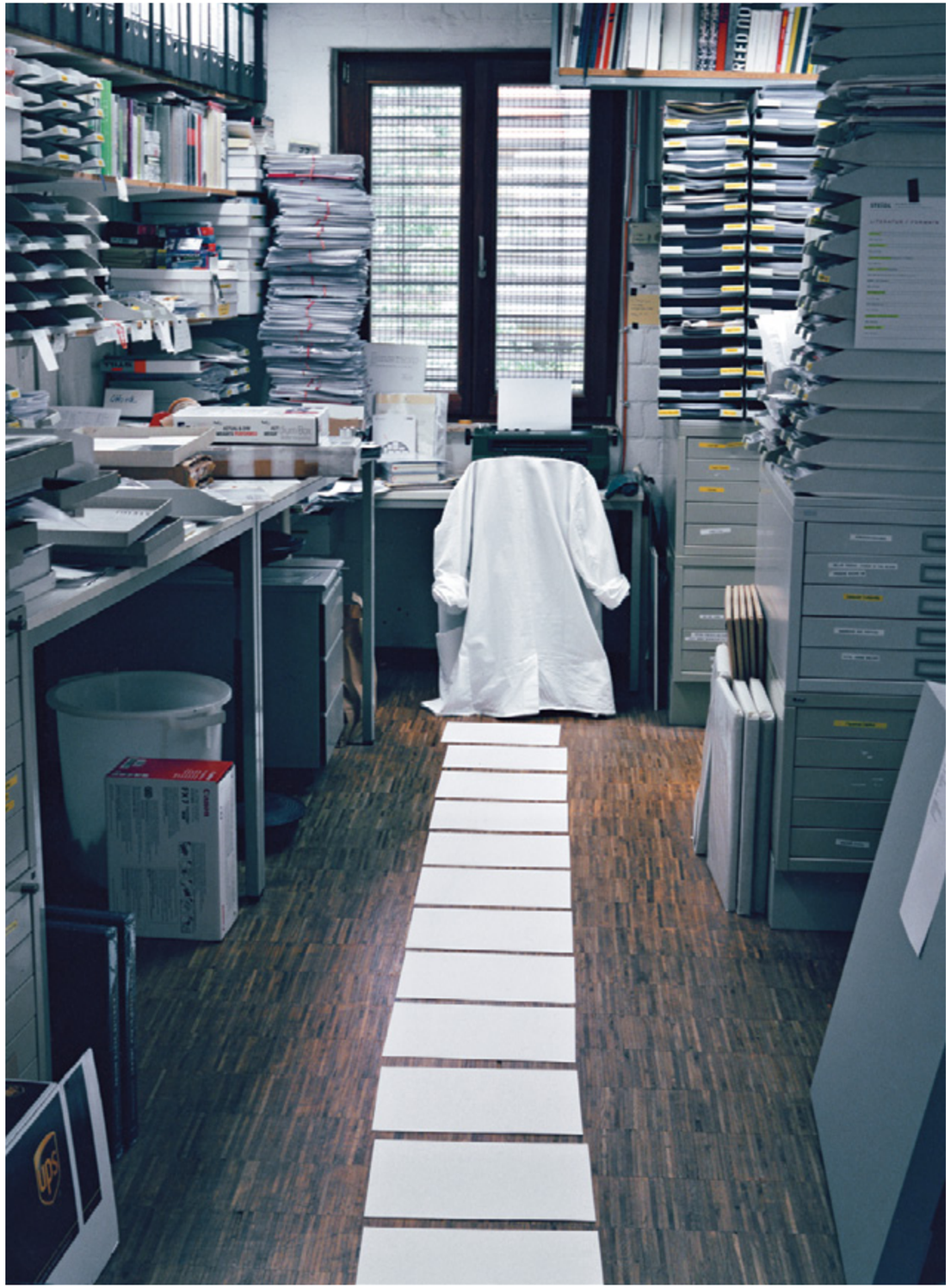


GERHARD STEIDL **PRINT THAT MATTERS**

by **Eugene Rabkin**

Photography by **Koto Bolofo**

1

One quiet New York morning I met with the legendary German book publisher Gerhard Steidl at the Mercer in SoHo.

It was 8:00 am, and the guests were silently slipping in and out of the hotel lobby. Steidl is the last of the Mohicans in the world of print – a fiercely independent publisher who has managed to maintain complete control and ownership of his house for over forty years. His art and photo books on the likes of Robert Frank, Ed Ruscha, and Bruce Davidson are revered as best in the industry and are collected by art appreciators and book lovers around the world. He also publishes literature in German, including work by the Nobel Prize winners Gunter Grass, whose archive he owns, and Halldór Laxness.

Steidl was in town for just two days in order to present his new titles at a US bookseller meeting. Although he travels extensively, he claims he hates it. His favorite trip – favorite because it is short – is a Friday morning flight from Frankfurt to New York, which allows him to be in the city by noon and then leave again on a flight back to Germany the same night. Thus, he is home on Saturday morning to continue work again.

Over coffee we discussed Steidl's body of work and the state of the publishing industry. Steidl roughly divides books into disposable and worthwhile. He talks a lot about "print that matters" – well-executed books that are worth retaining and revisiting, unlike say, crime fiction, which he reads on his iPad so he doesn't have to waste paper.

"I very much like the advertising of Patek Philippe, where the father is sitting at the desk with his small son and the text in the advertisement says, 'You never actually own a Patek Philippe, you just take care of it for the next generation," said Steidl. "I think with print that matters, it is memory and history and the knowledge of mankind."

