

# ***THE PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTOR***

INFORMATION, OPINION, AND ADVICE FOR COLLECTORS, CURATORS, AND DEALERS

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## **PHOTO LA VIRTUAL COLLECT + CONNECT by Stephen Perloff**



**John Dowell:** *The Poet*, from *Cotton*, 2017, at Laurence Miller Gallery at Photo LA Virtual Collect + Connect

## Photo LA Virtual Collect + Connect

*Art is not a Zoom meeting, art is not an Instagram account, art is not a Powerpoint presentation, and art is not a virtual art fair. By definition art is elusive, unattainable, against the rules, avant garde, symbolic, and demanding.*

—**Arturo Delgado**, curator, author and founder of **Almanaque fotográfica**, México.

Like much else, the art world has been deeply affected by the coronavirus pandemic. The Photo LA Virtual Collect + Connect was one attempt to reimagine the photography fair for current conditions. We sent the following questions to participating galleries.

1. What motivated you to participate in this virtual fair? Especially if you were a first-time exhibitor, was one of the motivations a more reasonable expense of participation without costly travel, housing, and shipping?
2. What were your expectations going in to the fair? Did the fair meet, exceed, or fall short of your expectations? What worked best and what do think still needs to be improved in order to make a virtual fair successful?
3. How were your overall sales compared to what you would expect from an in-person fair?
4. If you made sales, did you do better with higher-end or lower-end and mid-range material?
5. If you made sales, what specifically did you sell?
6. How did you feel about the fair overall — publicity, show management, cost of participation, web galleries, lectures and panels, audience response? (For myself, while I can easily spend a whole day from opening to closing walking around an actual fair, after watching one online panel on a beautiful spring day, I found it hard to spend much more time going through virtual galleries on a computer.)

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7. Have you participated in any other art fairs in the last few months, especially any virtual fairs, and if so, how did they compare to this virtual fair? Are you planning on exhibiting at any other art fairs this year, like Paris Photo, or next year, like Paris Photo New York, and if so, which one(s)?

8. Would you participate if it turns out Paris Photo or Paris Photo New York has to become a virtual fair? If yours is a US gallery, what do you think will happen if US citizens are still not allowed in Europe by November? Given that the current administration seems to have completely surrendered to the virus, there seems little evidence in the US that conditions will be any better in November, and could be worse if there is indeed a second wave.

9. Is there anything else you'd like to comment on?

### Laurence Miller

1. Motivation.... We have had many clients in the Los Angeles area over four decades and we did numerous photo fairs in LA as well. So when I learned of this online event, it was a no brainer. Cost was \$550 and time spent. And it was perfect for my associate Jacob and myself to keep collaborating on projects while Gallery is closed...and no travel costs nor risks.

2–5. I enter every fair with the expectation that I will sell something, and with costs so minimal, I believed we would make a profit. As it turns out, a very early acquaintance of mine now lives in LA and is a prominent art consultant, and she told me that when she saw my name on the exhibitor list, she dove in to see what this event had to offer. And she discovered the work of Philadelphia artist John Dowell in our exhibit, and shared them with a client of hers from the Midwest, and we sold two works by John, for \$4,500 each. Our only sales (so far). Images attached.

But the intangibles are also important, so when they showed us the names of the collectors who would be “attending,” I spotted some collectors I had forgotten about. So I wrote one about some material that we just received that he might be interested in, and I hope this week to make another good sale to this LA collector.

6. I thought the platform needed a lot of work, and some of their choices, like selling tickets to participate were counterproductive. But I am confident



they can improve it and hope to participate again next year.

As for panels and all the other social venues they offered, I paid no attention.

7. In regard to how sales might be compared to actual art fairs, since there was no cost, no dinners out in LA (too bad), no car rental or Uber, etc., there really is no comparison.

8. I do not currently have plans to participate in person in any art fairs this year. And I look forward to participating in more virtual opportunities. We need to learn how to do them better ourselves.

