

Hans Ulrich Obrist

interview with Alex Hanimann
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Hans Ulrich Obrist

Let's begin at the beginning. Where did the project start?

Alex Hanimann

Was there a beginning? There never really is one – everything just somehow keeps on going. *(Laughs.)* Things develop continuously – one thing leads to another. Maybe birth is a beginning and death an end, but I actually believe in something like reincarnation or eternal life. Of course you can go back to a certain point in time and say, let's wipe the slate clean and start with something new. We deliberately make a cutoff and let ourselves in for a new story. Looking back, what seemed a beginning, something supposedly new, often turns out to be something that already existed or is rooted in the past. On the whole, things mesh and merge, more or less smoothly – apart from certain discontinuities in time.

HUO

This book is a kind of photo archive. Interestingly, it turns out that there are a great many such artists' archives. The most famous is certainly Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*, which is based on or can be traced back to Aby Warburg, the cultural historian from Hamburg. Richter started putting together his atlas in the mid-1960s. It's a store of pictures which he deposited it at the Lenbachhaus early on and then continually sent new pictures there. Hence the wide range of different versions of *Atlas*, which has never been finalized. He keeps adding new elements.

Your book bears a resemblance to that atlas, but it doesn't document your work from the very beginning. We've known each other since the '80s, since 1985, I think...

AH

... when you first came to my studio with a little Kodak Instamatic.

HUO

We must find the photos from back then sometime!



But getting back to the book: it doesn't cover all 33 years since then, let alone the forty years of your overall oeuvre – just the past fifteen years. How come?

AH

My photographic archive starts with the advent of digital photography about fifteen, sixteen years ago. I bought a little digital camera pretty early on and started taking pictures with it. What made all the difference for me was that the camera was handy and I could access the pictures quickly and directly.

HUO

Aha, that explains the starting point for the archive in your book.

AH

The archive from which I selected pictures for this book starts a little after the turn of the millennium. I often had that camera with me. So a considerable amount of material came together in a short time during those first few years. It wasn't long before I started reviewing and sorting the pictures and putting them in a new archive – a process that forced me to examine the pictures for their content and formal qualities. The upshot is an archive of fifteen to sixteen thousand pictures shot over the past fifteen years.

HUO

But you were already collecting pictures from magazines and books before the digital age set in, as I remember from my first visits to your studio back when I was still in high school. You worked details from those pictures into your drawings. So what became of your analog archive?

AH

Yes, that's right, I started collecting and archiving pictures early on. I'm a collector. But basically, it isn't collecting per se that interests me. Collecting, merely accumulating stuff, is never an end in and of itself. I collect purposefully, meaning that when collecting, I already have an idea of the point and purpose of each item. What interests me is the subject-matter and themes depicted, the figures and objects. That's what interests me about the archive, because that's how a collection can become an instrument of intellection, a catalyst in the process of gaining insight. For a long time I concentrated on collecting third-party material, pictures from all over the place, from all sorts of different contexts. I cut them out of newspapers and magazines, brochures and books, and then divided them up into categories, which I

subdivided into more and more subcategories as the quantity of pictures grew. For years I drew on this archive material as a starting point for extensive graphic explorations. I'd isolate individual figures or things from photographs by drawing or tracing them, then analyze the extracted elements for their prototype potential and, in some cases, place them in new contexts. This is how the photo archive has given rise to a new archive of drawings over the years.

With the Internet I was able to tap new sources, new imagery. My digital archive is still separate from the analog one. But the goal is to merge the two at some point.

HUO

You took relatively few photos back in the pre-digital day...

AH

Very few to almost none.

HUO

That's surprising!

AH

I didn't take many pictures myself because I'm not a photographer. When I did take pictures, they were of the family. I did realize two or three photographic ideas with a friend who used to come and photograph me in the studio from time to time.

HUO

Norbert Möslang, the great composer.

AH

He's a multimedia artist, performer and composer.

HUO

Getting back to the book, how can the photos you've included be categorized? There are photos of people, portraits, photos of animals, landscapes and buildings, and photos of art works and craftwork, of pictures and sculptures. How would you describe the various categories? How is the archive organized?

