

Christophe Berhault, *About 250000paintings.com*

Enlarging/Projecting

My interest in old photographs came from a small pile of shots I dug up about twenty years ago, in a garage sale in Montmartre. They were of a pretty tawdry French family who reminded me of the atmospheres of my own childhood. I started buying them here and there, on my travels too. My curiosity grew when I arrived in Berlin, where you find photographs much more easily than elsewhere. A lot of Germans don't want to preserve their history. Sometimes you come across the entire albums of one family, or in a box, entire lives thrown out in bulk. One might wonder why they don't destroy them. It's hard to destroy a photo, it's like a second death.

The Germans had access, very early, as early as the twenties, to good little cameras, with excellent lenses, inexpensive, that were easily accessible. And they soon showed an interest in taking good pictures. I've never anywhere seen as many books as here on "how to take a good photograph". I have more than thirty of them...some of the themes: representations of family life, inspired to an extent by old painting: the mother knits, or crochets, embroiders, the children play; in the background, a door is ajar, like in a Dutch painting. Or again, the way of placing the subject in relation to a window, in an atmosphere à la Vermeer. Children blowing soap bubbles. It shows immediately when a photo has been inspired by this kind of guide.

I accumulated a lot of photographs. And I also bought quite a lot of newspapers, picture books, engravings, works on the German painters of the 19th century... To the point that I said to myself I had to do something with all of it. Certain visitors see my studio as a work of art in its own right. I tried to photograph it, without succeeding: I don't have a good sense of space. In one of the rooms, there is a table with a whole pile of things on it that I didn't manage to photograph either. But on coming closer, it worked. So I said to myself that I had to photograph the material itself, that that was what was interesting. I started photographing a few books, one about hunting, a few dozen on sport, another on the GDR...And at the end of the afternoon, I carried on with a photo album, whose shots I re-photographed, and then something else occurred: it became intimate. The next day, I set up a small table in the bow window to have some light and I went into the other room to get photographs that I had filed over the years, organized by themes. In any case, it couldn't all stay the way it was: the room was overrun with tables, there were boxes of photos everywhere, piled on top and underneath, and I couldn't bear it anymore, I needed to tidy them up. Too many faces, too many families, too many eyes watching me: for three years I'd been living with these people, knowing them without knowing them, and the best way to finish it off, was to look at them one last time by photographing them.

Then enlarging them: I told myself it would lend them the status of works of art, or that is what I told myself. They would no longer be just these small shots that I had been stooping over to examine with a magnifying glass for three

years. In the beginning I simply thought to enlarge them on the computer. But as soon as I emptied my photos onto it, I understood that what was at stake was clearly of a different nature than what occurred with the books or newspapers. They needed to be enlarged further, and projected. I started photographing shots like a madman, it was all I did... I must have photographed 1200 in a day. And I carried on like that for a month. Today I have three times more shots than I did two years ago when I started this work, for as soon as I started photographing them, I bought more. I was in a state of high excitement. I re-photographed more than 25000 shots, some several times with different framings. In all I only kept half of what I'd accumulated.

It forms a huge loop of more than two weeks — the 250000 photos each appearing for ten seconds. But if I could, I'd be up for doing 500000 photos.

All of one family's photos

When her father died, a friend brought me all her family's albums. A cubic meter! She said it took up too much space. They were all their family photos since the end of the 19th century, apart from those of a man who she'd had an affair with. Her father was a good photographer. A medical student, he liked gloomy atmospheres: arrangements with a skull and candles, dissections that took place in the context of his classes... During the war, he had as a doctor followed the progression of the troops in Russia, he photographed the bombs that tore the sky, the operations of the wounded. Then during the retreat, the bogged-down trucks — in one photo we see several horses trying to tow a lorry. There is an album apart that contains the photos of his mistresses. He loved their legs, to the point that he sometimes cut them out carefully to paste only them in the album. This group is important in the 250000, because it represents about 1000 photographs, from 1890 with the grand-mother still a little girl, to the grandson running naked on a beach when he was 75.

