

THINKING THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY – A WORKING PRINCIPLE OF THE ARTIST COUPLE KORFMANN-BODENMANN

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FROM FIRST WORD TO A VEHICLE OF MEANING

When it comes to their working methods, many leading photographers—both nationally and internationally—would likely agree on one thing: “Nothing is without the word.” Though Biblical in its origination, this statement is widely accepted as a commonplace truth. It marks the artistic foundations for many photographers and photographer couples since the nineteenth century—at least for those who do not rely purely on visual experiences, but instead build their work on a “literary idea,” which is by no means always the case.

This principle applies in a unique way to the collaborative work *Through Different Lenses* by Sabina and Kenneth Korfmann-Bodenmann. Each project in this extensive photographic series—which the couple has rigorously pursued since 2019, and which now includes over 16,000 working images—begins not with an image but with a carefully articulated “idea” formed in dialogue. As early as the 1930s, Raoul Hausmann and Werner Gräff emphasized that a “literary idea” could be “effectively expressed” only “through a clear formal language.”¹ That dual requirement shapes the entire artistic practice of this couple.

Before they turn to the precise orchestration of light using the camera as their only “tool,”² the two artists undertake in-depth discussions and debates—exploring a broad range of ideas, themes, opinions, and conceptual frameworks, many of them rooted in contemporary issues. After thorough research, this exchange typically results in a single word or pithy phrase, which eventually becomes the title of a photo portfolio. From that point forward, their process is unwavering: every portfolio idea has, without exception, been realized.

This method echoes the age-old tradition of forgoing an original title and opening a text instead with its very first words—the “incipit.”

Even the Gospel of John alludes to this practice and to the special role of light when it says: “All things were made by him [*logos*]; and without him [*logos*]

was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men.”

In a secular analogy to this principle, the titles of the thematically focused portfolios are not just headers but are meant to function as true incipits. While it may seem natural—though not essential—to invoke Erwin Panofsky’s famous study *Idea*, what matters more is that the artist couple Korfmann-Bodenmann seeks to open the viewer’s eyes to a new way of seeing photography—as something that carries meaning. From a historiographical point of view, this intention finds a strong parallel in a classic of art history: *Mittelalterliche Architektur als Bedeutungsträger*, the influential 1951 volume by Günter Bandmann (1917–1975). As noted on the back cover of the 1998 reissue from Gebrüder Mann Verlag, Bandmann made a pioneering attempt “to do justice to the very fact so characteristic of medieval architecture: that the art of building—a particular floor plan, a vault, a column, a gallery—possesses a specific meaning, and that shaping this meaning in a clear and compelling way was the foremost concern of the patrons, realized through the hands of the artists.” The artist couple Korfmann-Bodenmann is not familiar with Bandmann’s book, yet their thoughtful and precise pursuit of meaningful contemporary photography ineluctably brings Bandmann’s concept of the “vehicle of meaning” to mind.

FROM INDIVIDUATION TO EMANCIPATION

By the early twentieth century at least, photography had already begun offering artists a way to express themselves in deeply individual terms. Curators and scholars started focusing on artist couples at least as early as the 1980s, if not earlier. At that time, Sandor Kuthy explored “artistic relationships” at the Kunstmuseum Bern, organizing successive exhibitions on Camille Claudel and Auguste Rodin, Sophie Taeuber and Jean Arp, and Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock. Today, literature on artist couples in the visual arts, photography, architecture, and design is both extensive and nuanced. From this, one point has emerged with particular clarity: the identity of photographic artists rests, in part, on preserving creative independence, allowing “the photographer’s subjectivity [to be] expressed [...]. As in painting, the photographer’s ideas and their personal feelings should elevate and liberate the modern medium of photography from all constraints of industrial society and capitalism.”³

In their collaborative work, Sabina Korfmann-Bodenmann and Kenneth Korfmann do not treat the medium of photography simply as a tool for conveying individual ideas and thoughts. They use it as a means of dialogue to realize

themselves artistically—both as individuals and as a couple—through a process grounded in dialogical thought. Their notion of artistic self-realization is explicitly collective. It takes shape dialectically, in a mode that develops both personal and shared creative potential and leads to the realization of thematic photographic projects. Practical collaboration, intellectual exchange, and—last but not least—the sheer pleasure of thinking are central to this process. The aim is always to understand and realize the self in relation to the other—not to isolate or exclude the other. The motivation for such a practice comes, in the sense of Erich Fromm and Maslow’s humanistic psychology, from the “pleasure of production, creation, and growth of insight.”⁴ Through this shared approach to self-realization, the artist couple raises photography to a new emancipatory level—one that can be described in Maslow’s words:

