

Talk 01: Normality and desire

Sebastian Hau and Erik van der Weijde

Sebastian Hau: You regularly publish books and fanzines that are to be found in some of the best art bookshops in the world. You have been publishing your work for over ten years now, being today respected as one of the most important voices in photography and publishing in Europe. What was the beginning of this longterm strategy and practice of publishing?

Erik van der Weijde: Immediately after I graduated from the Rietveld Academy I got a grant to photograph on the beaches of a small city in the Northeast of Brazil and part of this money was destined for the production of the prints. But as I couldn't find a proper lab in the area I decided to use the production money to publish the project in a book. This was *Praia*, printed in offset in an edition of 500 in 2004. When I got the books from the printer I was really disappointed with the paper choice, glue binding and the overall feeling, so out of some kind of frustration and anger I suddenly had the first issue of *foto.zine* nr.1 printed in that same week. It had a completely different paper, it was stapled and much thinner, but most of the images had already appeared in *Praia* as well. Over the following ten to twelve months, I produced seven more issues of what became my first *foto-zine* set and I experimented a lot with papers, design and different printers and I was really learning on the go. The only problem was that I wasn't selling anything, so I had piles of unopened boxes from the printers plus a smaller pile of production bills and no income, so I had to become a *publisher* and find ways for marketing, sales, distribution, planning, etc. It was do or die.

SH: In the magazine you've started publishing last year, called *Subway*, where you present found footage alongside discussions that you have with contemporary artists, I've noticed a recurrent question, where you ask your partner for the most impressive dish, the most interesting or memorable food they had last year. So let me first turn that question to you – what was the most interesting dish you had last year? (And in what way do you think food, and talking about it, can enrich the discussion in an art magazine)?

EW: Well, the idea behind *Subway* is to connect people with paper. So it's more about the people behind the artworks, than about the work.

It's about these small encounters with like-minded people you might «know» through Facebook and then (briefly) meet in real life, maybe in a book fair, or exhibition or whatever and then just have a little chat about the minor things in life – food, a trip you took, your new car... For me these encounters and chats can be very inspiring and I hope Subway to be that as well.

In april this year, when I was installing my exhibition in Antwerp at Still Gallery, I had a great lunch with my friend Jan Kempenaers and Kasper Andreasen in a small restaurant that hasn't changed it's interior since the sixties. I had a very good steak with great fries, two beers and a Jenever, so very memorable indeed...

SH: Your work turns around several axes, one of which is architecture, and what Lee Friedlander used to call the «social landscape», where photographs of buildings and urban landscapes describe the social reality and underlying sociological parameters at once. Where did your interest in Oscar Niemeyer begin, and in what way do his buildings excite you as a photographer?

EW: Oscar Niemeyer's work, or actual one specific building, was, in retrospect, what made me decide to study art. In '94 I was doing a high school-year-abroad in Brazil. When I visited a friend in Belo Horizonte she took me to Pampulha, an early Niemeyer project around a lake and which includes the famous little Church of Saint Francis of Assisi. Coming from the Netherlands I only knew two types of churches, being the boring protestant ones and the catholic cathedrals. So seeing this modernist, beautifully curved in concrete, sensually set in the landscape architectural work I thought, hmmm, things can have more and different shapes than I am used to seeing. In a way it made me think of also doing things differently and not follow regular patterns. I am very impressed by the huge catalogue of Niemeyer's work, covering almost 70 years of the last century, but it's not only this photogenic quality of his architecture I appreciate. Sure, that attracts me as a photographer, but what I am more interested in, as an artist, is the duality in his work: On one hand the intimacy, coming from the sensual curve and the female body as inspiring force and on the other hand the extreme connection to power and politics, having built for presidents, dictators, the communist party and the armed forces. It's a bit like Private Joker's peace button on his Born to Kill helmet in Full Metal Jacket.

SH: You produce your work using multiple supports, prints, portfolios, books (in limited and unlimited print runs). From which point on in the creation process do you start thinking about the support of the work you're working on?

EW: I would say somewhere halfway the project. Almost all projects start with a single idea; usually a question that keeps repeating itself, like: Is there a McDonalds in Hiroshima? Was Adolf Hitler actually an artist? How does it feel to design and build a whole city? What if the family album would contain a bit too many images of that hot niece? Then comes the research and the planning and the shooting or gathering of material and the editing. Most of the times during the editing some ideas on the support of the work enter the project, whether it will be a book, or zine, or edition. These ideas crystallize into a final product-idea over the course of a few days or weeks. I never experiment or try out different things. Each project finds its own form naturally.

SH: What influences you in your decision of prices for your works ?

EW : For the books I look to a few other publishers and check their price ranges, according to size, printing technique, edition, etc. The prices for my photographic prints are set by my gallerist. The editions are all priced around a hundred euros, that's what I would spend on a similar work.

SH: How are creative partnerships, editing other artists' works, or anonymous work for example, important in your practice as an artist yourself ?

EW: An important factor in my work is the context: photographing is re-contextualizing (reality) for me. To take things out of their context and providing them with a new one is for me a way to look at the world, both in my work and private life. So this editing, or re-contextualizing, opens up this world of ideas, which can enrich life and inspire at the same time. Editing other artists' works can bring me new ideas of context and/or why and how the work touches upon my own questions I have as an artist. More specifically, what I do in Subway Magazine, is edit or mix my personal interests with works by artists who work with similar themes and so create a new context -in the form of a magazine- for the duration of that particular issue. The different works and written copy in each issue sustain the medium, even though they all have their separate values or meaning.

