



SPECIAL ISSUE – 20 YEARS ANNIVERSARY

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# Interview with SVEN EISENHUT, the Director of Photo Basel

In mid-June 2022, I visited Photo Basel, a charming boutique fair dedicated to photography that takes place during the Art Basel week. It is a stop worth making as the fair's approach is different in comparison to others. When walking through and exploring the fair, even beginner collectors can feel like they belong to the photographic family – there is no space that feels intimidating. During my visit, I had the chance to talk to Sven Eisenhut, Photo Basel's director.

DK Sven, how did you realize that Basel needs an art fair dedicated to photography?

SE There was just me and three other friends of mine and we all grew up in Basel. When you grow up here, there is the carnival (Fasnacht), there is the FC Basel, the soccer club, there is the ZOO, and there is the Art Basel. And when you are a kid, your parents walk you through its halls, it's just something you do when you're living here because how the city transforms in that time is magical. And with my three friends, we thought there might be something missing when we saw that there is Paris Photo and other fairs focused on photography. So, that is how the idea started and then we just tried.

DK So, you just tried?

SE Yes, we tried to get galleries in. They all had the same three questions: who are you? Have you done that before? And which other galleries are doing it? We have never done it; we did not have the background, and we hoped that the first gallery would sign up. That happened in late 2014 and then it was just much easier to come to the galleries and ask them to join.

DK It seems to be similar to many new projects, if you get the first one on board, it continues like an avalanche...

SE Yes, exactly. So, we got started. Back then, the first fair was tiny with 18 participating galleries, and it was situated in a different location. The second year, we moved the fair to the Volkshaus Basel building as the fair that was there before luckily moved away. It is a great location, close to Art Basel, and since many people go from the fair to the Three Kings (a hotel and restaurant where the collectors and gallerists meet in the evening after Art Basel closes) on the other side of the river, they come to our fair as well for a quick look. It is the sixth year we are here, and we can benefit from it as all people know we are connected to this place.

DK The space is amazing, the garden and everything around makes it feel cosy and friendly. Is it a part of the fair's DNA you wanted to create or it originated naturally?

SE It was natural. We always looked at ourselves as hosts. There are so many

stakeholders we must take care of, it's not just the galleries, it's the collectors, the visitors, and the press, and hospitality is absolutely the key point. That is how we wanted to do it; we call it soulful. Of course, such an approach also brings pros and cons as it is quite like in a family. And it is more complicated to say to a family member that something is not right. For example, this year, we had a waiting list for galleries to participate and we could not accept two galleries that were with us last year and it is quite difficult to say no to someone who is like a family member.

DK The year 2020 was difficult. In June of that year, the fair offered virtual exhibitions only, albeit, in September, you could join the POSITIONS Berlin Art Fair and exhibit at the Tempelhof Flughafen in Berlin. How did this experience affect the fair?

SE I think we were the very first photography art fair that did a virtual edition. We had a lot of views and website visitors but sales were not that strong. On the one hand, we were concerned to try something new but on the other, we realized that people still want to see the photographs and

Daniela Kozáková

buy them in person. I think it was important for us to stay afloat, to continue with our initiatives. I would say that, fortunately, the virtual edition didn't work out so well because otherwise, the galleries would not need us.

DK The pandemic caused new technologies to become more involved in the art world. You also dipped your toes into technological waters by introducing the first-ever NFT display cabinet. Why did you decide to do it?

SE We were curious. Our hierarchies are very flat and we can react very quickly. However, it's always risky to try something new. I think that 18 galleries participated with 35 works, from which two works were sold before the fair opened and then another one that was quite pricey was sold as well. It was a good experience.

DK Do you plan to continue to work with NFTs in the future?

SE We did not repeat it this year. And there are reasons why not. It is not that we don't believe in it or we don't want to monitor it. At first, we realized the hunger of people to come back and get something physical, something tangible. Second, we are a very small team but for such a project, you must have a dedicated staff. The third reason is that there is not yet a curated platform of solid quality. And I think that until that point, there are not a lot of places to present it. Last year, there was a collector who bought an NFT piece at the fair and she wanted to also buy the TV on which it was presented, she even asked us whether we could install it at her home. With that, we realized that it must become easier – like, every TV should be able to show art. Apart from that, you need to have a virtual wallet and to have a credit card or a PayPal account to buy NFTs. As there are all those hurdles and there's so much that needs to be explained on top of that, we decided to focus on what we know to do our best. DK During the past several years, the number of collectors specializing just in photography increased. Does your fair show the same experience?