For the rest there is the Internet, which for Steidl serves the purpose of convenience and speed. He does not denigrate the digital world wholesale – "nobody wants to read yesterday's news" – and he thinks it's important that people in remote areas have access to information. He plans to digitize literature that he prints, so scholars in any part of the world will have access to the works of Gunter Grass and the like.

What Steidl bristles at is the permission culture that digital publishing fosters with its unlimited and pinpointed levels of control that companies such as Apple promote. "I don't think American businessmen should dictate to us what is the future of books," he said. "They just want to sell their software and their hardware, and they want to have our data in the cloud, so that every month you have to pay them. It's a good business model, part of which is to have products that they can say are outdated, old fashioned, and the newest iTunes and iPads and iPhones is what you need. In the old Wild West they solved their business problems with a gun, and today it's software."

Physical books, on the other hand, once purchased, end up where the owner chooses. He can give them to a friend or donate them to a library or even bring them to a used-bookshop. For Steidl, this human element of exchange is paramount, especially because it is the individual and not Amazon that gets to decide what is worthwhile and what is not, what should be read and what should not.

As far as the visual culture goes, according to Steidl, art on a computer screen is deceptive and without merit. "Why do hundreds of thousands of people go to the Louvre and look at the original Mona Lisa? Because there are ten thousand reproductions of the Mona Lisa on the Internet and they all look different. And you don't believe them anymore. You want to go to the Louvre and see for yourself how it really looks." This is why a faithful reproduction on a printed page is significant to Steidl and why he thinks it will not go away.

What will go away, Steidl thinks, are the big box stores with their cookie-cutter, impersonal approaches to bookselling (the UK-based chain Borders is already out of business and Barnes & Noble is struggling to stay afloat). Mostly, it will happen because these stores do not offer a personalized, editorial approach. Steidl sees curation as the main value of independent booksellers.

"I think a fine book store today that's worth going into is one where there is an owner who has a staff of three-four people who are intelligent and know something about books," he said. **"So, when you go into a store and buy a book that is more expensive than on Amazon, you also buy their intelligence, the chat you can have with them about books or culture. And then what is in the curated program is hand-selected by those people. So, you share with them their taste. Out of millions of printed products that are coming onto the market every year they select maybe four-five hundred that are worth moving into your library. And this cultural experience is worth paying a little bit more for than through Amazon."**

Curation is another thing that sets Steidl apart and is a big part of his print-that-matters philosophy. Steidl publishes about two hundred art books a year. Among these you will not find books about fancy interiors or cute kittens or other schlock of the Christmas-gift variety. The publisher sees his role as akin to that of a museum gatekeeper who, because of his expertise, is charged to choose what is worth sharing.

Steidl is known for his independence and he values it above all. He gets to do whatever he likes, and what he likes is not to cut corners. "If I want to do something, I just do it, and I don't ask how much it costs – this is my luxury," Steidl told me. "I buy the materials I need. I produce my objects of art – as I call my books – in a way that I want and in the end I hope that they sell and make some money. This is the essence of my success."

He cites Johannes Guttenberg as his precursor. "He had an idea – he wanted to publish, print, and sell the Bible. To fulfill this idea, he created a new business model because he made an invention by founding the movable letters. So, he was designing the Bible, printing the Bible, binding the Bible, and selling the Bible. That's a perfect business model for a publisher."

Though Steidl is in his sixties now, he shows no signs of slowing down. Nor is he interested in selling the company or bringing on a successor to continue his legacy. "The moment Picasso died, there was no new Picasso art," he said. "Once I am dead, I cannot take care of my books, but I really believe in the future there will be young people who can take up my ideas and build their own publishing houses. It is not necessary that the Steidl publishing house survive for the next two hundred years. Once it's closed I only want to make sure that I have delivered my know-how and my ideas to others so that they can continue."

But aren't young people only interested in browsing Tumblr photos and reading sound bites on blogs? Isn't our "I-get-the-idea" culture killing the spirit of plunging into depths of a book? Steidl's outlook is bright. He guest-lectures five-six times a week at universities across the globe, and he sees a strong interest in theory of the printed matter from the young. The problem, according to him, is that they have no practice.

But neither did Steidl when he was their age. Steidl was a young drifter in the late sixties when he went to see an Andy Warhol exhibit in Germany and became enamored with the silk-screening process. It was his "Wait, I can do this?!" moment. He bought a silk-screen press and began experimenting. He knew nothing of color theory or art history, but the printing process gave him great satisfaction.

He got his break in 1972 during the well-respected documental art exhibition in Kassel, just forty kilometers from Göttingen. One of the main participants was the German artist Joseph Beuys, who set up "The Office for Democracy by Direct Vote of the Population" as his art project. "So, he'd sit there every day and people would come there to discuss politics," recalled Steidl. "One Monday I went there, and I told him that I work as a silkscreen printer and I can do some etchings and lithographs, and if you have any ideas for a print, I would be happy to realize them. And he said, yes, why not; he took some paper, made some sketches, and I went home and made them into a print. The next day I went back with a print, showed it to him, he critiqued it, and I went back and printed again."

This was the beginning of a lifelong relationship that continued until Beuys's death. Steidl printed almost everything for him – books, multiples, edition prints. He also traveled with Beuys to organize his exhibitions. Beuys, who once said, "To be a teacher is my greatest work of art," became Steidl's private tutor. Steidl was twenty-two and he had absolutely no knowledge of art theory.