“At the level of self-actualizing, many dichotomies become resolved, opposites are seen to be unities [...]. For self-actualizing people, there is a strong tendency for selfishness and unselfishness to fuse into a higher, superordinate unity. Work tends to be the same as play; vocation and avocation become the same thing. When duty is pleasant and pleasure is fulfillment of duty, then they lose their separateness and oppositeness.”⁵

FROM CONCEPT TO REALIZATION

The technical requirements for realizing the project *Through Different Lenses* have been described at length elsewhere.⁶ What follows here focuses solely on the intellectual process of realization—from the first idea to the finished portfolio. For Sabina and Kenneth Korfmann-Bodenmann, this process follows a fundamentally dialogical method of working, which unfolds in nine steps:

1. Photographic project ideas are generated continuously through brainstorming, discussion, and research, and are recorded in simple lists—without explanation, definition, or justification. These lists function as a kind of private correspondence between the two artists and are intended solely for internal use. In their language, they resemble highly condensed notes—so compressed that they are largely unintelligible to outsiders and read more like experiments in surrealist literature. A more recent example of such a list looks as follows: “Nihilismus / Konformismus (Eingezäunt/Begrenzt, Stereotype Bauten, Fussballstadien, Cruise Ships, Rheinfahrtschiffe, Touristenbusse, Flughäfen, Messen, Tattoos, Nailstudios, Reihenhäuser, Kirchen, Sneakers, Foodchains) / Classic / Optimism & Pessimism / Balconies / 6.00 – 8.00pm / Lost Souls (Dörfer, Fabri-

ken, Menschenmassen) / Lux & Tenebris (Doppelportfolio) / Tod und Verklärung (Zeitpunkt der Seelenumwandlung eines Toten, um in das Jenseits zu treten) / Chaos / Dead-End / Vivere / Liberalismus / Am Boden / Macht – Wer regiert die Welt (Geld, Wissen, Religion, Politik) / Anima / Passione (Passion) / Dignitatem (Dignity) / From Dawn to Dusk / Intelligenza (verschiedene Formen der Intelligenz) / Monotonie / Movements / Tradition & (R)evolution / Imperfektion / Integration (Orthodoxy/Christianity) / Uniformity / Confusion / Distractions / ‘Staunen’ / Decline / War & Peace / Tempus / Secret Places (2. Juni 2025).”

2. A final portfolio theme is selected through a mutual decision, based on the entries in the lists.

3. The strategy for execution is then developed by selecting locations and objects for the photo campaign, while the forewords for the portfolio are written individually. For the portfolio currently still in progress, “AI—Artificial,” the working notes are as follows: “Fotografie / Glühbirne / Elektrizität / Farbe / Süsstoff / Zucker Rapperswiler Zuckermühle/Schweiz Zucker / Benzin: Auhafen/ Pratteln / Kosmetika / Softdrink (Büchse/Flasche): Coca Cola / Brütisellen / Waschpulver / Kunststoff (Rohre, Gefässe, Kleidung) / Medizin (Tablette, Kapsel) / Kunststoff-/Plastik / Kunstdünger/-Erde / IT (Computer Key-Board, TV, Film) / Telephone / Auto / Flugzeug: Runway 34/Opfikon / Rad/Pneu / Buchdruck/Kompass/Kunststeine/Künstliche Pflanzen/Stahl: Auhafen/Schienntransport: Auhafen / Gartencenter Meier / Shopping Centers: Mediamarkt Dietlikon/Volketswil; Ikea Dietlikon/Spreitenbach / Church / Payment Systems (Banks, et al) / Varia: Laufental /La Ferette / Varia: Balsthal / Liestal & Umgebung / Varia Basel: Schweiz Energie / Birsfelden – Wasserwerk / Milano: Varia / Region Bischofszell: Recyclinganlage / Frauenfeld: Schweiz Zucker, Ricoter / Aarberg: Schweiz Zucker / Niederlenz: Schreinerei (Wohlen, Muri, Wettswil a. A.) / Dornbirn, Lindau, Bregenz / Schaffhausen / D-Land Grenze bis Lörrach / Weil am Rhein.”

