

01/06/2024 – 06/10/2024

**Paare / Couples**

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**Bernard Voïta  
Melencolia**



**Fotostiftung Schweiz**



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# Paare / Couples

**Vernissage: Friday, 31st of May 2024, from 6 pm**

Welcoming address by Andreas Spillmann, president of the foundation board, at 7 pm. Introduction to the exhibitions: Peter Pfrunder, director of Fotostiftung Schweiz. Iwan Schumacher, film director and photographer

**Wednesday, 26th of June 2024, 7 pm**

**Couplehood – a lifestyle under scrutiny?** Barbara Bleisch in dialogue with Dania Schiftan

**Sunday, 11th of August 2024, 1:30 pm**

**Between longing and voyeurism – couples in photography.**

Exhibition tour with Elisabeth Bronfen

Moderator: Michael Zimmermann

**Saturday, 21st of September 2024**

**Kulturnacht Winterthur.** The Centre for Photography hosts

Theater am Gleis for the dance performance ECHO

by Naomi Kamihigashi & Thomas Walschot in the exhibition

*Bernard Voïta – Melencolia* at 6 and 7 pm

In 2015, filmmaker Iwan Schumacher began collecting photographs of couples not looking at the camera. Peter Pfrunder, Director of the Fotostiftung Schweiz, had long been planning an exhibition of couple pictures from the Fotostiftung's collection. They decided to join forces and developed the project *Paare / Couples* together.

Couples are omnipresent in photography. Lovers never tire of having themselves immortalized together, and no effort is too great for the perfect wedding photograph. But even couples who have long since left the first flight of fancy behind them work on their façade. One poses, looks into the camera, automatically adopts a certain posture, controls one's facial expression, and thus influences the way one wants to appear as a couple in the photo. Anyone who allows themselves to be photographed in this way agrees to have a picture taken of her, of him, of both.

More exciting than the countless idealizing self-portraits, however, are the shots in which couples seem completely at one with themselves and strangely removed: playing and courting, in love and intoxicated, desperate and searching for support. Or lonely and lost. There is hardly a subject in the photographic depiction of human relationships that is as productive as photographs of couples – when they are *not* posing. Whether they consent to being photographed, however, is then no longer clear: the pictures are either taken clandestinely or the person behind the camera

is so familiar to the couple that they allow him or her to do so as a matter of course. The photos, in which the subjects look past the camera, appear to be taken from real life.

Our exhibition presents couples in the broadest sense: the type and duration of the relationship, gender or skin color are irrelevant. It shows pictures in which something happens *between* two people. A wide spectrum of emotions becomes visible and tangible – rarely do people display their feelings and sensitivities as openly as in these scenes of togetherness, even when it becomes loneliness. Looks and postures suggest that things are happening in secret to which others have no access. Each individual image hints at an action that remains enigmatic and leads to speculation or projections. Photographs of couples not posing are small revelations that go far beyond documentary snapshots. The photographers' motivation to take such pictures presumably stems from the same impulse, the same fascination with which we as viewers encounter these images: with a mixture of curiosity and empathy.

*Paare / Couples* does not claim to bring together a historically or socially representative selection of works. Rather, it is a joyfully arranged score, put together by two lovers of the photographic image in free play: Shots that each seem to come from a different film, but which can be assembled into something new.

Publication: Iwan Schumacher, Peter Pfrunder: *Paare / Couples*. Design: Teo Schifferli. 228 pages, 110 photographs. English / German. Ed. Patrick Frey / Fotostiftung Schweiz, Zurich 2024.

1st June to 14th July 2024: Relationship status: It's complicated. Film programme on the topic of couples at Kino Cameo, Winterthur.

Sunday, 9th of June, 30th of June, 1st and 22nd of September 2024, 1:30 pm. Public guided tour through the exhibition *Paare / Couples*

Hans Peter Klauser, Waldspaziergang (front), 1933 © Hans Peter Klauser / Fotostiftung Schweiz. Iwan Schumacher, Ohne Titel (left), 1972 © Iwan Schumacher. Justin Jin, Nai Nai, a 23-year-old live-streamer with her friend, the famous live-streamer Jiang Bo, Wuhan (inside), 2021 © Justin Jin / Panos Pictures.

An epilogue by Peter Pfrunder

# Conveying Amazement

In 1999, I had the privilege of curating my first exhibition as director of Fotostiftung Schweiz at Kunsthaus Zurich. Entitled *Vom Staunen erzählen* (Conveying Amazement), it was about the already almost forgotten photographer Hans Peter Klauser, whose estate had been donated to Fotostiftung Schweiz. For the poster, I chose a photograph of a couple quickly walking away, down a forest path. In the evening light, the long shadows create a second visual layer, in which the photographer also intervenes as a silhouette; a somewhat eerie but fascinating interplay that adds a magical quality to this photograph.