It was Beuys who instilled into Steidl the love of the tactile, of paper and ink, of color theory, and of how all these elements interrelate. "Beuys helped me develop the concepts I have today for publishing. Because I did not know anything about his work or about art history and because he wanted me to do a good job, he educated me. And because I wanted to do a good job, I listened. This was the beginning of Steidl printing, and up to today, all my knowledge about material and my material esthetics comes from Beuys." Whenever the young Steidl thought his ignorance became annoying he would tell Beuys to shut him up, to which Beuys would inevitably reply, "Every revolution began with stupid questions." Beuys eventually made a postcard with this phrase.

Perhaps his experience with Beuys is why, despite his overwhelming success, Steidl never forgets to credit the artist. "My deepest respect is always with the artist, because all of us who work in this industry are nothing without the artist," he said. "The artist is the one delivering ideas; he is our work giver. Without him we only have blank paper or an empty screen."

In turn, Steidl garners deep respect from the artist community. They are attracted to him for his affinity for making things. Steidl is the quintessential artisan, who can talk about acidity of paper, quality of ink, and binding materials for hours. He has longstanding relationships with paper mills and it is not unusual for them to cook paper to fit Steidl's exact specifications. His favorite paper-maker is the family-owned Bavarian company Gmund, which has been operating the same papermaking machine since 1895. "I don't need the mass market shit of a Canadian or a Russian giant. I need the hand-picked stuff," said Steidl. One story has it that one day J.K. Rowling bought a Steidl book, then called her German publisher and insisted that the German edition of Harry Potter books should be printed on the same paper – it was paper exclusively produced for Steidl books made 100% out of recycled fiber.

“It is totally exciting to touch paper with your fingers, to study it in a reflecting light, to see shadows on pages,” Steidl added, stressing the importance of the tactile and the olfactory senses of books. **“Then there is of course the smell. When you have an understanding of printing you can use different inks and every type of ink has a different chemical reaction to a certain paper. So, like a perfumer building up an olfactory pyramid, I am creating my smell on the paper. That’s just know-how. In the old days every printer had this, but now this knowledge is lost. You can study it by making print tests, but that is only possible when you have your own press.”**

2

Each year Steidl receives approximately twelve hundred unsolicited book submissions.

He publishes virtually none of them. “I look through all of them, and we respectfully send them back because I cannot make so many books a year,” he said. “They are returned with a nice letter and a little gift, like our catalog, or a Steidl book. It costs me tens of thousands of dollars just to reship submissions, but I do it because they are artists who believe in Steidl, and they have a dream to make a book with Steidl. At a minimum, a respectful letter should come back.”

Instead, Steidl relies on the network of artists with whom he has established relationships, some of which, like with Richard Serra or Ed Ruscha, run for decades. For fresh blood Steidl relies on those artists’ recommendations. This way he can be sure he is working on something worthwhile.

At the end of the day though, it is Steidl who decides if a book is worth printing. And, once he decides, he goes all in. “When I’m working with an artist I feel myself like a student,” he told me. “There is somebody who has knowledge, who has a certain experience, who has created a body of work that I don’t know anything about, and then by working with him I can ask any stupid question. And he will deliver to me a serious answer because he wants me to understand his subject and wants me to do a good job. This way I can learn an immense number of things that are never delivered to somebody else by the artist, because it’s kitchen work and others should not look into the kitchen while you are cooking. So, everything I am doing throughout the day with an artist is for my own education and for my own level of knowledge, and when the book is ready, my hope is that others will share my enthusiasm.”

In addition to the artists, Steidl has a few trusted partners whom he has given imprints at his publishing house, such as the gallerist David Zwirner and the fashion industry’s go-to re-toucher Pascal Dangin. The most preeminent of these partners is the Chanel designer Karl Lagerfeld.

Lagerfeld is an avowed book-lover with a 350,000-volume personal library. His passion for books rivals his love of fashion. He has his own bookshop in Paris, called 7L, which is one of the best-curated stores I have ever visited.

Lagerfeld is also an accomplished photographer. He and Steidl met in 1993 when Lagerfeld won the prestigious Lucky Strike Designer Award. Along with the monetary prize came an opportunity to do a monograph with Steidl. Steidl wrote a letter to Lagerfeld about doing the book. Lagerfeld refused, citing the poor quality of most printed books and saying that he is perfectly content looking at his gelatin silver prints all by himself rather than sharing badly printed work with the public. Needless to say,

he was talking to a kindred spirit. Steidl wrote back asking for some of Lagerfeld's photos so he could print some proofs for him. Then Lagerfeld could decide for himself the quality of Steidl's printing. Three days later some photos arrived. Steidl printed them and sent them back to Lagerfeld. The next day Lagerfeld called him and agreed to do the book. It was called "Off the Record."

Since then Steidl has printed over fifty books of Lagerfeld's photography – none of it fashion – and they have become intimate friends. Lagerfeld, ever passionate about whatever interests him at the moment, would constantly send Steidl recommendations.

"When we'd come together to work on fashion catalogues, he would always have a book for me, and he'd say, 'You have to read this,'" Steidl told me. "So, after a while I said to him, why not have a publishing imprint together, so all the books you select for my publishing house will be published under the imprint Edition 7L, and people will know that this book was selected by Karl Lagerfeld."

