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Peer Brecht
Snapshots of a photographer

by Ulrich Fleischmann

It began like one of those clichéd mafia films. In a tiny Italian osteria in Stuttgart's West End. We had just founded an agency and were looking for someone to "shoot" some photos. As we were also looking to "get shot of" our clients' regular photographer with the aim of creating a new mode of visual expression, the meeting was of an unusually conspiratorial nature. Peer Brecht appeared black case in hand, and presented samples of his work between pizza crusts and cheap red wine. Hardly able to hear ourselves think, we hunched together in the smoke-filled bar, which as ever was bursting at the seams. We were blown away. Here was a young photographer with a new and challenging visual sense. His photos were simply liberating. Their exuberant vitality freed them (and us) from the deadly boring advertising photography of the era, which, leaden and uninspired, had been condemned to stasis by timid agencies and clients alike. With their elements of trash, direct references to British underground aesthetics, pronounced blurring, and weirdly alien colours produced by cross developing, Peer Brecht's photos not only injected new stylistic impulses into conventional advertising photography, but also – and more importantly – restored its genuineness.

That was a good ten years ago. Peer Brecht had just gone freelance, having worked for three years with the Stuttgart ad agency RTS Riegerteam as a photographic assistant, only to be subsequently promoted to studio manager – at the age of 23! "During the first six months I learnt more than during my entire three year apprenticeship." He not only had the freedom to photograph as he chose, to explore and experiment with the medium of image and his own perception, but was also given the luxury of time. A rare piece of good fortune. These days it's barely conceivable that an assistant would get the chance to spend a week finessing a single photo for Fischer Technik. But that's how you learn



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the perfidious contradictions of the material, light, composition, not to mention your own limits – and how to go beyond them. Today if you watch Peer Brecht shoot a photo more or less from the hip and it turns out to be precisely what the client had in mind, that's not the genius of a single moment (though we wouldn't wish to deny him that), but internalised experience, knowledge that is etched into him – his eye and his shutter release finger.

As studio manager, responsible for five employees, Peer Brecht was automatically member of the agency's creative team. This meant he was closely involved with the development of new campaigns, designing new adverts, and – through presentation photos – with client acquisition. As a result, he is streets ahead of many of his freelance colleagues when it comes to thinking and working in terms of concepts (he was substantially involved in, among other projects, the campaign to launch dba); moreover, he is intimately acquainted with the organisational structures and creative processes of an agency and the attitudes of its clients. His work is nothing if not commercial. Even if the result is often different from that initially envisaged by the client. There's always a definite sense of artistic intention, an experimental questioning of accepted norms, an uncanny reflection of contemporary visual perception. Sometimes photographers are simply better communicators. After all they think in images and use them intuitively to distil the perceived world of the end consumer – something which market researchers are always attempting to reflect with dry statistics. Who can we expect to capture and express our individual perceptions in this era of iconolatry, if not a photographer? Being directly involved in the life of an agency also seems to have influenced yet another aspect of Peer Brecht's development: brand creation and product marketing were not just for the clients, he learnt to make use of them himself. I have seldom



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encountered a photographer who has carved out a niche for himself in the complex world of freelance photography with such a clear idea of who he is, what he wants to achieve and how he means to achieve it. Over the years I have ungrudgingly observed his readiness to take risks, not to mention his courage in the face of failure (the fact that he hasn't let himself be corrupted and has remained the unpretentious, honest, guy-next-door type simply makes him all the more likeable).

The Germans, however, have a particular problem, which dates back to the genius cult of the eighteenth century. They expect the work of a true artist to wondrously manifest itself of its own accord. Any artist seeking to avail himself of market forces in search of success risks infamy. Despite his proactivity, however, Peer Brecht doesn't fit into this category, nor for that matter does his image of himself: after all, he's never considered himself an artist. He prefers the constraints of the advertising industry to the freedom of fine art. Even if he can't resist massively rocking the boat.

His childhood and teenage years were not what you'd expect from a budding artist either. No precocious talent, predestined for a career as a photographer. Sacrificing playtime to pursue his solitary craft in the darkroom. Talent is not that easy to categorise. Every biography is subject to splits, cracks, and fears – experience takes its toll. Perhaps Peer Brecht's family background was one such factor. His father's bankruptcy, the clothing alterations and repair shop run by his mother, forced as she was to supplement the family income, showed him at an early age how quickly the social fabric can tear under the pressure of economic insecurity and straitened financial circumstances. You either lose all faith in life, or you learn to have faith in yourself and your own capabilities. It goes without saying that Peer Brecht falls into the latter



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category. The quaint photo of the four children on the back seat of a VW beetle reveals both financial need and familial strength. Maybe it was simply – if we must look for a turning-point – a TV programme about the glamorous world of photography that literally triggered the imagination of the teenager? We can but suppose.

Whatever the case, Peer Brecht decided at the age of 15 to do a photography apprenticeship. Not with a famous New York photographer, but in the nearest town – Markdorf. As well as vacuuming the premises and selling films – “a double pack is better value” – the apprentice was shown how to take passport photos (naturally under fixed lighting conditions). Artistic commissions such as wedding photography were the prerogative of the shop owner. Nevertheless: “What I did learn was to think things through first.” Much of his knowledge is self-taught; additional inspiration came from the local vocational college. The first camera from his grandfather, the first second-hand large format camera bought with his apprenticeship money – slowly Peer Brecht acquired more photographic equipment. And he experimented; he began “to discover what light does.” He became obsessed with the subject. It even dominated his national service, during which he trained as an aerial photographer with the German army’s aerial reconnaissance team.

