Lieko Shiga’s ‘Rasen Kaigan’; Darren Sylvester on Carol Jerrems; Daniel Palmer: Is Australian Photography Global?; In Search of Lost Children: Polixeni Papapetrou; In the Judgement Seat: Quentin Bajac. Portfolios by Justine Varga & David Noonan

Photofile
In the Judgement Seat: 
The Museum of Modern Art’s 
Quentin Bajac

TEXT BY CAROLINE HANCOCK

Photography is about to celebrate its 200 years and still the medium remains relevant and open to changes in technique and form. In a preeminent position to test its relevance and explore its changing forms is Quentin Bajac. A photography curator at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris from 1995 to 2003, Bajac transferred to the Photography Department at the Centre Pompidou/National Museum of Modern Art, which he then led from 2007 until late 2012. As Photofile went to press, Bajac was about to embark on one of photography’s most hallowed roles as Chief Curator of Photography at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).

Bajac brings with him a fluid knowledge of the medium that traverses the Atlantic in breadth and depth. In his view, digital technology wasn’t a revolution but an evolution, comparable to the arrival of silver gelatin printing in the nineteenth century. And such developments have allowed us to review any naïve belief in the photographic image as simply tracing or indexing reality. The fundamental understanding of photography as a highly coded and constructed message has been brought back to the fore.
PHOTOFILE

Following the 1980s and 1990s, when photography went vertical, large and physical, Bajac has become increasingly interested in other ways of engaging with the image, involving photo books and therefore the written word, and self-published portfolios that can remain immaterial and screen-based. The modes of diffusion are vast and could elude the museum, rather like conceptual art did in the early stages. Bajac is intent on constantly adapting to new technological developments and circumstances of production and continues to read photographs through the lens of the present, with particular attention to artists’ essential, and usually visionary, viewpoints. Their influence on reconsidering modes of display is one aspect Bajac is highly aware of, while maintaining the objectivity necessary in his role as conservator and curator.

In a few weeks time you will leave Paris to head up the Photography Department at MoMA.1 How did you encounter your predecessor Peter Galassi? While I was at Orsay, I read some of his texts including the book Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography [MoMA, 1981] which dealt with the parallels between the pictorial model and photography in the nineteenth century. In fact I met Peter Galassi at the Centre Pompidou when an exhibition he curated, ‘American Photography 1890–1965: From the Museum of Modern Art, New York’, was presented in 1996. MoMA was closed for building work at the time and the touring show was a selection from the collection. I remember making lots of discoveries, since in France one didn’t really have a clear, precise vision of this collection, despite its notoriety. But I was frustrated not to see more contemporary work; the overview seemed to leave the story in a sort of suspense.

Peter Galassi and I have never had the chance to work together. But we have met on numerous occasions because he often spends time in Paris – particularly while he was researching his exhibition ‘Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Modern Century’ [MoMA, 2010].

What are your plans for MoMA? During the extended recruiting process I had to present a detailed exhibition and acquisition program, as well as discuss my vision of modern and contemporary photography, of photography within contemporary art. But obviously I have no intention of establishing a predefined program; when you arrive in an institution, things change. I want to talk with the team, hear their wishes – some projects are already programmed of course; proposals might be submitted, and so forth.

I would definitely like to organise more thematic exhibitions while continuing monograph-ic projects. I hope to develop multidisciplinary projects in dialogue with other museum departments such as Painting and Sculpture, Film and Architecture. Contemporary artistic practices have this hybrid mode and there are more and more meaningful parallels between techniques.

The Photography Department at MoMA has a strong tradition and a very particular place within the history of photography. After all, Christopher Phillips called it ‘the judgement seat of photography’. Indeed in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s it was one of the rare photography departments in museums of modern and contemporary art. It had a leading role and it has been scrutinised and emulated as such. Each head of the department – Beaumont Newhall, Edward Steichen, John Szarkowski, Peter Galassi – worked with very different visions and fortunes. The landscape of photography has changed immensely since the beginnings and MoMA is no longer unique. Photography has gained in notoriety and recognition. Other MoMA departments – such as Painting and Sculpture, or Prints – collect photographs. But MoMA’s Photography Department continues to be observed as a reference. I think that is wonderful.

