

WHY GERHARD STEIDL IS A BOOK PUBLISHING MASTER

THE GERMAN PUBLISHER, WHO CONSIDERS HIMSELF A SERVANT TO ARTISTS, IS REVERED BY PHOTOGRAPHERS FOR HIS BOOK-MAKING ESTHETIC AND CRAFTSMANSHIP. BY DAVID WALKER



ALL PHOTOS © TORSTEN NYSTRÖM

Martine Fougeron recalls an evening in 2011 when she was in the lobby of a New York City hotel, showing a friend a book mockup for “Tête-à-Tête,” her acclaimed project about her teenage sons. Several book publishers had turned it down, fearing it wouldn’t sell, and Fougeron was discouraged. Suddenly she noticed Gerhard Steidl sitting across the hotel lobby.

She had dreamed of getting her book published by Steidl, but she had too much reserve to approach him in the hotel with no appointment. Her friend had no such qualms. He grabbed the mockup and walked up to Steidl, who agreed to take a look. Steidl spent 20 minutes leafing slowly through the pages, without a word.

“He finished and I said, ‘What do you think?’ He said, ‘It would make a good book,’” Fougeron recalls. “I said, ‘Thank you very much, but do you think it would make a good Steidl book?’ He looked at me and said, ‘Yes, if you’re not in a hurry.’”

Gerhard Steidl (right) discusses production details with photographer Mitch Epstein (left) for Epstein’s book *New York Arbor*, which was released earlier this year.

Fougeron refers to it as her “miraculous encounter with Gerhard Steidl.” (Steidl has scheduled her book for release this fall, under the title *Teen Tribe*). Few book publishers are as revered by photographers as Steidl, who publishes books that others won’t, and collaborates with artists as if each book is a special edition, and money is (almost) no object.

“I see myself as a technician and servant to fulfill artists’ ideas,” Steidl says with sincere modesty. But photographers see him as a master. A trip to Steidville—the name of Steidl’s publishing compound in his hometown of Göttingen, Germany—is almost a religious experience. It has such a creative energy,” says Christopher Morris, who has published two books with Steidl.

“Gerhard is like a couturier,” says Robert Polidori, who has published four books with Steidl. “He can look at someone’s maquette, and in ten minutes he gets the book. The thing he loves to do is dress it up. He’ll pick the size, the paper, the covers. He knows how to tailor a book, based on an understanding of the contents.”

Steidl now publishes books at the breakneck pace of 200 per year. One hundred twenty of them are visual art books, the rest, literature and politics. Gerhard Steidl personally supervises the production of all of them, start to finish. That includes the editing, design, scanning, retouching, separations and the actual printing. While most publishers farm out production to cut costs, Steidl does everything on location in Göttingen except the paper making and book binding. “A Steidl book is never outsourced. These ten fingers”—the publisher holds up his hands—“have touched every book that leaves the company. I like to compare it to haute couture.”

To date, Steidl has published more than 2,000 photo books. The big names on his roster are too numerous to list; William Eggleston, Robert Frank and Andreas Gursky are but a small sampling. Among the book projects by unknown photographers he’s taken a chance on recently are *Afghan Gold* by Luke Powell, due out this month, and the forthcoming *Heroes of Labour* by Gleb Kosorukov.

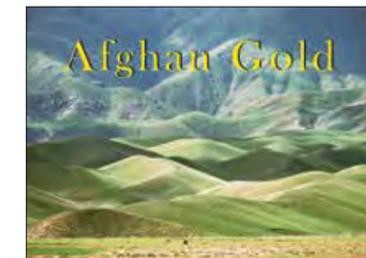


Most Steidl books are by established, well-known photographers. Above: Covers and spreads from Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (issued in a revised edition by Steidl in 2008), Christopher Morris’s *Americans*, Mitch Epstein’s *New York Arbor* and Chris Killip’s *Arbeit/Work*. Below: Occasionally Steidl takes a chance on books by lesser known photographers, such as Luke Powell’s *Afghan Gold*.

Artists—writers or photographers—work for years on a project, and then “need a helping hand to release the vision,” Steidl says. They don’t get that from most publishers, he argues, because the process is fragmented and dispersed, and the artist is removed: scanning and retouching might be done in India, design in Los Angeles, printing in China.

That makes publishing the books cheaper, notes Polidori, “But what happens is [your book] gets whacked. It’s like when you have tons of different contractors. There are more opportunities for misunderstandings and time delays.”

Polidori adds, “I did books before Steidl, when I lived in France. I’m not really proud of those books.”



© LUKE POWELL/COURTESY OF STEIDL

Photographers are expected to come to Göttingen to see their books through production. Steidl employs 45 people at a location on a residential street that is so unassuming that you wonder upon arrival if you’ve got the wrong address, says photographer Chris Killip. “The door shuts behind you, and you’re locked in,” he says, comparing it to a submarine. “You’re in Steidl’s world and you have to step it up to his pace.”