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**Françoise Bornstein**

1. Participating in PHOTO LA virtual was the opportunity to get in touch with new collectors, to meet the collectors we met at the last edition of Photo LA last January, to introduce our new gallery artists to the Los Angeles public, and also to many other people from abroad as it was a virtual fair. Of course the financial aspect was a very positive point.

2. I expected international visibility for the artists. But the results were more than disappointing. We only received one single request for one of the four photographers presented on the stand. The price of \$20 to enter to visit the virtual fair was discouraging to visitors. The visit should have been free. It was a big handicap for many people. In addition to this, visiting the stands and the works was very restrictive and difficult.

Visiting the fair required too much time so that the people possibly interested did not necessarily have to devote outside of a lockdown period of confinement.

The Whova platform was not the right platform for this type of event. It was not responsive enough or flexible enough in hanging possibilities or the choices of frames

3. We did not sell anything and we didn't even get a response to the information we sent to the only person who asked for some.

6. Watching the lectures, panels and talks was impossible for Europeans, the scheduled was Los Angeles time

7. We had no other participation to virtual fairs this year. I am not planning anything at the moment.

8. Paris Photo would be the only fair I will participate in if it becomes virtual.

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**Terry Etherton**

1. We wanted to participate to show support for the Photo LA folks. We have exhibited with them the last few years.

2. Our expectations were to sell nothing. We met those expectations.

3. We had ZERO sales.

6. I liked the platform. It worked easily and looked good. It ended up being more of a chat room than anything else. We got a lot of compliments on our booth but no sales.

7. We participated in a virtual fair for Photo Basel. No sales.

8. Depending on cost, we would most likely participate in PPNY. I think the EU ban will kill Paris Photo in November.

9. While we did not make any sales at Photo LA, we did have some interaction with visitors and felt like the organizers the best job they could.

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**Unattributed**

1. Yes, definitely the reasonable expense.

2. We did not expect much and just wanted to see where it goes. Unfortunately, the app was a little bit unclear and not the best option in our opinion.

3. Unfortunately, we did not have any sales.

6. In general, the efforts that went into it were very good and we felt that the team was always available.

7. We participated in the Art Basel Online Viewing Rooms, which were a bit more successful. We are still planning on participating at Paris Photo and FIAC this year. Also Art Cologne. But let's see if it will be physically or also as a virtual version.

8. See above. We would participate in a virtual version of a fair, yes.

### **Sid and Michelle Monroe**

1. We were contacted about the virtual photo la fair in May. At that time the Gallery had been closed for almost two months and we were eager to try anything to increase visibility and reach out to the virtual world. Claudia and her team have worked tirelessly the past two years to reinvigorate the Photo LA fair and we were happy to support their efforts. Additionally, the fair fee was more than reasonable so it was an easy decision to participate.

2. We really had no expectations going into the fair. We are in extremely uncertain times, businesses are struggling, travel is next to nonexistent, unemployment is at record levels, the United States is failing on every level to address the Covid-19 pandemic, and there is much uncertainty as we head towards a presidential election. The weak spot for the fair was the need for collectors to download and become familiar with an app in order to "visit" the fair. Nonetheless, we had modest success and sold several prints in the \$3,000–\$5,000 range. The fair did a good job of publicity and was quite innovative with offerings of virtual programming; perhaps it remains to be seen just how many people are really committed to virtually participating in panels, lectures, etc. As long-time exhibitors at the physical Photo LA we no doubt benefited somewhat from a familiar client base.

7. We have not participated in any other virtual fairs and currently do not plan to do so. The quick proliferation of virtual fairs do not seem to have perfected the best approach and platforms, so most seem to be experimental, at best.

8. We had planned to participate at Paris Photo but at this time see no way the fair can be viable given the current travel restrictions and continued presence and spread of the virus internationally. We are also planning on exhibiting at Paris Photo

New York but spring 2021 seems light-years away and it is almost impossible under current uncertain conditions to plan that far in the future.

