



Gerhard Steidl  
On how to make an incredible publication from scratch – including the paper itself

Sixty-four-year-old Gerhard Steidl is a busy man. When there's a book to be made, the most uncompromising authors and artists, from Ai Weiwei to Carine Roitfeld, Juergen Teller to Luc Tuymans, head straight for his company, Steidl, the best printer and publisher in the world. Its humble headquarters, a housing block in Göttingen, Germany, seems an unlikely place for Chanel's publisher of choice. Featuring a printing plant, offices and sleeping accommodation for visiting artists, the place is run by its charismatic, super-hectic founder, who also lives on the premises. Gerhard Steidl runs several imprints, two of which he directs in collaboration with his countryman Karl Lagerfeld.

Interview by Gert Jonkers  
Photography by Franziska Sinn

# Gerhard Steidl



# The obsessive creator of many sublime books.

Gert Jonkers: I love the maze-like Steidl campus you've created here. Gerhard Steidl: Campus? That's a nice word for it.

GJ: I'd like to talk to you about paper, but first, a little bit of history and background: you started your company at a very young age, didn't you? GS: I was 17, but in Germany you have to be at least 18 to start your own company, so I did it illegally for the first few months – it was cash in hand. So whenever there's an anniversary coming up, we never know exactly what the real starting date for Steidl is.

GJ: Does that mean you've never lived anywhere else but here in the charming town of Göttingen? GS: Indeed. I started here simply because it was convenient: living with my parents, not paying any rent, and I could easily find a garage around the corner in which to start printing. And then after five or six years I had so much stuff – materials, machines – that I simply couldn't move it anywhere else. Joseph Beuys actually asked me to move my operations to Düsseldorf, where the giants of art, like Beuys and Nam June Paik, were working at the time, but it was just too expensive for me to move.

GJ: Bummer? GS: No, because if you look at the map of Europe, you'll see that Göttingen is right in the middle, so it turns out to be very convenient to be based here. I can go to Berlin or Hamburg or Warsaw or Rome or Stockholm and be back home the same day. And in the end, I think it's very healthy for me to keep a distance from the art world and the artists I work with. I like to keep strictly working relationships. I don't want to be friends with them, I don't want to sit in the pub with them, I don't want to go on holiday with them; I just want to work with them. Also, with artists, if you're too close to them, they eat you up, head to tail.

GJ: So you wouldn't call somebody like Karl Lagerfeld, whom you work with a lot, a friend? GS: No. I have a very serious working friendship with him.

GJ: But Lagerfeld, and Günter Grass,

whose work you've been publishing for ages, surely must love you? GS: And I love them too – but that's all. If they ever stop working with me, I will lose a client and they will lose a publisher, but nobody loses a friend. It's strictly professional.

GJ: I hope you do have friends? GS: Well, what's a friend? I guess it's somebody whose door you know you can knock on at any time of day. I have friends around the world, surely, whom I consider to be like brothers or sisters and whom I love. But you know, I do my work and I serve my artists I make my books with, and there's never been much space for family life or friendships. I spend my summer holidays with a group of six or eight friends – we cook, we talk, we read – and the same in winter, but for the rest of the year there's really no time. My luxury time is when I'm alone, in silence, and I can read my newspaper.

GJ: Are you single? GS: No, my girlfriend and I have been together for 40 years, but we each have our own lives, our own work and our own apartments.

GJ: This may be a silly question, but what's your relationship with paper? GS: Well, I personally think that paper is one of the most beautiful industrially produced materials in the world. You can really feel thousands of years of creativity in paper production. I never like it when people say we don't need paper any more, that paper is outdated and unnecessary for the spreading of information.

GJ: Who says that? GS: Well, there are people who love the internet and say paper has become obsolete. It's a bit like religion: either you believe in Mary's immaculate conception or you don't. You believe in the end of paper or you don't.

GJ: And obviously you don't? GS: Correct. I mean, I know that technology moves on. There's no need to read a pocket book on the plane and throw it away once you've landed in New York – just read it on your Kindle. And I don't think there'll be much need for a printed newspaper in the morning and another one in

the evening for much longer. Newspapers are great for their comment, their analysis of the news, the background story, but otherwise you can find your news online, and so those trees can be saved as well. But on the other hand, artists still make drawings on paper. Photos are still printed on paper. So it makes sense to reproduce them in books, on paper.

GJ: What can you say about the look of paper? GS: Paper has a surface, so it reflects light. It looks different from different angles. Paper is something you need to explore. It's almost a living organism. Why do you think hundreds of thousands of people per year make a pilgrimage to see the Mona Lisa in Paris? Because it's so much more beautiful in real life than in any of the millions of reproductions you can find online. And one thing I know for sure: if you look at photography on paper, in a book, you're much closer to the original than when you see the same photo online. If you see a photo by Cartier-Bresson on a screen, it'll look too sharp, too digital, with too much contrast. It'll be a photo that Cartier-Bresson would never have approved in his lifetime. But if you look at his picture in a book, it's close to what he would have liked.

GJ: I remember an interview with the photographer Jeff Wall, who said he never liked to see his work reproduced in books. GS: Yes, well, his medium is the light box, and with a backlit digital print you have a colour space that is so much richer than a stupid CMYK paper print. But a good printer tries to open up that colour space with special inks and know-how and software and hardware and make it much better. That's what I try to do. I'm the helping hand for artists, I try to guide them and help them to the end of the road.