AH

The archive is organized along relatively simple, you might even say ordinary, lines. There are people, animals, things, landscapes, abstract subjects such as structures, colors, shapes and repeatedly – this may be what's unusual about the collection – what I call "found footage", though that's not the right term. "Found footage" actually means found third-party film material used together with one's own footage. I ought to use the term "appropriated images" instead. In my collection and in this book, observed actions and events are repeatedly shown in

photographic series, which lends them something of a cinematic quality. So in this respect, “found footage” might not be all that wrong.

These general, rudimentary categories are not further differentiated in my photographic archive. There are no subordinate levels or subdivided subject layers as in my archive of third-party material, just the simple breakdown.

But the book does not reflect this breakdown. The pictures are arranged in chronological order instead. We spent a long time thinking about how to present an archive in a way that is ordered, structured and comprehensible to the viewer. After careful consideration, we decided to go with chronological order. Vinzenz Meyner’s layout yields just the right combination of isolated photographs, on the one hand, and photo series that form a kind of pictorial sequence, on the other.

HUO

In an interview I found online, you said photography helps you understand the world.

AH

Yes, that’s true. The perception process is slowed down by means of or with the help of photography. This slowing-down makes reality permanently available so it can be analyzed and broken down in detail.

The same goes for analog archives. The availability or permanent access to images enables us to perceive the world more precisely, which in turn helps us to a better understanding of it.

HUO

How do your photos get worked into paintings? If you look at Richter's *At/as*, the photographs are always shown in relation to realized or unrealized paintings, or they’re projects for spaces.

You paint. And lately, you sculpt: over the past few years you’ve produced some public sculptures. So I’m wondering how your archive translates into other media, how it serves you as a basis for other works?

AH

I undertake a sort of visual parsing of the photographs. There are basically two ways for me to use the archive. On the one hand, I use transformational techniques to develop new content directly from individual pictures or details, which in turn gives rise to new works. On the other hand, I go through the archive in search of material, images, figures and objects, according to the specific themes or subjects I’m working on. My use of the archive is not confined to a single medium. In the ‘80s and early ‘90s I often painted from photos, but that’s all over now. I haven't painted in twenty years. While the archive is still a vital tool for my work, I don’t decide ahead of time what media I will use it for – unlike Richter, for example. Photography can become drawing, for example, drawing sculpture, and so forth.

HUO

Like the big sculpture in Zurich?

AH

Exactly, *Anne-Sophie*. There's *Vanessa* and then there's *Anne-Sophie*. Both are larger-than-life sculptures. I developed the idea through drawings. My initial question focused on the prototypical, exemplary or symbolic qualities of certain figures, poses or gestures. In the realization stage, I got the project going with the aid of photography.

This book contains other shots of models by people I've worked with. One extensive series of photographs was produced in collaboration with students at Zurich University of the Arts, where I teach. They formed the basis for a group sculpture I'm developing for a show at the art museum in Sankt Gallen. In this case, the photographs are a crucial element in the production process.

HUO

Can you give an example?

AH

Specifically, I was looking for five models for the group sculpture I mentioned. I took between four and six hundred photos of each model in the studio to see how various poses, gestures and positions might look. I developed the final settings to produce 3D scans based on those parameters. We're currently processing the data. The first trial cast has already been produced using test prints.

HUO

The group sculpture will be shown in St. Gallen in parallel to the publication of your book. Henri Cartier-Bresson, whom I knew well, once told me that the best way to show photographs to advantage is in a book. But we are now living in an age of large-format or oversized photography. Cartier-Bresson felt that it's OK to enlarge photographs and hang them on the wall, but that the book is still the format best suited to photography. Helen Levitt agreed, saying, "My books are my work."

What's your opinion? Are your photographs predominantly in books or will they also find their way into exhibition spaces?

AH

With one exception, I've never exhibited photographs.

HUO

So your photography is mostly to be found in books?

AH

Yes, at least for the time being. I agree that a book is the perfect medium for photography – partly because it offers almost unlimited editing and presentation possibilities. But I can well imagine various pictures of mine being shown at an exhibition in the future.

Since photography played a crucial part in developing the group sculpture for the exhibition at the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, it was only natural to include it somehow in the overall exhibition project. Hence the book project, among other things, which also gives me an overview of the pictures I've produced over the years. It's a very exciting process to view and contemplate the photos that have accumulated over the past fifteen years, as well as to range them in a larger context.

HUO

Painting, on the other hand, is a chapter you've closed for good – or can you imagine returning to this art form at some point?