The imprint was a great success. In 2010 Steidl and Lagerfeld expanded their collaboration by launching a second imprint for the German market, called "LSD" (Lagerfeld.Steidl. Druckerei.Verlag). Besides art books, they also translate literature and non-fiction from English and French into German.

Several years after their collaboration began Lagerfeld recommended Steidl to the owners of Chanel and Fendi. Today, Steidl handles all of their printed matter, from printing show invites to setting up exhibitions. Fashion work has grown to take up about half of Steidl's time. But it's all worth it.
In turn, Steidl delivers superior product, and delivers it himself. Two weeks before we met he flew to Singapore where Chanel was having a show and an exhibit. He was delivering the press kit, all forty-six cases of it. He flew in the evening, slept on the plane, worked the entire next day upon arrival, and flew back the same night.

What makes Steidl and Lagerfeld work together and understand each other so well is their unabashed pursuit of excellence. When we spoke, Steidl drew a parallel between his work process and that of Lagerfeld. "When you buy a piece of haute couture from Chanel, you can only buy it on Rue Cambon in Paris and you will know that it's Karl Lagerfeld who will be taking the fittings. Nothing is outsourced. No matter where in the world you buy the Steidl book, you really know this book has been done by Steidl in person together with an artist at #4 DüstereStraße, Göttingen, Germany. That's a guarantee, and I think this is a really strong argument for Steidl books."

3

A month later I was in Göttingen to witness Steidl's work process.

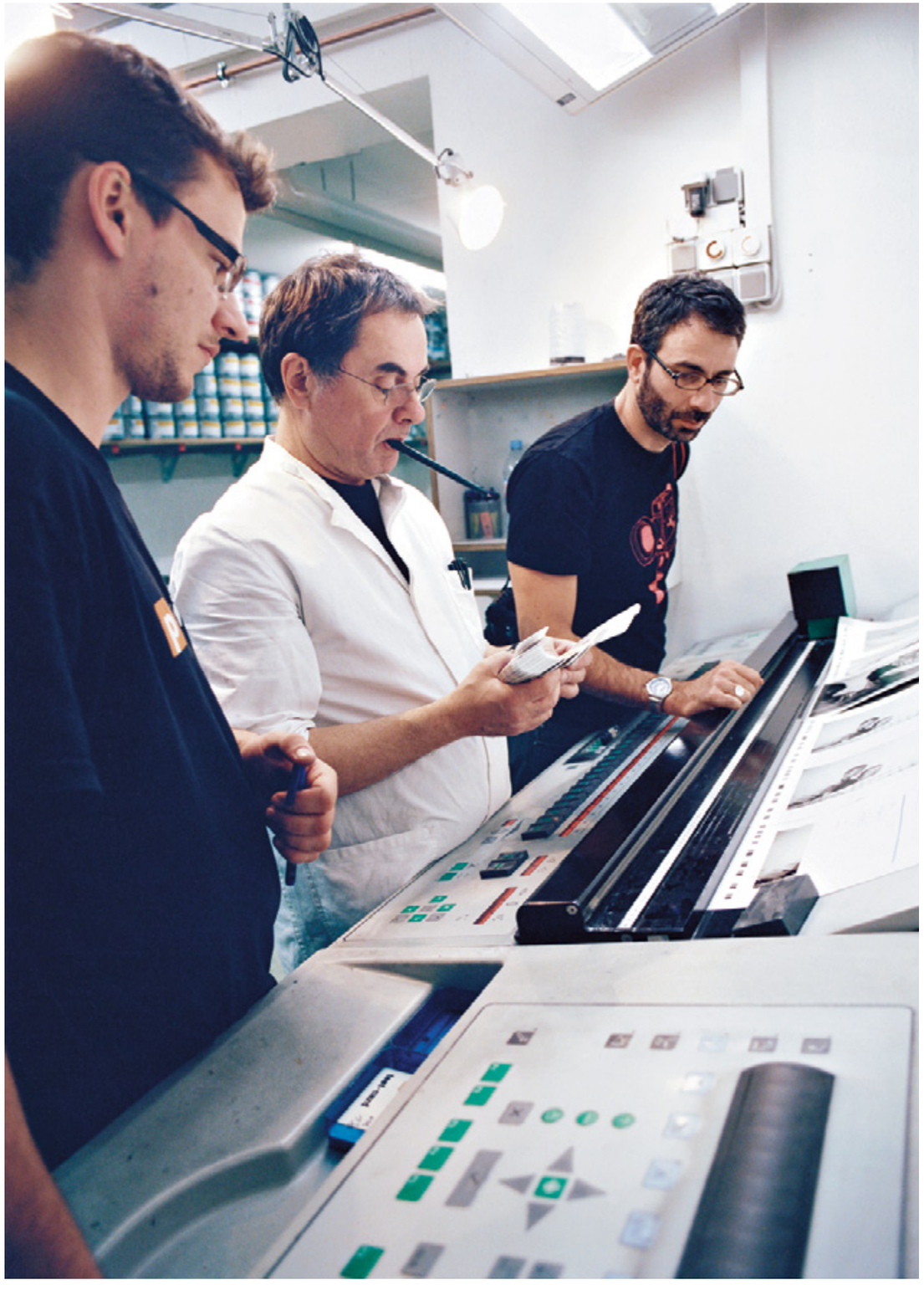
Virtually every artist that Steidl works with, no matter how important, must come there and spend time with him to oversee the bookmaking process. "Regularly, when you go to a publishing house [to make a book] you have a meeting with the publisher, maybe you go for dinner, and that's it," Steidl explained. "The production of the book goes through other hands. Maybe the publishing house is in New York, the designer is in London, the photos are processed in India, the printing is done in Hong Kong and the warehouse is in Italy. So, the artist cannot share in the production process."

