up. When I used to take nude pictures, it was exactly the same thing. I've never had to convince anyone. Someone you have to persuade first will make a poor movie interview partner or photo model. More than once the model herself took the initiative to be photographed; or it came from the boyfriend or mother of the model who found the idea somehow exciting.

Let me tell you something that happened to me in Cuba: I walked past a house in a narrow alley in Havana and saw through one of the building's window, a young woman tying her hair to a ponytail in front of a mirror. I pulled out the camera and wanted to pull the trigger for a candid shot. But she noticed me. At that very moment she dropped her blouse, which she had not yet buttoned up, and she looked out of the window with her naked torso. I took a few shots after that, and she closed the window. The whole exchange hadn't lasted a minute. I moved away. Suddenly I heard the young woman calling. I turned around. She shouted, «Today's my fifteenth birthday». Then she closed the shutter for good. At first, I thought she wanted a gift or a fee. However, this was not the case, the window remained closed. In the evening I told my friend, an ethnologist, the story of what happened. He explained the young woman's behaviour: He said that the age of consent in Cuba is 15 years old. Most girls would have sex with their boyfriends for the first time at 15. Probably she would not have had a boyfriend at the time and the display of her breasts was more of a symbolic act...

You told me that as a child you often witnessed fashion photography during your father's work. In fashion photography, as in no other photographic genre, everything is staged and the models are degraded to being clothes hangers.

Never tell that to the models, because they don't see it that way. [Laughs] And yes, fashion photographer might have been an ideal job for me. Virtually a perfect fit. But life isn't always seamless. And when asked about my father's fashion catalogues, I have to admit, of course, that most of the models actually did have to function as live clothes hangers. By the way, I was also a model in my father's catalogues. Did I tell you that? My freckles were in demand. I received 50 francs per half day. A fortune, since we children had twenty centimes a week allowance back then. Fashion photography is probably the last and only way to make really great art today! The famous photographers today not only determine the sets and locations, they also say which models they want to have. The better known the photographers are, the more expensive models they can wish for. You can see this on the relevant Youtube channels and on Fashion TV. I like to watch these and other shooting reports on YouTube. And I am happy about the creative ideas and the wonderful photos. I'm always amazed. If I had such budgets and such opportunities, I would want to say something, tell

something to the world. Not so in the fashion world. Meaning and form seem to have nothing to do with each other...

The icons in the history of photography always tell a story. It is not always directly visible in the picture, the story can also take place outside the frame; one interprets or feels it. One example is the world-famous picture by Henri Cartier-Bresson, in which one looks through the grenade hole in the wall of house, at playing, cheerful children. One of the children is wearing a cast and bandages (the «punctum», Barthes would say). The boy laughs too. This photo tells a story on several levels. And it creates, even though it seems so cheerful, an incredibly poignant image. It's a statement against war. The metaphor is more important than what you see right away. There are very few photos of this quality and strength. This of course also includes the naked, crying, nine-year-old Vietnamese girl, of the Vietnamese photographer Nick Ut, where she flees the bombed village covered with napalm. This black-and-white picture, along with another Vietnam War picture, Eddie Adam's «Saigon Execution», depicting the execution of a young Vietcong soldier by a South Vietnamese officer, contributed to the end of the Vietnam War. I still am moved today when I see these pictures. In every genre there are such pictures that you see once and never forget. Icons. In surrealism it is Man Ray's pictures, in nude photography Nobuyoshi Araki's pictures.

Araki would be the complete opposite of David Hamilton...

Absolutely. Here nothing is blurred. The pictures are brutally frank. They also have nothing to do with reality; everything is staged. Whether or not the situation depicted could have taken place in reality is completely irrelevant to the quality of photography; photographs rarely have anything to do with reality. All my photos are staged. In some cases they are prepared for days and the subjects are taken to the previously researched or even manipulated location. Sometimes I only have a few seconds for staging, like in the picture of my Moroccan «angel». The picture shows a Moroccan mother carrying an infant in a cloth on her back. Her 8-year-old boy is standing next to her. When she sees that I want to point the camera at her, she realizes that her wrap is not sitting nicely on her shoulders. In a determined swing she wants to reposition it. At the moment, when the cloth looks like angel wings, I pull the trigger. The picture reminds me of the angel statues I photographed in the Colon Cemetery of Havana. I should assemble the two pictures together, as Araki did in some of his books. Another example are the children playing with old records found in the streets of Havana. I saw a group of children kneeling on the floor, lost in thought, looking at their treasure. I asked the children to pose with the records in front of a wall. The posing was suddenly much more important than the records, the interaction with the foreign photographer much more exciting.