AH

Painting is seeing something of a revival these days. I'm going to rework a painting for the St. Gallen show. Which is surprising for me because I haven't shown a painting in twenty years.

HUO

Can you tell us what it's going to be?

AH

It's a large-scale work from 1989 comprising thirty parts. I'm painting over all the pictures. This may well be the beginning of a return to painting, maybe even a rediscovery of the medium.

HUO

Before we concentrate on sculpture, let's get back to photography. I once asked the same Cartier-Bresson who said photography lives best in books what photography actually is. He put it in quasi-predatory terms: a photographer is a hunter who also happens to be a vegetarian.

What is photography for you?

AH

For me, photography is primarily a means of gaining insight. I use it to heighten my awareness of the world. Or rather, to visualize my position in the world, my perspective on the world. It's also an instrument for slowing things down. This may sound contradictory, especially in this day and age in which we often get the impression that our lives are being further dynamized and accelerated by the glut of images flooding the media. In fact, however, by capturing and permanently documenting scenes and things that interest me, I can make them available, visible and useable beyond the present moment. But another aspect occurred to me while reviewing the images for this book and the layout work: even though it actually stops and in a certain sense freezes time, serial photography, the way I practice it, is capable of setting time in motion – in slow motion. Static images can be smoothly transformed into motion pictures.

On the whole, my photo archive shows that many things in my life pull in opposite directions. Some people continuously advance along a single straight path on which they seek to compress their life and artistic work. My life trajectory is erratic, with lots of discontinuities, some of which are intentional, and some due to external circumstances. So opposites keep colliding. Which is strenuous – and yet highly stimulating. I think these oppositions are clearly manifest in the book.

HUO

So you seesaw between dynamism and standstill, fast and slow. Out of a multitude of pictures, you focus on a single one... Francis Picabia once said that our heads are round so our thoughts can change direction.

AH

Yes, Picabia is a very interesting artist in this connection, perhaps one of the key pioneers of present-day art alongside Marcel Duchamp. His work continually shows similar discontinuities and irregularities. One always senses a sort of ambivalence in Picabia, a sort of detachment from his own art.

In this regard, his work and his thought are very close to mine. Exaggerating contrasts may seem showy. But simple as it may seem, it's true: time and again, I notice that even complex and complicated structures can be traced back to simple, clear-cut principles. To oppositions, for example, plenty of which can be found in this book: private versus public, banal versus meaningful, art versus life, animals versus people and so on and so forth. This constant collision generates energy. But it doesn't result in a fusion or a unified whole. It's more a matter of coexistence, a simultaneity of being. As an artist, I inhabit various worlds.

HUO

Parallel realities, in other words, as in quantum physics.

AH

Parallel realities, exactly. Several experiments have proven the existence of parallel realities. Splitting consciousness up into several simultaneously existing states may also be one of the special things that artists are capable of achieving. But this is a digression from our concrete projects, from the works in question.

HUO

In this age of 3D scans, it might be said that sculpture now draws on photography to an even greater extent .

AH

Definitely! New technologies are constantly expanding the range of possibility for sculpture. New production methods have a big influence on the forms of contemporary sculpture. Present-

day scanning processes are based on photographic principles. And this specifically photographic element is particularly evident in the treatment or appearance of surfaces. On the other hand, sculptural experiments nowadays are also heavily based on materials.

HUO

In contrast to your XL public sculptures, the sculptures on display in the Oberlichtsaal in St. Gallen are life-size. They're center-stage in the exhibition and, as a group, are called "Conversation Piece", interestingly enough. (*Laughs.*) Now, museums seldom serve as venues for conversation. Museumgoers may communicate with the exhibits, but generally not with one another. Joseph Grigely often wrote about the fact that people don't talk much to each other, let alone to strangers, in museums.

AH

Conversation between museumgoers is one thing. But there's also a form of communication between the works themselves. Works of art are in conversation with one another in an exhibition. The six sculptures will communicate with one another, creating a network of relationships within the space. Something similar happens in the book. The juxtaposition of the images engenders a form of cross-referencing. The images converse with one another on each page and across multiple pages.

HUO

How do you pick the models for your sculptures?

AH

It's an intuitive process. There are no set criteria. Sometimes I work with people I know, and sometimes I talk to people on the spur of the moment and we end up working together.

HUO

Your sculptures involve objects as well as people. Is this true of the St. Gallen group, too?

