

**Dorothea Strauss:** What would you say is your attitude to life right now?

**Beat Streuli:** I think we'd have to start by defining "attitude to life", which is far from easy. I'm reading a Chinese science-fiction novel right now, *The Dark Forest* by Liu Cixin, in which he writes: "Time is the one thing that can't be stopped. Like a sharp blade, it silently cuts through hard and soft, constantly advancing. Nothing is capable of jolting it even the slightest bit, but it changes everything." Something like that, maybe?

**DS:** And how are you feeling at the moment?

**BS:** I'm fine, probably happier than I have been at other times. Occasionally I'm asking myself more questions – for example, what my work actually amounts to. I'm asking myself more questions, and probably have fewer answers.

**DS:** So on that question of what your work over the last forty years amounts to, what's your answer?

**BS:** It's important to challenge yourself all the time. But there isn't a catch-all answer to that question. At first sight, my work looks very straightforward and simple, but actually it can only exist because that simplicity is underpinned by a relatively complex and self-critical framework.

**DS:** Has your work changed?

**BS:** I think basically it hasn't changed that much. But the times have changed, and with them the way my work is received. I started out in the 1980s and 1990s. The context of art, society, politics has changed, but urban situations and constellations are still at the centre of my work.

**DS:** How do you prepare for a new work?

**BS:** I try to keep my work as open as possible, so that it can't be read as an illustration of any particular ideas or conceptions. So I don't prepare too much. Where a work is supposed to be created in a specific city, for instance, I'll make very little, or just a superficial effort to find out about the political, historical and cultural background. Today I perhaps do things a bit differently, but that lack of preparation had a conceptual basis, because I didn't want to prejudice myself with pre-formed opinions. I then just went ahead and tried to capture something specific to a certain situation on this purely visual level. These days I'm less rigorous about it, because a conceptual naivety of that kind only works up to a point.

**DS:** Was there a specific trigger that made you start preparing more?

**BS:** To some extent you can blame my attitude back

then on the times. In the 1990s we were just – if I may interpret this somewhat loosely – emerging from the avant-garde of the last century. It was going through a last hurrah, which can perhaps be covered by American Minimal Art and conceptual art, and which greatly impressed and influenced me when I was studying art back in the 1980s. But things couldn't really go on in that conceptual and quite over-intellectual vein. That's why, in my opinion, photography came into its own in the 1990s in a way that it never had before in the visual arts. It was permissible to work in a purely visual way again, there was no need for cultural criticism as we understand it today, and you could concentrate on the narrative once more, and on looking at reality and the everyday.

**DS:** The 1990s were very much the era of engaging with the context, and that engagement was undoubtedly critical, yet more playful. Art as service was also a slogan. The institutional criticism that had been practised as far back as the 1960s came very much to the fore in the 1990s. Not as antithesis, but rather, in art terms, in a seismic connection to reality. I'm interested to hear you say you didn't find it critical.

**BS:** Our slightly differing perspectives are probably down to the fact that, as the classical avant-garde came to a close, the 1990s saw everything break up for the first time in art history, so a number of isms and schools could operate side by side without problems. That was almost impossible even in the 1980s, because, for instance, photography was scarcely an option during the years of the *Neue Wilde* and their painting.

**DS:** You describe a sense of freedom.

**BS:** Working with photography in the visual arts had a degree of radicalism about it back then. There was something very liberating about working with such a popular medium.

**DS:** When was the first time you looked through a camera?

**BS:** I've just read an interview with Anselm Kiefer in which he said that all artists are shaped primarily by what happened in their childhood. If you consider some artists and their work in that light, you can see what he's getting at. I was an amateur photographer in my adolescence. I had a darkroom, and I took lots of black-and-white photos of my friends and holiday trips. While we're on the subject of biography, it's also worth mentioning that we subscribed to the magazine *Du* at home, although we weren't a typical bourgeois family. I was often impressed by the Swiss photographers from the 1950s and 1960s that *Du* presented: figures such as Werner Bischof and Emil Schulthess, for example, and their photos of post-war reality in Europe or travels to faraway lands such as Japan. But after I'd spent two years studying art in my early twenties, that kind of photography didn't seem as cool as everything else that was going on in art. So I set it to one side for quite a while. I painted, I made installations and collages. But then I reactivated photography and initially used it in fairly un-photographic

ways, in collages, photograms and large-format montages that were more reminiscent of Russian Constructivism than, for example, reportage photography.