Steidl's design process is completely personalized and human interaction for him is key. "First, we sit together and I ask the artist, 'What is your vision?' In my experience, every writer and every photographer or artist who is dreaming about a book has a strong vision. But a regular publishing house will never ask that. They have one standard size for novels, another standard size for photography books. They use the same paper, the same binding technologies, the same cover. And everything has to be made in one pass to reduce costs. And then the vision and the dream of the artist are lost."

Because of this approach Steidl is widely revered in the art book world. I asked him if there is a book that he wished he could do, and he simply said, "No. What I want to do, I do, because there is no other prominent printing house that has this technology under one roof. And this is a known fact, so if I call an artist, they are happy to come."

His process has become so legendary that it was turned into a 2010 documentary and an exhibit called "How to Make a Book with Steidl." One of the main threads in the documentary's plot is the making of the book called iDubai with the photographer Joel Sternfeld, and it allows you to see the flexibility and deftness with which Steidl picks materials and produces the layout to fit the specifics of the raw photographs. It makes you understand what Steidl has realized a long time ago – the art itself shapes the book.

What happens at Steidl's headquarters is roughly this; an artist comes to Göttingen on Monday and leaves by Friday (Steidl works seven days a week, but he reserves Saturday and Sunday for working on his own). He stays in one of the four apartments in the building next door that Steidl bought specifically to house his guests (Lee Friedlander christened it The Halftone Hotel and the name stuck). By nine in the morning the artist will come to the top floor of the Steidl building and wait for Steidl in the library. First, the initial discussion and material selection takes place. Then someone from Steidl's design department, one floor down from the library, works on typography and creates the preliminary layout of the photos and the text. They do some test printing and bring the pages back up to the artist to see if the pages are to his and Steidl's liking. After a workable solution is achieved the entire book goes down to the ground floor where Steidl selects paper that he thinks is right and a mockup of the book is printed. This way the artist can see what the book will look like in the end, its weight, the way the pages turn, the way the pages reflect the light, and all the other minute,



tangible things that are important to the book's look and feel. Such a process is unheard of at a big publishing house where an artist usually sees an already finished product.

I arrived in Göttingenearly Monday evening and took a cab to Steidl's building complex. Göttingen is a university townof about one hundred thousand people where everyone knows each other.When the cabby heard the address, he sized me up and said, "Steidl?"

The Steidl complex is nondescript, the front window gate is lowered over the ground floor where the printing press operates; there is no logo on the outside and no signage other than the small plaque on the entrance door and a name on the doorbell. The thing that gives it away most is the strong smell of paper.

Besides the production building (there are technically two buildings – production and administration, but they are so closely interconnected that you often do not realize you have crossed from one building into the other) and the Halftone Hotel next door, there is Steidl's own house, which is connected to the work building by a footpath. The adjacent building to the one where he lives is now being converted into a Steidl library, because the current library floor has run out of room (there were books everywhere in the production building, on desks, on staircases, and piled on shelves overhead).

Next to the Halftone Hotel is the oldest building in Göttingen, dating back to 1310, that is now being converted into the Gunter Grass archive. It will be open to the public once it is completed. The building is so old, the engineer who heads the renovation told me, that they are building a metal cage inside it that will prop up its mortal remains.

Across the backyard is a storage facility where Steidl books go to rest before they are accounted for and shipped to his distributors across the globe. There is also a 10,000-square meter warehouse on the town's outskirts where Steidl stores books and paper. It's temperature- and humidity-controlled, because, as Steidl told me, "I love my paper like the butcher likes his beef." He added that in today's world most paper for books goes from the paper mill and onto the printing press too soon and is therefore too wet. Steidl's paper spends two-three weeks in the warehouse until it's just right.

When I arrived I was shown to my room by one of Steidl's employees, Maren. She is also an editor. Steidl employs forty-five people and often they wear more than one hat. Steidl himself was in Paris that day working with Karl Lagerfeld on his new photography exhibit set to open during the haute couture week in ten days. For two months before the exhibit Steidl would go several times a week to Paris and back on the same day.

The Halftone Hotel has eight rooms, two rooms per floor, all named after prominent artists that Steidl works with, and a shared kitchen. I stayed in the Karl Lagerfeld room. It was connected to the Pinocchio room, after one of Jim Dine's projects. Over the years of staying at the Halftone Hotel Dine has grown to love Göttingen and ended up buying a space of his own next to Steidl's, where he now spends part of the year with his wife.

On the days Steidl is at home, he usually gets up at four in the morning. He is often in his office by four-thirty. The office is shaped like the letter "T" tilted ninety degrees to the right, and is overflowing with books, manuscripts, and all kinds of files, arranged by artist. There is a small desk at which Steidl sketches ideas for books and types his letters on his old typewriter – he does not own a computer – until six in the morning. While in the office, Steidl wears his white lab coat. His employees know that if the coat hangs on Steidl's chair, he is not at work.