9. Monroe Gallery of Photography is again open to the public with Covid-19 safe operating procedures, and have expanded our exhibitions on-line. We extend our concern and gratitude to our community, colleagues, and clients, near and far.

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### **Unattributed**

1. The pandemic has been a major challenge for art in general, art galleries in particular, primary/emerging/new art related projects and photography more specifically, for that matter the motivation was to get an opportunity to be exposed to a specialized public during times when it is impossible to attend the art fairs that I normally participate in, such as Photo London, Photo Basel, or arcoMadrid, Maco Foto, Unseen. That said, the fee was not cheap whatsoever if you consider that the organizers had minimum costs in comparison to those in an in-person art fair and unfortunately Photo LA did not deliver. It was a disappointment despite the tremendous amount of work that the galleries did in order to promote, attend, upload, catalogue, feature, etc., because the organizers oriented their strategies on their program of activities that had nothing to do with the exhibitors. They only promoted their talks (some of them pre-recorded) and there was not a single strategy to promote the virtual booths, which got lost in the incommensurable ocean of internet images.

2. A virtual art fair is a great challenge because although the marketing promises since the last decade has been "experiences," one of the few authentic and hard to beat is the aesthetic experience that by definition has to me multisensorial, which is impossible to replicate online. These months have demonstrated that a virtual art market favors what we know: from a Cartier-Bresson to a Sherman, but in order to discover, bet, support, appreciate and enjoy a new proposal, a serious, committed, awarded, reviewed and curated new proposal from an emerging artist is very complicated. And

if the art fair does not understand these in order to assist the system to focus on that it is simply not going to work for that and only the top will be moving while the rest of the pyramid will be drawn in the omission.

3. There was not even an inquiry, nor sales at all, and unfortunately that was the repetitive comment I got from the enormous group of desperate galleries from around the world that spend their savings during very challenging times, especially in developing countries outside the USA which was the 40% of Photo LA virtual clientele.

4. I did not make sales at all despite the vigorous work I did to promote Photo LA, I have been fortunate enough to sell to my collector base doing what we always do: work directly with the collector, assisting them on a one-to-one basis, tailor-made service.

6. In general, for good and bad, art is not a Zoom meeting, art is not an Instagram account, art is not a Powerpoint presentation, and art is not a virtual art fair. By definition art is elusive, unattainable, against the rules, avant garde, symbolic, and demanding. Those virtues are not favored in the virtual world and that is good. We can proclaim that Art will be a reserve of the real. Photography can be looked at, perhaps observed online, preferably in a big computer, not on a 5" screen. It will be difficult to appreciate a Gursky in your mobile and it will be hard to pay 5 grand to buy something that you do not know exactly how it looks printed and framed. A photographic work on the internet is another pic, in the middle of a kitten meme, and a recipe in your newsfeed.

That said, if the owners, curators and organizers of the virtual art fairs are not aware of that and if they do not commit all their efforts to promote the work of the exhibitors and the artists on sale, it is simply not going to work. Period.

This was a very disappointing experience because PhotoLA chose a terrible app to access that was confusing and did not add anything. It is obvious that Photo LA did not make tests nor practices to check if it was suitable. Also it looks that they are not even aware of the main technical information that has to be promoted in photography. They paid no attention to crucial matters in the photography market such as editions, kinds of papers, frames, proportion, certification, books, etc. We hope that they were going to do a much better job and unfortunately it was a big disappointment.

7. At the beginning of the year I participated in the art fair season in Mexico City and NYC, from March on in a few virtual art fairs with not incredible results. I expect to participate in the Miami art fair season in December.

8. I will not participate in virtual art fairs until the organizers deliver something clear for exhibitors, selling artists, and collectors.

### Unattributed

1. Yes, the low fee made it worth the while even if nothing were to sell.

2. I had zero expectations except to get our artists' work out there and be on people's radar.

3. I sold nothing directly from the fair.

6. The Whova app that was required to download in order to attend the fair was horrible to use — not user friendly and clients complained about its wonkiness. The feedback I received from my clients in general was the interactive presentations were more interesting than the virtual fair. The fee to get in was ridiculous in my opinion. I had a few take part in the "VIP" access but not many and those were the clients who gave me feedback.