Photography and film are almost always an interaction for you?

Yes, I can't repeat that enough. I use the camera like certain dog owners use their pets. The animals are used as a pretext for a conversation... «That's a sweetie, how old is he? What's the name of this breed?» etc. Of course, today, when everyone is shooting all around with their mobile phones, nobody comes to me anymore and asks: «What kind of camera is that?» That reminds me of something that happened to me a few years ago in the Maggia Valley in the Swiss canton Ticino. I had set up my Sinar on a big tripod to photograph sheep grazing on the river. When I wanted to hide under the hood, a woman with a small digital camera in her hand came up to me and asked: «How many pictures can your camera take?» I answered, «One.» - «Oh,» she replied, «mine can do two thousand!» Then she went her on way without saying goodbye. Today, however, communication is mostly initiated by me. And today you can photograph pretty much anyone and everyone. The age of mobile phone photography and selfies is a blessing in this respect. Everyone is used to being photographed permanently. I shamelessly exploit that, of course. [Laughs]

To what extent has the selfie generation influenced photography?

In my opinion, quite substantially. Over a billion images are uploaded to Facebook and Instagram every day. Without pictures, your life is non-existent today. Whether it's your food or whatever you're watching and doing, it needs to be photographed. The cameras of the new mobile phone generation are better than some big, professional cameras; and above all you don't have to worry about the technology anymore. The device thinks for you and adjusts everything correctly. Every picture succeeds. When uploading, for example to Instagram, you are offered a complete darkroom, you can change look, exposure and contrast and so everyone becomes an artist. For those who want it even more artistic, there are apps like Hipstamatic. This makes every picture look like it was made with a Rollei around 1960. You don't have to know anything about depth of field any more. And many photos, especially on Instagram, look fantastic. But in most cases this has nothing to do with art, as my generation of artists saw it in our time.

Despite the competition you mentioned, how can art still be made? Do we still need it?

Good question! And no, we probably do not need fine art photography anymore. I'm also surprised with what the curators, the people who determine whether something is art or not, exhibit today. At the moment, for example, the photographs of the French writer Michel Houellebecq have made it into the museums. He is undoubtedly an important contemporary author. However, his photographs are no more than mediocre, completely uninteresting and irrelevant to the history of photography. Just because someone's a celebrity doesn't make him or her a good photographer. However, this also happens more often today, in fashion photography.

Many photographers use stylistic devices to make their pictures unmistakable. For example, they flash everything to create a «handwriting» (e.g. Ellen von Unwerth). I am usually astonished by such efforts of many contemporary photographers: they believe that their pictures must have a handwriting, an unmistakable style. This is a strange aspiration of many photographers: they believe their pictures must have a personal style, an unmistakable signature. Their point of reference is fine art, so a Chillida is a Chillida and a Miró is a Miró. And they always cut off the heads, for example, or hold the camera at an angle or whatever. Like the pictures of the German painter Georg Baselitz, who depicts all his subjects upside down.

Good photographers have a handwriting, I don't want to deny that. Even if at first glance it is not as easy to read as in painting. It's easy with photographers who claim a theme for themselves, like for example Arnold Odermatt, ex-policeman and photographer from Nidwalden. He photographed traffic accidents all his working life. Of course, you can recognize an Odermatt picture at first glance. The pictures of the Czech photographer Miroslav Tichy are also immediately recognizable. With his pictures, it's the point of view; Tichy only photographed in secret. A discovery of his actions would have deeply confused and embarrassed him. He knew that maybe he shouldn't have been doing what he was doing. The pictures of the good photographers are also unmistakable, they have a «visual signature», as the US-American photographer Ralph Gibson stated. However, they manage without technical gimmicks.

Are there still design rules today?

By all means! Today, when everyone is constantly photographing and technology is no longer a problem, it is particularly important to stand out from the crowd in terms of design. This can only succeed if one understands something about image design and succeeds in finding the unmistakable visual signature I mentioned.

