With Walter at Scalo 1994–1999

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Funny how often Walter comes back to haunt you. In March 2018 I went to an exhibition at the Barbican Art Gallery in London. Called *Another Kind of Life: Photography on the Margins,* it was made up of works by twenty photographers whose work dated from the 1950s to the near-present and their subjects — bikers, runaways, transvestites, drug addicts, hippies, teddy boys, the homeless – were people whose lives were lived outside what are commonly referred to as "social norms". Though the works were situated in the past, the show's theme was clearly intended to synch with the current waves of feminist radicalism and gender fluidity. All this, I thought, would have been close to Walter's heart, but more specifically, among the photographs on display, a good number came from series he'd brought together, edited and published.

One of the sections that made the strongest impression, judging from the crush in the gallery and the reactions of people I talked to later, was Jim Goldberg's *Raised By Wolves*, published by Scalo in 1995. More than twenty years later, the emotional intensity still came off the scrawled notes of Echo (Beth) and Tweeky Dave , the teenage runaways Goldberg spent the best part of six years following on the streets of Los Angeles and San Francisco between 1987 and 1993. The whole story was laid out as a massive collection of scribbled notes, Polaroids, items of clothing, skateboards, along with Goldberg's black and white portraits taken in squats, in street shelters and shooting galleries, as the lives grow more crazy and more squalid. Photographers rarely go this far. Goldberg became a lifeline for the pair and some of their friends, who called him up, spinning him stories he readily admitted were probably lies, but still he responded. Sometimes he took them in, tried to get them hospitalised, willingly crossing the line between their lives and his own. The whole thing is so depressing, so sad, so ultimately terminal…and yet it remains one of the most closely observed, sympathetic accounts, in words and photographs, of this kind of desperate urban existence. By the end, when Goldberg finally meets the families (Beth gets pregnant, she thinks to Doug, a violent, abusive junkie; and her mother comes to stay with Goldberg during the birth; Tweeky Dave dies of liver disease, hepatitis, kidney failure, leaving Goldberg to organise his funeral), you see the painful inability to comprehend what has happened to their children, or why.

Elsewhere in the Barbican show were Boris Mikhailov's portraits of *bomzhes*, the homeless men and women he found in Kharkov, in the Ukraine, where he had lived and worked under the Soviet regime. Mikhailov, b. 1938, had been a technical engineer and taken photographs as a hobby. In the late 1960s, the KGB condemned his photographs as pornographic, and he had to give up his job as an engineer. But he continued taking photographs, and by the late 1980s they began to be

exhibited in galleries in Europe and America. In 1998, Scalo published *Unfinished Dissertation*, a collection of small black and white snapshots arranged as a kind of personal archive with epigrammatic texts scribbled on the margins of each page. Then the following year, Scalo published *Case History*, which would be one of the defining photobooks of the post-Soviet period. "Returning home," Mikhailov wrote, "the city had acquired an almost modern European centre. Much had been restored. Life became more beautiful and active outwardly (with a lot of foreign advertisements) – simply a shining wrapper. But I was shocked by the big number of homeless (before they had not been there). The rich and the homeless — the new classes of the new society —this was, as we had been taught, one of the features of capitalism. "

At the time there was a lot of concern about the fact that Mikhailov had paid these men and women to pose for him, to take off their clothes and display their sagging, ulcerated, swollen bodies, which served all too easily as a metaphor for the political system that was falling apart around them. When Mikhailov's pictures were exhibited in the gallery on the top floor of the Scalo building in Zurich, they were printed about 6ft high and confronted visitors from every wall so there was no escape, however upsetting or offensive people might have found them. "When I was first working on the book," Mikhailov wrote, "I suddenly felt that many people were going to die at that place. And the *bomzhes* had to die in the first rank, like heroes — as if their lives protected the others' lives. And I took the pictures displaying naked people with their things in hands like people going to the gas chambers. They agreed to pose for a so-called historical theme. They agreed that their photographs would be published in magazines for others to learn about their lives."

