



# Inside the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation

A conversation with  
Anne-Marie Beckmann

by Max Houghton

The Art Collection Deutsche Börse is perhaps the lesser-known relative of the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize, held each year at The Photographers' Gallery, London, commanding much debate and discussion over what the shortlist says about the state of contemporary photography. In undertaking a trip to Frankfurt to see the collection *in situ* and to meet its distinguished Curator and Director of both the Art Collection and the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation, Anne-Marie Beckmann, I am given real insight into the influence of one woman's remarkable vision.

MAX HOUGHTON: A Richard Mosse *Heat Map* is the first image I see on the way to the generous gallery space in the Deutsche Börse Cube Gallery in Eschborn, a space that I imagine as the beating heart of this steel and glass world. The next image to catch my eye is a wonderfully lugubrious portrait of Gordon Parks, taken in 1992 in New York by German press photographer Barbara Klemm, which serves as a jumping-off point for the current exhibition of Parks' work, *I Am You: Selected Works 1942–1978*. The collection owns seven Parks images, and later I am struck by how these works epitomize the humanitarian ethos of much of the work selected by Beckmann over the past 18 years.

An art historian, Beckmann's eye was trained in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century art and architecture, but her interest in photography manifested longer ago as a child growing up in Germany:

ANNE-MARIE BECKMANN:

I remember my initial moments spending time with photographs; my parents had a book, *The Best of Life*, from 1973. I see myself lying on the bed looking again and again. I remember understanding photography as history and politics but also as movie stars, fashion, animals and nature. Film played a vital role too, I was very cinematic. Photographic imagery shaped my whole youth; it was foundational.

MH: This early interest in the photographic image and innate understanding that photography could span many genres, would sow the seeds for an original and consuming passion, which today, is the driving force behind one of Europe's most renowned collections. Beckmann is personally responsible for each purchase, and devotes countless hours to her decision-making process. She was lucky to have had a superb mentor, whose decision it was to make the collection exclusively photographic:

AMB: Jean-Christophe Ammann a Swiss man, who died in 2015, was Director of the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt. He had been showing photography in the Museum in a period when art was art and photography was something else. He was always very open to photography. Then, there was the rise of the Bechers' school, as well as Ruff and Gursky and photography came into focus. His ideas grew in connection with the building in line with the *Kunst am Bau* policy in Germany; if you construct a new building here, you are expected to create a piece of public art at the same time. Jean-Christophe had the idea to start the collection and focus on contemporary photography, and that is when I came into the story.

In the beginning, I could not have been described as an expert of contemporary photography. If that had been specified, I would not have even applied for the job. I was very lucky to be there at the right moment, with my background as an art historian, and my experience in dealing with art in a corporate context at Lufthansa. I would say the first two years were where I learnt a lot about the medium. Jean-Christophe was truly a mentor.

MH: I was intrigued by the idea of someone classically trained, working in corporate art, having their heart stolen by this imposter medium. Whose work, I wondered, absolutely captivated her? As she pauses, I can sense she is time-traveling back to when she first saw these images:

AMB: A work that really deeply impressed me at an early stage was the series *Wüstungen* – or *Desertions* by German photographer Inge Rambow. Just after the wall came down she toured the open-cast lignite mines in Saxony and Brandenburg, in her VW bus, curious

to see what she had not been able to see until that moment. She took a big Dearborn plate camera, which conferred authority, taking pictures in this region where photography had been forbidden under the socialist regime. The visual scene was striking, but so were the many different smells emanating from the mines. I know that smell too because my Grandmother lived in eastern German, and I used to visit as a kid. That was really an experience.

This is really a special series, which is largely unknown, and the only major body of work of the photographer's life.

MH: It was fascinating to hear about this work from East Germany, and I sensed a specific understanding in Beckmann, particular to Germans who had a familial affiliation with the East; almost a different reading of history and its consequences. The collection is enriched by this sensibility, as though it has a duty to reconstitute other histories. As well as photographs by Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer and Thomas Ruff, we find lesser-known work of a new generation of German photographers like Jessica Backhaus and Florian Albrecht-Schoeck. The collection extends internationally by way of Araki, Malick Sidibe, Pentti Sammallahti, and Diane Arbus, to pull out a few names, and is probably 70/30 male/female at present. Beckmann by no means strives to tick any boxes to ensure a fully 'inclusive' corpus, but at the same time, her eye is continually seeking, and is original in its focus. She is also highly attuned to contemporary trends and direction in photography, though she neither leads nor follows them:



AMB: I am looking on different continents and for different cultures all the time, but it's the best work that matters. It doesn't follow, if Deutsche Börse has an Asian initiative that I must therefore be buying Asian art. This is not the way it works.