What the viewer perceives as a good picture is usually not simply an arbitrary photo. For me personally, it is clear that every picture must follow very strict rules. In other words, if I break these

rules, I'm trying to say something. If, for example, I hold the camera at an angle when taking a picture or later in framing in the darkroom, this means that one thing is «out of balance». Anyone with an intact sense of balance must be irritated by such an image. Maybe I want to, but if all my pictures are crooked, it's just mannerism. The film *1900* by Bernardo Bertolucci shows a moving example from the history of cinema, a correctly applied «mistake». When Mussolini comes to power and politics gets out of hand, Bertolucci makes all the shots askew. However, when people or things are just cut, it means nothing. In 99% of cases, except for close ups, it just shows the photographer's lack of skill. And it's not only me who shoos people out of the frame or moves a distracting element, as Henri Cartier-Bresson told us about his own work, he did this with almost every picture. Pictures don't come into the world perfectly!

How do you make a perfect picture?

Perhaps we should say at this point that in this conversation we are talking exclusively about art photography, fine art photography, as Americans call it. So, it is not a question of commercial photography, such as wedding photography, advertising photography or online photography. Because I don't know anything about that. As I mentioned at the beginning, I never had to make a living from photography. Photography and film are for me «sacred» and I see these media in my case as a personal artistic means of expression.

How do you make a perfect picture? This is, of course, the key question. I don't think I've ever taken a perfect picture. Maybe I almost succeeded a few times. For example, the portrait of the then 17-year-old Sofia Snozzi, the daughter of architect Luigi Snozzi, taken in Locarno in 1982. I observed how Sofia always moved her long blond hair with a skilful swing from one side of her shoulders to the other without touching it. For the photo Sofia had to make this movement for me dozens of times until we had a good shot. Another picture I love very much is the portrait of our cat Zorbas. The cat thinks he has to imitate the lion in the Metro Goldwin Meyer logo. In fact, he simply yawned [laughs]. But even with these two pictures I have to point out, of course, that they never even remotely approached the pictures of a Sebastião Salgado, they are too simply crafted, too banal in their statement.

Asked about a method or a trick, I can only confirm what I have read from the great photographers or observed myself: You need a lot of time and incredible patience. The weather or the time of day is usually not right when you get to a location for the first time. So sometimes you have to come back for days until everything is right. It is also similar with people and models; only after multiple days or after hundreds of photos do you approach what you originally had in mind. Every year in Cambodia I photograph an old man who makes animals and figurines out of coloured sugar on his street stand. Among the dozens of pictures I have already taken of him I still don't have the ultimate portrait. Probably the picture will only succeed if he trusts me one hundred percent. When he thinks, «Where is that photographer? He hasn't come yet this year...»

What's very important is the knowledge that you can't photograph when you're travelling with a partner, for example. You'd feel guilty all the time if the person has to wait for you. Thank God my wife also has a passion, where she needs the same framework of conditions. She draws and paints in streets, restaurants, etc. Today it's called urban sketching. So, she understands me and I understand her. We give each other the necessary peace and privacy. It's different when you have an assistant with you. This person has to know my style and rhythm. My favourite companion is a Canadian Friend with whom I made my last movie *Fire Fire Desire*. For years we have been travelling together in Southeast Asia and Japan. He has an incredible feeling for the countries and people and knows so much about light that he always knows when and where to hold the lamp. I am in sync with him in other ways, too. He's the only one, besides my wife, who can criticize my pictures. For example, he says, «There's not enough sky up there». Not that I'd listen to them. [laughs] Yes, I think that art

photography differs from everyday photography in exactly this respect: I always know exactly what I want, what is right and what is wrong. I remember that my father was always very upset when, which rarely happened, someone criticized one of his paintings.