SH: There is a big discussion on the web, following Joachim Schmid's conference at Paris Photo, about the relationship of photographer's to galleries and institutions, where Joachim Schmid claimed that basically everyone is making money with the exception of the photographers. How do you feel about this - do you feel independent? How do you see your position in relationship to institutions and galleries?

EW: I feel as independent as I can be, at the moment. I have no obligations towards anyone, but out of choice I commit myself to working with other people or institutions. I think it's completely normal to also have relationships based on money, or trade. I do this or give you this, you give me money. I don't think this should even make one less independent, as long as it's based on equal exchange, free will and ethical decisions. The whole un-balanced relationship between artists/photographers and institutions is based on the illusion there's room for all this art and culture in our society. The larger part of the population is not interested in art and not willing to pay for it. Art audience and public just isn't big enough to sustain all the artists around. Especially in a country like Brazil I see how much cultural activities are a pure luxury product. I accept that although I wish it were different.

SH: You are exhibiting your work in the prestigious Camera Austria space right now, one of Europe's earliest photography institutions, in what could be called a career midterm retrospective. How did you construct the show in order to organise the multitude of approaches you have been using?

EW: Maren Lübbke-Tidow, the curator, and I, we decided to focus on the photographic series and their underlying meanings, instead of focusing on the books or publishing. So we chose around 200 images from 13 different series and printed all of them in the same size and exhibited them on a custom made table that followed the architectural space of the exhibition. Leaving all the walls empty we kind of forced the viewer into a similar way of looking you have when you read a book: looking down. This concentration is strengthened by having to walk around the whole table, in an Ikea kind of way. The longest part of the table measured over 35 meters, so it was an impressive installation. It was a very photographic show, even though I don't consider myself a photographer. To offer a view into the multitude of approaches we published a book, *Gebilde*, for which we invited different writers from the art and publishing field to write on specific approaches in my practice. I even wrote a piece myself in which I talk about the importance of travelling in my work.

SH: Here are two connected questions to finish this first go, and I'll need a maybe lengthy way to go ahead. I'm thinking of you as an artist who has created a complex system, as a publisher of maybe up to 5 books per year, with an online presence, and especially a place in the landscape of contemporary art and photography, participating regularly in exhibitions around the world. Also you have a family, which is sometimes the subject of your work. You're based in Brazil and travel a lot and your work is both about

the most normal appearances of everyday life, in the form of architectural photography of suburbs. On the other hand your work, with photographs of the female body, and of highly symbolical places has a certain aspect of the erotic and exotic. I'd be interested in what has been called "the normal life" - what does normality mean to you? And after this year of exhibitions and publications and articles, what does desire mean to you? I guess I'm referring to the german Sehnsucht (which is of course slightly less sexual) – can you tell me a bit what desires you have as an artist?

EW: I think we are arriving here at a core that is shared by both my work and personal life. It's about what drives me as a man, a person and also about decisions I have made in the past of how to live my life and make my work. First of all I believe that being an artist is not a 40-, 60- or 80-hour job. Being an artist means a way of thinking and acting 24/7. It is both great and hard, like, always being weekend but never having a day off. Secondly I believe that as an artist I don't need to create: everything is already present in daily life and it needs a trained eye or investigative mind to see and extract themes and objects from there, as opposed to create things from zero, say a white canvas. So in that way, everything I see and experience is both normality and a possible artistic theme or subject, simply said, it's all the same, or at least I experience it all on a same level. My attraction to the exotic comes from always being slightly detached from both European and Brazilian society. I look at Europe from a distance, but I am also not 100% part of Brazilian culture. And definitely has Brazilian sensuality influenced my work and me. It is always present.

Both desire and Sehnsucht are very important to me. Desire, I believe, is almost like the motor that's always running in the background and keeps things going. I love the ambiguity of Sehnsucht, this ability of being both positive and negative at the same time, it is very similar to many of the subjects I photograph. Even the logo of my publishing imprint – 4478zine –, an image of the Matterhorn (4478m.) has its part of longing or yearning: to me it's one of the most beautiful images around, these iconic mountain postcards, but I have never visited the mountain. I think about going there all time, but never do...

(A Portuguese word closely related to this theme of desire is Saudade, which I have even tattooed on my body.)

My ultimate desire as an artist is to build, or in the end having built, a body of work that explains my view on life itself, even to me, in a way that for example Ludwig II – King of Bavaria – did, or Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

Erik van der Weijde

(Netherlands, 1977)

Lives and works in Brazil. He is the founder of the publishing imprint 4478zine, through which he promotes his own printed matter. Van der Weijde attended the Rietveld Academy and the Rijksakademie, both in Amsterdam. An overview of his photographic work is currently on show at Camera Austria in Graz.

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Sebastian Hau

(Germany, 1976)

Worked from 1999 to 2010 at the Schaden bookstore, specialised in photobooks. Since 2010, he works at the BAL bookstore in Paris, LE BAL Books. He is also curator in Warsaw, Leipzig, Arles. He writes regularly for publications like FOAM magazine, IMA magazine, Photo-eye and others. He publishes books in collaboration with Yellow Magic Books.

Erik van der Weijde***Courbe***

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In 2015, Temple is starting **Talk**, a series of discussions between artists and curators and critics to accompany its exhibitions and events, aiming to create a deeper understanding of contemporary practices.