7. I participated in the Antiques and Fine Arts Magazine fair which in all honesty was even worse than the photo la fair. They had horrible promo, zero inquiries, etc.

8. My guess is Paris Photo and Paris Photo NY will be canceled and go online.

9. I cut Photo LA slack, as the rest of the online attempts, it's just tricky right now and it's a brave new world and we're all just trying to navigate it.

### Unattributed

1. With Paris Photo NY cancelled, we had loads of new acquisitions ready for display, so this seemed like the right avenue to get our material out there... especially with only a \$500 exhibition cost.

2. My expectations for the fair were very low, but I had hoped for one or two solid sales, or at least new additions to the mailing list. Even my hedged hopes were unmet, with zero sales and zero inquiries.

3. Our fair at Photo LA in February was fantastic, with sales in the six-figures and plentiful connections. It was surprising to achieve zero sales and

no new (or old) connections during the virtual edition.

6. Navigating the virtual fair was frustrating, and the app seemed useless. The fair organizers tried to translate the in-person fair experience verbatim, rather than reinterpreting the fair experience to better suit the digital medium.

7. Art Basel produced a nice, simple virtual fair. If a photo fair organizer produced a compelling model, I'd be eager to try it. I'm wary of in-person fairs for the near future.

### Peter Fetterman

1. The main and only motivation to participate in Virtual Photo LA was to be supportive of Claudia Bartlett and her team as they are our only local fair.



**Willy Ronis:** *Carrefour rue Vilin/rue Piat, Belleville, 1959* (© Ministère de la Culture — Médiathèque de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine, dits. RMN — Grand Palais/Courtesy Peter Fetterman Gallery, Santa Monica)

2. I had very low expectations but to my surprise we did end up selling one Willy Ronis photo to

someone in Paris who had tried to visit our physical gallery once before when he was visiting his son here but hadn't quite made it.

I appreciate all the effort Claudia, et al., put in. This for sure is a new era. I am completely techno challenged and staring at a computer for any length of time is not actually my cup of tea or how I would like to spend my time.

Nothing can replace viewing the nuances of a print in person and having a congenial conversation with someone who knows more about it than I do. I'm amazed at the naivete of our show organizer friends who think that things will come back to normal in a relative short period of time like November or next April. The world needs to heal from this unprecedented. Pain and tragedy and the economic impact that this has had on all of us.

I respect any innovative technical endeavors that are offered up to us but we all need to lower our expectations as to a quick fix for all that has happened. In the meantime I am encouraged by our own small efforts online, which have been rewarded with some success. I started a daily blog called the "Power of Photography" as a form of self-therapy to keep myself positive. I thought I would just distribute a few images, but to my delight and surprise it has developed a momentum of its own now that the recipients forward on to friends and family who now subscribe to it. It has been very humbling to receive wonderful comments from strangers saying how it now helps them get through the day.

Yes, for sure, the Power of Photography. I'm working on a book for it now with an English publisher.

9. All any of us can do now is to keep well and safe and optimistic for the future.

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### Joel Soroka

I decided to give the fair a try as it was not expensive and nothing much else was going on. Plus I'd never done anything like this previously. I thought the organizers did a good job though the platform was not very good for an art fair. The work looked



okay and while I am never optimistic I thought it was worth the effort.

Over the course of the fair I did not receive one email or phone call except from photographers wanting me to look at their work.

I generally don't enjoy selling online and have not been successful doing so thus far so whether I would do another online fair, even PPNY, remains to be seen. For PPNY it depends on the price.