Yeah, what does it take to make a perfect picture? Now that I have to consider this question, a lot comes to mind. I wonder whether an exclusive occupation with photography would be necessary. Well, don't be interested in a thousand other things like I am. «Once in a lifetime, to dare it all...» as Kurt Guggenheim quotes the French medical doctor, photographer and philosopher Michel Vieuchange in *All in All*. I quoted Vieuchange in a conversation with Werner Herzog, by the way. And Herzog responded enthusiastically to the quote. I never had this courage, neither with my photographic or my cinematic work. There was always the fear that I would not succeed or that I would lose my artistic freedom. But if I had made such a decision at some point in my life, I would have taken the perfect picture already. As we know, to ask 'what might have been' is useless. So, I still have everything ahead of me... [laughs]

Of course, it is helpful to devote oneself completely to something. For example, the gifted Japanese photographer Daidō Moriyama, he's been strolling through Tokyo every day for over 50 years to take his pictures. This was and is the case with most great photographers, exceptions only prove the rule. Of course there are others like me who have more than one profession, Wim Wenders, for example, or René Burri, who originally only wanted to illustrate his journalistic travel stories. Both are great photographers who also have other professions. And of course, Karl Lagerfeld. It was especially interesting with him that when asked about his profession in interviews, he always listed photographer first and not fashion designer, which was his main occupation. I am also tempted to answer the question about my occupation with photographer, although I have a completely different profession... Photographer is more than just a job title, it describes a «state of mind».

Annemarie Schwarzenbach is also an example of a photographer who did other things...

Mhm... with Annemarie Schwarzenbach I have rather ambivalent feelings about her photography... The pictures are historically interesting and, if you read her diaries, also illuminating with regard to her life. She was one of the first women to travel alone through the Orient and so on. But the photos are not really good. Nevertheless, Schwarzenbach was an important person and I don't want to belittle her work and her great influence, also with regard to the Swiss women's movement! I much more appreciate Vivian Maier as a real photographer, even if she did something else as her job. She was a nanny. Her pictures were never shown during her lifetime, by the way. No one knew of her secret obsession. At the same time Helen Levitt had also photographed in the streets of New York and she became world famous.

How to make a good picture... the perfect picture. You see, the question still occupies me... I would like to say that «the perfect picture» does not exist per se. But that wouldn't be true; there are images, as if made by extraterrestrials, they move you deeply. Yes, in some cases even shake you to the bone. The lilies of Robert Mapplethorpe belong to that category. Unfortunately, I sold these years ago. I am such an idiot! Today they're worth about a million dollars. But that's not the most important reason I call myself an idiot. No, I really miss the pictures! After «studying» and finding the «punctum», in such moving photographs, I come to the conclusion that much lies with the recipient. And by that I don't mean the stupid saying «Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder». Even if the saying is quoted ten billion times, it does not become any more true. Only because beauty lies outside today's scientific knowledge and there are (seemingly) no rules in the sense of mathematical formulas, perhaps with the exception of the golden ratio, it bears witness to a great lack of understanding to end the discussion of aesthetics so superficially. I think that unique pictures draw their strength from archetypal sources.

And so, I also consider the role of the viewer. He changes the image in his head, influenced by his education, his background and his intelligence.

I am reminded of something that happened in my youth. When I was 20, I was in San Francisco. I heard from friends that Roman Polanski was giving a seminar at Berkeley University. Unfortunately, this had already been going on for over a week and I joined during its last days. On that evening the film *Repulsion* was shown first. Afterwards Polanski had a discussion with the students. One of the students took the floor and in a long lecture praised the use of a dead rabbit which was laying in the kitchen. He explained the metaphorical effect, the historical significance in Jewish mythology, etc. I don't remember the details. Polanski listened to the student with fascination, thanked him for his explanations and said that he had not known any of that. Instead, one morning on his way to the film studio, he saw the rabbit hanging at a butcher's and bought it without thinking. Polanski thought that it would fit well into the set kitchen of the schizophrenic protagonist. Nevertheless, he agreed with the student that the image had a strong metaphorical effect on the viewer. He could explain his spontaneous behaviour by the fact that he had internalized such symbols. By the way, it often happened to him that he learned from film journalists afterwards what certain metaphors and symbol in his own films meant.

Yes, I think that metaphors and symbols in photos can move the viewer. As a photographer, you rarely have the opportunity to use them consciously. Here - as with Polanski's dead rabbit - the photographer's intuition and, not to be underestimated, chance come into play.

How do you deal with subsequent image processing in the past and today by digital means?