DK Compared to other art forms, could it be easier to collect photography as both its contents and creation process show a certain story, and it mostly comes straight at you with emotions you immediately see and feel?

SE Sometimes, we see compositions that are a little harder to understand and then it's important that the gallerist and even the artist are present, so they can explain the work and you really know what it is about. For this reason, we also did a record number of guided tours this year since we realized that there were so many people who have no connection to the art

spending a lot of time every day looking at images. I've read that from the moment we get up in the morning until we have lunch, we see more photos than our grandparents in their whole lifetime, so our eyes get trained better and better in that sense. Photography is affordable and accessible. I think it's great that photography has been around for so long that even classic collectors have photographs in their collections. And, at the same time, we try to educate a new audience to become buyers and, hopefully, collectors. And that is why we try to keep the entrance level quite low, the fair's layout is very intimate.

DK Yes, I have the same experience. For me, Photo Basel is friendly and informal and does not make you feel intimidated...

SE I always have my mother on my mind when I want to make the fair accessible. She works in the restaurant business industry, and I want her to feel comfortable and just stroll around and get in a dialogue with the gallery. And I think this is important. It is also something we consider when we select the galleries, we look at the quality of the show but the personality of the gallerist as well. Not just whether they can sell but also whether they can accommodate someone like my mother. Would she feel comfortable? And at the end, she gets emotionally attracted to the media and to this lifestyle and usually buys the piece. It doesn't matter if you're old or young; I think it's important that you are aware that photography is an existing art form and is somewhat affordable.

DK This year, Sonia Voss joined the team as an artistic director. What has changed with having Sonia on board?

SE We, the founders, come from the event-organisation side of things and our knowledge of photography is limited. We realized that it is fine to outsource certain activities. As a result, we started to work with artistic directors who are part of our

world. Our guided tours are for free and the guides try to help the visitors to overcome these obstacles and start to understand the photographs and by that make photography accessible to the public.

DK That's wonderful because new collectors sometimes mention that they find it difficult to understand the photographic works' descriptions and captions.

SE Let's take vintage prints; since there is no official definition, we try to define what it means. We intend not just to educate people but rather inspire them and create a whole community around the fair. If you don't buy anything now, maybe you buy something next year, and then it happens every year. I see colleagues or friends of mine or their parents who come to the fair, look, and maybe buy. That's also why we have school visits here. And sometimes, they call the fair an exhibition. It's a fair and it is a commercial event but, at the same time, we are one of the largest photo exhibitions, you can explore 550 pieces by 130 artists here.

DK The fair also contains different perspectives and covers a wide range...

SE We have the whole range of photographic works, video works, and we had NFTs. We even presented sculptures. It happened that a gallerist asked me whether they could exhibit a sculpture. I thought about it and found out that as long as it has a connection with photography, it's fine to show it. However, it was too large so they had to put it outside of their booth but this is fine with me as well, as it pushes the limits and I think we can be different in this approach. Furthermore, in 2017, we had a special exhibition with moving images and video works, and it was well received.

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team. They don't just work on the selection, they also talk to all the galleries, see their applications and proposals, and sometimes guide them; they lead an open dialogue with them. I think it's important as it ensures high quality.

DK How do you find the inspiration for the next edition of Photo Basel and the developments you will make next year?

We listen very much to our galleries, they are the main stakeholders (in the sense of persons of interest), and we do not have a sponsor to tell us what we need to fix. The galleries are those that show us the direction a bit. We must always work on the quality, and I wish we had a bit more space to make the booths larger or to have more special exhibitions. If we had more space, I would like to create a white cube or a dark cube through which you must pass to kind of neutralize your senses before you enter the show because there is a lot to see at the fair.

DK How about adding another "sense" by playing music, for example? Is it difficult?

SE Yes, it is difficult. It is difficult because you have a lot of galleries here. We tried to turn the music on at the fair, some gallerists loved it, some not. Some of the galleries have a rather traditional and classic approach. I had lot more visions on my mind before the pandemic. The pandemic did not just slow things down but it showed me how fragile everything is, so I am glad to just open in a very traditional and classical way people were longing for.