Who are the American photographers you have already worked with? Who do you look forward to encountering? It is clear, Of course, that American photography is not my speciality, but as a photography historian I have a good knowledge of the scenes beyond European photography. One of the rare American artists with whom I have worked is William Klein; he is in fact more integrated in the history of French photography rather like Man Ray. But he is very American in so many respects and I really think he deserves a larger place within American photography. He has often held himself apart by having a militant stance and being very critical of American politics in the 1960s and 1970s.

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1 This interview took place in Paris on 21 November 2012.

INTERVIEW
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When I arrived at the Centre Pompidou I noticed the gaps in the museum collection with regards to American photography. My predecessor Alain Sayag had set up the Photography Department 25 years earlier and he had decided at the time to concentrate on European photography – particularly since American photography was already very expensive. In the last years I have worked very closely with the Centre Pompidou Foundation (our American friends) to purchase key examples of American photography. The intention is to pepper the collection with notable works that can accompany and frame the European history. It will never be a major part of the collection, but the introduction of photographs by Harry Callahan, Louis Stettner and Richard Avedon, as well as by contemporaries such as Sherrie Levine, James Welling and Zoe Leonard has been really important. They function as reference points for a more global contextualisation.

I am very interested in James Welling's work. Through his teaching and his practice he has had a strong influence on questions relating to abstraction in contemporary creation. Vera Lutter and Uta Barth came to live and work in the United States; they have developed distinct work, taking their photographic training in the German school to new directions. The current exhibition at MoMA, 'New Photography 2012', highlighting Michele Abeles for instance, and the new generation of photographers including Amy Granat and Katy Grannan, are all evidence of the strength of American photography today.

How will your expertise in European photography and beyond be put to use at MoMA? Indeed, I hope to bring a new outlook to European photography. The MoMA collection is primarily directed towards American photography from the nineteenth century to the most contemporary practices and it is extremely rich in this domain. But it is also open to the world, and increasingly so, since the scenes are now so expanded and spread out globally. This is something that will be important to continue to develop while establishing certain priorities since it is impossible to pursue all avenues. The internationalisation leads me to look towards Eastern Europe and Africa for example. Latin America is obviously of crucial importance since there are major cultural links with this part of the world. Japanese photography has been well represented in the MoMA collection since the 1950s and this needs to be sustained.

What brought you to photography in the first place? I became interested in photography via painting and cinema. I saw all the big multidisciplinary exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou in the late 1970s and 1980s, such as 'Paris–Paris', 'Paris–Vienna', 'Paris–Moscow' and 'Paris–Berlin'. Yet, the first images that particularly attracted my attention were scientific photographs, experiments in proto-cinema and with X-rays dating from the nineteenth century, such as the work of Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge. And I then realised that photographers in the 1920s and 1930s had been similarly fascinated by this type of material.

Are there any early readings that influenced you? Michel Frizot's book A New History of Photography [Adam Biro/Bordas, 1994; English translation 1998] was very important to my generation. His approach to photography was very open and included artistic, scientific and vernacular practices.

You worked with Françoise Heilbrun as photography curator at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. Can you describe this early part of your career? In fact Françoise Heilbrun had a strong training in American photography since she spent a year at the Princeton University at the end of the 1970s. She has been very inspired by the study of the artistic history of photography and by John Szarkowski. I curated exhibitions which comprised photography as fine art: on Victorian photography (Tableaux vivants: Fantasies photographiques victoriennes, 1840–1880*, 1999); scientific photography (such as the exhibition 'Dans le champ des étoiles: Les photographes et le ciel, 1850–2000'), documentary forms such as 'La Commune photographiée' (2000); and a major retrospective 'French Daguerreotype: A Photographic Object' (2003). We attempted to represent all the different fields and to create dialogues.

What were your main achievements at the Centre Pompidou? Of course, the Centre Pompidou demanded a very different approach since it is a
museum of modern and contemporary art. As the second head of department, following on from Alain Sayag, I decided to continue developing the collecting policies he put in place – that is to say a history of photography centred on Europe and experimental uses of the medium. It is intriguing to note how the Americans have revered Eugène Atget, a Frenchman, as a model, whereas in France an American, Man Ray, is taken as a reference figure. There are multiple ways of telling the histories of photography and each institution writes its own story. I am pleased that photography now has a bigger presence within the permanent collection displays.

I curated approximately one exhibition each year since my arrival – again very different in nature. To cite some examples, I worked on ‘Jacques Henri Lartigue’ as I still had a foot in Orsay, and in one section, we actually restaged an exhibition of his works at MoMA in 1963 curated by Szarkowski. With Clément Chéroux, who has been Curator in the Photography Department since 2007, we put together a historical show on the relations between photography and film in surrealism: ‘The Subversion of Images’ (2009). ‘Dreamlands: From amusement parks to the cities of the future’ (2010) was a multidisciplinary project which I prepared with Didier Ottinger with amusement, seriousness and a certain detachment. Some shows were smaller in format like the focus on ‘Miroslav Tichy’ (2008), a photographer of Czech origin who was very little known in France. The retrospectives devoted to ‘Bernd and Hilla Becher’ (2004) and ‘William Klein’ (2005) were such extraordinary human encounters with renowned photographers who couldn’t be more apart in terms of their practice.

Several large collections have recently entered the Centre Pompidou collection ... Francis Lacloche and I curated the exhibition ‘Les peintres de la vie moderne: Donation—Collection photographique de la Caisse des Dépôts’ in 2006 to commemorate the addition of 700 prints from the Deposits and Consignments Fund. This had been set in motion before my arrival and it enabled a very important reinforcement of the collection with work from the 1980s and 1990s. Until then, it had principally been oriented towards work made prior to the 1960s. I have since deliberately continued to complement the contemporary components of the collection with my colleague Clément Chéroux. Yet, when Christian Bouqueret’s collection of photographs dating from 1925 to 1950 became available a few years ago, it was immediately clear to us that this was a rare opportunity not to be missed since this was one of the last major private collections of modern photography. Key sponsorship made this unique chance a reality and it is currently the object of a first exhibition, ‘Voici Paris: Photographic Modernities, 1920–1950’. We are fortunate that important donations have also considerably enriched the collection such as those of work by Brassai and Marc Riboud.

The Centre Pompidou now has an emphatic focus on globalisation, yet the collection has a very small holding of works by Australian photographers. Coincidentally I was recently contacted by curator Claire Monneraye from the Australian Centre for Photography [Photofiles publisher] concerning this, 4 I must admit that until then I had never particularly researched this question and I have very little knowledge of the photographic practices from this region of the world, other than perhaps Boyd Webb from New Zealand. It seems there was an exhibition of Robert Besanko’s work at the Centre Pompidou in 1981 which led to a number of gifts to the collection. There has been no purchasing policy since then, therefore this is only a limited snapshot. The photographs are by Besanko, Nanette Garber, Graham Howe, Henry Lewis, Stephen Roach and Samuel Roxburgh.

I noticed a print depicting Ayers Rock by Hiroshi Hamaya and a series called ‘Tasmania’ by Hamish Fulton too. Tracey Moffatt, Liz Stirling and Arthur and Corinne Cantrill are present in the New Media Department. When proposing acquisitions for the Centre Pompidou, we work closely with other French public institutions so as to avoid too many overlaps and allow complementarity. Therefore in the case of Tracey Moffatt and Bill Henson, for instance, purchases of photographic works were made by Centre national des arts plastiques.