

# ***Photography in Motion***

**Stephan Kunz**

In 1989, plans were being made to memorialize the invention of photography 150 years earlier. During that time, the medium had rapidly evolved in terms of technology, form, and content and had become a mass medium. Consequently, there were various ways in which this anniversary could be celebrated. At the Aargauer Kunsthaus we thought about what contribution we could make to the celebration of this anniversary. At the time, art museums did not view it as self-evident that the same worth should be attached to photography as to other artistic media, both in exhibitions and collections. In this context, we wanted to take a strong stance, carving out an important place in the art realm for photography, and this not as an isolated action for the anniversary, but as the starting point for a new approach.

We therefore organized three exhibitions to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of photography: *Heraus aus Dreck, Lärm und Gestank* (Out of the Dirt, Noise and Stench) was dedicated to classical documentary photography and showed photographs taken from an archive of images of workers. The second exhibition was dedicated to Anita Niesz, a Swiss photographer who was not well known at the time; she had started out in commercial photography and then devoted herself above all to the human image. The third exhibition was the greatest challenge for us: How could we offer a platform for contemporary photography? A large survey exhibition or an exemplary solo exhibition? I remember well the beautiful day when we withdrew into a darkened meeting room: myself and Beat Wismer, along with Urs Stahel, whom we had invited. Stahel had arrived with several boxes of slides (!) and offered us an impressive perspective on the photography being produced in Switzerland at the time. There was a great deal we learned or began to see in a new way; we tried to determine characteristics, identify trends, find commonalities—always remaining open to all the different possibilities of an exhibition of contemporary photography in Switzerland.

## The “Reinvention of Photography”<sup>1</sup>

In the end, we chose Hans Danuser, who in the years prior had been working on *In Vivo* (fig. on p. 124) and had at that point just finished it, making it possible to show the entire, extensive work for the first time. We were interested in the urgency of these seven series, which touch on socially volatile themes. But we found his unconventional approach to the medium of photography convincing. Although Hans Danuser retains the form of classical reportage photography in the series, and also employs its techniques, he moves decidedly beyond it. In the end, this approach is not a documentary one, but rather an attempt to create images that have great intrinsic value and contribute to one another in the series that they form. Expression is given far more weight than realistic content. Yet Hans Danuser operates in a space entirely beyond the medium of photography; he wants to develop its specific qualities, in order to give it a new pictorial value. It is precisely because he has so decisively chosen to move within the medium of photography, without trying to preserve anything or deny its elementary features, that Danuser was predestined to celebrate the invention of photography and to ring in its “reinvention.”

Each new group of works by Hans Danuser reveals another step in the evolution of photography, right up to his most recent large project, which was first presented in the exhibition at the Bündner Kunstmuseum in Chur in 2017, and whose title, *The Last Analog Photograph*, is programmatic in character. Before this came the *Frozen Embryo* series (fig. on p. 166), in which everything



Hans Danuser's studio and darkroom at the Arnold Böcklin studio in Zurich from 1991 to 2001, view of the interior with pictures

centers on what cannot be shown and ultimately also what cannot be said of research on the human embryo; the series entitled *Strangled Body* (fig. on pp. 186–195), which features close-ups of maimed bodies that Hans Danuser elevates to an abstract monumentality and at the same time gives them an overpowering physical presence; the floor installations with photographs from the series *Erosions* (fig. on pp. 56–73), in which the slate sand in the photographs is very consciously linked to the tonality of the baryta paper. His numerous experiments with the material aspects of photography have preoccupied Hans Danuser since his earliest days as an artist and are found in all his series. When, in his latest cycle of sand photographs, he collaborates with scientists in a chemistry lab to develop photographic layers that make it possible to connect the material and the image in new ways, he is opening another chapter in this “reinvention,” remaining at the same time conscious of its endpoint.