GJ: Did you find ways to print Wall's work in the end? GS: Jeff Wall is a super technician when it comes to his own prints, and he knows the exact limitations of the printing process, so he doesn't expect me to make miracles happen. But I think together we made some inventions that make the printed





Offset printing, of which Gerhard Steidl is a meticulous practitioner, involves the transfer of ink from a plate to rubber blankets or rollers and then to the print medium, in this case, stacks of uncoated Schleipen Fly 1.2/150gsm.





results quite acceptable. It's often hard work, but I like it when an artist kicks me in the arse and wants me to try harder.

GJ: Do you like the sound of paper?  
GS: I do. Don't you ever listen to the sound of paper? You tap a piece of paper and it makes a very specific sound. It's part of the experience of holding a book.

GJ: What about the smell of paper, or the smell of print? Some magazines and books just stink.  
GS: What I really don't like is print that doesn't smell at all, which happens when you cover it with disper-

sion so that the ink dries straight away so you can pile it up and bind it instantly. It saves time, but the result is no smell. It has no character. The other bad thing is print that stinks, which happens if you use the wrong combination of materials. That's

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months, and the base note can easily live for ten, 15 years. You want your book to still smell nice after ten years.

GJ: Could you add perfume to print to make it smell nicer?  
GS: Yes, there are several techniques for adding scent, where you mix synthetic perfumes through the ink. I don't like it. I'm not a fan of paper that smells like strawberry. It's artificial.

GJ: But in theory you could add a splash of Chanel No 5 to the ink to make a lovely-smelling book?  
GS: Sure, but I prefer the technical smell of petrochemical inks on real

paper. It's a technical process, so it may as well smell technical. If you open the bonnet of your car you don't want the engine to smell of strawberries or Chanel No 5 either. You want to smell the engine.



One of Steidl's recent publications is *Juergen Teller: Wool*, a retrospective of the photographer's work as displayed at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts.

sion so that the ink dries straight away so you can pile it up and bind it instantly. It saves time, but the result is no smell. It has no character. The other bad thing is print that stinks, which happens if you use the wrong combination of materials. That's where experience comes in: certain papers don't go with certain inks, and you have to know that, and you have to make tests. That's what I do all the time: do some tests, wait a little, let it dry, smell it a few days later, change it a bit, smell again... The method of creating a certain smell of print is much like what a perfumer does. You create an olfactory pyramid, with top, middle and base notes. The top note lasts for

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GJ: What about the feel of paper? I heard that it's best for a tailor to have naturally dry hands in order to have a better sensitivity to the cloth.  
GS: For touching paper it's actually good for your hands to be a little bit moist. I love touching paper. I'm like a dog, sniffing and touching and comparing papers all day. It's my little game. If you were to blindfold me, I could tell you the name and weight

of any given paper with a success rate of about 80 per cent. It's a matter of experience.

GJ: You could have been on a game show!  
GS: (laughs) Yes. You know, it's like other people being able to tell out of ten bottles of grappa which one's from the south of Italy and which is from the north. It's a passion.

GJ: Have you ever thought of making your own paper?  
GS: I wouldn't want to start a paper mill, but I've designed two types of paper.

GJ: Oh, what are they? How do you design paper?  
GS: One is the famous PhoenixMotion Xantur paper, for which I found an old formula from 1890. It's a coated paper made with natural ingredients such as egg, chalk, milk and white cheese. I made it in 2000, together with a paper mill, and for the first three years I had it exclusively, but I print in such small quantities that they had to make it available to other clients. It's the best paper to print photography on.

GJ: And the other paper you designed?  
GS: It's a 100 per cent recycled paper made of post-consumer waste that I make with a German paper mill. It has a beautiful surface, an amazing smell and a great opacity. It's one of the best papers for literature and fiction. I used it to print the complete works of Günter Grass on. One of those sets happened to fall into the hands of JK Rowling, who then wanted exactly that paper for her German editions of *Harry Potter*. The mill that has the license to produce it made a fortune!

GJ: Oh, wow! And did you get a percentage?  
GS: Ah, I can't talk about that. But I'm very proud of the paper.

GJ: Doesn't Steidl publish, like, 300 books a year? That's almost one book a day.  
GS: No, no, no, we don't have the capacity for 300, but we do make 200, maybe 220 books per year. Of which, let's say, 60 are fiction books

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GJ: And do you keep control of everything, or are you able to let go?  
GS: I'm obsessed with details up until the book is ready. Obsessed! I never give up, and I'm a nightmare for the people I work with, because if I'm halfway through printing and I have a new idea, I stop everything and start all over again.

GJ: Can you enjoy a book once it's finished?  
GS: Not for a while, no. I feel like I've been brainwashed, I can only look at it with a technician's eye. I need to put it away for at least half a year, and then I can see the beauty of it. Or, sometimes, the mistakes.

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and the rest are visual books, which take much more time to produce, of course.

GJ: And you read all the books you publish?  
GS: Of course. Every book is my baby. But you know, I don't watch TV, ever. I've not seen one film in at least 30 years. I don't go to pubs or parties, and I spend my nights alone. I go to bed at 10.30, I sleep for seven hours, and the rest of the day I work and I read. Of course it's different when my brain scans 200 pages in two hours or when I want to enjoy Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, for which I'd take my time. But normally I can read and work fast.

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