On completion, however, he nearly became a butcher or a baker. For a long time any applications for a position as photographic assistant remained frustratingly unsuccessful. His deficits in comparison with other applicants, who had either a degree, experience, or an apprenticeship with a good photo studio, were all too apparent. After many a rejection, he decided to give it one last chance. At the RTS Riegerteam photo studio. And the rest is history.

Carving out a career as a freelance photographer is not easy. It’s



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even more difficult when you're only 25. And more so, if you have high expectations of yourself and other people. Or if you're not prepared to be quietly pigeon-holed – then even more a feature of the industry than it is today. Categories such as “People”, “Still”, “Architecture”, “Cars” and other arbitrary terms dominated the industry. For advertising agency art buyers a matter of convenience, for the clients reassuring. He's got experience in fashion photography, nothing can go wrong. The world of advertising is still haunted by such assumptions. A phenomenon which has always baffled me (and Peer Brecht too): how is it possible that a motif, the object to be photographed, can indicate the quality of the photographer? Why not examine the photographer's visual style, his method of creating an image?

It is to Peer Brecht's credit that he not only managed to challenge the status quo for himself, but in doing so, also paved the way for future photographers. Not least as a member of the BFF (Bund Freischaffender Fotodesignern – Association of Freelance Photographic Designers). For Peer Brecht the need to do away with these strict categories had nothing to do with form and everything to do with content. After all, he had from the outset made a name for himself with atypical advertising shots, characterised by alternative perspectives, reflecting a culture of crossover. As one of the first in Germany to shoot “lifestyle-esque” images for conventional product photography jobs, or create a stir using fashion photography lighting for advertising, he might have been at odds with the established photo studios, but his photos (and thereby those of his clients) stood out from the crowd – and therefore caught the eye. It would be exaggerating to claim that he provoked this trend (no artist can make such a claim), but he managed intuitively to anticipate people's changing appreciation of the visual. And not just in Germany, either, but internationally – as his representation in the USA and Japan shows.



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His approach to photography has changed little to this day. Time and again he is able to find new ways of seeing things – for both himself and others. Delving deep into subject matter, images, and techniques to find the unexpected – prising out that which the world has not yet seen. For me personally, the most amazing thing about Peer Brecht's work is his capacity for constant development (his ongoing quest to coax new perspectives out of the visual). I have scarcely had time to get used to his latest take on something, when he has moved on again. We as observers can only benefit from having our perception of the visual and the world around us challenged, our way of seeing things constantly held up to scrutiny.

His latest baby is CGI (computer generated imaging). Once again he is at the innovative cutting edge, already availing himself of the different methods of "artistic" image creation, which many others in the business still regard as being ahead of their time. It is incredible how he manages to interpret Walter Benjamin's "Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" in such a way as to transform the artificial into the genuine.

Moreover his photos clearly express an interest in innovation not just for innovation's sake, but for the sake of content. When Peer Brecht says of himself: "The stories in my pictures are really only for me. No-one else need understand them", he pinpoints exactly what makes a good picture, i.e. the fine balance between the expressible and the inexpressible. The story an image tells must be as open and multi-faceted, as ambiguous and casual as possible, so that each observer is put in mind of something different. Thus it is the observer who creates the image. The "photo-grapher" literally becomes the one who "records the light". As such Peer Brecht should be well occupied in the coming decades.



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Peer Brecht's curriculum vitae

Peer-Oliver Brecht
Uhlandstr. 26
70182 Stuttgart

- 17.02.1969 Born in Konstanz (Germany)
- 1975-1984 Meersburg primary and senior school
Hauptschule leaving qualification (GCSE equivalent)
- 1984-1987 Photography apprenticeship at Foto Strauch,
Marktstrasse 2, 7778 Markdorf
- 1988-1989 National service, aerial photographer
- 1989-1992 Assistant to Jochen Hähnel, agency photo studio,
RTS Riegerteam Werbeagentur GWA, Bunsenstrasse
7-9, 70771 Leinfelden-Echterdingen
- 1993-1994 Studio manager, responsible for 5 employees, and
member of the creative team, RTS Riegerteam
Werbeagentur GWA, Bunsenstrasse 7-9, 70771
Leinfelden-Echterdingen

- Since 1994 Freelance, first in Steinenbronn, 2002 onwards in
Stuttgart
- 1997 Member of the BFF (Bund Freischaffender
Fotodesigner)
- 1998-2002 Vice chairman of the BFF regional advisory council



Peer Brecht: Awards

1993	1 x Gold Montreux B&B Award
1995	1 x Gold Montreux Photographie Award
1995	2 x London Finalist
1996	3 x Gold E3 Award
1996	1 x New York Finalist
1996	1 x Cresta Finalist
1996	1 x Diplom für Fotografie Berliner Type
1997	1 x Gold E3 Award
1997	1 x Silver European Design Annual
1999	1 x Silver BFF Award
2000	2 x Merit BFF Award
2000	2 x Silver BFF Award
2001	2 x Silver BFF Award
2001	1 x Merit BFF Award
2002	1 x ADC Award Category Photography
2002	3 x Merit BFF Award
2002	1 x Bronze Clío Award
2003	1 x New York Finalist
2004	1 x London Advertising Award Finalist
2005	1 x New York Magazine Cover-Image award
2005	1 x Merit BFF Award
2005	1 x Shortlist Cannes Pepsi
2005	1 x Red Dot Design Award
2006	1 x ADC New York Merit for Photography „Pepsi Light“
2006	1 x Black Spider Award Nominated

Exhibitions

1985	Exhibition „Young Guns “ Germany
2000	„Le 6e Salon de la photographie de Colmar“
2003	„Le 7e Salon de la photographie de Colmar“
2003	„Salon des Artistes Français, Paris“
2004	„Salon des Artistes Français, Paris“