## Photography in the Context of Art

That the first comprehensive presentation of the seven-part photographic work *In Vivo* in 1989 was held in an art museum makes sense for both Hans Danuser and his work. At the time, the exhibition would also have been conceivable as a project of the Schweizerische Stiftung für Photographie (now Fotostiftung Schweiz); at the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne, which specializes in photography; at the Schweizerisches Landesmuseum; or at the Museum für Gestaltung in Zurich. From the outset, however, Hans Danuser's understanding of photography as artistic work has been part of his self-image, and he wanted photography to be conceived of in this context too. It was also part of his artistic methodology that various different paths for the reception of his work should be left open—including those which fell outside of the art context.

Hans Danuser had already set off on the path to art by the mid-1970s, when he successfully applied for the Eidgenössisches Kunststipendium (Federal Art Scholarship) in 1976 for his experiments with photographic materials, the *Marblegraphs* (fig. on p. 6), and he is still proud even today that he was permitted to enter his photographs into that competition, despite photography having been categorized as applied art. The art critic Hanna Gagel observed on the occasion of the exhibition *Fotografie 3* at the Strauhof in Zurich in 1982 that his *A-Energy* series, which was being shown for the first time, represented a "refinement of commercial photography that can be grasped at a glance,"<sup>2</sup> thereby definitively opening up the reception of that work within the framework of fine art. In 1983 Hans Danuser participated in the *aktuell '83* exhibition at the Lenbachhaus in Munich, which was an attempt to use examples from the work of around forty artists from Milan, Vienna, Zurich, and Munich to illustrate what painting and sculpture, video, photography, and the environment meant in those years. Erika Billeter selected the artists from Zurich. They included Anton Bruhin, Hans Danuser, Martin Disler, Peter Emch, Peter Fischli/David Weiss, Leiko Ikemura, Urs Lüthi, Thomas Müllenbach, and Klaudia Schifferle. Hans Danuser was the only



Brigitta and Hans Danuser with their son Hans Andrea at the *In Vivo* exhibition, Aargauer Kunsthhaus, Aarau, 1989

Swiss photographer represented in the art context, which, as Hans-Joachim Müller noted in the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, was primarily looking inward: "That is what strikes one immediately looking at this vividly nonhomogeneous cross section: hermetic impenetrability, insular self-references, a climate of looking inward. Hardly any artists sought a break with accepted forms, on the contrary: the questions of what had been constructed and how it had been constructed were not up for discussion. [...] Anything which seemed to represent a reaction against the contemporary context was not placed center stage, and instead remained hidden in a state of torpor. Clearly, they are all seeing the same specters, these artists, but they cannot say what they are called. The postmodern condition is the awareness of the lateness of the age."<sup>3</sup> It is interesting that the series of photographs shown by Hans Danuser at the time, *A-Energy*, was examined within the framework of subjective worldviews, against the backdrop of the "darkest emblem of the epoch: angst."<sup>4</sup>

In 1987, Hans Danuser was again invited to exhibit at a representative exhibition of recent Swiss art. In the exhibition *Offenes Ende* (Open End), curated by Manfred Rothenberger and Urs Stahel at the Institut für moderne Kunst in Nuremberg, of the forty-eight artists only six showed photographs: Francisco Carrascosa, Hans Danuser, Peter Fischli/David Weiss, Felix Stephan Huber, Beat Streuli, and Hanna Villiger. Increasingly, however, photography has become a mainstay of contemporary art, and Hans Danuser's works contributed to this process. Collections also demonstrate this development: since the mid-1980s, Danuser's works have entered the collections of the Bündner Kunstmuseum in Chur, the Aargauer Kunsthaus in Aarau, the Kunsthaus Zürich, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, as well as private collections.

This initial reception of Hans Danuser's photographic oeuvre was important for the artist, who was thereafter seen in the context of a contemporary photography that was leaving behind traditional ideas and opening up new fields. The few solo exhibitions that Hans Danuser has had in museums underscore this trend: the exhibition at the Aargauer Kunsthaus in Aarau in 1989 was followed by exhibitions at the Lenbachhaus in Munich (1991), the Bündner Kunstmuseum in Chur (1993), the Kunsthaus Zürich (1996), and the Fotomuseum Winterthur (2001). The exhibition at



Hans Danuser and Juri Steiner installing the exhibition *Hans Danuser: Delta* at the Kunsthaus Zürich, 1996



Hans Danuser working on the *Alphabet City* project in New York, 1984

the Bündner Kunstmuseum in Chur in 2017 was the first comprehensive presentation of his artistic oeuvre since the large solo exhibition at the Manege Central Exhibition Hall in Moscow in 2006, more than ten years ago. It was the first attempt to provide a survey of his work since the mid-1970s.

