

Essays: Wesley Stacey's *The Road* and the American tradition; Remembering Rennie Ellis, John Szarkowski and Michael Riley; Daniel Mudie Cunningham revisits William Yang's queer nineties; A speculative exhibition: Aspects of recent photography. *Interviews:* Graham Howe, Tamara Winikoff and Alain Sayag. *Portfolios:* Narelle Autio and Trent Parke, J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere, Tacita Dean, Greg Semu and Angelica Mesiti

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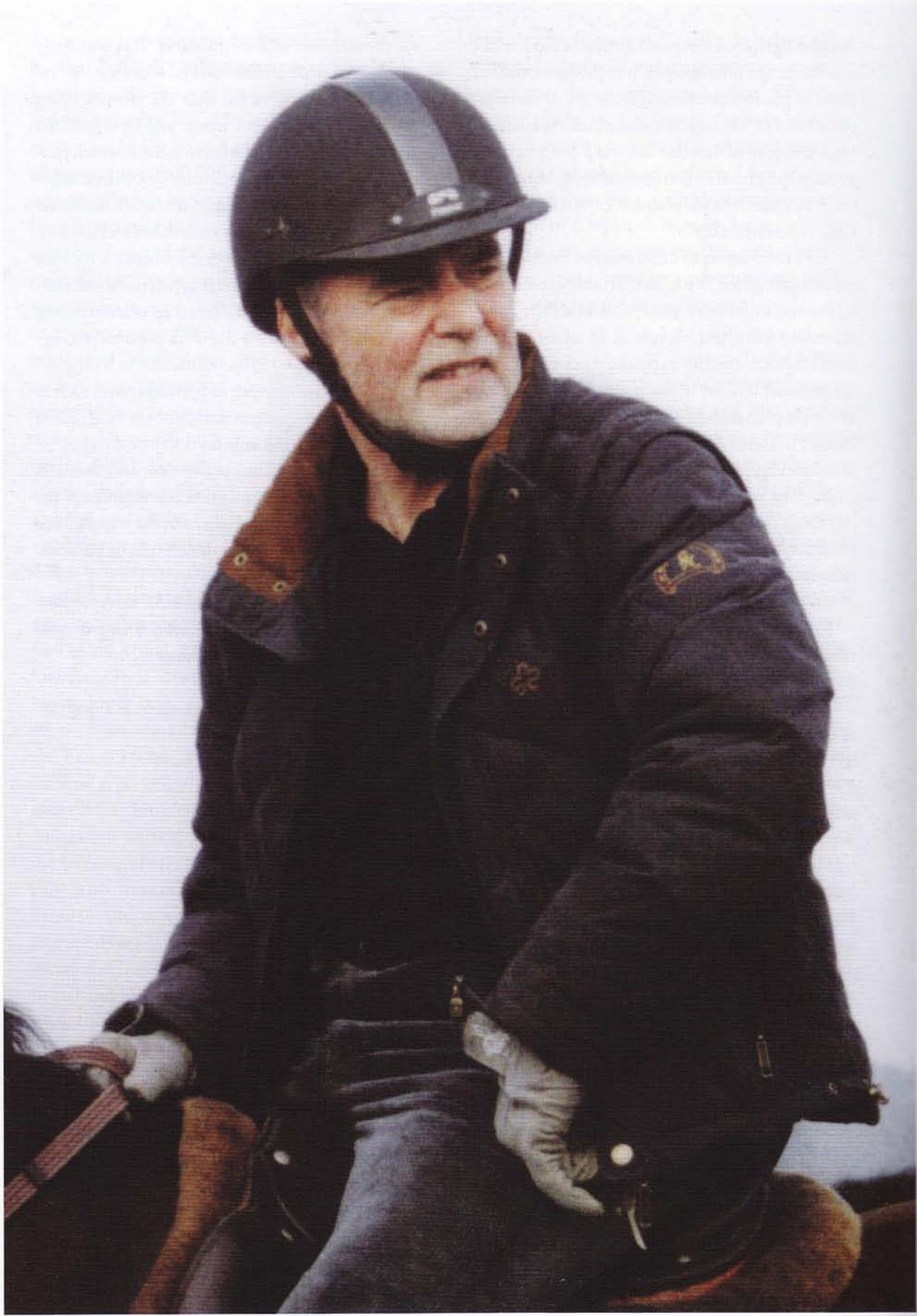
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THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: FROM THE 1970S TO NOW



'A photograph is not just an image, it is also an object'

Alain Sayag was a curator at the National Museum of Modern Art in Paris from the early 1970s – that is to say before the Centre Pompidou building opened to house it in 1977 – until 2007. In 1981 he became the head of the newly established Photography Department there and started to develop the museum collection with this specificity in mind. He has published widely on the subject, for the Centre Pompidou and in other contexts. Throughout his career he also worked closely with Agnès de Gouvion Saint Cyr on the photographic acquisition panel of the FNAC (the French National Contemporary Art Fund). He met and exhibited the Australian photographer Robert Besanko in Paris in 1980–81, but only travelled to Australia a few times in the late 1990s.¹ While also focusing on his other passion for horseriding, today Sayag curates exhibitions worldwide and his expertise is highly sought after to advise collections or photography festivals.