Photographers—three to five at any given time—bunk on the premises at what’s called the Halftone Hotel. Steidl, who typically works from 5:30 AM to 8 or 9 PM, expects photographers to be available on a moment’s notice. A full-time chef serves lunch every day to help keep people from wandering away. Photographers bide their time in the library, amid an immense collection of photo books, while awaiting periodic calls from Steidl to “come downstairs” to make on-the-spot production decisions.

Steidl is brisk and deliberate, with his own strong opinions about content, narrative and structure of the books he publishes. He is quick to offer those opinions to indecisive photographers, to keep the presses rolling.

Sparks occasionally fly. Polidori says he got himself thrown



© LUKE POWELL/COURTESY OF STEIDL



© KOTO BOLDI/O

out of Steidville on his first book project, the publication of *Havana* in 2001, for calling Steidl's flatbed scanner a "dust breadbox" and insisting Steidl get a drum scanner instead. Polidori wasn't long gone before Steidl decided the photographer was right, and sent a driver to Frankfurt, Germany, to bring Polidori back to Göttingen to finish the book.

Steidl came to blows with Nan Goldin because he couldn't get his presses to render two bold colors—green and orange—in one particular image that Goldin had shot on color negative film. "She said to me, 'You don't like me, and you don't like my work, and that's the reason why you can't do better,'" Steidl recalls. She slapped him, he says, so he kicked her out of his shop, and was about to cancel the book.

Unwilling to admit defeat, though, Steidl stayed up late to make some separations for the orange and green ink by hand, and solved the problem. (It was before Pantone made its Hexachrome process available, Steidl explains.) He and Goldin made up after he showed her the results the next morning, and finished the book.

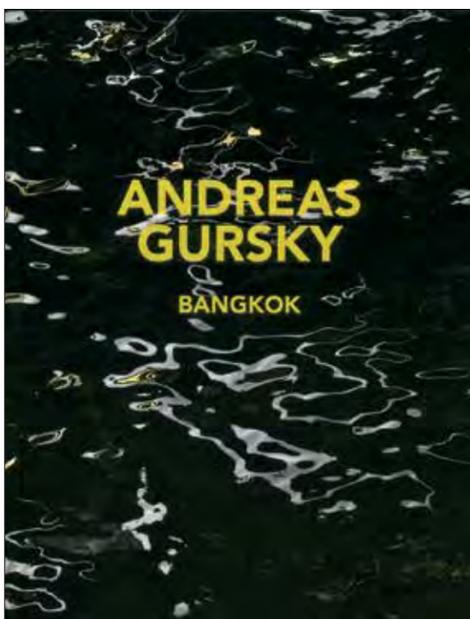
Steidl prides himself on solving gnarly printing problems, which he often brings on himself with the unconventional materials and methods he uses. Last fall, he published *Bangkok*, Andreas Gursky's collection of shimmering, abstract images of Thailand's Chao Phraya river. "We printed in eight inks"—all of them shades of gray, Steidl says. Details of the images were printed on separate sheets of tracing paper, which were to be glued at the bindery on top of the heavily inked pages. But the layers of ink contained so much oil that the glue wouldn't stick. Steidl's solution, which came after some head scratching, was to send the pages back through the press for application of a 3mm border of primer.

"He's completely obsessed. Nobody works harder," says photographer Martin Parr, who is also an authority on photography books. Parr gives Steidl high marks for his book-production values, but mixed reviews for book design. "Some are very good, some less good," Parr says, but adds that isn't unexpected, considering the sheer number of books Steidl produces.

Steidl's approach to photo-book publishing begs the question: How does he make any money, considering he doesn't outsource production, doesn't charge photographers to publish their books (as so many publishers

Left: Steidl (center) at work with printer Florian Beisart (left) and photographer Ivan Sigel (right). Below: The cover and a spread from Andreas Gursky's 2012 book, *Bangkok*.

GERHARD STEIDL: "I HAVE THE LUXURY OF [PRINTING PHOTO BOOKS] JUST AS GOOD AS I WANT. ANOTHER PUBLISHER HAS TO SIT DOWN AND CALCULATE: DO I HAVE ENOUGH FOR THIS PAPER, ENOUGH FOR HARDCOVER, ENOUGH FOR ANOTHER 64 PAGES? I SIMPLY DON'T ASK."



© ANDREAS GURSKY/COURTESY OF STEIDL

WHY GERHARD STEIDL IS A BOOK PUBLISHING MASTER



© KARL LAGERFELD/COURTESY OF STEIDL

Steidl does Chanel's commercial printing, and has published 80 books of personal work by Chanel Creative Director Karl Lagerfeld. *The Little Black Jacket*, published last year, has sold more than 115,000 copies.

now do) and takes on so many books that other publishers won't touch? (Fougeron's book is one example. Mitch Epstein's *Family Business* is another. "It's 300 pages, big in format with a lot of plates and eccentric, with mixed media," Epstein says. "I didn't think I would find a publisher.")