## Expanded Reality

Hans Danuser is one of the most important Swiss protagonists of the new photography that has emerged since the 1970s, which was presented in the exhibition *Wichtige Bilder* (Important Images) at the Museum für Gestaltung in 1990, curated by Urs Stahel and Martin Heller. Hans Danuser, too, was represented in that exhibition, with individual series from *In Vivo*. His work also formulated the core of the heated discussion of photography which surrounded the exhibition. Urs Stahel formulated his critique of classical photojournalism in the catalog to the exhibition, claiming that it was outdated in the contemporary context: images “fail when their faith in the subject and their old understanding of observing and mirroring fragments no longer conform to our experience.”<sup>5</sup> And he called for a contemporary photography which would reflect the new questions being asked of artists in the face of an increasingly complex world of images.<sup>6</sup>

Hans Danuser begins precisely here. Although in *In Vivo* he still seeks out places in which to make his observations, he does not remain stuck in the phenomenological experience of the world, but rather reflects on his experiences and perceptions in a complex engagement with the themes selected. His photographs avoid pointing to one unambiguous interpretation. Instead, Hans Danuser seeks out open discourse. Collaboration with experts from specific spheres of knowledge provides the basis for his work. Hans Danuser’s art has repeatedly put him in contact with people from different contexts. A work such as *In Vivo* would be inconceivable without the trust that the artist is able to earn for himself and for his equally conscientious and urgent work. The participants in his conversation come from very different spheres of knowledge. From the outset, however, he has actively sought to bring his photographs into new contexts so that they

are not appreciated solely in the art world. As a result, the circles of reception for his work have continuously expanded.

The list of thematic exhibitions in which his works have been included is as long as it is revealing. Publications and exhibitions have in turn inspired new collaborations: for example, the architect Peter Zumthor saw the first three series of *In Vivo* at the Bündner Kunstmuseum in 1985 and then invited Hans Danuser to photograph three of his buildings. A little later, the writer Reto Häny studied the artist's photographic oeuvre intently and produced an autonomous literary work based on it. As early as 1982, Hans Magnus Enzensberger published photographs from *In Vivo* in his journal, *Transatlantik*. In 1984, photographs from the series appeared in *pan arts*, a magazine from New York's subculture that combines all the arts, and also in 1989 in *Fabrik-Zeitung*, produced by the Zurich cultural center Rote Fabrik. Other photographs found their way into theater programs (Stadttheater St. Gallen 1989, Stadttheater Bern 1992) or literary journals (*Entwürfe*, 1992). All this is evidence not only of Hans Danuser's connections to the active and involved cultural scene of his time, but also of his clear interest in his photographs becoming part of the discussion. This exposure was presumably much less about self-marketing than about a keen interest in the process of exchange.

## Art and Space

Hans Danuser has been concerned not only with a broad reception of his art but also with the careful presentation of his work. I still recall quite vividly how important the special presentation of the photographs from *In Vivo* was at the Aargauer Kunsthaus in Aarau in 1989: the work is clearly divided into seven series, each of which has not only a specific sequence but also a rhythmical arrangement that turns the linear presentation into a spatial composition. Hans Danuser made that very explicit in the title of his Zumthor project: *Partituren und Bilder* (Scores and Images). With the *Frozen Embryo* series, in which the works feature strikingly larger formats and all have multiple parts, it became clear that the exhibition space should now be considered as well and that Danuser's photographic oeuvre was increasingly reflecting on concepts from the fine arts. Hans Danuser quite deliberately presents these series above eye-level, resulting in a special relationship between the viewer and the image. The artist takes this idea even further in the floor installation *Erosion*. He leads us on a walk through this landscape and encourages us to observe what we are seeing. At the same time, he radicalizes his chosen theme, erosion, since fixed points are increasingly lost. Perhaps the photographic material ultimately remains the only solid thing, whereas the image as image increasingly disappears or is exposed as pure fiction. Not least for that reason, we are as fascinated as we are baffled when we stand in front of the photographs of *Sandstorm I–III* (fig. on p. 20), as our gaze sinks down into unfathomable expanses and concrete space breaks down, while in the grain of the close-up we perceive the materiality of photography, and recognize it as a constitutive element of a world view that has become uncertain.