In the final exhibition that I have the privilege of opening at Fotostiftung Schweiz, on the 31st of May 2024, this couple have quietly caught up with me again: Their picture hangs prominently at the entrance to the show *Paare / Couples*. It only occurred to me much later that I had already given it a place of honour 25 years ago.

The history of the institution and my own life story have become intertwined. From the very start, I was enthused by the idea of a foundation that aims to preserve an important visual heritage for the future, and to make it visible and usable. My predecessors had done some great pioneering work, which I and my colleague Martin Gasser were able to build on together. Although I had gathered experience as a curator and publicist in the field of photography, my actual background was in literature and in broadly defined cultural studies, writing texts and working with language. To this day, I still see photographic images as a kind of text that can be read in very different ways, enabling us to understand our present, our past, our culture and our lives. My interest is often piqued by the manifold modes of expression and styles, the 'visual language': photography as a form of fiction that says more about our own imagination than about reality.

Over the course of a quarter century, Fotostiftung Schweiz has developed, from a small organisation under the roof of Kunsthaus Zurich, into an independent national institution and point of reference for photography – thanks to countless archival, exhibition and publication projects in Switzerland and abroad, along with a collection encompassing well over 100 lifetime and posthumous bequests. This development was only possible thanks to many years of substantial support from the Swiss Confederation, and major contributions from the public and private sectors. The collaboration with Fotomuseum Winterthur proved to be consistently fruitful, too. Above all though, the decisive factor was an incredibly committed and motivated team, now comprising around 20 people, who put their heart and soul into achieving the goals of Fotostiftung Schweiz without ever failing to keep benevolence and pragmatism in mind. We were fortunate to always have the full trust of a highly capable foundation board, who gave us the backing we needed in our balancing act between ideal and feasibility.

I would like to express my gratitude for my 26 years as director with two exhibitions, conceived as a pair of opposites: the quiet meditative work *Melencolia* by Bernard Voïta and the light playful capriccio *Paare / Couples*, which I designed together with filmmaker Iwan Schumacher. These two exhibitions could hardly be further removed from each other. When compared, they offer an invitation to explore the different languages of photography and to let the imaginative power of photographic images take effect. As an overarching title, 'Conveying Amazement' would be appropriate on this occasion too.



# Bernard Voïta Melencolia

Bernard Voïta, born in 1960 in Cully (Vaud), is a master of deliberate photographic confusion. Around 1990, he was already attracting international attention with large-format works that generate a reality all of their own. Voïta's works bring to mind montages or collages at first, but on closer inspection, they turn out to be real installations in the space. By shooting from a very specific perspective, he succeeds in making three-dimensional 'bricolages' become two-dimensional tableaux – impenetrable nestings of objects and surfaces. However, this tipping effect is more than just a gimmick: Familiar reality suddenly becomes strange and 'illegible', fascinating and unsettling at the same time. Where there was certainty, there is now uncertainty; what seemed true, turns out to be an illusion. The artist still adheres to this approach in his more recent works. His series *Melencolia*, which is being presented comprehensively for the first time at Fotostiftung Schweiz, constitutes the quintessence of his long-standing balancing act between reality and appearance – and perhaps also an echo of our era's loss of reality. In conversation with curator Peter Pfrunder, Bernard Voïta provides insight into his oeuvre.

Bernard, photography plays a major role in your art-work. Nevertheless, you object to being labelled a 'photographer'.

Photography itself is of little interest to me. I see it as part of a much broader history of painting; it is anchored within it, especially via the camera obscura, which constitutes the heart of the photographic mechanism and was initially a painter's tool. The history of photography does not begin with the corresponding chemical invention around 1840, as the principle of the camera obscura had been known since antiquity. It is likely that even the first humans had experiences with it when rays of light happened to enter their caves, showing an image of the outside world...

The title of your first photographic work is «Antichambre» (1987). In what sense is this series significant with regard to your approach?

In a way, when you look at these large-format works, you find yourself standing in an antechamber ('antichambre' in French): You're standing on the threshold and you cannot enter! My intention was to create images that are not immediately penetrable and comprehensible, but instead allow our gaze to bounce off them and reflect back on ourselves. The *Antichambre* works are square. They are in the format of the Hasselblad camera I was using at the time. On its focusing screen, which is used to check the framing, a small cross is marked. It's the central point between four fields of equal size and it served me as a grid to divide the surface of my photograph into four squares. So I took this cross, an aid provided by the camera, and literally projected it into the heart of my set-up.