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**Unattributed**

In total consideration of the market and people's welfare because of the virus, it was good to see initiative and a risk-taking attitude. Photo LA didn't lose anything to try something and it didn't cost very much — only \$500 — to try the fair. The initiative was first to be on a mobile app with a 3D booth. The layout of the booth was very good and easy and pleasant to navigate. The Fair also offered a time where dialogue and interaction were possible with several public talks. The app was interactive and was able to connect with many people.

The fair was not really successful in terms of sales but I think it was a great opportunity. Also, the fair was put together in a very short amount of time. It was very challenging but a good opportunity for the market and galleries — in terms of spirit. In my opinion, Photo LA started something different and they should pursue and develop this initiative to make it a significant rendezvous between photo galleries and the public. The spirit and the dynamic are there.

This initiative was much better — because they had more time — than Paris Photo New York, with their online platform as a substitute for the show that was canceled. The experience was poor and not relevant. I hope the online demonstration will be much better in November at Paris Photo Paris...if the fair does take place.

In general, there is a lot of room for improvement and I think we should expect new shifts and changes in the gallery business model in the years to come even beyond the Covid effect.

**Anna Avetova**

1. Mironova Gallery has always been intensely engaged in art fair activities around the globe. By no means did we want to interrupt this valuable practice. When deciding whether to participate in Photo LA or not, we did consider neither financial factors nor the possible “more convenient” virtual format. The major motivation to join this year's edition was to preserve existing contacts and gain new ones, and to get to know enthusiastic clients, etc.

2. It was no doubt a serious challenge. Our high hopes were to reach new clients and sell some artworks, which appeared to be rather complicated due to fact that it is almost impossible to establish such a connection without live personal contact. In fact, it was frankly hard to operate in the specially created app and navigate through all of its functions.

Probably using a usual site or already well-known social media would have made more sense in terms of user-friendliness and intuitiveness. I also had some thoughts on collaboration with established brands, e.g. Artsy or Artnet, just to provide a familiar interface.

Apart from that, I felt there was a lack of personal interaction, which could have been solved via Zoom calls, meet ups with curators, clients, etc. That is my view on how to improve a virtual fair.



**Boris Mikhailov:** *Yesterday Sandwich*, 1966 at Mironova Gallery

3. Unfortunately, we did not have any sales at all. I strongly believe that in the art fair world in order for an artwork to be sold you have to be selling it. That means a lot of communication and face-to-face contact, which was sadly not as efficient as usual.

6. I absolutely agree with the expressed opinion. It seems to me that the art fair demands a radically personal approach and is to a great extent dependent on informal networking.

Undoubtedly, the time and effort invested into the digital transformation of such large-scale events deserve respect and appreciation. However, for me as someone used to (addicted to) offline sales, in-person communication and spreading empathy about the artworks, it appeared to be psychologically hard to stay at the smartphone through the whole day, desperately trying to discover new clients.

7. The fees were affordable, however the outcome, as I have mentioned earlier, was not satisfactory. We intended to build up a network, search out new opportunities, and it was sadly not possible. However we are immensely grateful for this chance and hope to improve our mutual experiences in the upcoming Photo LA editions.

We are planning to take part in Kyiv Art Week and Photo Basel Berlin later this year.

8. I guess, that the art fairs cannot be completely turned into a virtual dimension, as personal interaction cannot be converted into any of digital alternatives. On the one hand, I am glad that although being caught off guard by the pandemic's risks and restrictions, art professionals were able to still find numerous adequate solutions on how to continue their activities. Technological progress, solidarity, and inspiration for the pioneering made a miracle in this case.

We would participate in Paris Photo and Paris Photo New York with great pleasure, first of all, to support the art fair and make a contribution to keeping it afloat. Furthermore, we strive to continue our activities uninterrupted, thus chances are that we will find ourselves under necessity constructing new dialogue models to improve our policy and keep them up to date. We expect the buyers and collectors to review their policies as well in order to make future art fairs, regardless of whether online or offline, more productive and significant anyway.