AH

I don't know yet. We have scanned a knapsack and a yoga mat. We also talked about using animals. But that's still up in the air. The group sculpture as currently planned is not a definitively self-contained work. It's much more about depicting a temporary state, which is to be further developed. I can readily imagine – if not this time around, then next chance I get – scanning an animal and maybe some other objects. In any case, the ensemble is going to be expanded. How I handle the scaling is also wide open, with plenty of options. So far I've only worked in two different sizes.

HUO

Getting back to the existing group: one gets the impression that the individual figures are in conversation with each other and yet isolated.

AH

Exactly, it's both. On the one hand, each figure is focused on itself, perhaps even trapped within itself to some extent. On the other hand, each is reaching out to its surroundings. The postures are conceived in such a way that the sculptures can stand alone, but through their gestures they also refer to their surroundings. Communication arises between the figures themselves as well as between the viewers and them.

HUO

Can you explain your choice of materials? The whole thing is printed using a 3D printing process. But that's not the end of the story; the sculptures are then cast in aluminum. Why aluminum?

AH

3D prints aren't very durable. The material decomposes and can only be stabilized for a while. Aluminum is a modern-day material and it combines two opposing properties: solidity and softness.

HUO

And it reflects! Is it shiny or matt?

AH

The aluminum is polished. We're still trying to figure out how far we can go with this. We've already done some preliminary test castings. We'll finalize on the basis of the results. We might use very pure aluminum to get the brightest possible results. The figures have to look noble and precious. Their silvery glow should give them an expression of something ideal, unearthly. With their hyper-realistic photographic surface, the result should oscillate between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible, between present and absent, contrasting their material presence with an appearance of the utmost immateriality.

HUO

The underlying idea is an echo of a prevalent 18th-century genre: "conversation pieces", paintings that generally show a group of people conversing with one another. Joseph Grigely, an artist who has been deaf since the age of eleven, says his conversation pieces are about hesitations, stutters, repetitions and ellipses in spoken language.

Language has always played a part in your artwork. I remember the very first time I paid a visit to your studio: you showed me lots of drawings made up of nothing but words.

AH

Language has always been important to me. I began working artistically with language early on.

Getting back to the idea of oppositions: there's the world of language and the world of images in my work. On the one hand, it's like swinging back and forth between different worlds. On the other, when I work with images, language is always present, even if I'm not working directly with it. Conversely, images are always there when I work with language. I decided at a very early age to keep images and language separate. I didn't want to fall into the illustration trap. When both forms of expression are combined, each is liable to be used to explain the other.

Maybe we should get back to the photographs now...

HUO

You're right. After all, the book's about photographs.

One question I still have is about the order or disorder of an archive. Which criteria are decisive? The Biedermeier writer Adalbert Stifter is known to have arranged his books by color, putting yellow books with yellow, green with green, blue with blue and so on. The alphabet is often used as an ordering principle. So is chronology, of course: this is how image archives are arranged on smartphones, which are used to take lots of photos nowadays. The machine arranges items automatically, without our planning input. How did you decide to arrange the photographs in the book chronologically?

AH

The graphic artist Vinzenz Meyner and I considered various approaches. We looked at drafts to vet potential layouts with regard to their message, how they put the content across. We came to the conclusion that chronology yields the most interesting mix of continuity and discontinuity. The idea was to come up with an approach that wouldn't look too chaotic, but wouldn't stick to an overly rigid order either. Chronological order produces a certain liveliness insofar as it keeps photographs from the same period together, whereas my sporadic use of the camera gives rise to discontinuities. So this approach is a good reflection of the way I work.

HUO

Do you take all your pictures with a smartphone or do you use a digital camera?

AH

I take a lot of them on my smartphone. At first I had a little Sony digital camera. The advent of iPhones has improved the quality of smartphone cameras. So now I take most of my photos with a smartphone. But I didn't take all the pictures in the book myself. When I need pictures of my studio, for instance, or high-resolution photos of a certain place, I call on a photographer. The models for the sculptures, for example, were shot by a photographer. I assumed the role of a director, providing ideas and giving instructions.

HUO

Are these photographs included in the book all the same?

AH

Yes. For me, these photographs are also part of my pictorial cosmos because – even if I don't physically take them myself – I do make or lay down the artistic decisions in my capacity as the author.

HUO

Were any filters used?