At six in the morning he oversees the shift change at the one printing press that prints all of Steidl's books and other printed matter that is not fine art, such as Chanel press kits and invitations. The press runs pretty much 24-7, only stopping for cleaning and maintenance between projects. (There is a smaller press in the adjoining room for book jackets, special printing delicacies and for test printing.) At two in the afternoon, Steidl oversees the next shift change. At ten in the evening, he gives instructions to the third shift of print operators, walks back home, drinks a glass of red wine and goes to sleep.

By nine in the morning other Steidl employees file in. Steidl's guests come in, too, and go up to the library where they patiently wait until he has time to join them. I was told to come at 8:30 a.m. just in case Steidl might have time – an attempt that proved futile. I walked over to his office – the white lab coat was hanging on the chair.

I went up to the library, which is not the worst place to wile away your hours. Time flew by as I flipped through books, many of them out of print. Steidl only does reprints when a book becomes a proven hit, so many of his books become covetable collector's items. Steidl has a few blockbusters, which allows him to finance riskier books. There is the Gunter Grass archive, of course, to which Steidl bought the printing rights in 1993. He has sold millions of copies of The Tin Drum, Grass's most famous novel.

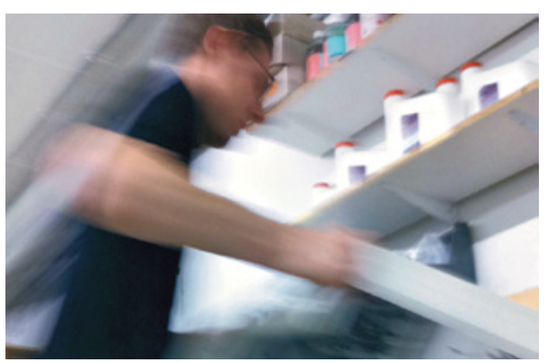
Then, there is the Robert Frank's hit, The Americans. Steidl owns the printing rights to that one since 2007, selling roughly thirty thousand copies a year. He does like the idea of a reprint for technical reasons. There have been advances in printing technologies, which he likens to the record industry. "In 1962 the first Beatles album was released in mono, then ten years later it was released in stereo, then ten years later it was re-mastered, then released on the CD, and so on. And you buy it again, because it is a new experience. It's been refreshed with a new technology and it sounds better and it's worth buying again," he told me. "The same with books. A book that I have printed with all my know-how in 2000, I can now do it better. Then, this is a reason for a second edition."

Soon, I was joined in the library by three other guests – a young woman from the David Zwirner gallery who was gathering material for a new book on the artist Richard Serra, the German art collector Artur Walther, and Inge Schoenthal Feltrinelli, the widow of the renowned Italian publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, who went from being a scion of one of the wealthiest Italian families to a communist guerilla and was eventually killed, supposedly by his own malfunctioning explosion device. Feltrinelli has led quite a turbulent life herself. A Jewish girl from Göttingen, she survived World War II and went on to become a model and a photographer, hanging out with Simone de Beauvoir in Paris and Ernest Hemingway in Cuba. Feltrinelli was working with Steidl on a book of her photographs. Though she has aged, she had that self-depreciative but easy countenance of someone who has led a privileged life that is now in its twilight. "I get hysterical looking at my photos. It's been so long ago," she told me somewhat coquettishly. "But Steidl wants to do it. At least I know that it will be a good book. Because he is the best."

I passed the time by flipping through Steidl's treasures. I picked up a multi-volume book on the fashion house Hermes shot by Koto Bolofo, another photographer with whom Steidl has a longstanding relationship. As I flipped through the photos, almost fetishistic in their detail, of the finest leather on earth shaped into being by the best artisans on earth, it occurred to me that Steidl does for books what Hermes does for luxury fashion.

Steidl walked in at some point to confer with Feltrinelli, who was sitting on the edge of the big communal table with one of Steidl's designers, a bunch of her old photographs spread around them. Steidl made notes in his notepad as they talked. He apologized for not having time for me – he was leaving for Paris after lunch – but would I like to go to the opening of Karl Lagerfeld's photography exhibit there in ten days from now? Yes, yes I would.

Lunch for Steidl's guests is served in the kitchen adjacent to the library room. The idea is the same, keeping the guests in the building within Steidl's reach. Steidl employs a chef, Chef Rudy is his name, who comes in each day to cook. Chef Rudy is no hack and his lunches, naturally, were eventually compiled into a recipe book called Schmatz! Lunches at Steidl, printed in 2010. Bruce Davidson and Mitch Epstein,



among others, shot for the book. There was also a book on the kitchen table were guests left their comments. It was turned to a page where Bob Dylan scribbled a thank you note. File under only-at-Steidl. My brain agog from all the visual stimulation, I wolfed down my vegetarian pasta as Feltrinelli and Walther exchanged anecdotes.