I'm a nostalgic, and since childhood the dead existed to me as dead, but also as beings who are still here. It's not that I believe in life after death, but when I see faces on a photograph, or a pair of shoes, or a sewing-box at the flea-market, I don't think they belong to dead people. They are and they're not. It's very close by, from the last century. I recognized myself in the very first pile of photos I found in France, it reminded me of when I would go to Brittany to see distant cousins, complete alcoholics, in these incredible tight pull-overs, I loved the atmosphere, we would turn up out of the blue because there wasn't a phone and everyone was delighted. And those photos from times past evoke nothing but life to me. It's Boltanski's vision: we always photograph the same things, picnics, communion feasts, Christmas, the tree. But at the same time, not really: there are other major directive lines, "pre-Facebook", like photographing yourself, as I discovered in one album, with a stocking on your head that makes your nose turn up. We also photograph sadness: tombs, funerals, people ill in the hospital, the dead...

Editing

Every day, I re-photographed. Every evening, I emptied the camera onto the computer, and there I did the editing. Very fast. I erased very few, one in ten, if that. Usually because I had moved, made a blur. The *250 000 Paintings* thus follow the chronological order of the days. For example, I would photograph two albums, and then go on to my thematic boxes to do fifty photos of men alone in nature, then one hundred of aging men in bathing suits, then I'd go on to another theme, "four girls" for example, groups of friends, girls amongst themselves, from the age of ten to eighty-two. Afterwards, I might go back to the albums and photograph three: that was how my days of work went. And the "men in nature" theme might resurface two or three days later, until it was entirely re-photographed. Why is it that two grandmothers sitting at a table, somewhat startled at being photographed at the end of an Easter meal, is good, while another photograph that tells the same story can be of no interest? Hard to say. The faces count for a lot, but also more discreet compositions: the way in which the dishes have become displaced during the meal, the light. And of course, there are all the photos that are simply boring.

Revelation

When I project these photos on a screen, or, like recently, on the window of a shop in Berlin so that the passers-by can see them from the street, I don't want the image to be oversized. I like it when they have the format of a large 19th century painting. The enlarging of a photo is a revelation. It reveals its artistic dimension. The Beuys element: everyone is an artist. Certain compositions are magnificent, sometimes in spite of people, other times not. Others are failures as photographs, but become decadent impressionist images, cubist...All the various painting genres are present. That goes from Bacon — a face in movement with three mouths — to Rothko — a door so blurred you don't know where it even begins —, or Manet, Courbet, Picasso...It all depends whether you look at the composition, the textures, the contrasts or the light.

The fact of enlarging a print opens up to some incredible discoveries. So many things occur! You discover in a corner someone who is crying, or, in a group photograph, a couple embracing in a corner, perhaps a little drunk, who don't care about the photo being taken. Sometimes the photo has been redone because of this couple who weren't part of the event. And yet both have been kept, the one that didn't meet approval hasn't been thrown away, and I find both in a pile of photographs. We discover the looks: in a group photo, a man gazes at a woman, he's mad about her. That's frequent. And then we make out the erased witnesses of the Nazi era. An arm-band that we take for a mourning band, upon which we discover a small black or blue circle over the swastika.

The strangest of all, is one that came from a group that had something sad about it. Women at a housing estate doing their shopping from the back of a delivery van. It was hard to define the exact era, but I think it was the fifties. That said, there was a man wearing golfing trousers that

didn't fit in with the period. But the houses really looked as if they belonged to the fifties. In this group of shots, a couple had photographed an image of their happiness, breakfast, with the eggs in the eggcups, the bread-rolls. On the wall something had been scratched. And the enlargement revealed that a glass case nearby reflected the effaced portrait of Hitler. Suddenly I looked at the whole image with a fresh eye: the new house, the garden, the women who are queuing up in front of the delivery van, which is, indeed, not a shabby supplies van from after the war, but a brand-new vehicle...

I have become something of a specialist at dating haircuts, clothes. I see immediately if the clothes have been worn for a long time, or if they're new. After the war, the haircuts change, there is a real break. Then there's the difference between East and West. Palpable above all in the seventies, when the East Germans find their style: everything is clumsy, from the clothes to the haircuts, it looks like they're all wearing wigs!

Details

Doing details is like looking at a shot with a magnifying glass: we meander through them, penetrate them. Even if the photo is sharp, when I isolate a detail, it's a little blurred, you're getting into the print. It's like when I'm opposite a painting I love, I sit down, I go up close to see the painter's hand, but also to understand how he organized his composition, if he started with the figure or the background...

The details add a lot to the narrative, which is an important part in the *250 000 Paintings*: within a same photo, you go from a face to a hand, a foot, a vase of wild flowers on a window sill. It's a film. You can follow the way in which I tell myself a story, what I'm pointing out. The faces first, I like to pick them out from a group photo. The hands too, if they're in any way beautiful or gracefully positioned. I like the shoes. They reveal so much! I also do details of the decors. Some don't work: I tried to do a close-up of a hairstyle and it was grotesque. In a general way, I let myself be guided by intuition, there's nothing systematic.

