

## PHOTONEWS 2011

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### Studying photography in Offenbach

Questions to Prof. Martin Liebscher, Offenbach University of Art and Design

Anna Gripp interviews Martin Liebscher

We meet at HfG Offenbach: Satellit Berlin. Three years ago at the initiative of Martin Liebscher a project space was installed in Berlin's Wedding district. A fixed address with its own gallery and separate living space. >Unlimited Freedom< is the name of the exhibition at the beginning of May and shows photo works and installations by students. The gallery is also a starting point for trips. A current example: as part of the semester project >Collecting, Collectors, Collections<, which took Martin Liebscher and his students first to Leipzig and then to Berlin.

Born 1964, Martin Liebscher has taught photography in the Visual Communications Faculty at HfG Offenbach since 2007. As an art photographer he is omnipresent – and even crops up a hundreds of times in his >Family Pictures< (also see Photonews 6/2003).

*Anna Gripp/Photonews: From 1990 you studied art at Frankfurt's Städelschule. What did you do in the year before that?*

Prof. Martin Liebscher: I spent five years applying to various universities, but I was always rejected. At the time I lived in Mannheim, drove taxis, was a film presenter ...

*... and evidently you did not lose heart.*

No (laughs), I was just determined to do it. When you look at the old portfolios now, it's clear why I didn't succeed before. But I really tried everything. Then in 1990 I had a portfolio that worked, and could also have started studying in Hamburg or in Kassel. In Frankfurt I got to know Thomas Bayrle, whose work I really found good, and then Martin Kippenberger. I thought that it was probably most difficult to get through the course in Frankfurt and decided to go for it.

*Did you then focus on photography from the start in your art studies?*

No, my background is actually drawing. I drew a lot, but also had my own photo lab as a youth. The technical side to things, the actual apparatus really fascinated me. I enjoyed taking things apart, and also built a lot of cameras. When I started at the Städel there was only a black-and-white lab. Later as a student assistant I worked on expanding the laboratory, and also gave technical courses.

*Why did photography become your favourite medium?*

Because I'm interested in the distance the camera, the technology creates. Not that I think I work explicitly photographically. The older works are more like spatial stories or images of spatial movements, which I see as being located in this intermediate world between photography and film. And the >Family Pictures< really have more in common with painting because they are edited to a large extent so that an enormous battle painting is produced and a world that is thought out. If I'm honest straight photography has never really interested me.

*But it does interest your students.*

Yes, of course. Naturally, there is this scope within photography, at least in the artistic photography that I teach. I cannot cover everything that is more applied photography, but students learn the tools of the trade and studio photography.

*When did you feel the desire to teach?*

Immediately after the Städel, I had had enough of art students. But then once my own work had reached a certain stage, I began to look around for other tasks and things that interest me. It is simply enjoyable to approach things in a completely different way. And not out of financial necessity. You have to really want to teach, because it takes up a lot of time and energy.

*Other established, artistic photographers such as Jörg Sasse and Thomas Ruff soon abandoned teaching. Is there a danger of that happening with you, too?*

No, definitely not because I see teaching as part of my artistic work. It influences my work and I also like interacting with the students. You are free in your choice of topics. After all, these are topics that interest me, too.

*When I think of the Liebscher class, for example, the presentation at the last Photokina, I have the impression that things are always very relaxed and enjoyable. Is that right?*

It is supposed to be enjoyable. If you are lucky enough to be able to do what you really want, i.e., to make art, there is nothing better. But what we did at the Photokina was also very tiring – installing and taking down a new exhibition every day.

*Why is photography at HfG part of Media? After all, it could also be assigned to communication design or art.*

In real life, in student life the terms are much more flexible. Some of my students specialize in film, or in sculpting, others in photography. All of them also do other courses, they need to ensure they have several options.