Showing people things they had never encountered before, or shied away from, was Walter's aim, you might even say mission. He wanted to challenge people, confront them, confuse them, widen their sphere of experience by visual means, so that at least by seeing it in photographs, they might understand just how much larger and more complicated the world really was. Some of his choices were questionable — there was a collectors' market for artworks that included naked women and he didn't mind tapping into it from time to time. But for the most part he thought showing photographs that challenged people's preconceptions could persuade the bigoted and the small-minded to see the world differently. "I'm an anthropologist" he used to say, "before a publisher", and he was. He was endlessly curious about people. He wanted to know how they behaved and why; what they did to each other and to themselves. As a publisher he probably followed the American anthropologist Ruth Benedict's famous definition, that "the purpose of anthropology is to make the world safe for human differences." And maybe growing up in a predominantly white, middle-class country made him more than usually conscious of how different the outside world could be.

When it came to his personal anthropology, he liked to think he had a superior psychological understanding of women, many of whom found him fascinating and difficult and challenging and childlike, perceptive and arrogant, intimate and distant, pretty much all at the same time. He was physically not so promising: tall, slender, even gawky, green-eyed and short-sighted behind small steel spectacles with greying corkscrew curls. But somehow it worked. Right from the get-go he was the product of opposing cultural influences: he was born to a Swiss father and an Italian mother. In his late teens, during the mid-1970s, he studied folklore, linguistics and German in Zurich and at the Free University in West Berlin. He would have been in Berlin around the time the German photographer Michael Schmidt established the *Werkstatt für Fotografie* at an adult education institute in Kreuzberg, where photographers from Germany and beyond could come together to discuss and show their work. Schmidt particularly wanted to attract the American landscape photographers whose work had been included in *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape,* the exhibition held at George Eastman House, in Rochester, New York, in 1975, photographers such as Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Frank Gohlke and Stephen Shore. Later, Baltz would come to Berlin to run workshops at the Werkstatt, as did John Gossage, Robert Cumming, Robert Heinecken, Tod Papageorge, the new director of graduate studies in Photography at Yale, and Ute Eskildsen, who would become the respected curator in charge of photography at the Folkwang Museum in Essen. In 1997, Documenta 6, the major art exhibition in Kassel, concentrated on photography and film, thereby showing photography within the context of contemporary art. I mention all this not because Walter was closely involved with it – I've no idea whether he was or not – but he always had a nose for the prevailing culture; and this was part of the backdrop to his early adult life.

Twenty years later, when Scalo published Michael Schmidt's post-unification book, *Ein-Heit* (*U-ni-ty* is the English title), which mixed his own photographs of Berlin with enlarged sections of newspaper imagery, political portraits, propaganda leaflets, contemporary portraits of Berlin teenagers, creating a personal visual memory of Germany's recent past, it was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York: "*U-ni-ty* merges two artistic traditions, treating photographs both as a medium for describing personal experience and as a vast, impersonal resource created by the mass media," MoMA explained. "In its entirety the exhibition explores the emotional weight of history, the power of ideological symbols and the relations of the individual to the body politic."

"Give me a photo book I can read like a novel," Walter used to say.

He was interested in both words and pictures and how to make them work together. In 1978, when he was 25, he'd begun to publish *Der Alltag (The Everyday)*, with the subtitle, "Sensations of the

Ordinary", a magazine based on conversations with people from everyday life. In 1990, *Der Alltag* had a massive publishing success with *Dumm und Dick* (Fat and Stupid), the autobiography of Rosemarie Buri, an ordinary German housewife, which sold well over 130,000 copies in German and made Mrs Buri a television personality. In 1983, Walter had helped Bice Curiger and Jacqueline Burckhardt set up the contemporary art magazine *Parkett*, which was published in English and German and opened offices in Zurich and New York. It celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2014, the year Walter died.

But by the end of the 1980s, photography was where Walter wanted to be. It wasn't surprisingly, really, He liked being at the centre of opposing forces, and ever since the 1960s photography had been in the creative vanguard, offering artists all manner of ways and means to extend it. Pop artists used popular imagery as a source for their work. Conceptual artists valued its comparative, serial qualities, and as a means of documenting their work. Artists such as Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman appropriated and parodied the tropes and clichés of photography itself. And where photojournalism and street photography had once been dominant models, now photographers turned to their own lives as subject-matter.