I'm becoming more and more sensitive to the subject of women in photography and the opportunities that are open to them. This is something I definitely have in mind, for example, when I'm teaching at the art school here in Frankfurt, and I make a point of showing and supporting female artists. It's very important to make sure we discuss female photographers equally within education – this is where it starts.

It's important to note that when I meet each artist, it is always after I have purchased the work, so I am keeping my mind completely away from everything. It is the body of work that matters, on its own terms.

MH: Beckmann's commitment to female photographers is evident, not least in her friendship with the very talented photojournalist and conflict photographer Anja Niedringhaus, who was shot and killed in Afghanistan in 2014. Beckmann created the book *At War* and an exhibition of 85 images before the photographer's untimely death. These images from Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan are a stark reminder of the prevalence and horror of very recent wars, and their vivid presence is the antithesis of any notion of 'corporate' art. The way in which the work operates in the building is palpable, radiating its light in every direction. It occurs to me that chief function of

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this corporate collection is to inject life and emotion into this otherwise sterile environment. The power of photography, its emotional power specifically, inhabits a different register. Exposure to work that tells stories of environmental and human devastation like Phillip Jones Griffiths’ unforgettable images from Vietnam, or Julian Röder’s work, *Summits*, which offers a damning critique of globalization – a subject closer to home. The Deutsche Börse staff are certainly interested. As lunch time approaches, the gallery starts to fill with groups of colleagues who have chosen to spend their precious break looking at art.

AMB: The collection is open for the public, but is mainly for the employees, We are bringing societal concerns into their work environment – here and also at our other international locations... It is really there to open people’s minds and to help people learn to read images. We were showing the Paul Fusco images of the Robert Kennedy funeral train during Obama’s election campaign when he was also travelling the US by train, and people were suddenly talking about politics at lunch time. There are public collections and private collections, and we are in between. Unlike the private collector, I am not simply buying what I like or what my bank advisor might wish. But at the same time, I don’t have the public task, like museums, which have to collect the most important artists of that time.

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The collection is not based on increasing financial value. The commitment that Deutsche Börse made to photography is huge; it’s not just that they allowed me to build up this collection for 18 years without any restrictions and to transfer it into a foundation in 2015. We have a national and international collection network, and we meet and people talk. This is often when I realize how much trust they put in my work. We were lucky to begin with Jean-Christophe, who was a well-known personality, who gave his initial input and hallmark of how we do it. It is a museum-quality collection. To have cheerful decorations... this is not what we do. We want to be challenging in our bringing together various perspectives of the world, which sometimes also includes war photography and other difficult themes. For instance, we collaborated with Jules Spinatsch in 2012. Every minute for 24 hours, one image was taken, transmitted, printed and assembled in a display at Fotomuseum Winterthur. He created images from the stock exchange trading floor and transferred one kind of

speculation into another – speculating on the image. It created a huge site-specific installation of 1440 images. We also own Gursky images of the stock exchange, and a surreal series by another German artist, Martin Liebscher. He takes hundreds, sometimes thousands, of images of himself and puts them together so the room is crowded with faces, all of which are his own. It has a very destabilizing effect.

MH: The connections that run through the core of the collection are rich and fascinating. Of course the public-facing and best-known element of Deutsche Börse’s relationship with photography is the annual prize, among the most coveted in contemporary photography, with past winners including Boris Mikhailov, Juergen Teller, Rineke Dijkstra and Trevor Paglen. I had assumed the winning work would gain automatic entry into the collection, but Beckmann explains why this is not the case:

AMB: The prize is a very important award to raise awareness of photography. What I like about the prize is that it’s not a lifetime achievement, it’s not a talent award but it’s about what is happening now. It can be a book, a small gallery exhibition, a huge retrospective – all these can be nominated. There are more and more books now and they can be influential, even more so than a retrospective of a well-known artist. One year we shortlisted Stephen Shore’s republished *Uncommon Places* – it is an old body of work but the fresh new printing raised awareness and, for younger generations, it is still very important. He was not the winner but it was important to see him on the shortlist. This is what the prize is about, to see what direction artists can follow, and how they use the medium. This year’s winner was Dana Lixenberg: classical black and white portraiture, wonderful prints, an amazing haptic. It’s great to see how a classical silver gelatin print can have so much impact and still be so important. I have the feeling there’s a shift, something to do with new media, that work has to be off the wall, there has to be something in the room. I work with students to see how they deal with these techniques and it’s amazing what they do with them; it’s wonderful. But it is dependent on the body of work, sometimes it doesn’t need any embellishment.