I recently asked Urs Odermatt, the son of Arnold Odermatt, a bit naively, whether his father's photographs were taken directly from the camera or were edited? Urs laughed and asked if I wanted to hear a myth or the truth. The truth is that Urs, together with his father and Photoshop specialists, had worked on every picture with great effort. In the old days in the darkroom - and you ask me about it - it took us days to get a good picture. Framing, brightness and contrast have been changed. Dodging and post-exposure were the order of the day. In addition there was the choice of paper grade. If one wanted to see the original framing, you left the black border around the picture. So, you could also see which camera was used to take the picture.

Today, digital processing software offers considerably more possibilities. Especially in black-and-white photography (I usually photograph in black-and-white), there are great new possibilities. Already during the sorting with the program Capture One, one can playfully try out different exposure variations. Then in Photoshop, you have the possibility to design the picture in countless ways. For example, if the original red sweater of the subject looks too dark in the picture, I simply turn down the red curve and now have a brighter sweater in the black-and-white picture. Of course, this is only possible if you photograph in RAW format. Post-production is the be-all and end-all of a good picture today. Even the «old» photographers have recognized this and Annie Leibovitz and Sebastião Salgado, for example, spend hours at the computer.

Talking about post-production, we have come to the big subject of analog versus digital. Is there also a difference between analog and digital recording?

When I now say that one has nothing to do with the other, that is not entirely true, but it comes close to the truth. Except perhaps for Araki, who photographs continuously, presumably even when he sleeps, with all possible and impossible apparatuses. He doesn't seem to care about the device he uses, as long as he can pull the trigger. Every shot is a stroke of genius and can be used. He is the Picasso of

photography. With Picasso, every stroke, no matter how spontaneously executed, was a masterpiece. It happens. I'm afraid that never was and isn't the case with me.

As a technology freak, I immediately 'clicked' with digital photography when it was invented and so I bought myself a Nikon D100. By the way, I shouldn't have done that; all pictures taken with that camera can only be used in exceptional cases today, the quality is so poor. Only with the model D300 did the quality begin to become a bit better, but still not as good as the analog negative. The advantage was that I could quickly get used to the style of digital photography. And again, yes, it feels completely different. I find it hard to put the difference into words. Probably it had to do with the fact that I had to insert a film in analog photography. I have only one - for the Sinar, twelve (for the 6x6cm format) and 36 shots (for the 35mm format). And the materials and subsequent processing were expensive. So I thought, «Do I really want to take this picture?» Then the release and the sound of the shutter! Brilliant! Insanely inspiring! [laughs] I produced much less scrap than today in digital photography, although I already used motor drives from the model Nikon F2 onward, so I was also able to shoot series.

In digital photography, the most important thing for me is the choice of camera: time and aperture must be adjustable in the same way as with the old cameras; if possible using a rotary switch (timer) and the aperture on the lens. The physics of photography has not changed; the most important design elements are still time and aperture, the depth of field. It must also be possible to use a manual focus. With a new camera, I spend a lot of time switching most electronic devices to OFF. All this stuff is just distracting and mostly useless. For my new Nikon Z6 I took a special course at Nikon to learn how to deactivate the electronics.

Why do I need dozens of different exposure measuring methods? In the past I had an exposure meter dangling around my neck and either guessed the exposure or held the large white hemisphere of the Sekonic light meter in front of people's noses. Of course, that was psychologically adequate. The people felt like they were at the doctor's and after this almost intimate act of measuring the light, they completely trusted me and gave me the power of command over them. For this reason in my film productions, I always connect the radio microphones personally to the protagonists. If, for example, I have to thread the mic cable under a woman's brassiere closure so that it is not visible in the picture, or if I have to stick it on a man's beer belly with tape, I get very close to the people and they give up any internal resistance. Photography is psychology. My son Remo is studying psychology, maybe one day he will become a great photographer...

What do you think of today's forms of presentation? Do you print your images on an inkjet printer or do you enlarge them manually on Baryta paper?

There are photographers who copy their digital images onto film and then make Baryta prints in the darkroom. I can't quite understand that. In my opinion, analog belongs to analog and digital to digital. When I look at my Jock Sturges or Jan Saudek originals, which have been enlarged on Baryta paper, they radiate something completely different than a digital print, although the quality of the printers and the photo papers have improved enormously in recent years. Now that an exhibition of my photos is planned, I naturally had to ask myself: How do I do it? Due to time and financial limitations I decided to print all pictures digitally. I am not a Vivian Maier or a Helen Levitt. With their pictures it would be a sin to print them out digitally!