AH

No, I don't use filters. But some of the pictures are partially reworked. I often opt for the black-and-white version of a photo, and I've included a bunch of negative prints. For one thing, this has to do with my interest in reduction and abstraction, as well as with a search for the prototypes that lie behind figures and images. For another, I'm simply interested in contrasts. Black and white is also reminiscent of analog photography, which I grew up with. Back then, you always had these strips of negative film on which light and dark were reversed.

HUO

What role does chance play in photography?

AH

A pretty big one. I often photograph spontaneously when I'm out and about. Many of the pictures are shot more or less by chance, on the spur of the moment. I see something that interests me – for whatever reason – and I capture it. As I said, I do take most of my pictures nowadays on a smartphone. So the wonderful thing about it is I always have my camera on me.

Planning a shoot is a lot more time-consuming. Besides all the equipment, I have to provide information and ideas about the object or situation to be shot. So the project has got to be planned out, conceptually prepared. I usually don't shoot such planned pictures myself, I work with a photographer on them.

HUO

When is photography art?

AH

A photograph is art, in my opinion, if, first of all, the content is interesting and, secondly, the picture works in formal terms. Whether a photograph becomes art is up to the artist, whose attentiveness gives the picture the aura that art requires.

But let's ask the question more generally: When does anything become art? Is art a game or a serious matter? Ever since Duchamp, art can be a mere idea, it can be ephemeral, immaterial – and yet the traditional definitions, which are heavily tied to physical execution, to

techniques and media, still apply. So anything can actually be or become art: philosophy, history, natural sciences, language, fiction or reality.

HUO

Has the computer changed your working methods? If so, how?

After all, we're also talking about the state of our generation: we've got one foot still in the analog age and the other in the digital age, which increasingly determines our lives. We grew up on analog media. When we met over thirty years ago, I had just discovered faxing. *(Laughs.)* So tell me, how has the computer changed your work?

AH

Digitization has led to greater flexibility. And maybe opened my eyes too. But using a computer doesn't only open things up, it can also constrict your work. I make a point of breaking away from the computer from time to time.

Analog has had a heavy influence on me. And although I take lots of pictures digitally now, I still look at them afterwards through analog glasses.

HUO

In addition to the tens of thousands of photos in your archive, are there any others you've yet to realize? Objects, people, animals, scenes, places and so on that you've always wanted to photograph but never could? Specifically, what's missing?

AH

What's missing is the future, what is yet to come. There are still some places I'd like to visit. I think we all have places we long to see, places we feel drawn to even though we don't know them. Places we think we'll eventually get to. On the other hand, there are places we're familiar with and keep coming back to. Even if we know them and we've been there many times before, they still attract us, we still have to go again. And every time we go back, we seem to see places like that with fresh eyes. That goes not just for places, but for people and things too. So it's all about both repetition and novelty. Which is why I feel I'm far from having finished taking pictures, it's not over yet, because a lot is still missing.

HUO

What's the first picture we see upon opening the book? And the last one before closing it?

AH

We have yet to reach a final decision on that one. But for the time being, the first photo is of clouds and the last is of a tethered dog waiting. Although we've got a rough shortlist of pictures to work with, which we've already laid out, there will still be some changes. Our concept for the book and its design is to fill in the agreed layout first and then remove any duplicates or unnecessarily repeated contents. The resulting layout will be interspersed with gaps.

HUO

The Nobel prize-winning poet Czesław Miłosz, I visited in Krakow, said that as a poet – though this probably goes for every painter, photographer and sculptor of the 20th or 21st century – he was influenced by film and that one always thinks of film, too, when viewing photographs. But photography isn't really film, it's something else.

AH

There is a connection to film in my work, though it's not all that obvious. It's there in the content, at any rate. Certain films I saw at an early age etched themselves on my mind. Michelangelo Antonioni's films, for example. They enlightened me! I watched some of his films over and over again. That definitely influenced my thinking and my artistic work. When amateur movie cameras became affordable about fifteen years ago, I bought myself one and occasionally filmed little scenes. The first one was about polar bears at the zoos in Munich and Stuttgart. Over the years I've repeatedly shot videos on the spur of the moment or deliberately planned out in advance. The exhibition includes my footage of a place I once shot in London. Riding my bike in East London, I kept passing a square used by boys from an Islamic school during their supervised recess. I was drawn to this whole scene, which had a visual magic about it, and couldn't get it out of my mind, so I finally decided to film it. After a lengthy conversation, the supervising teacher allowed me to film the square with the kids there. The resulting scene is shown in the exhibition uncut, in a loop, combined with shots of the vacant square and recorded music.

