

Pia Zanetti Photographer Until 24/05/2021

It was an assignment, one among many other assignments. But sometimes an assignment unexpectedly turns into something greater. The distances fade away, and suddenly the camera is no longer a secret observer, black and menacingly looming in a dark corner. The camera becomes the space where the images take place. Immediacy, the magical quality of photography, sheds its inherent voyeuristic element, there is no curiosity, no desire to expose the outrageous to the public.

Pia Zanetti

Pia Zanetti, born in Basel in 1943, made a name for herself with her insightful photo stories. Her great perseverance led her to excel in a field that had previously been dominated by men. Starting in the 1960s, she travelled extensively on behalf of publications such as *Die Woche*, *Espresso*, *Stern*, *Paris Match*, *Elle*, *Telegraph*, *Das Magazin*, *Du*, or *NZZ*, first in Europe and later all around the world. It was always the common people on the street, at work, at football stadiums, playing outside or lost in thought that caught her discerning eye. Unobtrusive, empathetic, critical and precise, she captured dramas big and small that unfold in day-to-day life. Pia Zanetti documented solidarity and resistance against injustice, but she also tirelessly sought out those happy moments in which dreams seem to become reality.

Even at an early age, she already knew that she wanted to become a photographer. But when she started looking for an apprenticeship in Basel after graduating from school, she was met with a series of rejections – the petite young woman was not deemed capable of the profession. In the end, Pia was allowed to train under her brother, who was 15 years her senior: Olivio Fontana ran a studio for advertising photography. She then attended the Basel School of Design before starting a career as a freelance photojournalist at the tender age of 20. At the same time she met the journalist Gerardo Zanetti, with whom she bonded not only privately but also professionally. As a flexible, open, adventurous and effective team, the couple soon met with success: together they developed ideas for stories and illuminated the rapid social changes in post-war Europe for magazine audiences at home and abroad. While Pia captured a diverse array of unique subjects with a keen sense for the individual setting, Gerardo provided insight and analysis in his finely crafted accompanying texts.

Between Rome and London

In the 1960s, the couple lived in Rome and London, travelled all over Europe, and sometimes ventured even further afield, for example to South Africa or the USA. When Pia's family work

took on a more dominant role in her life in the 1970s – she had two sons and a daughter to look after – the family first settled in Ticino, and then later in Zurich. Nevertheless, the well-established photographer continued to be successful in the business. In addition to photo stories, for which demand in the media landscape was steadily dwindling, she took on numerous assignments for charities – in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, for example. When her husband Gerardo died in 2000, she continued her work on her own. She balanced her way through life and found the perfect equilibrium between earning a living and telling her own stories. Travelling, discovering foreign worlds, and a respectful sense of wonder continued to shape her work.

Movement and emotions

Almost all of Pia Zanetti's photographs are imbued with an innate dynamism, either because of the event depicted or due to a mysterious tension that immediately draws the viewer into the scene. One of her earliest works shows people in furious motion: young men, their arms and legs flailing in wild abandon to the turbulent sound of "The Hurricanes". They break out of their structured world for a brief moment, heralding the dawn of a new age with their strong, sensual expressiveness – still an exceptional sight to behold in Basel in 1960. Movement also characterises her street scenes from Italy. Pia Zanetti skilfully uses motion blur as a stylistic device, as if she was trying to say that capturing life is a futile endeavour: the ballet of everyday life is fleeting, the world is constantly changing, and it is always worthwhile to explore it anew – this is also the implicit message in her later works.

Documents become images

The photographer likes to focus her camera on individual figures and faces in the midst of a crowd of people – be it on the street (as in an impressive colour series from New York), in a football stadium, or at a rally. The juxtaposition of glances, gestures, and postures is full of life stories that transcend the moment frozen in time. The individual in focus is one among many who reveal something very personal in that instant. Unforgettable, for example, is the face of a Black South African on the stands at a sporting event, a phantom without clear contours, foregrounded in front of a hazy crowd of spectators: Is he watching the action on the pitch? Or are his eyes looking for stability in an uncertain future that will continue to be marked by racism and violence? The photograph was taken in Johannesburg in 1968. But even with no knowledge of the historical circumstances and the specific situation, this picture is captivating in and of itself.

A panorama of human sensibilities

Seismographically, Pia Zanetti also registers the inner movements that take hold of people, focusing on the emotions reflected in their faces and postures. Fear, humour, hope, cunning, resignation, sadness, joy, protest, elation, amazement, pride, arrogance, distrust, bitterness, despair: Pia Zanetti's work reveals a panorama of human sensibilities – the inner life of the outer world. And yet her works are anything but voyeuristic. Rather, they blend together into a very personal album. Her work, born from a desire to understand the world, the people, and their living conditions, is based on hundreds of encounters. She approaches the residents of a psychiatric clinic in Nicaragua with the same openness and respect she affords to the most prominent writers, actors, or movie directors. The photographer's empathy and discretion ensure that she never compromises the people in her pictures. "Why is it that almost all the people Zanetti photographs are so beautiful?", wondered author Nicole Müller, who often accompanied her on her travels. Because when taking pictures, the photographer pulls back completely and puts herself in a different state "to become completely permeable to the things and people in front of the camera. That's her special gift. To create this space in which people can reveal themselves."

Flow of images

For the exhibition of the Fotostiftung Schweiz, Pia Zanetti reviewed her entire archive and selected a number of images to assemble them into a new, free-floating narrative. The fact that it was possible to compose such an extensive, associative flow of images, both on the walls and in the book, without confining herself to a rigid structural corset of individual chapters, speaks for the quality of her work. Just as Pia Zanetti develops a particular theme into a narrative in pictures – one of the finest examples of this is her work on the dying Aral Sea in Uzbekistan – her entire oeuvre also produces a grand narrative image of an era. What was created in the context of a photojournalistic assignment now proves to be rather resilient, evolving from a document into an independent work. It is precisely in the broader overview that the consistency of her work becomes apparent – as a result of artist's unwavering confidence in her own visual language. The subjective gaze of an author who has followed her inner voice is all we need as a common thread.

The exhibition is curated by Teresa Gruber and Peter Pfrunder.

As a companion to the exhibition, the book "Pia Zanetti. Photographer", edited by Peter Pfrunder, will be available from Scheidegger & Spiess AG, Zurich, and codax publisher, Feldmeilen/Zurich.

Special events and guided tours

The Fotostiftung Schweiz offers a programme of special events to accompany the exhibition as well as free public guided tours. Due to the unpredictable development of the pandemic situation, we kindly ask you to inform yourself via our website fotostiftung.ch. You can also make reservations there.

The Fotostiftung Schweiz receives regular financial support from the Swiss Federal Office for Culture, the cantons of Zurich, Thurgau, and Ticino, the city of Winterthur, and F. Aeschbach AG.

50 Years of Fotostiftung Schweiz 1971–2021

For 50 years the Fotostiftung Schweiz has been committed to the preservation of photographic images. What began with no money but with a great deal of passion and tireless dedication has developed, over the years, into a diverse national institution that has become an integral part of the photographic landscape.

In our anniversary year we will be presenting three exhibitions that reflect the Fotostiftung's central fields of activity – responsibilities to which it has remained true since its beginnings: researching the history of photography, securing and processing archives, and paying tribute to authors and their life's work.

We would like to invite you to rediscover the world through the mirror of photography! Journey into the past. Allow yourself to be seduced by technical precision and sensual stimuli. Or immerse yourself in other realities – both real and imagined. Good Morning, World!

This awaits you in the anniversary year 2021:

4 June to 10 October

Ernst A. Heiniger – Good Morning, World!

Ernst A. Heiniger (1903–1993) belonged to the avant-garde of the Swiss “New Photography” movement in the 1930s. He constantly took on new challenges and was always on the cutting edge with his pioneering work. In the 1950s, Heiniger travelled the world as a documentary filmmaker for Walt Disney – two of his short films were awarded an Oscar. He later created Switzerland's first 360° film for Expo 64 in Lausanne.

Even though Ernst A. Heiniger's visual worlds were admired by a broad public in his day, his name is still largely absent from the canon of Swiss photographic history. The Fotostiftung was able to return his archive from the US to Switzerland in 2014 and is now presenting his multi-faceted work in the first comprehensive retrospective since his death.

A comprehensive publication accompanying the exhibition will be available from Scheidegger & Spiess.

23 October to the end of January 2022

Nach der Natur – After Nature: Swiss Photography in the 19th Century

After photography was proclaimed as a French invention in 1839 in Paris, the new medium quickly embarked on its victory march throughout Europe. Although the race for technical innovation started in the cultural centres, the heavy cameras soon made their way to the villages and the countryside, to remote valleys and mountains, where photographers gained recognition for their images “after nature”. How was photography able to spread so rapidly? Who were the Swiss pioneers who constantly conceived of new applications?

The first retrospective of the first 50 years of the new medium brings together exquisite works from numerous public and private collections to capture this momentous invention in its artistic, social and economic dimensions.

A co-production between the Fotostiftung Schweiz (Winterthur), the MASI Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana (Lugano), and the Musée de l'Elysée (Lausanne).

A comprehensive publication accompanying the exhibition will be available from Steidl, Göttingen.