**DS:** Casting your mind back, what was the first moment that you saw through the viewfinder?

**BS:** That's difficult to say. My father made Super 8 films of us kids when we were little, and I'm bound to have looked through the viewfinder then. But more deliberately, not until I was a teenager. Beauty meant something to me. Apart from the usual snapshots, I wanted to reproduce the beauty of nature or a girlfriend.

**DS:** Was the first motif a flower or a girl?

**BS:** I'm afraid my memory lets me down on that one. As I mentioned, it was all about beauty, and from my perspective at the time it probably didn't make much difference ...

**DS:** Even if you don't recall the motif, can you still remember when you held a camera in your hand for the first time?

**BS:** To be honest, not really.

**DS:** Sometimes I think that if you can't remember something, it may be that it has always been part of life, and has always been there.

**BS:** That's certainly how it feels. We're from a generation that grew up with photography. Everything was documented right from the start, there were family albums, Super 8 films and so on, so that parallel pictorial world was always there. You're right, I can't recall a particular starting point.

**DS:** I'm just trying to picture it. Children and young people also try to imagine what they are going to be when they grow up. Which can be anything from a realistic job to space travel. How was it with you? Why didn't you become a doctor or a lawyer?

**BS:** Good question. I could maybe just as well have become an architect, lawyer, journalist, writer, film-maker, set designer... Because those are topics that still interest me today.

**DS:** What stopped you?

**BS:** There's a simple answer that perhaps isn't the whole truth: it was a time when studying was totally uncool, for us at least. My siblings are a bit older and were a little more wrapped up in the late '68 ethos than I was. In any event, once I'd done my school-leaving exam, I didn't for a moment consider going on to study at university.

**DS:** In artist talks and in general when dealing with artists, there's often this idea of the genuinely artistic – the artist who simply had to become an artist and couldn't do anything else. But you say that studying was uncool. Yet you did go on to study in the end.

**BS:** Yes, but studying art wasn't a classic university education. At that time in Switzerland, the opportunities to study art anywhere were very limited. So my career progression was very largely self-taught. In retrospect, I think that's perfectly OK, but I also understand that artists' training these days is often more academic or scholastic. Back then the ideology tended to

be anti-academic, and it's maybe a shame that it meant I didn't have the freedom to explore, just once, whether for example a career as a writer might have been an option too. But such things also develop in opposition to the prevailing trends, and I assume I would have ended up becoming an artist anyway, because in some way it suited my character.

**DS:** In around 2018, the way your works were presented in exhibitions changed again to some extent. Previously they'd almost exclusively been displayed "filmically"; after that, they were more like a collage. I hadn't noticed it about you at first, and then in 2018 I visited the exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bonn[P]. It was the first time I'd seen wallpaper installations by you. Am I right? Did something change?

**BS:** Yes, that's generally true. I always like to say I avoid conveying anything clear. But I've always been a *Homo Faber* looking for solutions to specific problems, be it in design or for situations like that huge wall in Bonn, where a "cloud" seemed right to me. In my mind, I've perhaps often been something of a *flâneur*, but on the other hand I'm also a craftsman. I always wanted to avoid seeming like a brilliant Bohemian, in whom everything emerges solely from his unfathomable sensibility.

**DS:** That's interesting: you don't strike me as that at all. My impression is more that you have very clear ideas. When people are working with you in a curatorial capacity, you have clear ideas and you put them across accordingly.

**BS:** I know I come over that way sometimes, that's true. Especially nowadays, when curators often play a more important role than they used to, working together is sometimes a touch more difficult because I'm quite insistent on what seems the best solution to me.