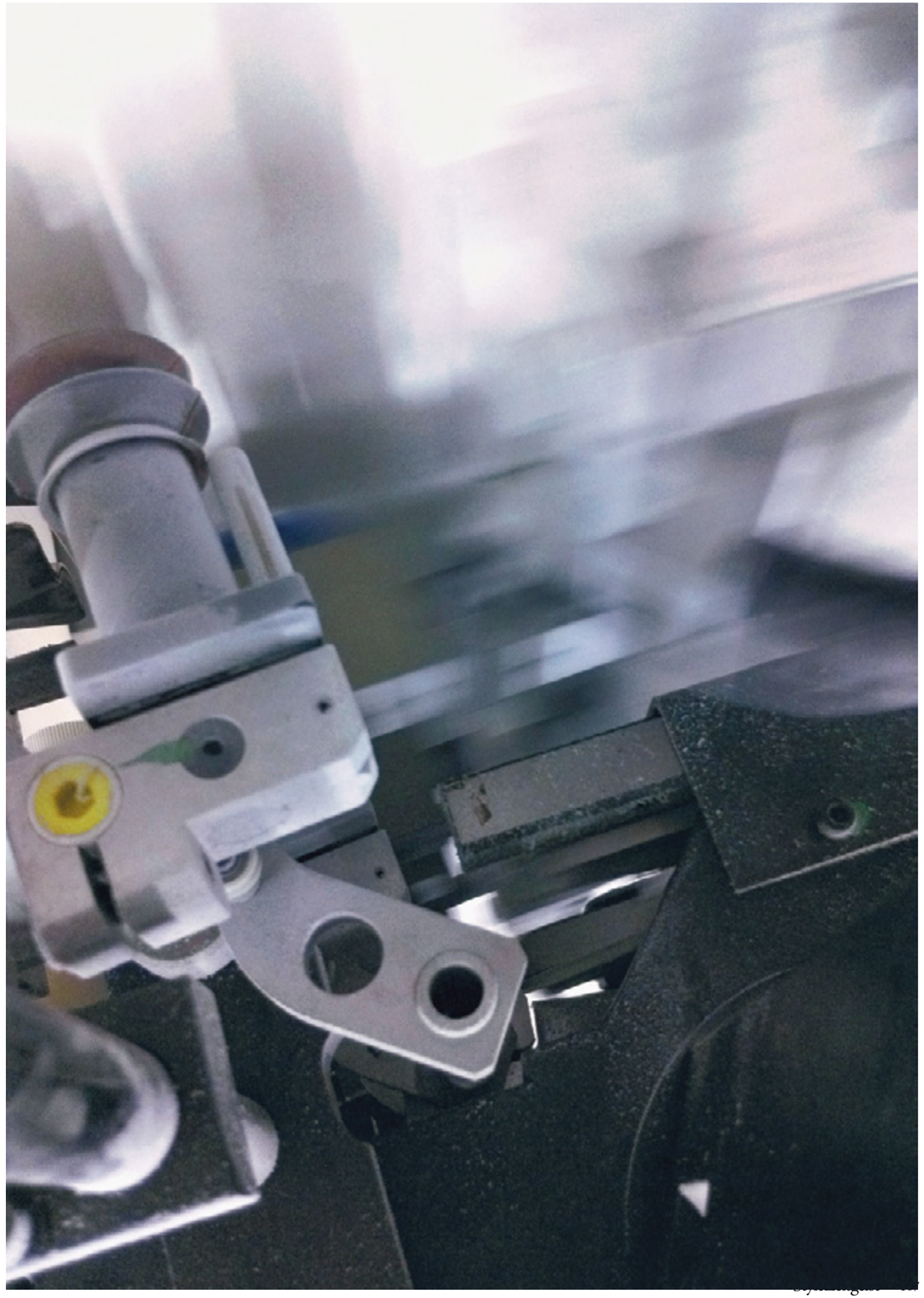
I spent the rest of the day with Claudia, Steidl's PR person who is also an editor. She guided me through the complex. We stopped by the design floor and saw several designers busy with laying out books on their computer screens. Next to them stood long file cases where raw paper layouts of past books were stored. We looked through some of them, and I must say, it was impressive to look at the raw material for iconic books like Bruce Davidson's Subway.