Despite these forays into the medium of video, I think there's something static about my work. My photographs are somehow un-cinematic. Although there are repeatedly scenes or sequences in which the camera circles around a subject, the overall effect isn't fluid – on the contrary, it seems choppy and jerky. For me, photography always freezes the moment and not a period of time.

HUO

Books as a medium have been of central importance to you for over thirty years now, in fact for as long as we've known each other. The book we're discussing here is an artist's book. What exactly is the role of books in your work?

AH

Either you love books or you don't. I need books, I need the physical certainty of materialized knowledge. It so awful to think that someday all knowledge and poetry might only be available in digital – and thus immaterial and invisible – form. Although the prevailing view nowadays is that the age of the book is over, I still believe in the power of printed words and images. Books are still very important to me to this day.

I've made one book after another over the years, often – but not always – in connection with an exhibition. Generally speaking, they did not become conventional catalogues. They fall more under the category of artist's books. For two reasons: First of all, I find most conventional

monographic exhibition catalogues boring. I don't know many catalogues that interest me as books. And secondly, it isn't easy to do justice to my heterogeneous work, which encompasses various genres and media, in a conventional manner. Perhaps other people will have to do it for me at some point.

My books to date explore individual aspects of my work – mostly covering a specific genre such as drawing or word art. They are archival in nature, so they remain important instruments for me to work with even after an exhibition. I use them as tools to follow up on and delve deeper into certain subjects over an extended period of time. So I make considerable use of my artist's books in the studio, where they lie with lots of little slips of paper sticking out of them. In recent years, in addition to these artist's books, I've stored pictures and writings in a number of notebooks and booklets as well as one-off books not intended for publication. For the most part, they're the results of extensive research. They document the development of a project and show what was on my mind during its realization. Most of them are simply stitched-together booklets or self-bound books.

HUO

How many unpublished books and booklets of this kind have you produced?

AH

I'd say five to ten books and maybe twenty or thirty booklets.

HUO

Actually, there ought to be a book about your books someday.

AH

Yes, why not. Another project to realize.

HUO

The last artist's book you published is called *Trapped* and is about wild animals in their natural habitat. It's a book made not just for the art world, but one – and I'm quoting you here – that could interest zoologists, too.

AH

Since my childhood, for as long as I can remember, I've had this interest in and love for animals. I began studying animals artistically very early on – and from various perspectives: there's the artist's perspective, that of the animal lover and that of the zoologist. The book you mention shows wild animals photographed by camera traps mostly at night.

HUO

Is the camera integrated into the trap?

AH

They aren't actual traps, of course. The cameras themselves, which are generally set up outside, often in woods, are called traps because they capture the animals in a figurative sense. The camera is triggered by a built-in sensor whenever anything enters its field of vision. And because most wild animals are nocturnal, there are very few daytime shots. I spent several years collecting the photographs in *Trapped*. I also had some help from zoologists. To them – and this is quite interesting – these photographs have no importance as pictures. They serve solely for the purpose of gathering information.

HUO

Is it fair to say that the photos in *Trapped*, unlike those in your latest book, were not really taken by you?

AH

Correct.

HUO

There actually isn't any photographer in *Trapped*, just motion detectors to trigger the camera.

AH

Strictly speaking, there is no author. The animals themselves are the authors, they trigger the exposures. The pictures might even be described as unwitting self-portraits. Chance plays an important part here.

Strictly speaking, there is no artistic intention behind the pictures either. And yet they are very interesting from an artistic point of view. The compositions are often surprising, unusual, expressive, because the spatial conditions are unusual, the moments surprising and the lighting conditions often magical and enchanting.

HUO

Hans Rudolf Reust, in the essay he contributed to *Trapped*, writes about your work of word art *Is there Anybody?* The question obviously refers to the fact that these photographs are taken when no one's there to operate the camera.

AH

Yes. As I said, these photographs have no author. Authorship only comes into play in the editing process. Someone has to select and make creative decisions about how the pictures are to appear in the book. I've given a great deal of thought to issues like authorship and influence, observation, and presence-in-absence, which in turn has given rise to some more word art.