**DS:** Where do your concepts come from? How do the ideas for an exhibition come about, and where do your motifs originate? How do you begin fitting it all together in your mind? Is that the architect in you?

**BS:** Probably, but an architect who at that stage is still adopting a very intuitive approach.

**DS:** Your approach is intuitive?

**BS:** Unfortunately, there's still no word more precise than "intuitive" to describe how an artist works, unless they're very intellectual and conceptual. The key question is, how is it even possible to talk about pictures? For example, you can talk about how they are used, by whom, for what purposes and in what context they are perceived in a certain way. The question of what it actually means to look at a picture, along with the qualities of that act, whatever they may be – it's all very difficult to define. As soon as you start, you risk losing sight of the image's essence.

Susan Sontag often tried to explain how these mechanisms of perception work, and she found some good answers. There's a famous text by her called *Against Interpretation*, which deals with exactly what I'm talking about here. She argues that you

shouldn't interpret or read pictures, you should allow them to exert their effect on you – put as briefly as that it sounds quite emotive and vague. In the text she explains very clearly what she means by it. Sontag also compared the perception of an image to eroticism. You can't distance or withdraw yourself, but at the same time you're extremely aware of yourself. But still, these are really diffuse concepts that keep coming back to intuition. I'm normally someone who defines things as clearly as possible and tries to grasp them intellectually too.

**DS:** How can you reconcile that discrepancy? On the one hand you want to grasp things clearly, and on the other your approach is intuitive.

**BS:** That's the endless conflict, not just in art but also in our heads. As we know, there are two halves to our brain, one of which is more responsible for feeling and the other more for rationality.

**DS:** Do conflicts like that help you in your work or do they get in the way?

**BS:** They definitely help, because they make things more complex and conscious. A lot of photography still quickly degenerates into stereotypes and kitsch. That has always been my worst nightmare: that my "human interest" photography could somehow drift off into something kitsch. It helps to have those doubts, to keep questioning yourself and thinking about what photography is, what it can do, what it can't, where the dangers are and so on.

**DS:** Is that one reason why you include fields of colour? So things don't become kitsch?

**BS:** Even in my earliest publications, I frequently inserted blank white pages rather than placing fifty photos one after another in an unbroken sequence. A simple device like that is enough to break up your unconscious mode of perception, and stop you from being swept along by the tide of images and forgetting yourself as a viewer.

**DS:** On the one hand, then, there's the photographs and installations, and on the other the composing that goes with them.

**BS:** You can't separate the two. In my work, the individual image is less essential than what I do with the photos. It's rare to encounter a photo that you can hang on a wall entirely on its own and then find it still works that way twenty years later. I'm much more interested in what you do with the photos. The architectural aspect of what I do is essentially like the work of a film-maker, who has lots of shots and then places them in a rhythm or context in order to organise them in a certain way – and also, to an extent, intends viewers to see them as the film-maker wants them to.

**DS:** You anticipate the viewer's perspective and try to guide it onto a particular track?

**BS:** You have to view the thing from a number of perspectives. The perspective of the person who has photographed or seen something, the perspective of what there is to see (or not, because it happened before or after), and the perspective of the viewer who will see the photos. Those are structures that are in some cases spatial or architectural or filmic, or even social or media.

**DS:** How do you know that an individual image is just that, and not something to play around with and keep making new groupings?

**BS:** That could probably apply to most photos, but of course there are conventions in the world of photography and the photographic perspective. Henri Cartier-Bresson, for instance, talked about the "instant décisif", while for Roland Barthes there was a "punctum". Both are narrative pivots that make a photo attractive as an individual image in the conventional sense.

**DS:** Are there motifs that, for you, will remain individual images for all time?

**BS:** Ultimately, all pictures can be shuffled around and used as part of a series. And incidentally, there are also pictures that I present as individual photos and on which there's almost nothing to see: abstracts, fields of colour, montages.