You constantly mention photographers and pictures from the history of photography. I know that you know and knew many famous photographers personally and partly collect their pictures...

Yes, I always felt attracted to photographers. This of course already had started with the friends of my parents. But that went on for the rest of my life. When I was twenty and studying in America, I lived in the house of the great filmmaker, photographer and art professor James A. Herbert. We spent nights discussing these things on his porch. On evenings he would suddenly jump up and fetched a box of pictures or a photo book for us to discuss. I learned a lot from him. He was also significantly involved in my first feature film *Moon in Taurus*.

Then there was the young American woman in Athens, Georgia, who called herself Bonnie T. She was an incredibly talented photographer. She had a very soothing, almost narcotic influence on people. Bonnie T. moved slowly, spoke very quietly and seemed to float permanently one meter above the ground. She dressed in long, flowing hip skirts and wore broad-brimmed straw hats. And then there was her long, blonde hair. No one believed she could do what she did in photography. Her portraits of Athens blacks are among the best I have ever seen. She mostly photographed with an 8/10 inch plate camera directly on paper, not on negative film. The photo paper had a sensitivity of about 4 ISO, the exposure times were correspondingly long. People had to wait in front of her camera for hours until she had arranged the light perfectly and then sit motionless for minutes. Surprisingly, most of her pictures are sharp. She lulled people with her soft voice, even hypnotized them. Walter Benjamin once said in his *Little History of Photography* about these steps: «...the procedure itself causes the models not to live out of the moment, but into it». By the way, Bonnie T was a student of the legendary Pinhole photographer Wiley Sanderson. Sanderson was then still a professor at the University of Georgia. I was lucky enough to meet him at an exhibition. During the shooting of *Moon in Taurus* I asked Bonnie to do the stills. She said she'd like to but didn't have a suitable camera. She actually only owned the plate camera and used shoe boxes for her pinhole photography. I lent her my Nikon...

Then, at *Fetish & Dreams*, my second feature film, shot in New York, we filmed Joel Meyerowitz photographing redheads. When I was invited to shoot with Werner Herzog and Klaus Kinski in Ghana, I became friends with Beat Presser. Presser was the only photographer to satisfy Kinski's demands. One year later I travelled through Thailand with Presser, where we also took a lot of pictures.

In the film *Secret Moments*, photography plays a leading role. Already in the first sequence my leading actress Judith van der Heuvel, who by the way was a professional model in her real life, pulls the nude pictures of the Swiss photographer Bruno Bisang from his coarkboard. In the film's story, she was jealous of the women depicted. Furthermore, my friendship with the Danish photographer Fin Hansen influenced the course of shooting and thus the storyline considerably. Fin was a so-called «academic» photographer who had studied his craft at the Academy in the 1950s. For some reason, he became a porn photographer from the beginning. Denmark was the first country in Europe to have a porn industry. Fin staged each of his sex stills as if it had to satisfy great artistic demands. In perfect studio decor and expertly illuminated, he recorded the scenes, always with his Hasselblad in 6x6 format. He refused to photograph close-ups. He left this to the magazine publishers; they then had to enlarge sections with a lot of effort. I was there a few times for his shoots and could see how carefully he worked.

A highlight was when I did the photography for a sequence in a film by Isa Hesse-Rabinovitch (*Snake Magic*). René Groebli, who was a friend of Isa's, joined us during the filming and asked me if he could be my assistant. And that's what we did. In two days I was able to learn more from him about light setting than in my whole life before... René gave me his flash system back then. I still use his flash meter and the poles to hang up backgrounds today. He also gave me a photo with nudes, which I hold

in high esteem. A very long friendship connects me also with the cameraman, filmmaker, artist and photographer Jürg Hassler. Some of his black-and-white photography, which he did in the late 1950s, I published in my magazine TOX. I also photographed the exhibition catalogue for the Tinguely Museum in Basel for him.

Such experiences are of course better than any photo school...

