

Andreas Gursky in Conversation with Jeff Wall

JW What are your memories of your childhood in relation to your father's photographic studio and business? You are among a very small number of people who had such a childhood. A very simple but I think interesting question. I don't really have an idea of what it was like and I'm sure most other people also wouldn't either.

AG When I was barely one, my parents fled with me from Leipzig [in East Germany] to Essen [in West Germany], and shortly after that we moved to Düsseldorf. My father went over using a made-up contract in the West. Once the dust had settled, my mum and I followed by train.

My parents' advertising studio boomed in the wake of the post-war Wirtschaftswunder [economic miracle]. For that time, their living standards were pretty luxurious. Much to the chagrin of my mother, any surplus money was invested in expensive bespoke flash units, their own colour lab etc. During the peak of their success, my parents employed 20 people.

Up until the age of ten, I spent my childhood in the studio, because the sofa set and the television were right by the infinity cove and there was no living room and certainly no privacy. I remember very clearly being occasionally woken up at night to come and pose for photographs.

Generally things went really well for my parents in the 60s and 70s, they travelled a lot and for long periods, which I can still witness today if watch any of their numerous Super-8 holiday films.

Looking back, the studio seems very cool to me. 60s Knoll furniture, sparsely arranged, and photographic equipment everywhere, bright red Agfa and yellow-orange Kodak cartons and a chemical smell.

In the 80s, the economic situation quickly deteriorated and my father turned to portrait photography to secure his existence. He created countless, typically stately group portraits of families. Usually he worked with a Hasselblad or an 8x10-inch Plaubel. I have appropriated all of the techniques he used. In a recent obituary, when asked if I'd learnt anything from him, he was quoted as saying: 'His lighting, he got that from me.'

JW Do you recall being attracted to the photographic process as such at some point in your earlier years, I guess in the 60s or 70s? I remember going to my father's medical clinic and never having any interest in what was going on there. Because you've been so deeply involved in and committed to photography, it is fascinating to know how you saw and how you felt about what was going on in your dad's studio every day.

AG So, first off, there were the labs, five of them, and an additional black room equipped with a central 8x10-inch Homrich colour enlarger. Though simplified and slightly stylised, Christopher Williams' darkroom picture exactly reflects how the labs looked – the red basins for developing, fixing and rinsing, the orange light of the darkroom and the lab clocks with their shrill sound are really burned into my memory.

The cameras used were Hasselblads, Linhofs and Plaubels. It's amazing how little the form and function of these cameras has changed over the decades. I created many of my early landscapes with my father's cumbersome old Linhof. When I took the camera to Munich to have it checked over, I was greeted with a lot of shaking

heads. They'd never seen a camera like it and I really had to talk them into taking on the repairs.

The Plaubel cameras, which are in essence very simple and robust, were used by the Becher Class [i.e. the Düsseldorf School of photographers that studied under the Bechers, including Gursky, Candida Höfer, Thomas Struth] up until the 2000s. The Homrich enlarger is now at Grieger's [a photo lab in Düsseldorf] and you can go and marvel at it there.

Beyond that, the studio was a limitless treasure trove of equipment that I happily plundered for anything that looked like it might be fun to play with.

Because the studio never specialised in any particular direction, things often had to be heavily

remodelled. I was always really impressed when they photographed beer, which my father became a real master of. With the help of a little glycerin, a beautiful draft pils could look fresh for a very long time, despite the heat of the lights. A flash was used, but the warm modelling light was critical in controlling the lighting.

Putting together these kinds of still lifes was very complex and required a huge amount of patience.

To expose an 8x10-inch transparency, everything had to work together right up until the last moment, because, of course, nothing could be changed once the photo had been taken. After that, looking at the final crop of a perfectly lit large-format transparency on the light table was pure pleasure.

Actually, I just thought of one other thing. I was always really envious of my father's drawing abilities; he was really good.

JW Accidentally, Christopher Williams' own fascination with that era of photography seems to have led him to create an image that corresponds to your memory rather than his.

I get the impression that it was good fortune for you to have had those experiences with photography – also good fortune, of course, to have been on good terms with your father and even to have a dialogue about photography with him over the years. You clearly had learned a lot about the practical aspects of photography before you arrived at the Academy in Düsseldorf and the class with the Bechers. How did that affect your experience in the class?

AG Of course, to begin with, being technically proficient seemed like a big advantage when it came to studying at art school. But that ostensible advantage also had a price, namely that those techniques hadn't been acquired objectively, but were coupled to the aesthetic standards of advertising photography that had been burned into my way of seeing. While my fellow students were gathering exhibition experience from the get-go, I was lagging behind and only found my own individual perspective bit by bit.

In Becher's class, we didn't deal with questions of photographic technique. As a conceptual artist, Bernd didn't know a huge amount about technique. What he used stringently, in fact, were essentially compositions and stylistic features: well-balanced light without shadows, a centred perspective, distance and a careful crop. The whole thing was captured on a very precisely exposed 13x18 centimetre black-and-white negative, photographed from a slightly elevated perspective. There wasn't much to learn per se, but rather a lot to comprehend in terms of the content of the image. I was able to appropriate this compositional template and have internalised it to such an extent that I often return to it.

JW There is a distinction to be made between what I will call the 'manner' of photographing for advertising and most magazine work and that which we usually accept as a way of photographing that conforms to the criteria and attitudes of pictorial art. Not only a distinction but a conflict. You can always tell when a photographer is working in the spirit of publicity even when he or she appears to be making something serious, or trying to. This is a complicated matter because there are really no rules and things that can appear very commercial and even objectionable turn out to be artistically really good – for example some of Roe Ethridge's work. This line has been blurred ever since pop art emerged. But even keeping this large complication in mind, and knowing that there are no set guidelines, we always have to deal with this distinction. Because you began where you began you must have had to deal with this right from the start.

AG As I indicated earlier, I wasn't just forced to deal with this difference, I had to completely free the way I saw from this old commissioned-photography aesthetic. As artists, it's our job to see images liberated from existing, known or acquired aesthetic standards.

I discovered how hard this was to do when I began to work digitally and started constructing my images. When I started out, I needed weeks, months to FIND an IMAGE.

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