We made a very conscious decision to leave the spatial structure open at the Bündner Kunstmuseum, not placing partition walls between the groups of works—the exhibition photographs in this volume show that clearly. The idea was to make it possible to experience Hans Danuser's creative work as a path. This reveals both his artistic development and the connections between the groups of works. This spatial arrangement also permits us at this point to draw a



Installation of the *Frozen Embryo series*, 4<sup>e</sup> biennale d'art contemporain de Lyon, 1997

parallel with the series of spatial works by Danuser that began with the *Schrift-Bild* (Type Image) installation at the Universität Zürich-Irchel in 1992<sup>7</sup> and evolved over a number of exhibitions and projects which were situated within and with architecture. Again and again, they manifest Hans Danuser's spatially subtle approach, which has its origin in the arrangement of his photographs into installations.

## Art and Commitment

Hans Danuser made it clear from the outset that for him making art always had something to do with our time, with our society, and with the circumstances in which we live. This becomes explicit in the classical eyewitness photographs of New York which offer insights into its politicized subculture in the early 1980s. Hans Danuser is here not an impartial observer, but instead himself part of the scene. Right from the beginning, he was moved by the currents of the age. That is still manifested in his art today. His commitment is very clear in the work *In Vivo*, which by his own account he hung on the spray-painted walls in Brooklyn to lend them particular urgency. In other series, the artist's cultural and sociopolitical engagement is much more subliminal. In the *Frozen Embryo series*, of course, discussions of gene research and gene technology resonate, and *Strangled Body* manifests a nonspecific brand of violence, even if it was the war in Yugoslavia, with its excessive violence, which formed the political backdrop for these large-format photographs. Don't these images get under your skin more than press images from theaters of war? Considered in this way, the photographs of the floor installation *Erosion* are much more than closeups





Double page: Setting up the exhibition *Dunkelkammern der Fotografie (Darkrooms of Photography)* at the Bündner Kunstmuseum, Chur, 2017



of alluvial land made up of slate sand. The floor literally slips away from under our feet—a symbol for a time in which so much is slipping away, both socially and politically. And in his latest monochrome photographs, which put us into the middle of a “sandstorm,” we lose every certainty and are ultimately completely thrown back onto ourselves and our perception.

Hans Danuser has developed his artistic work on the basis of a worldview turned uncertain and a faith in his own powers of perception, and in the process he has explored photography in its different dimensions.

1  
Bettina Gockel and Hans Danuser, eds., *Neuerfindung der Fotografie: Hans Danuser; Gespräche, Materialien, Analysen* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