Absolutely. But it's important that the photographers whose shoulders you look over are great photographers. Otherwise, it's no use. Add photo books, and exhibitions. That's how you learn the most. And taking an analog camera in between and spending a few hours in a darkroom is also very rewarding. I gave my son Leo my Sinar when he was still studying architecture. With this he started doing architectural photography during his studies. He was then able to pass on his knowledge and experience with this large format camera at the ZHAW in Winterthur as a guest lecturer. Nobody masters this technique anymore.

Besides the planned exhibition, what kind of photographic plans do you have?

I'd like to re-enact some of the «not yet taken photos». I would also like to make a large portrait of Zurich's Langstrasse. The Zurich City Council and the real estate speculators want to ban this «cesspool of sin» from the city and turn the last street with real life into a shopping paradise, similar to the Bahnhofstrasse. For this series I have less a documentary reportage in mind than a fashion production: I want to showcase the fashion that the Zurich original Fred Kennel offers in his Towndown store with the customers of his store. His Gothic models would fit wonderfully into the Langstrasse.

If I find a sponsor, I would like to fly to Greece with two models and recreate the shepherd fairy tale *Daphnis and Chloe*. *Daphnis and Chloe* is a classical romance by the Greek writer Longos, probably written towards the end of the 2nd century and set on the Aegean island of Lesbos. Longos tells the story of the foundling children Daphnis and Chloe, who experience their childhood with shepherds on Lesbos, are separated from each other, find each other again, love each other and finally find their parents again and get married. Karl Lagerfeld has already done this. The exhibition in Hamburg was very impressive, but I have a completely different idea of how the story should be photographed. If these pictures would be exhibited, of course, you would have to play Maurice Ravel's ballet piece *Daphnis et Chloe*... [laughs]

Then I would very much like to travel again to Cuba and Ghana to see how these countries have changed. I am also drawn to Japan again, the paradise for photography par excellence. Symbolism attracts me mystically. I would also like to shoot nude pictures again. But not like I used to, spontaneously and with girls I know. No, today I would like to tell a story with a bigger crew in a studio with top models from the fashion world. Also this year the next issue of the magazine TOX will be dedicated to my photographs. A book would also be nice...

What do you recommend to young photographers?

Don't blend in. But this is not limited to photography. Oppose «political correctness»! Try not to see the world in black and white, even if you photograph it in black and white. Question everything you see. I get scared and anxious when people have clear ideas about good and evil and no longer perceive the grey areas. Sometimes you also have to resort to unorthodox means to accomplish something great.

The most important thing, which I cannot emphasize enough, is gaining knowledge of the history of photography and art. Photographing in a vacuum doesn't do much, in my opinion. You always have to keep in mind what's already been done. Otherwise nothing great and new can come up. And one should also be concerned with the philosophy of the image, for example by the reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and John Berger. As Werner Herzog so aptly says in my film Location Africa: «I have prepared myself with enough philosophy, nothing can happen to me anymore...».

Steff Gruber, thank you for the interview.

November 2018, Can Tho, Vietnam

Cited photographers and filmmakers:

Eddie Adams	Sally Mann
Nobuyoshi Araki	Robert Mapplethorpe
Diane Arbus	Joel Meyerowitz
Bernardo Bertolucci	Daido Moriyama
Werner Bischoff	Hanspeter Mühleemann
Bruno Bissang	Nadar
Jacques Bourboulon	Arnold Odermatt
Henri Cartier-Bresson	Urs Odermatt
Walker Evans	Kipling Phillips
Ralph Gibson	Roman Polanski
Jean-Luc Godard	Beat Presser
René Groebli	Isa Hesse-Rabinowitch
Leo Gruber	Man Ray
David Hamilton	Bettina Reims
Fin Hansen	Sebastiao Salgado
Jürg Hassler	Wiley Sanderson
James A. Herbert	Jan Saudek
Werner Herzog	Annemarie Schwarzenbach
Michel Houellebecq	Jeanloup Sieff
Irina Ionesco	Alfred Stieglitz
Karl Lagerfeld	Jock Sturges
Walter Lübli	Bonnie T
Annie Leibovitz	Andrej Tarkowskij
Daniel Leuenberger	Miroslav Tichy
Helen Levitt	Nick Ut
Vivian Maier	E.T. Werlen