**DS:** I'd like to talk to you about another topic. On your website I saw a work in Ghent from 2010, in a long tram and pedestrian tunnel under the Sint-Pieters railway station[Q,R], that effectively depicts urbanity in the urban space. Then I juxtaposed that installation with your contribution to the Jordan Festival in Petra [S] in 2008, where you presented urbanity in the desert. Is it just the formal aesthetic that interests you, or is there a social discourse involved too?

**BS:** I'm not looking directly towards social discourse, but the works do often achieve something similar by, for instance, sparking debate about social realities. Formal aesthetic, on the other hand, is a negative concept for me, one that hopefully I've never had much to do with. If we come back to when I started out in the late 1980s, when I began with a simple form of almost documentary photography, somehow filling the blank surface of the last Minimal Art picture with the kind of everyday things that you and I have to contend with on a daily basis, and that had largely disappeared from art, because movements like *Supports-Surfaces* were what mattered, that was a strong statement and a reaction to an avant-garde which, to a degree, had certainly adopted features of a formal aesthetic. Nowadays, photography has become more omnipresent in art, but especially in the social and other media, and large-format posters advertising something or other to people like you and me are around us wherever we go. On the one hand, that means my work risks being perceived as banal, but on the other hand it gives it extra topicality and social relevance. Since I've never focused on superficial differences between different places or times but, if anything, have zeroed in on commonalities and similarities, I think my work always has something contemporary about it and is in little danger of losing topical relevance, because reality is always new and can be reflected on in new ways.

**DS:** It sounds as if you're advocating for the present. Do you see yourself in that role?

**BS:** I don't know; not really. Naturally, I find the past extremely interesting and instructive too. The present is an interface between past and

future. Advocating is definitely not the right word, but my work derives very much from my constantly inquisitive scrutiny of my current surroundings. That is a fundamental, simple source of my inspiration: that wherever I am, I'm exceptionally curious to see how people live, what work they do, and so on.

**DS:** It sometimes seems to me like obsessive observation.

**BS:** I'm perhaps a kind of professional observer, I work with a kind of "écriture automatique". I scan, register, photograph, film, mount – that's a process that runs itself.

**DS:** I'd like to come back once more to where we started our conversation. You said it is necessary to describe the term "attitude to life" first. We then discussed the fact that you're rather happy at the moment.

**BS:** Being happy is also something you have to define. Happiness isn't a brilliant criterion.

**DS:** In other words, you prefer not to say anything that people can hold you to?

**BS:** That's true. Not because I'm being evasive, though, but because basically I can't do much with simple definitions and concepts.

**DS:** Do you need a certain attitude to life in order to walk through a town, a village or a region and develop a new work there? Do you have to be happy, or sad, or does it make no difference?

**BS:** The proportion of my time I spend taking photos is maybe 10%. The rest is working on the material, which is just as important. So you could also ask if I need a certain attitude to life in order to conceptualise the works on the computer.

**DS:** And do you?

**BS:** It's certainly better to approach it in a relaxed and open-minded way and to feel good, because then inspiration comes more easily. But I don't think that has much to do with happiness. And in any case, an artist's life isn't just inspiration and finding, it's also work and gaining visibility.

**DS:** You're searching for words, concepts. You're also rigorous, with yourself and the person you're dealing with. I think rigour is important. Especially when it builds a bridge to curiosity. But rigour can also be like a barrier you can no longer overcome; and then you're left with just rigour, which doesn't get you anywhere. I have the impression that you're rigorous and then completely open again.

**BS:** You can hardly judge that yourself, you don't have the distance from yourself. In any event, it's always good when somebody gives you a nudge and you respond to it. As an artist, you can only work with what you are, and if you're lucky, sometimes the weaknesses are also the quality.

Dorothea Strauss is an art historian, curator and transformation specialist. She has headed institutions including the Kunst Halle St. Gallen, the Kunstverein Freiburg, and the Haus Konstruktiv in Zurich. She also built a social responsibility department at the cooperative insurance company Mobiliar.