2  
Hanna Gagel, “Das 82er Lebensgefühl in fotografischen Spuren,” *Tages-Anzeiger*, December 29, 1982.

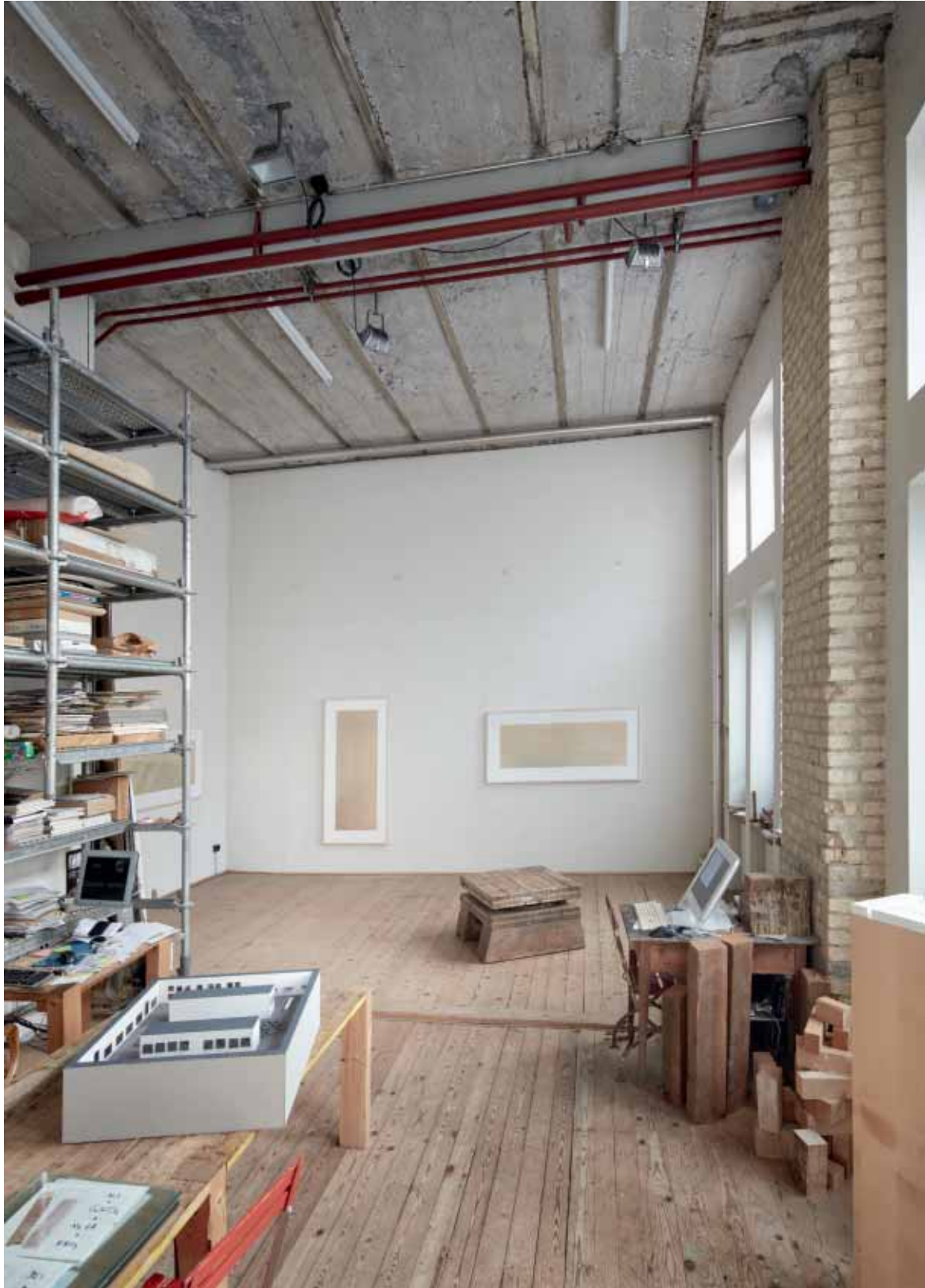
3  
Hans-Joachim Müller, “Himmel und Hölle,” *Die Zeit*, October 7, 1983.

4  
Ibid.

5  
Urs Stahel, “Fotografie in der Schweiz,” in *Wichtige Bilder: Fotografie in der Schweiz*, exh. cat. Museum für Gestaltung (Zurich: Der Alltag, 1990), 235.

6  
Ibid.

7  
*Institutsbilder: Eine Schrift Bild Installation*, Universität Zürich, 1992, typography on the wall in the departmental corridors of the Universität Zürich-Irchel. Typography applied directly by stencil, watercolor on white, interior, emulsion paint. Overdoor: photograph on baryta paper mounted on 2-mm aluminum.



Hans Danuser's studio and darkroom on Ottikerstraße in Zurich since 2001, view of the interior

# Hans Danuser

# Darkrooms of

# Photography

Edited by  
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Several bodies of works  
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