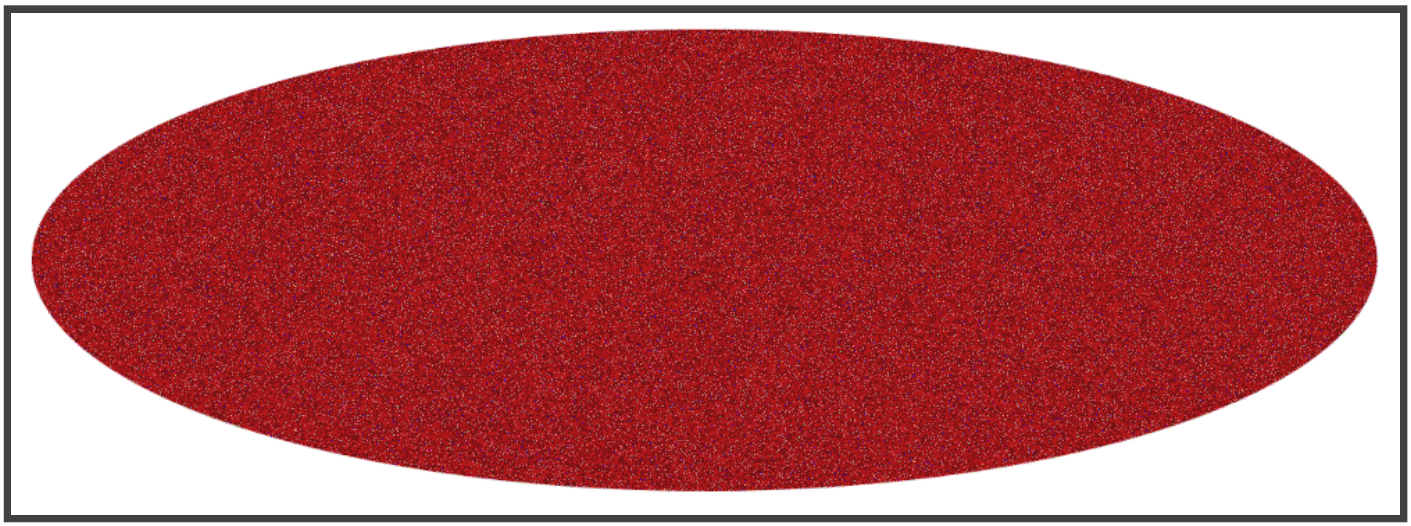
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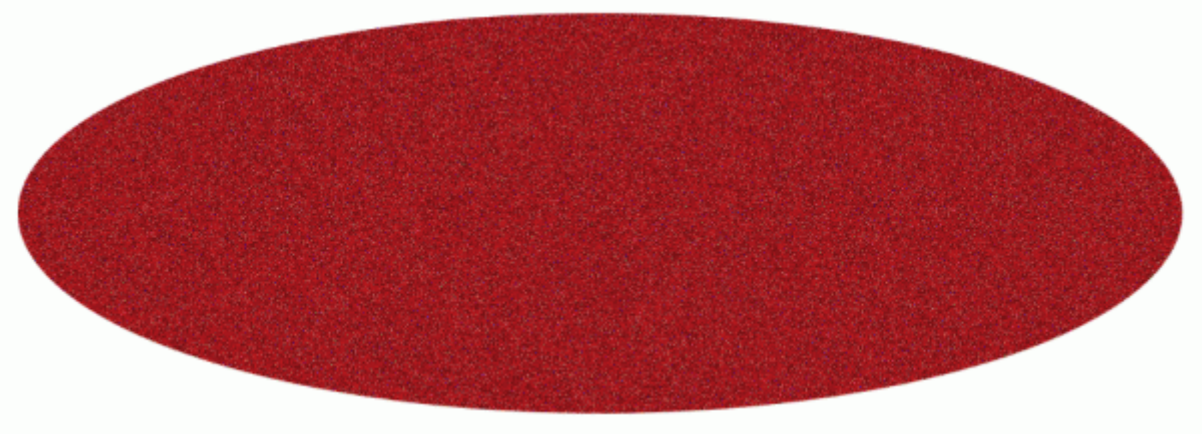
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«Circumstances don’t always chime with the exhibition cycle of a museum»

Barbara Preisig, Nadine Wietlisbach

Nadine Wietlisbach in conversation with Barbara Preisig, discussing what it means to be the first female director in the history of Fotomuseum Winterthur and giving her take on the female photographers she wants to showcase in future.