DK It might seem like we would all wish to go back to pre-pandemic times...

SE Absolutely but if we manage this pandemic a bit better, if we understand it better, then the visions will come again, and we will do something new. I do not lack ideas but I probably lack the courage to do something crazy now. I'm sure the time will come when we can be a bit more experimental again.

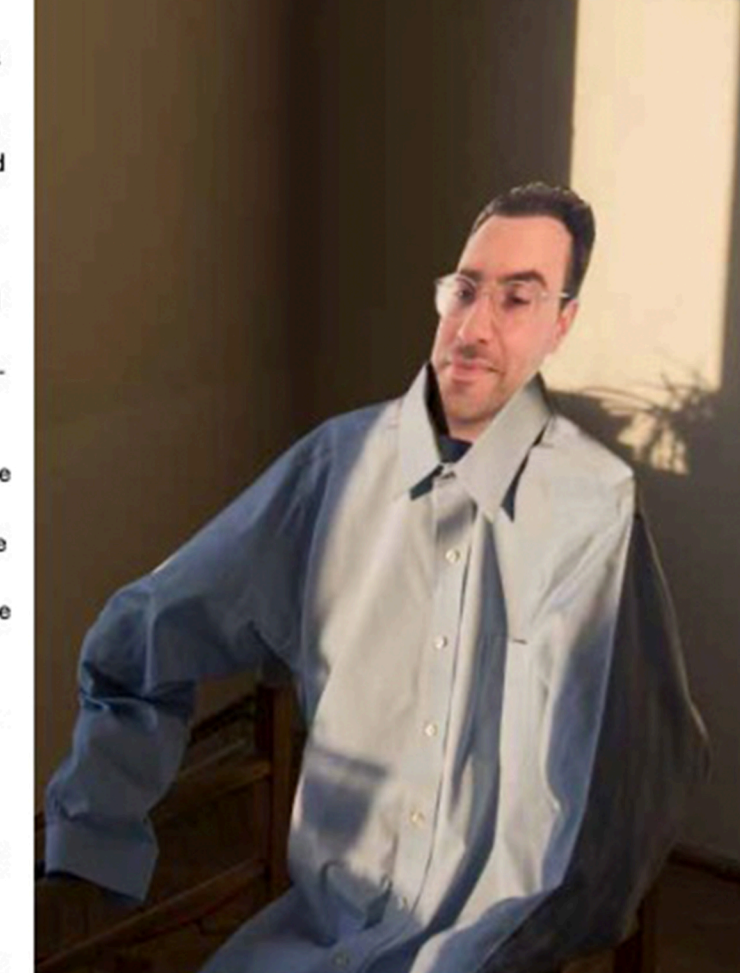
DK You mentioned galleries as stakeholders in the sense of persons of interest, which is rather unusual. Could you elaborate, please?

SE When I speak about stakeholders, it is in the sense of someone we listen to, who is important. We also send a survey to all VIPs because we wish to know what their experience was, whether they liked the service, how did they find us, and whether we need to improve something. We have a management team; we have a curatorial team with Sonia Voss, and we have an advisory team, we call them circles. The advisory circle is made of galleries; we listen to their inputs, suggestions, and feedback. However, the selection should not lie with them. The galleries that participate must apply and pass through the selection process. If we see potential, we might start a dialogue with the gallery and say, "hey that's a great application, however, maybe we should change this," and then the application goes to our selection people who evaluate it and review the applications. We prefer to have a smaller fair but with high-quality works.

DK In the beginning, Photo Basel was a fair for German-speaking countries but has become more international over the past few years. Did it influence the fair and bring new collectors?

SE We really do not look at diversity, we look at the quality. From the beginning, it was clear that Swiss galleries will remain very important as they have access to the collectors there. You never know whether a gallery that comes from far away can bring in big numbers of collectors. I believe it's the mix that makes sense. We do not look at the location of the gallery, we look at the proposal and the standing of the gallery.

DK Where do you see Photo Basel in the next three years?



SE It is very difficult to say, I was always curious to bring the fair somewhere else and become more emancipated from other fairs that happen here in Basel right now. Due to the pandemic, we must be more cautious, every step must be a bit more reflective. Also, every market works differently and we need to know which galleries would believe in such an idea. It's not an easy project but it's definitely on our minds. We believe it must be successful since we know how to do good fairs.