Photographers speculate that Steidl subsidizes the photo books with the lucrative commercial printing work he does for the fashion house Chanel and its creative director, Karl Lagerfeld. But Steidl says that isn't the case, and insists that the photography books he publishes pay for themselves eventually.

Still, the lucrative Chanel work certainly enables Steidl's ambitions. "I have the luxury of [printing photo books] just as good as I want. Another publisher has to sit down and calculate: Do I have enough for this paper, enough for hardcover, enough for another 64 pages? I simply don't ask. I don't want to know how much a book costs me. I do it [in collaboration] with the artist as good as I can, and at the end, you know, I learned that whenever you throw money out through the window upstairs, after a while it tumbles down and comes back in through the entrance door."

Steidl's success has been driven by his ability to win the loyalty (and business) of top authors and artists. One is the best-selling German author Günter Grass. Steidl took over publication of Grass's novels from another publisher after meeting Grass at a poetry reading, and offering to publish a catalogue of Grass's etchings (called *In Kupfer, auf Stein*).

His relationship with Lagerfeld (and Chanel) began in 1993 when Lagerfeld won Lucky Strike's design competition. The prize included publication of a book, for which Lucky Strike had contracted with Steidl. He was unknown as a photo-book publisher at the time, and Lagerfeld told him bluntly that he wasn't interested in seeing his work printed poorly. Steidl asked him to send some images for a no-obligation printing test.

Steidl has since published 80 books of Lagerfeld's photographs of architecture, landscapes, portraits and

abstractions. "[It has] nothing to do with advertising photography for Chanel," Steidl says of those books, although the line between Lagerfeld's "private photography" and the Chanel work is sometimes blurry. Last year, Steidl published *The Little Black Jacket*, a book of Lagerfeld's photographs of celebrities wearing Chanel's classic jacket. The book has sold more than 115,000 copies, Steidl says.

Steidl first took up printing in the late 1960s, after a local printer he'd commissioned for a political poster did a lousy job (Steidl was involved in the leftist political movement of the time). Around 1970, his friend Klaus Staack, the political artist and German Green party founder, approached him about making exhibition multiples for the revolutionary German artist Joseph Beuys. "I didn't know what a multiple was," Steidl recounts. "I said, of course, 'Yes.'"

Beuys asked him to print a photo motif onto a zinc plate using sulfur. "But I had no idea how to get the sulfur [to stick] to the zinc plate," Steidl says. "I went home and I was sweating blood and tears, because I didn't know how to make it. I was thinking, and trying and testing." He finally figured it out, and ended up working as an assistant for Beuys until the artist's death in 1986.

"I had this idea of being a famous photographer," Steidl says, recounting his youthful aspirations. "I did my photography and compared it with [Henri] Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans and so on, and I thought: You don't have the potential to be one of them. Then I was very realistic and I thought it is better to work for the best artists in the world to release their ideas, than to do your own shit that will never make you happy throughout your life."

Steidl says he got a private art education from Beuys. "I was 22, and I could ask him every stupid question and get a serious answer," Steidl recounts. Beuys frequently asked him to create multiples using unconventional, utilitarian materials: cardboard, felt, brown paper. "I was using metal and wood and plastic and rubber and I don't know what kind of shit to manufacture objects."

From that experience Steidl says he developed an instinctual knowledge about materials and esthetics. "I would ask Beuys, 'Why are you using those things?'" He said, "You just have to open your eyes. The most esthetically [interesting] things you find in the street and you find in the garbage, and not in a luxury shop." And so that sharpened my eyes for materials and technical products—whatever you need to release printed matter—which are not obvious in the market."

Steidl made his living as a publisher of political posters and books, as well as literature, but "step by step I was developing my interest in visual books. I was [test printing] for years and years with my own photography.

"I was researching for second-hand materials for my books, for combinations of old-fashioned materials and high-tech materials, and that all goes back to Beuys. What I did for Beuys I'm doing for Polidori and Nan Goldin and David Bailey and whoever else."

Around 1990, he decided he was good enough to offer his printing services to other artists, and within a few years he was printing photo books for Thames & Hudson and Scalo. Gradually he began approaching photographers about publishing their work under his own imprint, and winning them over by printing handmade book dummies to demonstrate his skill.

Now photographers stand in line at his door. He receives 1,200 unsolicited photo-book proposals every year. Steidl says he reviews them all in search of work "that opens my mind" intellectually or politically, or surprises him in some way, and publishes three or five of them (less than one percent). Fougeron's book was one of the rare few that got his attention. "It was an extraordinary look into their private lives of teenagers," says Steidl, who hadn't seen the work before he ran into Fougeron at the hotel in New York City.

Mostly, though, Steidl takes on book projects that are referred to him through his industry connections. The majority of books he publishes feature the work of well-known photographers, many of whom consider a journey to Steidville a sign that they have finally arrived. **pdn**