In this way, I turned the reproduction machine into a projection machine, reversing the principle of photography: I no longer stood *behind* the camera as a passive observer, searching for the image to be captured, but *in front* of the camera, to construct a photograph, to generate the image to be delivered by the camera. In this way, I used the cross mark, which is reminiscent of Dürer's perspective machine, against its intended purpose. It no longer served to copy or reproduce the world as accurately as possible; instead, reality was transformed according to the camera grid, reinvented from a specific point of view.

It is a special experience, moving real objects in the space in such a way that they end up forming an image, but one that can only be seen on the camera's focusing screen. The transfer to two-dimensionality deprives the things of their characteristics, their mass, their weight etc. Material differentiation disappears: There is no longer any distinction between solid and hollow spaces, between an object and its shadow. To be honest, even I was surprised by the results of these

Where does the 15-part series «Melencolia» fit into your oeuvre?

This work, created between 2014 and 2017, ties in very directly with the *Antichambre* pictures from the 1980s. Back then, I didn't dare to produce more than four works, which I soon regretted. I was at the beginning of my career and felt that I absolutely had to do new things! After 25 years had passed, I allowed myself the pleasure of revisiting the principle of that work in a related form. I now call the new series *Melencolia*, in reference to the famous engraving by Albrecht Dürer.

So what has changed since the earlier work?

With the *Antichambres*, I was forced to constantly walk back and forth between the objects and the camera. I had to find easily implementable ideas, in order to materially realise the situation that I wanted. As a result, the possibilities were very limited and, in the long run, it was also tiresome and frustrating! Whole weeks went by, in which hardly anything moved in my overcrowded studio. Centimetre by centimetre, I would change the position of an object or correct the brightness of a lamp. And after each shot, I still had to wait for the film to develop and the enlargement to take place before I could continue.

It was essential to improve my set-up, which is why I put together a machine that, as far as I knew, didn't yet exist in that form at the time: I attached a small video camera to my Hasselblad and pointed it at the focusing screen, so it transmitted a live image of that to a monitor. This allowed me to ensconce myself in the middle of my installation and establish a direct relationship between two incompatible spaces, namely between the reality of the objects in the studio and the view they generated on the surface of the monitor. It was still a somewhat archaic method, but it enabled me to realise my next series, *Architectures*, based on a similar process.

Later, digital technology was added, which allowed me to work more accurately, simply and easily when producing the *Melencolia* pictures, especially as I was no longer dependent on a laboratory. The process of creating my photographs is still extraordinarily slow though. But now I can organise the scattered objects freely in random geometries, without any pre-existing scheme. I can directly observe what's happening on the surface of the photograph from within the three-dimensional installation. You could almost say a phenomenon of crystallisation, in the chemical sense of the word, is in play here.

What significance do the «Melencolia» pictures have for you today?

With this group of works, I returned to my initial interest in the photographic process, albeit in a less

subject, photographed from different angles, can lead to different, and even completely opposite, interpretations: A group of blind men gather around an unknown animal, in this case an elephant, to gain an impression of it. One grasps a leg and immediately says: "An elephant looks like a supple tree-trunk." Another catches hold of a tusk and protests: "On the contrary, an elephant is hard and pointy. It has an elongated, curved shape." Touching its side, a third one cries: "Totally incorrect! An elephant resembles a flat wall with bumps." The fourth, in turn, triumphantly holds the tail in his hands and laughs at everyone: "An elephant is just a thin rope." They get into an argument and bash each other on the head because each is convinced that he is telling the truth.

Our perception of reality suddenly seems to be a very fragile construct and we become aware that this construct is threatening to collapse like a house of cards at any moment.

That's right, both literally and figuratively: At first glance, you may have the feeling that this organised entity is very stable – it seems almost immobile, solidified in its geometric structure. On closer inspection, you notice that the connection between the objects is extremely precarious: Nothing is firmly joined together or ever fixed in place, but merely set up in an unstable equilibrium. Just a simple draught would be enough!... Above all though, and this is the essential thing, you realise that moving the camera only a few centimetres is all it would take to make this whole structure collapse and to transform the geometric order into a disruptive jumble of objects. Basically, this is the case with every photograph, except that the effects of such a shift are usually not so clearly visible. **Where do you see the connection with Albrecht Dürer's engraving «Melencolia I» from 1514?**

What interests me about Dürer's engraving is firstly the very special arrangement of the objects (geometric, mathematical objects, including the famous polyhedron...), which are seemingly scattered at random, without order; they fill the space around the figure of the pensive angel. But I am also interested in the significance of melancholy, which was different at that time compared to today. The torpor, the inertia, the inability to act, contrasts with a kind of mental hyperactivity. I find in Dürer an echo – of the paradoxical space that I explore in my photographic works, and of my persistent attempt to lend something corporeal to the 'bodilessness' of photography.