One of Walter's closest relationships was with the American photographer Nan Goldin, whose tender pictures of her close friends and lovers, of transvestites, gays, prostitutes and transsexuals in New York, were taken at a time when Aids was ravaging their community. In 1995 Scalo published, *The Other Side* Scalo, a book by Goldin and her friend David Armstrong, and the following year co-published with the Whitney Museum in New York, *I'll Be Your Mirror,* which covered the first 25 years of Goldin's work. It remains today a tribute to those who died as well as a moving personal history. Other photographers — Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Larry Sultan, Tina Barney— approached domestic life another way, restaging everyday moments as tableaux for the camera, blurring the lines between truth and fiction. The imminent shift to digital photography — which offered a whole new level of creation, manipulation, sophistication—would blur those boundaries even more. At the same time the art market was opening up to photography as a medium that could be exhibited and sold to their clients with a similar gearing to contemporary art.

One person stood out in his importance to the way the understanding of a photography would change in the future: the Canadian Jeff Wall. From the 1970s his photographs and his writing began to influence the way photography was made and perceived. He worked in single, powerful photographs that from their conception were intended to be presented and studied as large, self-contained art works on a gallery wall. His influence spread quickly — not always successfully judging from the surfeit of large-scale colour works that would eventually flood galleries and museums – but in Dusseldorf, the students of Professor Bernd Becher, notably Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth and

Andreas Gurksy, absorbed his influence and in the 1990s they would be welcomed into the art world with open arms.

Mainstream art publishing, at this point, was still caught up with monographs or movements. Photography books by artists (as opposed to coffee-table books of travel pictures or fashion) were produced in small print runs by a limited number of specialist publishers — notably Aperture in America, Walther Koenig and Lothar Schirmer in Germany , Robert Delpire — who had first published Robert Frank's *Americans* —in France, and Thomas Neurath at Thames and Hudson in London. And there were a few prescient photography editors, notable among them Mark Holborn — an editor of Aperture magazine in New York, who was one of the first people to bring post-war Japanese photography to attention in the west, and who, in 1986, together with Marvin Heiferman and Suzanne Fetcher, edited Nan Goldin's first book, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency,* one of the seminal photo books of the late 20th century. Back in London by the late 1980s, he established a photography publishing programme , first at Secker & Warburg then at Jonathan Cape, that included Robert Frank, Chris Killip, William Eggleston, Lee Friedlander, Richard Avedon and Robert Mapplethorpe.

Meanwhile, in Zurich, Walter and George Reinhardt set up Scalo Verlag. Coincidentally, one of the books published on the cusp of Der Alltag/Scalo, was a new edition of Robert Frank's *The Lines of My Hand*, first published in Japan in 1972, revised by Robert Frank and Walter Keller. The European edition was published by Parkett/Der Alltag; the British edition by Secker and Warburg.

Scalo means a hub or a connection point in Italian — it's a word you find added to place-names to describe the area where the railways, major roads and services all come in: Chiusi Scalo, in southern Tuscany; Fabro Scalo in Umbria. And as a publisher, Scalo was perfectly placed to take advantage of the cross currents flowing between photography and contemporary art. Its links extended in every direction — into the art world, into fiction, into memoir, into abstraction, while at the same time, it retained its documentary value as a recorder of fact, of history, of evidence. Scalo was at that place where all those traditionally oppositional art forms could come together, be harnessed (edited) and presented as a book.

As a platform for art and photography books, Scalo gave Walter a freedom to publish books that no trade publisher would have, or could have, considered taking on. The figures would never add up. But looking back, none of it would have been possible without George Reinhart. The fifth generation of a family that had made a fortune from cotton and coffee, the Reinharts had been art patrons in Winterthur, 20 kilometres northeast of Zurich, since the nineteenth century. George, born in 1942, ten years older than Walter, had joined the family firm, but left to follow his interest in

photography and film. He worked as a film producer, and in 1993, with the help of the Volkart Foundation, which his father and uncles had set up in 1951 to support artistic and cultural projects, he established the Fotomuseum Winterthur, whose founding director, Urs Stahel, would be a crucial influence on Scalo's publishing programme over the next decade and a half. Scalo took shares in D.A.P. Inc., which distributed its books in the US, and negotiated distribution deals for Europe (excluding Germany and Switzerland if I remember correctly) and the rest of the world with Thames and Hudson. Scalo took offices in a lovely converted hat factory with its own courtyard in Weinbergstrasse , where the Scalo bookshop opened on the ground floor. When I first went to work in Zurich I was in heaven there, because you could spend hours looking through books you were never going to find anywhere in London.