4. During the main phase of each project, between twenty and forty potential subjects are explored at an equal number of locations—sometimes in the home country, sometimes abroad—through more or less elaborate field excursions. The two photographers are always present in the same clearly defined area but work independently of each other on-site.

5. After each shoot, the day’s results are reviewed: first individually, with unsatisfactory images deleted immediately; then jointly, where the remaining photographs are assessed together. The files are then uploaded from the camera cards to hard drives. This backup is handled by Alex Goldsmith at Tricolor Bildproduktion.

6. Once a sufficient number of digital images have been collected, a preliminary selection process begins. Kenneth Korfmann reviews all the images again and produces rush copies. Sabina Korfmann-Bodenmann reviews her work on her computer monitor and makes rush copies only of her so-called “top twelve candidates”; she also photographs her screen using a mobile phone and repeatedly reevaluates her images in that way.

7. Each thematic project spans two to six months. Every portfolio that has been defined as a project has been carried through to completion. In the editing process, an average of one hundred to three hundred images are considered per portfolio—not including deleted shots.

8. To make the final selection of twelve photographs—this number carries no symbolic weight—photocopies are arranged on the floor in a specific sequence, so the photographers, working as a couple, can discuss and review the order in dialogue with each other.

9. Before the portfolio is finalized—once again handled technically by Alex Goldsmith—all images undergo a final review.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of how one assesses the working methods or artistic output of this photographer couple from a critical standpoint, the most fitting methodological approach for scholarly analysis would be one grounded in production aesthetics—summed up by the notion of photography in the making. This is reinforced by examining documents such as the worksheets presented here for the portfolio “Principia Mathematica.” These materials provide essential data on the time-frame, dating, and identification of locations and objects (figs. 1–4, pp. XVII–XX), as well as insight into image selection, compositional strategies, guiding ideas, and discarded content (fig. 5, p. XXI). That said, the deeper, dialogical collaboration of this couple—focused on photography as a vehicle of meaning—could only be reconstructed in detail if all discarded images were made accessible and if enough information on the motivations and intentions were collected, ideally through an oral history.⁷ Only then could it be made visually clear that none of these images simply depicts “what we would have seen if we had been standing at the camera’s position at the moment of exposure.”⁸

Two key points can be emphasized for now. First, that Sabina and Kenneth Korfmann-Bodenmann, in their expansive project *Through Different Lenses*, create photographs governed by an “attentional structure”⁹ determined by the incipit, which invites viewers to perceive the images in the way they were con-

ceived. And second, that their creative process is rooted in a balanced and deeply fulfilling relationship between two spouses. It is not an abstractly intellectual, desexualized notion of creation, nor the familiar, historically entrenched model of male solitude and monastic retreat, nor the sublimation of bodily or emotional needs that give rise to the impulses of their artistic creativity.

NOTES

- 1 See Wolfgang Kemp, *Theorie der Fotografie II: 1912–1945* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1999), 176.
- 2 “Anyone who thinks cameras naturally generate unmediated images has lost sight of what these instruments really are—or even that they are instruments to begin with.” See Joel Snyder, “Sehen darstellen,” in Wolfgang Kemp, *Theorie der Fotografie III: 1945–1980* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1999), 281. Refer to the technical details accompanying each photograph in this publication.
- 3 Ibid., XXIII.
- 4 Abraham H. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, 2nd ed. (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1968), 32.
- 5 Ibid., 207.
- 6 See Wolfgang F. Kersten, “From Digital Camera to Hybrid Print,” in *ibid.*, *Photographic Thought Pieces: Kenneth C. & Sabina R. Korfmann-Bodenmann: “Through Different Lenses,” Sixteen Portfolios, 2019–2022*, with essays by Bettina Gockel and Roland Scotti, *Art & Photography 4* (Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net, 2024), 521–529.
- 7 This will be demonstrated using the portfolio “Nebulae,” created in 2024, through a selection of roughly three hundred working photographs in the forthcoming volume *Photographic Thought Pieces III*, scheduled for publication in 2026.
- 8 Snyder 1999 (see note 2), 280.
- 9 See *ibid.*