Barbara Preisig: You took up your new post as director of Fotomuseum Winterthur in January. The stats on solo exhibitions by women, recently published by Brand-New-Life, are sobering. Between 2014 and 2017 there were seven exhibitions by men and only two by women.

Nadine Wietlisbach: That doesn't really come as much of a surprise to me. It's actually even worse in the field of photography than in the fine arts as a whole. There are still very few female photographers out there who are getting any kind of attention when it comes to solo exhibitions within the established museum context. It is my express intention to change that situation over the coming years at Fotomuseum Winterthur.

BP: What's your explanation for the underrepresentation of women in the field of photography?

NW: It's partly to do with the history of the medium. Photography is a technical medium. And in many respects it is getting even more technical. Unfortunately, technology is still very heavily male-dominated. In the early days of photography, towards the end of the nineteenth century, there were professions in which photography served as a documentary medium that was primarily occupied by men. Of course, women also played a role in various contexts within that medium. But they had a much lower profile. And then there are broad areas, ranging all the way from casual everyday photography to the kind of photography we class as belonging to the fine arts. Even there, we find an immensely disproportionate representation of men, which is, in turn, reflected in the context of exhibitions. That doesn't provide an explanation or a reason, though. I often hear the argument that there simply aren't very many female photographers; otherwise we'd have heard of them. I find that disingenuous. If you can't see women in photography, you're just not looking closely enough.

BP: How do you, as a curator, deal with the invisibility of female photographers? How do you go about finding the women artists?

NW: Among the younger generation of artists, in particular, you can find a lot of very interesting female photographers I'd like to see being promoted more strongly. We're very fortunate in having exhibition formats at Fotomuseum Winterthur, such as SITUATIONS, that allow us to showcase very young artists as well as contemporary media-based developments in the field of photography. We don't just follow the latest trends at art fairs and museums that represent established artists, but actually go straight to the source. I visit art school graduation shows and listen to hints and tips from within my own network. My curatorial team and I keep our eyes open; I look at quality work in magazines or online, in exhibitions or while travelling. There's a whole slew of internationally recognised female photographers who have never been shown at Fotomuseum Winterthur.

BP: That sounds as though it should be quite easy to find female photographers. So why aren't other people seeing them?

NW: It's only since the early 1970s that we've been closely analysing the social and institutional structures that have created this situation where women are underrepresented compared to men – or just not represented at all – in certain fields, and which are continuing to have an effect. In other words, the notion that a photographic artist may well be female is something that is only just beginning to occur to some people.

BP: Are you in favour of introducing gender quotas in the world of exhibitions?

NW: I was sceptical of quota regulations for some time. But I've now started to come around to the idea that a quota could at least introduce a kind of transitional phase that would tide us over until equality does finally push through the barriers into the very furthest reaches of our established systems and our ways of thinking. So, in future, we won't be able to avoid quotas. But they will have to impact on more than just gender. They will have to affect juries as well. For instance, at the P3 – the Post Photography Prototyping Prize – held in London in May, we set down an expanded list of criteria.

BP: And what are the criteria for this prize?

NW: What we were looking for was a heterogeneous array of participants, with people from various different parts of the world, working in different disciplines, and with a fairly even gender parity. We managed that quite nicely, without much effort. I often hear from members of other juries that you don't need any clear-cut regulations, because you can just wait and see how the process evolves. But I'm convinced that nothing changes if you take that approach. You have to address it right at the very forefront of the jury process and, of course, you also have to ensure that the make-up of the jury itself is balanced. That has just got to become par for the course, because only then will we stop having to discuss it all over again.

BP: Does the museum keep tabs on the stats of gender equality in exhibitions?

NW: Not so far. At least, not systematically. But I do know that it's been a subject of discussion within the team for some time. The question is always what to do with these stats, and what conclusions to draw or what action to take,

BP: Fotomuseum Winterthur hasn't done much so far about these stats, then?

NW: In recent years, I've come to realise that the dearth of female representation in the art world art rarely has anything to do with strategy or bad intentions. It's more about a lack of awareness of the underlying structural problems. A lot of people simply don't manage to dig beneath the surface in order to see beyond the upper echelons of artist representation.

BP: What do you mean by that?

NW: In addition to questions of research and the reference system by which artists are sought out, there are other, no less crucial, aspects that determine who is invited into a museum and why. Let's imagine the following fictitious scenario: I'm in discussion with a young female artist about the possibility of an exhibition. The question of the timeframe for the exhibition soon crops up. But if this artist is bringing up two children, working in her studio and maybe has a lectureship as well, it's going to be difficult to get a solo exhibition up and running within just a few months. As often as not, people like the young woman I've just described don't fit into the production logistics of the art world and so they fall through the net. We should change that and fit the planning of an exhibition around the conditions of the artist

instead. It’s not just about the question of children and family, but about life circumstances in general that simply don’t chime well with the usual exhibition cycle of a museum.

BP: You’re the first female director in the history of the museum. What are your plans?

NW: I’d like to see Fotomuseum Winterthur continuing to reflect the topics of our time while combining the history of photography with its future. That’s all about finding pleasure in developing new curatorial approaches as well as reflecting the conditions that actually make photographic production possible in the first place, or even thwart it for that matter. What I’m interested in is being a good host, open to visitors of every age, while keeping a finger on the pulse of our time when it comes to theory and research. The way we structure our efforts within the institution – being collaborative and appreciative – should also be reflected in our work with the artists themselves.

BP: It’s hardly new in Switzerland to see women taking over the directorship of art institutions. In her recent Brand-New-Life essay, Gioia Dal Molin noted that it seems to be the smaller art institutions and venues that are headed by women. The major, prestigious museums such as Kunsthaus Zürich, Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, MAMCO in Geneva and so on, are still firmly within the male domain. Until recently, that is, with the changes at Kunstmuseum Bern and now Fotomuseum Winterthur. Do you share that view?

NW: That viewpoint merely states a simple fact. That said, I personally have problems with this categorisation in terms of prestigious and less prestigious institutions (e.g. smaller venues with smaller budgets). Good content is writ large in the smaller institutions, in particular – no matter how prestigious or rich in tradition.

BP: Are you a young director compared to other art museums in Switzerland?

NW: Well, I am younger than most. These days, curators tend to be over 40 when they take charge of a major institution. It was different back in the 1960s and 1970s. Jean-Christophe Ammann was 28 when he took the helm at Kunstmuseum Luzern. Szeemann was 31 when he became director of Kunsthalle Bern. I’m often asked what my next career step will be now that I’ve already achieved so much. Whether I’ll go on to head some institution overseas. I find it a strange attitude to assume that there always has to be something more, some further step, and that whatever institution you direct has to be ever bigger than before. It’s an attitude that is based on a very classic male career trajectory which isn’t interrupted by such things as childbirth, crisis or death – all those things that are a part of life and the way it pans out. I’d like to make a difference there.

Übersetzung: Ishbel Flett

BARBARA PREISIG

Barbara Preisig is an art historian and art critic whose research focuses on contemporary artistic practices and their social and political contexts. In exploring translocal, transdisciplinary, and nonacademic ways of writing and thinking, she addresses a range of subjects including artistic research, feminism, institutional studies, and the politics of authorship. Barbara Preisig is co-editor of Brand-New-Life.

NADINE WIETLISBACH

Nadine Wietlisbach devises exhibitions, publications and other discursive formats in the fields of contemporary photography and art. She is Director of Fotomuseum Winterthur since January 2018. From 2015 till 2017 she was the Director of Photoforum Pasquart Biel/Bienne, following her post as a curator at the Nidwaldner Museum in Stans. She founded the independent art space sic! Raum für Kunst in Lucerne in 2007. She worked for various institutions in South Africa and the States, lastly at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago.

Nadine Wietlisbach entwickelt Ausstellungen, Publikationen und andere diskursive Formate in den Bereichen Fotografie und Kunst. Seit Januar 2018 ist sie Direktorin des Fotomuseum Winterthur. Von 2015 bis 2017 leitete sie das Photoforum Pasquart in Biel/Bienne, davor war sie Kuratorin am Nidwaldner Museum in Stans. 2007 gründete sie den unabhängigen Kunstraum sic! Raum für Kunst in Luzern. Sie war für unterschiedliche Institutionen in Südafrika und den USA tätig, zuletzt am Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago.