

May 2012  
Press Release

## Back Light. Kurt Blum – Photographs

Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur, 9 June – 14 October 2012

Opening: 8 June 2012, 6 pm

Kurt Blum (1922-2005), who was born in Berne, was one of the outstanding Swiss photographers of the post-war era. In addition to numerous reportages for illustrated magazines, as of the 1950s he also did free artistic and experimental works which were presented to a wider public in exhibitions and publications. The focal points of his oeuvre were the artists' portraits he took as of the late 1940s, larger work groups on the themes of dance and opera, and an intense involvement through photography and film with the world of industry and labour. Blum always regarded himself as an artist, however, and strove for photography to be recognised as an independent art medium. Above and beyond the documentary aspect, he sought subjective expressiveness, the atmospherically dense moment, the consciously composed photographic print. Blum thus belonged to the avant-garde of Swiss photography, so it is not surprising that he also played a role in the "subjective photography" circle around Otto Steinert in Germany in the early 1950s.

After training with Eugen Fehlmann in Burgdorf, from 1943 onwards Kurt Blum earned his living as a photographer for the Swiss National Library in Berne. Parallel to this, he developed a passion for art and was drawn into, and inspired by a dynamic up-and-coming art scene in Berne. Moreover, through his acquaintanceship with Arnold Rüdinger, the then director of the Kunsthalle Bern, he came into contact with important international artists of his day, many of whom he portrayed in their studios, which resulted in a unique series of portraits of artists like Pablo Picasso, Alberto Giacometti, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko and Sam Francis. This was published in 1994, together with photographs of the Berne art scene, in a book entitled *Au milieu des artistes*. After an intermezzo as an expert on photography and film for UNESCO in Pakistan (1957/58), Kurt Blum worked for large industrial companies in northern Italy, leading in 1959 to the book *Pictures of a factory* (German title *Lebendiger Stahl*, 1960), in which he presented an almost infernal image of a steel works, sparks flying, by means of black-and-white photographs rich in contrasts. Under equally difficult light conditions he later took photographs in the large opera houses of the world for the book *J'aime l'Opéra* (1962). Published in the series *J'aime ...* (German title *Eintritt frei: ...*) by Editions Rencontre and designed by Jacques Plancherel, the book reveals a kind of radiant counter world to that of the dark factory, while still being marked by the photographer's same subjective creative impetus.

Blum also devoted close attention to film-making, and in one of his very first attempts, *L'uomo il fuoco il ferro* (German title *Symphonie in Stahl*, 1960) he succeeded, with captivating music by Sergei Prokofiev, in producing a superb abstract experimental film in colour and Cinemascope format. Blum also constantly experimented with the medium of photography in an effort to expand his technical abilities, his visual idiom and his artistic horizon. Inspired by experiments undertaken by 19th century pioneers of photography, by the surrealist artists, and by photographers from the "subjective photography" group, he also concentrated on photograms and light drawings, which he exhibited in large-formats at the Kunstmuseum Solothurn for the first time in 1997.

Kurt Blum was not a man of many words, but rather an intense visual person, a sensitive but self-confident artist and a meticulous craftsman, who not only mastered classic photography, but explored it to its very limits. Although Canton Bern honoured him with the Grand Prix for Photo and Film in 1983, no comprehensive retrospective exhibition of his photographic oeuvre was ever mounted in his lifetime. The Fotostiftung Schweiz would now like to make up for this – on the photographer’s 90th birthday, as it were – with an exhibition and an accompanying publication based on a detailed scientific processing exploitation of the Kurt Blum Archive.

The **exhibition** “Back Light. Kurt Blum – Photographs”, curated by Martin Gasser, will show, in addition to a small number of new prints from original negative, exclusively vintage prints from the Kurt Blum Archive, including a series of large-format prints which Blum made for the exhibitions “Photographie als Ausdruck” (Helmhaus Zurich 1955) and “Fotoexperimente” (Kunstmuseum Solothurn, 1997). Furthermore, contact sheets, book maquettes and other documents will provide insight into the Kurt Blum Archive, of which the Fotostiftung Schweiz has been in charge of since 2008.

**Accompanying publication:** *Gegenlicht. Kurt Blum – Fotografien*, edited by the Fotostiftung Schweiz for Limmat Verlag, with texts by Nanni Baltzer, Martin Gasser, Sylvie Henguely, Thilo Koenig and Fred Zaugg (256 pages, c. 200 Duplex and colour illustrations).

**Accompanying event:** On 12 September 2012, 7.30 pm, a selection of Kurt Blum’s films will be shown, including his prize-winning experimental film *L’uomo il fuoco il ferro (Symphonie in Stahl)* with music by Sergei Prokofiev, 1960.  
In collaboration with Lichtspiel / Kinemathek Bern.

**Bildfokus / Image in Focus**, with Sabine Münzenmaier, on 26 June 2012, 12.15 pm,  
“Symphonie in Stahl: zu Kurt Blums Industriefotografien”

**Bildfokus / Image in Focus**, with Astrid Näff, on 4 September 2012, 12.15 pm: “Bern – Paris – New York: Kurt Blum am Puls der Kunstwelt”

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