

## **China and the exhibition «The Leica Chronicles»**

*A conversation with Charles Moser and Stephan Wittmer, moderated by Gabriela Christen, recorded January 19, 2011 at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Design and Art.*

Gabriela Christen: Before Christmas, we travelled with Xing Lay Yang to China to build up our university's network. In addition to the trip, you two had your own very special photographic project. How and when did this project start? What is the project called?

Stephan Wittmer: «The Leica Chronicles». The motivation behind it comes from Charles, and the title challenged me. It is also for me somewhat irritating. The photo camera as label has not concerned me up to now. This perspective has, however, given me a couple of new ideas, which I now play out in the exhibition.

GC: You are both surely not just photographers from your artistic works here. What then does photography as a medium mean today in your work? When did you choose photography?

SW: For me, photography as a medium is an everyday possibility to record or capture observations and perceptions, and it functions to me as a form of visual, associative and emotional

localisation. The material that emerges is isolated when it is also always seen and individual pictures are isolated from the archive for specific requests or projects, and placed in a new context. Currently, I am less interested in spectacular, short photo moments than in pictures that in themselves already convey a temporal dimension.

Charles Moser: Right now, it is for me the ideal medium through which I can work artistically, despite time pressure. To take an interesting picture, I only need a second. So I must simply be alert. The best thing about photography is actually – though I was a much more alert person before – that it has made me even more aware as I walk through the world. That's the big benefit – increased attention.

GC: Now then, it's a bit different to go with a photographic project to a country like China. Even if you weren't there for the first time, this place carries with it a certain exoticness, a foreignness, and probably also a certain kind of promise. With what kind of picture reservoir do you connect China to the whole in your view?

CM: In urban China, over very few square meters, you have an eerie life potential in front of your eyes – you are surrounded by a higher event and activity density. The sampling frequency with someone that doesn't speak or read Chinese is very high, so vision is a permanent deciphering attempt. Subsequently, pictures, drawings, gestures start to be differently interpreted, and

become attached to an intimate area. There is a greater freedom around the pictorial.

SW: I expected to travel in the East, and then rediscovered the high potential of the West in China.

GC: Can you remember which was the first picture you took for this China project?

SW: I was snapping away already at the airport, then in the airplane while landing in Shanghai. It is always fascinating to me how one has an overview of the city, of the streets and houses. The city was covered in snow and looked like a high-contrast drawing. Taking photos is my attempt to attain new imagery.

CM: My first picture originated in the plane – a male Chinese teenager that had very fine hands with extremely long, elegant finger nails. Then I started with the trees along the road in Kunming, which are all wrapped up to protect them from the cold. As Stephan remarked, they looked like a project from Christo and Jeanne-Claude. These trees with their widow veils went on and on through the whole city.

GC: That picture is now also in the publication and in my mind is of importance because it alludes to the big contrast one constantly experiences when one walks through the streets of China today. Here things come quite unexpectedly together. Does this picture also have something to do with this for you?

SW: In China, even a tree becomes an extraordinary occurrence. The lower trunk is marked white or tied with cords against vermin and dogs. Or it's protected from cold temperatures. Every well-known thing in China has its exoticness and loses its familiarity in our eyes. For this reason, this photo is a good entrance to immersing oneself in this world. There are also Chinese symbols on the photo, and when one looks at them a longer time, they speak with their graphic quality.

GC: I detect these small adjustments right in the subject-matter, that one knows and yet doesn't know, also with you, Charles. I'm thinking just now of a picture in which there is a park bench with a blacksmith iron-like ornamental underpart. Maybe there is some foreign ritual behind there, or a sub-division of the classes in this foreign society.

CM: That was a situation behind the Chinese National museum in Shanghai. Adjustment is a good word. We experience that also right here, that we confine things to their use through barricades and blockades, through different measures that some people in their offices worked out. They have decided: Here no one is allowed to lie on this bench! That is actually a typical situation for Shanghai. One cannot rest there, because otherwise one loses access. This bench has an officially decreed seating arrangement, which is against laissez-faire democracy. Lest some tramp or migrant worker

should sit there too. This somehow touched me. Aesthetically, it is naturally sheer madness, this blacksmith iron thing!

GC: Did you have the feeling that China, with its' life and atmosphere, has influenced your artistic work and perception, like a reportage that you made in a familiar, nice part of Europe?

SW: China has shown me new life patterns. To record these traces isn't easy. This time, we were mostly in a group or accompanied, unlike in my first trip there, where we stayed about 14 days in a place making it possible to go on our own sightseeing tours. This made it possible for me to change my view and deepen or shed a new view.