The boxes I find are often wrung out, pillaged by other hands that have got there before me. But I like that, working with left-overs, what didn't interest other people. I buy a whole pile of photographs that brings together the remains of five or six boxes. And hence I find five or six families brought together at the same time. There, it takes a practiced eye to reconstitute the genealogies.

Heroes, heroines, and stars

I have heroines, heroes, there are more heroines than heroes for that matter, for the fact is the men were doing the photographing. It's no longer the case today, but up until the seventies or eighties it was the case. So I have four or five heroes, who I like, and two I don't like, and for the women, about twenty that I like, and four or five that I don't like. The heroes are characters I can follow throughout a whole lifetime. I plunge into them, I let my imagination run free, I create stories. I also have a few stars, instantly noticeable, they pierce the screen. Each has their own pet-name.

When I buy whole boxes of photos in bulk, it sometimes takes me a while to realize that a young couple and an old couple are the same people. Because they've stopped taking photographs of themselves for several decades, or because the rest of their life has landed up elsewhere. One of my heroes is a workman who repairs the wagons of the BVG (the Berlin metro); we see him at his place of work in the seventies, he's good-looking, afterwards he gets very fat, and in the end he's an old man on a beach in the mid-nineties, in a shiny purple tracksuit, and it took me a year to realize that it was him!

Germany

As I had photos of the French, Italians, Greeks, Turks, a few of the English and Dutch, I started off thinking I would mix everyone up together, but it didn't work. German history is too distinct.

The German photos are the day-to-day life of everyman, we see the rich, the poor, artists, and at the same time, they've broken everything, that's what's troubling. It's happened despite them, it wasn't really their story, whereas for others they were completely involved in it. You can often read it in the women's faces.

There is a moment when people stopped taking photographs. Perhaps more so in Berlin than in other German cities. In the albums, the last photos date from 1944, or 1945, and then it starts again in 1948, 1949, 1950. It's the story of families: some were very lucky, they managed to keep everything, cameras included. Sometimes I thus managed to recuperate all a family's albums, from before the war to the seventies, with just a gap at the end of the war.

In the Heimat series, the photographer of the family had his material pinched off him by the Americans. But he got an old camera from the twenties out of the attic and carried on taking photographs.

The themes

In arranging the photographs by themes, I revisit the important aesthetic moments of my childhood. Love stories, girls with pigtails — I was very much in love with two girls who wore pigtails —, groups of four girls — I spoke about them earlier, that came from an image I had in my mind of the four daughters of doctor March, from the movie *Little Women*. I have very basic themes: "sitting on a bench", "posing next to the car", "posing on a motorbike"... There's the theme I call "help!": children between five and ten, all cute, surrounded by utter monsters, their families with such hideous faces, worse than a carnival. A very well-documented theme! And then "fathers and sons", "mothers and daughters", the "naked fathers", — the fathers always bare-chested, the body ultra-present, "the empty roads", "the roads with silhouettes", "the tie" — women putting their husband's tie on. Another very frequent theme, and one that is found in every country, is that of a woman in front of a tree — it's rarely a man: she's in front of the trunk and the tree becomes a sort of halo, a homage to her glory.

Others are much closer to my own concerns as a painter: people sitting in the shade of a tree, who disappear in the shadows of the leaves projected onto the clothes,

faces; people projecting their own shadow as they take the photograph; photographs that are completely grey, with no contrast (hard to find: people don't keep them as they're considered botched); photographs that are over-contrasted and become incomprehensible, where you can't see the faces, where you only see the silhouettes. And then finally all those I reinterpret in my own way, love stories between men, between women, which are in fact friendships, but that I decide to consider love stories.

I think it's good to respect the groups of photos as I found them. The box, the package, that I found on such a day, it's better to leave them as they were at that moment, it's more respectful. So I make thematic groupings where the traces remain, which allow me to reconstitute the original groups.

Paintings...

The further I go, the more I have a tendency to consider these old prints as small paintings. Especially when I have several prints of a same negative, with variations of grey, contrasts that differ... Since the arrival of the digital, I am even more sensitive to the proximity between analog photography and painting: it's more material, more palpable. When we put a film in a camera, when we plunge it into trays for development, we are decidedly a hundred times closer to painting than with digital photography. And, paradoxically, it's by photographing them digitally that I demonstrate their status as paintings.