And for a few brief years it was a perfect storm. It should never be forgotten that Scalo was the work of five crucial people. There was Walter, of course, and George, and Hans Werner Holzwarth, based in Berlin, who designed every Scalo book and gave the company a simple, modern, graphic style, as well as bringing artists such as Christopher Wool to the party. There was Gerhard Steidl, the printer, who I first met in Berlin, a small busy dark-haired man carrying a small suitcase that looked like it contained a tool kit rather than a change of clothes. At that point, he was principally a master printer, who had established his company helping artists such as Joseph Beuys and Marcel Broodthaers print multiples, not yet the major global art publisher he would become (though since 1993 he has held world rights to Günther Grass and publishes other European writers in translation). And there was Urs Stahel, whose knowledge of photography, and choice of artists and exhibitions at Winterthur, would make such important contribution to Scalo's list, and vice versa.

In 1994, I was trying to find a way to establish a photography museum in London and Walter took me to meet Urs at the museum. He showed me round the galleries and led me to the store where the collection was kept. Two stacks of crates stood in the middle of the concrete floor. One held prints by Lewis Baltz, the other Robert Frank. Not a bad start, he said. And so it would continue. At a time when photographers were touchy about how they were described and exhibited, the programme at Winterthur succeeded by showing works from every period. But if you look back at the archive, it's clear how independent and forward-looking programme its programme was. And there were other crucial people at Scalo: the writer and critic Martin Jaeggi who ran the Scalo bookshop with the artist Marianne Müller, now a professor at the Zurich Univerity of the Arts; the historian Alexis Schwarzenberg, who worked as an editor, and Eveline Sievi, who looked after the international press, and many more.

But the most important people were, of course, the photographers. One need only look at the list of books that Scalo produced from 1993 onwards to understand what a haven it was for all kind of photographic artists, unlikely to have their work published elsewhere, and their relationships with Walter were intense. My role was mostly to help edit the English texts and follow some of the books through design and proofing ready for publication. Early on, there were translations to edit from the German and French texts, too: Scalo began with the ambition to be trilingual, but the labour and the cost involved in producing books in three languages soon became prohibitive and, really, unnecessary.

What stands out when you look down the list is the range of subjects Scalo embraced. It was never an art publisher in the purist sense, but I think Walter felt that, in the right hands, photography, could express all kinds of aspects of contemporary life more forcefully than the written word, and presented in the right way it could be shared and understood more easily, too. He would have been without doubt an early and obsessive adopter of Instagram.

History was important to Walter. He didn't — as some people in the art world were beginning to do — dismiss photojournalism and the recording of facts. He wanted to learn from people who had lived through political upheavals, and this made him a receptive publisher in sometimes surprising ways. He dedicated a lot of time and personal effort to persuading the American photographer John Phillips to go back through his negatives and write a book about the three decades of history in Europe and America – from the 1930s to the 1960s – that he had lived through and photographed. Walter had been dedicated to doing it for Phillips, who died before it was published.

In 1994, the French Magnum photographer Gilles Peress returned from Africa with a set of photographs from the massacre in Rwanda. Within 100 days, an estimated 800,000 people, most of them Tutsis, were massacred by Hutus, who blamed the Tutsi for the death of their president, Juvénal Habyarimana, whose plane was shot down as it prepared to land in Kigali. Hutus gathered into an unofficial militia, known as Interahamwe, several thousand strong, who hacked and slashed with machetes, killing Tutsi while they sheltered in schools and churches, leaving the horribly wounded, the dying and the dead. Peress keeps his camera close to the ground, finding bodies of women and livestock lying bloated and festering, squatting down with babies and abandoned children. In 1995, Scalo published the book under the title *The Silence*. Peress had designed the book as an assault on the senses; a visceral visual condemnation of violence and amorality. Not for the first time it spoke of his inability to express the depth of the repugnance and tragedy of the act of killing. In 1994, Scalo had published *Farewell to Bosnia* Peress's account of the six months in 1993 he had spent in central Bosnia, Mostar and Sarajevo during the Bosnian war. "I knew from the

beginning," he wrote, "that I could not explain all that was happening in Bosnia—the historical intricacies, the weight of blood. I set out only to provide a visual continuum of experience, of existence."

Two years later, Peress was back in the former Yugoslavia with American forensic anthropologist William Haglund and Eric Stover, an American human rights researcher, who had been sent with an international team of forensic scientists by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the Hague, to investigate the discovery of mass graves outside Srebrenica in Bosnia, and at Vukovar in Croatia. The resulting book, *The Grave*s, was published by Scalo in 1998. I remember reading the proofs of what seemed like a mission to discover the very worst that human beings can do to each other.

I stopped working for Scalo in 1999, but that was not before the untimely death of George Rheinhart, in October 1997, on his 55th birthday. Although his brother Andreas continued to support Scalo, and though Walter carried on publishing and the following year opened a gallery space in New York, he had lost an anchor, a sounding board, a supporter in the adventure, and a loyal friend. I have no wish to speculate here about what happened in the years before Scalo was declared bankrupt in 2006, only to reflect on how depressing it was to see Scalo books remaindered on second-hand book lists and online. By this time, the photobook had become something of an international publishing phenomenon. Steidl, who had grown his company from a handful of projects a year to one of the largest specialist photographic publishing company in the world, inherited some of Scalo's artists, most notably Robert Frank. In 2010, after working tirelessly for Steidl as his managing director for almost a decade, Michael Mack set up his own publishing company, MACK, which continues a to publish ground-breaking art and photography books today. One of Mack's most prominent artists is Paul Graham, who made two books with Scalo, *Empty Heaven*, in 1995 and *End of an Age*, in 1999, which he dedicated to the memory of George Reinhart. And in 2014 it was Graham who spoke up for Walter on the day after his death. "Thanks to Walter Keller," he said simply, "the appreciation and publication of photography has changed worldwide".

There were many artists who mourned Walter's passing. But one who is forever in his debt is the Indian photographer Dayanita Singh. Though her long publishing relationship with Gerhard Steidl has been far more fertile and productive than her time with Scalo, it was Walter, in the role of editor and adviser, who gave her the confidence to shift gear from the photojournalist she started out as to the confident photographic artist and bookmaker she has become. Singh's work was also included in the Barbican exhibition in London: extracts from her book, *Myself Mona Ahmed*, which Scalo published in 2001, and a film, *Mona and Myself*, which she made in 2013.

Writing in the introduction to the book, Singh explained how their meeting came about. In 1989 she had been commissioned by *The Times* in London to photograph eunuchs in New Delhi. During this assignment she met Mona Ahmed, who had been born a boy, but undergone castration and gender reassignment to live as a woman. Gradually she had come see herself as a member of the third sex, neither male nor female. But the friendship and trust that grew up between them was based on a simple act. "To my surprise, Mona agreed to be photographed and we spent the whole day shooting," Sing writes. "However, she changed her mind upon hearing that the photographs were for the London *Times,* and not the *New York Times*, as she had relatives in London who did not know about her being a eunuch. She asked me to return the film. I did not have any choice and returned [it] to her. … Mona embraced me when I returned the film, which she threw in the garbage. I am not sure I was quite aware of the bond that had been created, and how much a part of my life Mona would become." Their friendship deepened over the next 28 years, and only ended with Mona's death in September 2017.

Even in its nascent period it was an ideal project for Walter. He encouraged Dayanita – and he encouraged Mona — and when the book came out in 2001, it included the email letters that Mona had written to him. ""Dear Mr Walter…Received your email and I'm so happy to read it. Now I am going to tell you everything about me …"

End/