CM: Stephan and I once discussed how we are both not the kind of people that go searching for a theme or that say: Now let's photograph park benches in China! We could have absolutely done that all over the place, there are on average very many benches there. For me, the driving force is its own movement – that something you don't know, at best recognizable, is lurking behind the next corner. The work of interpretation, selection, composition, that comes much later. Initially, there is a huge openness for the moment and the situation.

GC: We were in heavily populated megacities that had a lot in common and that like most Chinese cities were largely stamped to the floor in the last 20 years. We experienced great anonymity, a kind of uniform architecture or

actually a specific perception of the city. Was it hard for you to photograph these scenarios?

CM: I've been a few times to China, so this urban scene didn't astound me as much as it did the first time. But the environmental conditions made themselves naturally very noticeable. The grey haze that lays above everyone and everything. Maybe I could say that I focused more on the spaces inbetween the volume. That's why I singled this photo out showing a mother and her child. I'm really appalled about having taken such a photo, because it shows an instant of such absolute purity, cleanliness, why even untaintedness, in quasi opposition to the global experience one is surrounded by. An ashlar stands in front of this woman with child in her arms, protecting her from the street traffic. This moved me; it works for this reason with this city experience around. Only for this reason do I find this picture so interesting.

GC: How did you react to this computer-generated, anonymous city landscape in your work, Stephan?

SW: I felt very comfortable in the back of the car during our daily transfers. The back window had however a blue, violet or green coloration. The photos I made through this window pane I like today more and more. I see the possibility of there being an autonomous working series evolving out there. High-rise buildings, wrapped up in green fine lattice nets and marked with big symbols, with cranes everywhere that pierce the

sky. The street fumes of a specific color, streaks and tawdry character drawings that flash out of the permanent gray. Taking photos out of a car is far different from doing so while strolling through the streets.

GC: Did you get the general impression that people in China like to allow themselves to be photographed?

CM: That varied. They give their opinion on that. I put my foot in it a few times when people signalled with gesticulation that they didn't want to be photographed.

GC: That's interesting. Is that yet another difference to us? We are, thanks to Generation Facebook, used to being constantly photographed, branded and to showing up somewhere as a picture in some context or another. Facebook doesn't exist in this way in China. Do people there have a different rapport to being photographed?

SW: They photograph back! I also noticed how a road worker in orange photographed the entrance to the National Museum. I found that refreshing and pleasant.

GC: How does one deal with the amassed picture volume after a trip? Does one have to wait to gain some distance? Or does one simply have to always go through the photos again? You make fairly immediately an exhibition and have to make a selection.

SW: It became an evening ritual to load the pictures on the computer so that the memory card was ready for the next day. The first quick picture taken doesn't have to be the best. On second look, I see something totally different. It's as if one moulds the picture material. It's about feeling one's way around, seizing, trial and error, discarding. The individual pictures have a diverse validity which I find fascinating in relation to photography.

GC: What will you do now with these pictures? Do you want to show a common picture of this Chinese world that we have seen? Or is it more about letting the different forms of perception that bring you to this photographic expression as two different artists, authors, photographers, and personalities appear?

SW: What interests me in relation to picture material is the dissolution of authorship in the brochure medium. For me, the choice of if it's a picture or specific images that Charles made, or if it's about a picture moment that I got hold of isn't important. What interests me is the open-ended picture potential in the respective constellation and in the proposed sequence. For me, the publication is a concentrated aftermath to my and our nine days in China.

CM: We both made a selection of about a hundred pictures and have made it mutually. Each of us knows most of the others' photos. To some extent they are almost identical, because

we were maybe a half meter away from each other. In this sense, I find it right that the authorship principle isn't the only subject of discussion. The question is much more: To what extent does the point of view dilate, widen when two people walk through a street? It appears then sometimes as if I had on top of my own two eyes two more, different eyes. I also noticed that a kind of dance with an improvised choreography developed when we photographed. One spins still on one's own axis. One looks back to see what is going on behind one's own back, what the other has in his sights. The outcome is a panoramic perception. Intrinsicly a beautiful experience.

GC: If you were to exhibit these China pictures in China, would this exhibition look different? Is what you show us about China different from what you would show the Chinese about China?

SW: Yes, I couldn't work differently. I always think as much spatially as in terms of situation in consideration of the potential observer in a specific exhibition context. It would definitely look different in and for China.

CM: I agree. Maybe we would then even photograph differently.

Translation: Ulla Pers