Analog photos re-photographed take on a different dimension, and texture, particularly when the camera used is a digital one. It's very much alive, any number of things occur: lights, reflections. When I start a session that lasts all afternoon, when I manage to re-photograph more than a thousand photos, I stay in the same place, but the sun moves, the reflections on the photo switch sides, the light goes down, the photos become darker. Sometimes my hands, my face are reflected in them. Certain prints are so glossy that they're practically mirrors, I can barely rephotograph them: all we see is my hands and the camera lens. It's the very opposite of the coldness of a scan.

I totally adhere to all of Hockney's theories, when he looks for the presence of photography within painting at the beginning of the modern era (late 15th-early 16th centuries), the moment where the contemporary vision, which corresponds to photography, became anchored in the western mind, the period when European painters began to create photographs before they even existed. Caravaggio, for the Italians, and Vermeer for the Northern school are the most well known, but it's also a whole vein of painting. It interests me to turn that idea around and say that any amateur photograph of the 20th century is a small painting. Technically well done, rapidly, by efficient small machines. Made by a tiny camera obscura, and not the big ones that painters stood inside. On the other side of the curtain, the model found himself in the light, in a very bright light. Pierced in the curtain, a small hole projected onto a canvas, in the dark space where the painter was standing, the model's reversed reflection. On painting it, the painter accomplished then what chemistry would later do: the development and the printing.

Black and White/Color

The more we have the impression of capturing a moment of reality, the less we pay attention to constructing the image of it. It's like when we draw: we want to reproduce, let's say, a vase with a pencil, we apply ourselves to rendering effects, to giving a sensation of volume, of projected shadow. Whereas if we use colors, we go faster, we straightaway reproduce the vase's motif, for example blue with yellow flowers, we are less attached to the light, to everything we set up in black and white to provide an understanding of what we're showing.

Hence, with color, the photos are much more deconstructed. Particularly the portraits. Let's take the one of the grandmother, happy because the whole family is reunited. When color arrives, it's an invasion: a garish sofa, complicated rugs, carpets with leaf patterns, awful paintings on the wall, that you barely noticed in the black and white. People often have dreadful interiors, from a chromatic viewpoint. It's a wonder they can live in them!

With color a middle distance is installed: people are cut off at the midriff. And when they do a full-length portrait, it's less careful, the feet are cut off. We're often in the realm of "bad painting".

Finally with color, we realize more clearly that what the photo restitutes is not real, that we're in two dimensions, flat. There are depths with black and white, an illusion of perspective, that don't survive with color.

Entomology, Henri Fabre

In *250 000 Paintings* there is the same obsession as Fabre observing his insects, the same pleasure, I can spend hours stooped over the photos, even if I suffer, even if I have to put heated bandages around my neck to ease the pain. A relentless observer. And yet, I don't draw any scientific rules about human behavior from them...

The things we don't photograph

Sex. Or if it's done, the photo is removed, hidden, destroyed. But we photograph naked people, above all in the East, because of the FKK (Frei Körper Kultur, Free Body Culture). People on the beach, big tables. We photograph children naked, in both East and West, until the age of five or six, afterwards it's the age of reason, they shift into an elsewhere.

Otherwise, worship isn't photographed much: a little during weddings, in front of the church, during communions, professions of faith. We don't see the priest at the moment when he baptizes, or unction for the profession of faith. You have to wait until the end of the seventies, when people start to have less faith, become more disinhibited, for them to allow themselves to take photos inside the church, during the ceremony.

The war ruins were also photographed very little. Those photos are now worth a lot! Sometimes, people photograph their destroyed home in order to be reimbursed. I found an album that dated from the war. It was poignant. A man with two women, two sisters, on a balcony, and behind them, all the houses destroyed. There comes the

day when he poses with them for the last time, it's marked on it. They have a large rabbit — there are a lot of photos of this rabbit — that will be eaten afterwards.

I also have photos, dating from after the war, of a couple who always picnic in front of the same plot of land in ruins. One senses that they love this place, it's as if they were in front of a medieval castle. The shots are in black and white, then in color.

They keep the same clothes for four or five years. There are ruins, then flowers in springtime.

And then there are the before/after: the house of the friend who bought me all her photos, both upright and entirely destroyed; churches before and after.