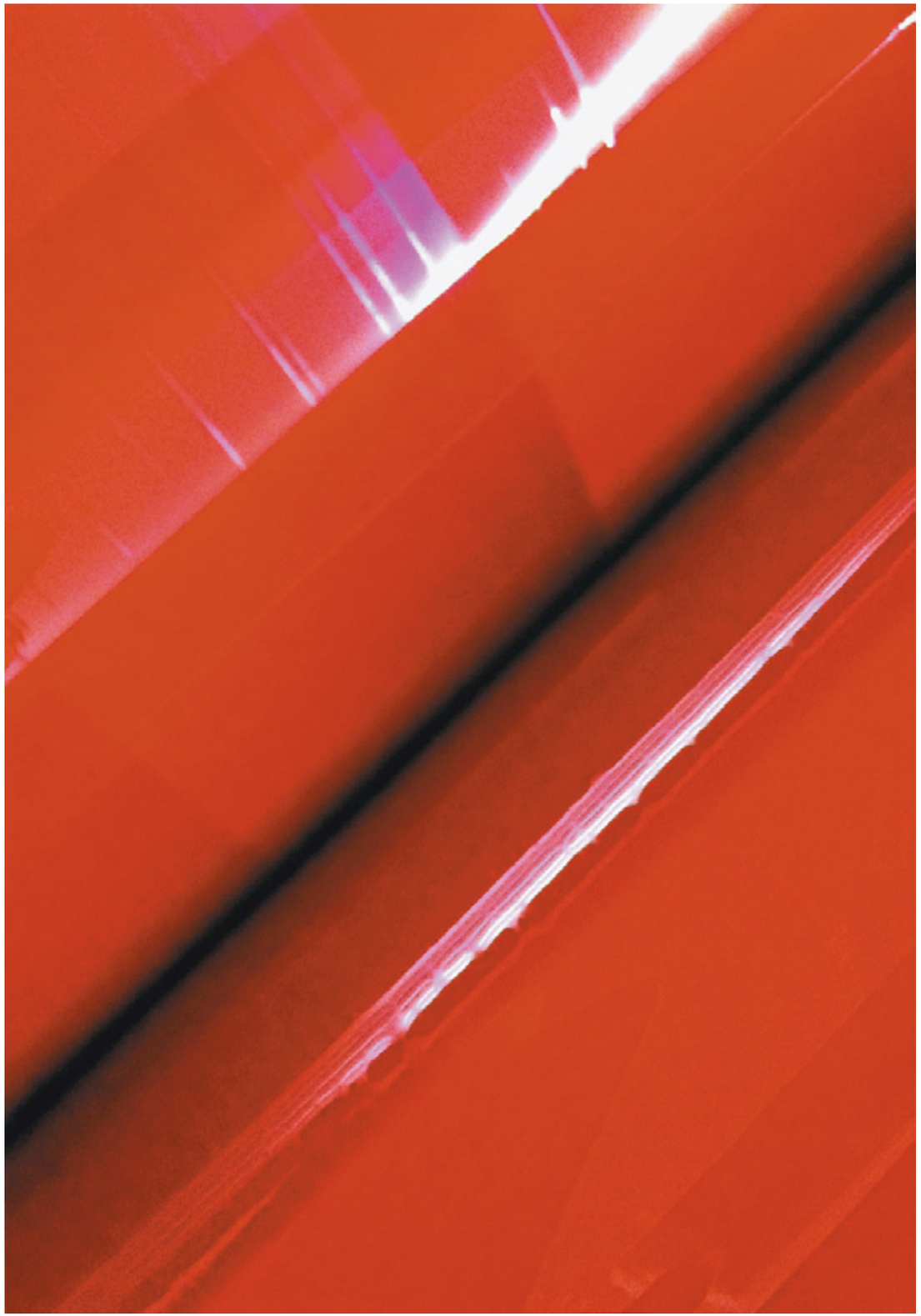
The heart of the operation is on the ground floor where printing happens. The printing press takes up two thirds of the floor. It was six days before the Chanel haute couture show, and the rest of the floor was stacked with Chanel printed material – press kits, pamphlets, and so on – on long sheets of paper that were ready to be cut and bound. The two small printers to the side were printing Chanel "Little Black Jacket"-posters. When we walked by the press was quiet and its operators were adding the cyan, magenta, and yellow inks that make up the primary color palette used for printing.

Next, we went across the street to the storage area where a truck was being loaded with books to be taken to the warehouse. Piles of books were spread around its perimeter. One held packaging for the Paper Passion perfume, which Steidl developed with Karl Lagerfeld and the perfumer Geza Schoen in 2011 for Wallpaper magazine.

On the other side was a gorgeous collection of Gunter Grass's work in a slipcase. It kind of made me wish I knew German.

After the truck was loaded, we headed to the edge of Göttingen, which took us all of ten minutes. The nondescript warehouse was filled with printing paper on one side and with books on the other side. I milled around amongst the bookshelves before helping Claudia to find some books that were to be brought back to the small warehouse for shipping, and we rode back into town.





4

I left the next morning for Paris.

Exactly seven days later, as promised, I was at the opening of Lagerfeld's photography exhibit called "The Glory of Water," sponsored by Fendi. The furrier is now involved in restoration of the numerous medieval fountains in Rome. To promote the project Lagerfeld went to Rome to photograph the fountains. He shot using two of the oldest photography techniques – daguerreotype and platinotype. Steidl came with Lagerfeld to over see the shoots. He did all the printing and the setup of the exhibit. This fall Steidl is also releasing the book by the same name.

The exhibit was held on the river Seine in the shadow of The Pont Alexandre III, across the street from the Grand Palais, Lagerfeld's venue of choice for Chanel's shows. A huge black four-room tent was set up right on the river's bank. The event was exactly what you would imagine – black limos and minibuses emblazoned with Fendi logos excreting their haute bourgeois contents, champagne flowing

The photos were brilliant. The daguerreotypes had the warmth that direct exposure gives them (there is no negative in this technique, the light is project directly onto paper). And that certain metallic sheen and a deep tonal range that platinotypes have did wonders for the other photos.

The tent was pitch-black and each photo was directly lit from above, the light beams reflecting from the photos down. As he walked me through the exhibit, Steidl explained that lighting is extremely important and that most galleries and museums get it wrong. I asked him about the daguerreotype process he worked with for the exhibit. He smiled and said, "Some things are too simple to explain. It's better to keep their mystery."

We moved around the exhibit freely. Except for a few people, no one seemed to have any idea who Steidl was, nor were they going to waste their attention on some guy dressed in shabby jeans and a plain dark jacket. This seemed to suit Steidl perfectly well. We were still examining the photos when excited half-whispers of "Karl! Karl!" broke out all around us. The crowd headed for the door. There was Lagerfeld, in his customary sunglasses, framed by bodyguards, stopping to pose for photos with this person or that. He eventually made his way inside. As Steidl walked up to Lagerfeld, one of the bodyguards blocked his way – half a second later he moved aside apologetically. Another bodyguard had intervened and said, "He is okay, he belongs to the family." Karl Lagerfeld and Steidl greeted each other briefly before Lagerfeld turned to oblige , Bernard Arnault, owner of Fendi and LVHM.

There was nothing more to do, so I said goodbye to Steidl. As I was leaving, Steidl caught up to me outside. We turned to lookback at the glittery crowd and he said, "Actually, I think it's time for me to leave, too."