Alain Sayag's analytical act of looking

Interview by Caroline Hancock

¹ An interview specifically about this encounter will be published in the forthcoming ACP monograph.

Opposite page: Alain Sayag in Luzarches, 2005, courtesy Alain Sayag.

Caroline Hancock: Can you describe your work in the 1970s?

Alain Sayag: We were asked to put together exhibitions that would travel around France. At the time the only places with a contemporary art program outside Paris were Saint-Étienne and Marseille. Pierre de Fenoyl and I organised numerous photography shows due to the fact that 50 photographs would perfectly occupy town-hall lobbies at little expense. The only photography galleries in Paris were Agathe Gaillard and Zabriskie, as well as Texbraun for nineteenth-century prints. Once inside the Pompidou building, I transformed a mezzanine space just before the entrance to the museum into a photography gallery in order to show the work of young photographers with a fast turnaround. This was a great platform to show some of the artists we met on a regular basis from all over the world. The format didn't last very long since it created tension within the curatorial team on the basis that it was unfair to painters whose work required years of maturity before being shown.

CH: Can you perhaps give a broader background to this period of photograph-



ic development in the 1970s and 1980s. These decades, after all, also saw the establishment of The Photographers' Gallery in London and the International Center of Photography in New York. Did you sense a new independence of spirit in the exhibition and presentation of photography at the time?

Left: 'London International Surrealist Exhibition', 1936, courtesy Alain Sayag. Right: 'Film und Foto', Stuttgart, 1929, courtesy Alain Sayag.

AS: As a general tendency, national institutions do not have, or do not express, an independent will; the exceptions come from a few individuals acting in a given context. In the 1970s the main key event was the appearance of artists using photography in new and ambiguous ways. They were as far removed from the typical 'art photography' group as they were from the photojournalism of Henri Cartier-Bresson or Robert Doisneau. An exhibition such as 'Ils se disent peintres, ils se disent photographes' (They call themselves painters, they call themselves photographers) at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1980, curated by Michel Nuridsany, who was also the art critic of the French daily newspaper *Le Figaro*, is emblematic of this change. In terms of photography, a gallery like Agathe Gaillard or an institution like the French National Library (despite all the dedicated passion of the photography curator there, Jean-Claude Lemagny) were established in the late 1970s, but they were of no real impor-

tance compared to the activity of someone like Ileana Sonnabend in her gallery on the Left Bank, or the publication of a journal like *Les Cahiers de la photographie*; they were the ones to really set the foundations for this 'arrival into art' which the art historian Dominique Baqué described so remarkably in her book *La Photographie Plasticienne: Un Art Paradoxal* (Éditions du Regard, 1998).

CH: In order to set the scene and because it is extremely indicative of your work establishing the photographic medium within the French national museum, I want to list some of the major exhibitions you curated or co-curated during your tenure at the Centre Pompidou: 'Bernard Descamps' (1978); 'Michael Snow' (1979); 'Instant Photography' (1980); 'Diane Arbus' (1980); 'Albert Renger Patzsch' (1980); 'Polish Photography 1900–1981' (1981); 'Paris–Paris' (1981); 'Contemporary Photography in Latin America' (1982); 'Atelier Man Ray: Berenice Abbott, Jacques-André Boiffard, Bill Brandt, Lee Miller' (1982); 'David Hockney' (1982); 'William Klein' (1983); 'Lucas Samaras' (1983); 'Nam June Paik' (1983); 'Czech Photographers' (1983); 'Fabricated Images' (1983); 'Hans Bellmer' (1983); 'Atelier Polaroid' (1985); 'Japanese Avant-



Garde' (1985); 'Deborah Turbeville' (1986); 'Pierre Dubreuil: Photographs 1896–1935' (1987); 'The Invention of an Art' (1989); 'Gisèle Freund' (1991); 'Nancy Wilson-Pajic' (1991); 'Robert Wilson' (1991); 'Rudolf Schwarzkogler' (1993); 'Eli Lotar' (1993); 'Laszlo Moholy-Nagy' (1995); 'American Photography 1890–1965, from the Museum of Modern Art, New York' (1996); 'Man Ray: Photography and Its Double' (1998); 'Brassaï: The Soul of Paris' (2000); 'Blanc & Demilly: Photographes a Lyon, 1924–1962' (2000); 'Heinz Hajek-Halke' (2002); 'Lartigue' (2003); 'Alors, la Chine?' (2003); and 'William Klein' (2005). Can you describe a project that stands out for you?

Left: The Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, New York, 1905–17, courtesy Alain Sayag. Right: 'Subjektive Fotografie', Saarbrücken, 1951, courtesy Alain Sayag.