*People talk about the “Liebscher class”, but that doesn’t mean students apply for your class, or does it?*

No, you start at university, and spend your first semester finding out what you want, then in the second semester you start to specialize. There are the basic course, like photography. I set the students tasks, they learn the history of photography and what can be done with the medium, what you can do in the laboratory, with a photogram, the pinhole camera, manipulated photography and so on. After the second semester you ideally know you want to concentrate on photography or film, or whatever. Moreover, theory makes up a very large part of the studies. More recently we have begun to offer a doctoral course comprising one third theory and two-thirds practice.

*How important is it that there is a >Liebscher class< and how big is it?*

It is important because you have a regular group of people who can swap ideas. We call this group >Liebscher class<, because you simply cannot give it another name. There are between 15 and 20 students. Every year I deal with 50-60 people, some of whom, however, decide to specialize on other topics.

*What are the students exploring at the moment?*

For every semester we have a main thread, a clear theme as it were. In this semester it is >Collecting< – collecting as an art form and collections in museums or private collections. Last semester we took as our topic >The Disappearance of Things and the Edge of the World<. These are themes you take as orientation, and that you have to deal with but you do not have to do it in your own work. There are no tasks as such. We use the themes for trips, for example, we’ll visit the Stasi archive here in Berlin, and for artist talks and lectures.

*There are quite a number of lectures and guests and the >Liebscher class< often seems to be on the road. Do you always have enough funds?*

Like all universities we are on a tight budget. But precisely when it's difficult I feel motivated to make it possible. Then we travel by bus to the exhibition Paris Photo. Two nights travelling and a hotel on the outskirts and you can manage on 120 Euros for five days. Or we travel to Venice. 250 Euros for flight and hotel. The students can afford that. And I also try to get extra funding via my budget and the QSL funds.

*QA?*

Quality assurance. They used to be called tuition fees. But I'm not a travel firm that organizes fun trips. It's always very tiring and we are on the go the whole time, visit exhibitions and so on. I find it incredibly exciting. And naturally via the vehicle of university you have access to things, can do things that you couldn't do before.

*When I asked your students about the profession they'd like, >freelance artist< came top of the list.*

That's right. But the advantage of HfG is that you have different options here and actually acquire skills from which you can earn a living later. By contrast, that was a big problem with my studies, because in these five years I learned few technical skills, except the things I taught myself. A lot of what I know about photography I have to find out for myself.

*Today's students grew up with digital photography, but you became familiar with stinking photographic chemicals and realized your first >Family Pictures< using a scanner.*

Today's generation is in this intermediate area between analogue and digital, takes analogue photos with a medium-format camera or digital images with a full-format 35mm camera. Our scanner is the equipment used the most. We have an Imacon and naturally you can do all the colour processing much better in digital because it's much easier to control everything. We have good printers for printing out images. On the other hand, there is great interest in analogue photography, including all those errors that arise, which a photo can have as a physical object. In digital photography there is no surface that can get scratched. This interest prompted us to start up the photography lab again. It is a large area of photography that students find very interesting.

*Does all of that still leave time for your own works?*

It has to because my own work is important for me. At HfG I have direct access to a well-equipped studio. I can produce images such as >Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band Liebscher< with 30 people at the university, some of holding up these cardboard panels, with a flash system and a Hasselblad digital camera. Naturally, that is something that takes your work in different directions. Including thinking about a collective memory of images, which we did in the small series with the record covers. All of that is also connected with teaching and exploring photography and history of art. Working with colleagues is also great fun – and Clemens Mitscher is a very dedicated teacher capable of showing incredible enthusiasm. He has initiated an enormous Pop Stage photography project from a technical course. That was entirely voluntary, something he really enjoyed, as did his students.

*A final question: If I would like to take a course in art and design and am especially interested in photography what advantages does HfG Offenbach offer?*

The advantage of studying at HfG is the combination of different areas. Students don't have to decide on a single professor or subject area. Then there is the fact that we have such a wide

range of theoretical courses. You get a grounding in the technology but it is not at the forefront. Today, you can also take photos with a mobile phone, but then you should know why you do it – and also how a Hasselblad works. You don't have to become a freelance artist, or a graphic designer or photographer, but can look what is right for you at the end.