HUO

In the book for the St. Gallen exhibition, which we should get back to now, will there be any captions?

AH

We've discussed whether there's any need for captions and maybe a picture index, too. But we've come to the conclusion that it's really not important. There is little information, if any, about the pictures anyway. But we are going to include articles by various authors on specific topics. One of them is to run as a footer through the whole book.

HUO

Have you decided on a title for the book yet?

AH

The working title is *Etwas fehlt* ("Something's Missing"). Patrick Frey, the publisher, came up with that. It was initially just an in-house name for the project file at the publisher's. Though it's becoming increasingly clear that this title aptly sums up not only the way I think about photography, the way I work, but also what the book is all about. So the book may well end up being called *Etwas fehlt*.

HUO

The philosopher Ernst Bloch is known to have said, "Something's missing." Bloch wrote a great deal about utopia and the "principle of hope". One anecdote has it that Theodor Adorno, who was skeptical about the term "utopia" simply because Bloch was constantly using it, asked him, "What is the definition of utopia?" To which Bloch replied, "Something's missing."

Utopia looms large in your work, too, doesn't it?

AH

Yes. But not in the political sense of fictional models for society. In very general terms, "utopia" is about openness as well as indeterminacy and the potential that lies in indeterminacy. It's an important term to me inasmuch as it connotes what has yet to be found. We're always looking for something, something that isn't there yet, but we think it might be there, it might be possible. "Utopia" is somewhat synonymous with longing, a yearning for perfection and the absolute. Perhaps it serves as a driving force in artistic endeavors: we try to get closer to this ideal state in which everything comes together to form an ideal constellation. Even though we know we're bound to fail over and over again, because we've already had to admit we've failed hundreds of times, yet we're still willing to invest the effort again, give it another shot... only to end up realizing yet again that something's still missing after all.

I designed two slightly different posters for the invitation to a show at Rolf Hengesbach's gallery in Wuppertal in 2001. One of them said "*Etwas fehlt*" ("Something's missing"). And the other *Etwas fehlt immer* ("Something's always missing"). (*Laughs.*)

This reflects the contradiction I find myself in every day. I'm looking for something which I think exists and is therefore missing, and yet at the same time I realize that this absence is a permanent state, that this very notion of perfection or the absolute is utopian and doesn't exist in reality.

HUO

Which leads back to the eternally recurring question about unrealized projects. Do you have any ideas that you've yet to realize? Ideas that may have been too big, too small or too expensive to pursue?

AH

Oh, I could run through a whole bunch of such projects for you. I've got whole lists of sculptures yet to be made, pictures yet to be painted, texts I'd still like to articulate and materialize. And new ideas just keep coming. I'm sure all these works will be realized at some point. If not by me, then definitely by others who will administer my estate.

HUO

Can you give me an example of one you'd definitely like to realize yourself?

AH

I'm going to make a replica of the aviary I built in 2009 for my *Conceptual Games* exhibition at the Kunsthhaus Aarau. Unlike the original, it'll be empty: a replication, a kind of reflection, an empty cage.

HUO

And what would you call that empty cage? Have you already got a name for it?

AH

No, not yet.

HUO

In an interview by Konrad Bitterli, he asked you about the subjects of your works in various media – painting, sculpture, installation – and you replied, "It's nature, it's animals, plants, landscapes, objects." The same subjects are all included in this new photo book.

But you have always captured all sorts of things not only in paintings and photographs, but also in drawings, which virtually form an encyclopedia unto themselves. When we first met, you had piles of drawings lying around. And during subsequent visits to your studio, we were always looking at drawings.

Unlike painting, drawing is still a mainstay of your practice even in the digital age. Hence my final question: What role does drawing still play in your work?

AH

Yes, of course, I still draw a lot, though not with the same intensity as before. When drawing, I'm looking for something, trying to suss it out by drawing it. For me, the first stage of drawing involves collecting, accumulating, appropriating things. I trace, copy, isolate and bring motifs

together without knowing exactly what it will all amount to. The second step involves trying to analyze, sort and structure what I've drawn. My thoughts revolve around it and reach beyond it. Meaning gradually emerges in this way, step by step, line by line. It's a process of zeroing in on an idea. Drawing has a lot to do with thinking. But it's not thinking in the usual sense. It's thinking in signs and pictures.