AS: 'The Invention of an Art' in 1989: this was an exhibition I co-curated with Jean-Claude Lemagny who was in charge of photography at the French National Library. It was our statement concerning the history of photography. We revisited John Szarkowski's argument about photography and painting in the early period of the medium, but otherwise our discourse tended to be quite different from the American stance. In Europe all the 'isms' in art give a solid framework for the understanding of photography as art, rather than as a separate pure entity. The boundaries are more flexible.

CH: As the photographic medium is about to celebrate its 200th year, what tendencies strike you?

AS: David Hockney accurately predicted the present situation and the floods of images. I exhibited his photographs at the Centre Pompidou in 1982, including his first large-scale collages. He had grasped the future and tackled photographs en masse. Initially photographers would perhaps make a few hundred photographs during their career: Man Ray produced over 10,000 images; Henri Cartier-Bresson 200,000; and now one has to count in the millions.

Amongst the current phenomena, there is of course the impressive development of amateur photography. Anyone can be a photographer, and mobile phones produced images of the London bombings. Now any type of photographic object can be produced for the market, but it seems to me that artistic photography is running out of steam.

Last year Gilles Mora and I were asked to curate an exhibition, 'Photography in France 1950–2000', which was mostly based on the collection of the European House of Photography in Paris. We decided, in particular, to recon-



Left: 'The Family of Man', Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1955, courtesy Alain Sayag. Right: 'The Invention of an Art', Centre Pompidou, 1989, courtesy Alain Sayag.



sider professional practices such as the use of photography in fashion, advertising and reportage. It is in advertising that is most creative at the moment: there is an incredible vibrancy and force, as well as large enabling budgets. I am interested in the fact that photography disappears in advertising through the process of digital production and there are no archives. This is a profound change. The photographer's name sometimes does not appear; there is an artistic director and then a collaborative block. Robert Delpire and William Klein, for instance, have worked for advertising but this is seldom shown.

CH: Is this disappearance a concern?

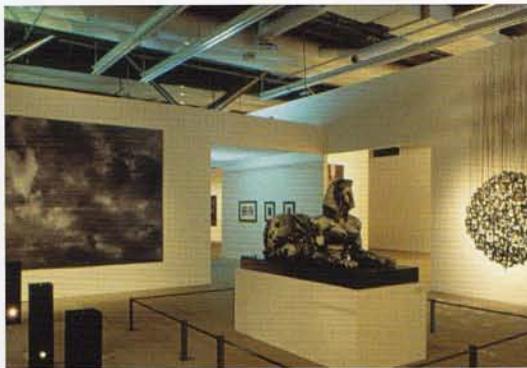
AS: No, photography is not made to last. That is a basic fact. And besides, we are now collapsing under such a mass of images in the world. So it doesn't worry me. Collectors who own a Kodachrome print by Cindy Sherman often never realised that it would only last 30 years. Reproductions and copies are possible, and there has been such a quantitative leap that the question of authenticity has become ever more important. But it is crucial to indicate the difference and incite an analytical act of looking: there are very varied qualities of vintage

and modern prints. People need to be taught to look at the detail of a photograph, how it is made and what the implications are. A photograph is not just an image, it is also an object.

CH: You mention that the work you do now responds to demand and that, as a consequence, it is eclectic. Can you tell us about another recent project?

AS: Gilles Mora, who runs a municipal venue devoted to photography in Montpellier called the Pavillon Populaire, asked me to imagine an exhibition to do with ruins and urban photography in 2011. I remembered seeing a beautiful book in Warsaw in the 1970s, presenting views of the city taken in August 1945 by the Polish photographer Leonard Sempolinski. I hadn't been able to do anything with this discovery in all these years and this is something I always find frustrating. Finally the occasion arose to include his work in this show 'Apocalypses' which concentrated on the demise of cities from Dresden to Detroit between 1944 and 2010. Of course, this project was very much inspired by W. G. Sebald's books.

Left: 'The Invention of an Art', Centre Pompidou, 1989, courtesy Alain Sayag. Right: The Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, New York, 1905-17, courtesy Alain Sayag.



CH: For years now, you have travelled to Asia extensively and China in particular. This continues to be a key location for your activities. Can you tell us about this specificity?

AS: Indeed, I was very involved in helping Japanese museums constitute their photographic collections so I know this scene very well. They have an established history of photography there, of course. I also went to Australia, Korea, Taiwan and Thailand, where photographers appear to follow the international trends but are often slightly detached.

Mao lived by diffusing his self-image. Therefore, despite a momentary cultural eradication, art and culture in China were revived relatively fast. In the 1960s and 1970s, the first Chinese avant-garde art such as the Stars Group has not received much attention, but the generation of artists from the 1980s and 1990s has retained its currency. The artistic photography they produce has correspondences with European criteria and is continually renewed. American art is a key influence. To this day there is no real critical discourse on photography in the Chinese press; everything is levelled and the artists and art teachers are absolute stars. Only the local media directed to expats attempt to create a certain hierarchy.