By locking off my camera at a point from which the position of each object in the photographed space is organised and determined, I multiply the perspectives. From here, the imagination is stimulated, you can move more freely in the image space, get lost as if in a labyrinth and sometimes even see things that don't even exist!

Are there parallels between the objects lying around in Dürer's work and the things you use?

Not really. I do notice some similarities, but I didn't consciously seek them. The objects I use are simply those that are available to me at the time. They have no intrinsic sentimental or symbolic value. I'm what Lévi-Strauss would call a 'bricoleur', a tinkerer who works with the objects he has around him – not based on their inherent quality, but based on the use he can make of them. Everything that's present in the studio is usable: chairs, lampshades, cables, glasses, cardboard boxes, table legs, books, parts of appliances and even my studio's wooden floor.

So here too, there's no manipulation, no digital post-processing – you get what you see, and you see what you want to see?

Yes, these photographs refer only to themselves. They explain nothing, show nothing, prove nothing...

Publication: Bernard Voïta – Melencolia. Ed. by Peter Pfrunder. Design: Camillo Paravicini. Edizioni Periferia/ Fotostiftung Schweiz, 2024.

Every Sunday, 11:30 am. Public guided tour through the exhibition *Bernard Voïta – Melencolia*. No guided tour on the 2nd and 16th of June, 1st of September 2024.

The exhibition *Bernard Voïta – Melencolia* was supported by: Friends of the Fotostiftung Schweiz, Landis & Gyr Stiftung, Ricola Stiftung, Ernst und Olga Gubler-Hablützel Stiftung, Studio Arte.

**Vernissage: Friday, 31st of May 2024, from 6 pm**

Welcoming address by Andreas Spillmann, president of the foundation board, at 7 pm.

Introduction to the exhibition: Peter Pfrunder

**Sunday, 2nd of June 2024, 11:30 am**

**The blind men and the elephant.** Bernard Voïta in dialogue with Peter Pfrunder (in French)

**Sunday, 16th of June, 11:30 am**

**Bernard Voïta – New perspectives in photography.**

Urs Stahel in dialogue with Teresa Gruber

**Sunday, 1st of September 2024, 11:30 am**

**Image and space: Voïta's art of persuasion.**

Lars Willumeit in dialogue with Nadia Schneider Willen

**Every Tuesday, 6 pm: Yoga in the museum.**

Instructor: Katharina Rippstein.

Registration and queries: hello@katha-yoga.ch

first experiments. But I didn't yet know whether it was of any interest at all. I was simply quite perplexed! Isn't it also the sensorial and philosophical aspects conveyed by the works that are so fascinating?

Yes, probably, but I didn't really foresee that. My approach has always been that of a practitioner. I need to do practical work in the studio, in order to find my project, to understand and define what I have in mind. I tend to be rather muddled and brooding by nature. I move forwards in small steps and my work is always the result of a slow maturation process. Of course, there is no practice without ideas though, without reflection – they go hand in hand. That said, the understanding of what you're really doing isn't always as straightforward as you might think, especially when you're a young artist.

**To what extent do you let your intuition guide you?**

Here too, the answer is not so clear. There is always an idea at the beginning, but it's still uncertain, vague, and you first have to find the form for it. And this only evolves as you work in the studio. I find the process rather exhausting and chaotic. There is nothing more fragile to pursue than the delicate thread of intuition. When I was younger, I was often afraid of working without knowing exactly what I was actually doing. Today I'm a little more relaxed. What I don't understand now, I will understand tomorrow. It's a matter of work and time.

rigid, more direct and simpler way. Although I say 'simple', this is probably still the most complicated kind of photography in the world (*he laughs*).

Almost the same objects are found throughout the series, but they are arranged differently. The possibilities are endless. Depending on the angle from which an object is photographed, it takes on very different appearances. I use an object because it reflects a certain amount of light or because of the shadow it casts.

That's banal and complicated at the same time. We are indeed terribly gullible, and we regularly confuse the photographic image with reality. We do know that a photograph is always just a picture, and yet... It's irritating that we have made hardly any progress in understanding the photograph and its supposed truthfulness. Our preconceptions in this regard are extraordinarily persistent. You can certainly ask yourself: Isn't a photograph always a fiction? When we look at pictures, we usually behave like illiterates who can't read them. Or else we are blind, like in the parable of the blind men and the elephant.

**Are you alluding to an old story?**

Exactly, a fable about perception and realisation that probably originated in India, and of which there are many versions. Chérif Defraoui told it to me. In relation to photography, it illustrates how the same



Bernard Voïta, Melencolia XIII (Nicolas L.), 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

Back cover: Bernard Voïta, Melencolia III, 2014. Friends of the Fotostiftung Schweiz Collection.