In relation to the collection, we stay absolutely open that good images can be found everywhere, not only on museum or gallery walls. This is why we have a lot of documentary work, because people did not think of this work as art. It is very important to look again and again, because there are images which attract you at first sight and are very seductive, but after a second or a third look, it’s gone. What I am looking for are images of timeless power.

MH: While of course there is great prestige attached to being nominated for the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize, and naturally in being part of the art collection, I am curious as to the benefit to a financial institution. Much attention is directed towards the idea of ‘art-washing’, as seen in the Liberate Tate campaign in the UK, in which creative activism offered a strident critique of the oil company BP’s affiliation with London’s leading art museums. While any country’s stock exchange is in itself neither ethical nor unethical, it is, symbolically the nerve centre of capitalist economy. And photography is a commodity like any other. Beckmann, though attuned to such criticism, sees photography as the primary beneficiary in the relationship, as consolidating it as the preeminent art form of our time:

AMB: When I started working with art in a corporate context, everything was less professionalized. In the beginning, at Deutsche Börse, no one would take me seriously; they would refer to me as the ‘art lady’ and the art world would not take me seriously, and referred to me as the ‘Deutsche Börse lady’. That was a difficult start... It can be called art-washing as you say, in terms of spending a lot of money and playing the role of the patron, which can certainly be an issue when it comes to corporate engagement. However you would not be very successful with it in long terms. Of course, the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation, is absolutely present and for 18 years we have been allowed to build this collection, making an investment, and they(our executive board) have never tried to influence the buying, and have never asked to sell any work when its value has increased. Now it is a Foundation, they cannot sell any work anyway. The Foundation has a minimum running time of ten years. This is really a huge commitment because the company is not very big compared to other DAX-listed (index for the biggest listed companies in Germany) companies. This shows that Deutsche Börse is doing it out of conviction, and at the same time, it gives them the opportunity to show a different aspect of their own corporate culture.

It was not easy to get this exhibition space; many other departments had their eye on it. But we were given the space and I feel this commitment to showing photography to everyone who passes through Deutsche Börse is not so widely known. Artists like their work entering into our collection because they know it will be visible and they trust it will be displayed in an appropriate way. I have managed to gain this trust from the art world. By now, we have become a regular venue for touring exhibitions and works from the collection are being presented at other institutions as well. If people get to know the Foundation for the first time, I hope they think, ‘Oh wow, I did not think it would be like that.’ I would count that as a success.

MH: Over lunch, we discuss the exciting collaboration with Foam Talent, deepening an existing commitment to supporting young artists and increasing the international scope of work championed by Deutsche Börse. We also discuss Beckmann’s invaluable archive of recorded interviews with every living photographer in the collection. I am left with an abiding sense that she believes photography has a power to touch people, to connect with them at an unconscious level. She also has an understanding of photography as a tool of not just vision, but perception:

AMB: It is a medium that reflects on the complexity of life. It’s a world where, more and more, we think and remember in images and less in words, which is a huge shift from a few hundred years ago...

It takes a long time to both make and collect good work. A picture can be taken very quickly, especially in conflict zones, when it is necessary to work fast. But in the way it has been taken, the understanding of the moment, the way it has been captured, the expertise, pressing the button is only the last action. We collect work that is substantial, which carries within it what the photographer has seen. It is their perception – a moment, a scene, a society, the whole world, sometimes – it is all in one image. This is really the fascination of photography: it’s about us and the way we live. Photography helps us to perceive the condition of mankind.

ANNE-MARIE BECKMANN (b. 1966 DE) is the Curator of the Art Collection Deutsche Börse and the Director of the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation, based in Frankfurt. She studied Art History with a special interest in twentieth century art and architecture. Alongside her role at The Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Beckmann is also very involved with other curatorial projects such as the *Ray Festival* in which Beckmann will co-curate all of the shows, with the exhibition at the Deutsche Börse and has curated shows at C/O Berlin.

MAX HOUGHTON (b. 1970, UK) is a writer, editor and curator in the field of contemporary documentary photography. She is course leader of the MA Photojournalism and Documentary Photography at London College of Communication, University of Arts, London. She authored *Firecrackers: Female Photographers Now* published by Thames & Hudson, and hosts regular talks in London and abroad.

LUCAS FOGLIA (b. 1983, US) is an American photographer. His work has been widely exhibited in the United States and in Europe, and also in the permanent collections of museums including the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Art Collection Deutsche Börse. Foglia has just published his third book *Human Nature*, by Nazraeli Press (2017). In 2018 the work will be exhibited at Foam Fotografiemuseum and Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago.