



40 YEARS LAIF

EXHIBITION AT THE STADTHAUS ULM

40 years, 40 series: the laif Photo Agency in Cologne has been inspired by this anniversary to look back over the past. Beginning with reportage dedicated to protests against the nuclear power plant in Brokdorf and continuing to the recent catastrophic floods in the Ahr Valley; one story is presented for each year – chosen for the time when the work was created, prominently published or exhibited, or won an important prize. The exhibition was first on display in Cologne. It can be viewed as a self-confident state-

ment underlining a reconfiguration: the founding of a separate cooperative which has brought about significant changes in the past year. We spoke with Andreas Herzau, co-founder and board member of the laif Cooperative.

LFI: This year, the laif Photo Agency was purchased by over 320 members of the laif Cooperative. Why?

ANDREAS HERZAU: The simple answer is to ensure the agency's independence. We, the photographers, wanted to secure the control over the use of our pictures. The background for this is that seven years ago the former owners of laif sold it to the ddp Agency,

which in turn was sold in its entirety (including laif) to ActionPress AG in 2021. At that point, it became clear that the agency might fall victim to the primacy of shareholder value, which could mean the distribution of fees between the agency and the photographers would suffer, and that the agency could be deprived of the money in its reserves, leading to a lack of the funds necessary for innovation.

LFI: Is independence today more important than ever?



Six examples from the total of the 40 laif Photo Agency series being exhibited: emotional reportages and photo stories, historic moments in Germany and around the world. Left page: Katharina Bosse, Wolfgang Volz and Bettina Flitner; right page: Manfred Linke, Kai Löffelbein and Peter Granser

Photos: © Katharina Bosse/laiif; © Wolfgang Volz/laiif; © Bettina Flitner/laiif; © Manfred Linke/laiif; © Kai Löffelbein/laiif; © Peter Granser/laiif

HERZAU: Yes. There is a tendency towards monopolisation in the picture market, meaning that a few global photo agencies dominate the market, dictate the fees, and have the potential to control content. Photography, and very specifically journalistic photography, is not a commodity, but rather an essential component of a free press. Furthermore, the large, journalistic publishing houses are driving this development with their fee dumping. In addition, many of our photographer authors consider it important to be able to tell their view of things, their stories, independent of external influences. The agency also has something that many photography providers no longer have: qualified picture editors who exercise this control and represent, of course, an invaluable service for editorial offices. There is, for ex-

ample, good reason why we have exclusive representation in Germany of the New York Times photo archive.

LFI: What has changed since the founding of the cooperative?

HERZAU: The most important change is the emergence of a lively community that actively supports our efforts for independent photojournalism and top-quality photography – which represents an important asset for our democracy, namely, the diversity and freedom of the press. That is also evident in the composition of our membership, which is two-thirds agency photographers and one-third civil society supporters.

LFI: What are the future challenges?

HERZAU: Photography, and specifically photojournalism, is an essential part of an independent press and for reporting on the complexities of our world today. I would go so far as to say that

pictures are more important than ever. No news item or article can be effective today – especially not on the world wide web – without a photograph. Because of the austerity measures dictated by the media market, it is barely possible for photojournalists to earn a reasonable living. That's why we must advocate that photography, especially in the press sector, no longer be traded as a commodity like soap or socks. Press photography is too valuable an asset for that. INTERVIEW: ULRICH RÜTER

ANDREAS HERZAU, photographer, teacher and author, is a member of the Board of the laif Cooperative together with Christoph Bangert and Manfred Linke. It is based in Cologne. www.laif-genossenschaft.de

EXHIBITION: The *40 Jahre laif* exhibition curated by Peter Bialobrzski, will remain on display at the Stadthaus Ulm until 1 May 2023. www.stadthaus.ulm.de