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## The Allure, and Pitfalls, of Seeing Photographs — and the World — in Isolation

By Kevin Moore

A friend pointed out recently that the months of isolation have made us not only worried and frustrated but also socially awkward. As we venture out of our pods, we are rusty at communicating, made worse by masks and other safety protocols. You can't read facial expressions, you don't know where someone has been, you can't trust their behaviors, or politics. The Covid pandemic has wrought much more than sickness and death. It has struck at the foundations of our social order, profoundly disrupting the ways in which we communicate and build sympathy for one another.

Isolation breeds problems on all levels. Humans are social beings and the realities we inhabit are complex and evolving over time. Our inherited political and economic systems are, like it or not, global and intertwined. And yet there persists these romantic — potentially dangerous — fantasies of isolationism, engendering thoughts of nationalism, racial purity, and absolute economic sustainability. On the private side, we remain fiercely individualistic, we idealize self-care, and guard our personal time. Yet, if we're honest, most of us only need these in small doses. Movement, mixing, and messiness are truer to who we are as human beings than any fantasy of isolation or self-containment.

Like many people, I've been questioning recently the innocuousness of large daily doses of news photographs, clever memes, and Twitter proclamations. In much the same way that reading only headlines spikes anxieties, "doomscrolling" large quantities of still images feels increasingly like eating a cake that's all frosting — the rich outer layer without substance. The sugar high is achieved but ultimately results in a headache.

Still photographs, like those by Henri Cartier-Bresson, tell a story in a concise and satisfying way. A quick glimpse at a photo like *Rue Mouffetard, Paris*, 1954, featuring a proud boy carting home the wine, and you instantly get it: he's playing the adult to an audience of girl admirers. Yet political stories are harder to capture in a single image. A Cartier-Bresson photo such as *Gestapo informer recognized by a woman she had denounced, Transit Camp, Dessau, Germany*, of 1945, relies on its title to explain what is happen-



## THE ALLURE continued

ing, and even then, no details other than haircuts and facial expressions are shared. But these are only partial stories. They are *symbolic* stories, telling us, paradoxically, more about adolescence, or French culture, or political retribution generally than about the life of a particular French boy or the deeds of a particular Gestapo informer and her victim.



**Henri Cartier-Bresson:** *Rue Mouffetard, Paris, 1954*



**Henri Cartier-Bresson:** *Gestapo informer recognized by a woman she had denounced, Transit Camp, Dessau, Germany, 1945*

We have all grown wise to the media convention of showing an image of a slumped POTUS for a story on spiraling polls, or a beleaguered Dr. Fauci touching his face, seeming to despair. And we know these images are merely illustrational — taken in another context and used to juice a given story. Photographs remain the gold standard for serious journalism in much the same way black-and-white photographs denote history: this thing happened, or it happened long ago, and here it is, this absolute truth, crystalized for eternity. Yet such images, we know, can be problematically incomplete and even misleading.



**Lewis W. Hine:** *Sadie Pfeiffer; Spinner in Cotton Mill; North Carolina, 1910*

In truth, photographic series are much better suited to telling long and complex stories, though they admittedly lack the punch of a galvanizing single image. Lewis Hine attacked the exploitation of child laborers during the first decades of the twentieth century not by producing a single iconic photo of a newsy or cotton mill worker, but by capturing child laborers by the score in two large and distinct bodies of work. And while there are certainly iconic images in the series, viewers were struck by the size of the problem — by the sheer abundance of images and children — and thus compelled to act through legislation. Similarly, the photographic division of the government-sponsored Farm Security Administration, which sent a slew of photographers such as, Ben Shahn, and Walker Evans out to record the impact of the Great Depression, resulted, as intended, in a massive archive of national crisis. Again, there are iconic images from the series, such as Lange's *White Angel Breadline* (1933), but the story was much greater, as reflected in the extensive FSA archive, housed now in the Library of Congress.



**Dorothea Lange:** *White Angel Breadline*, 1933

An aspect of photography attempting to document political crises is that politics and even the conditions they create are often abstract — an economic collapse is essentially invisible, unless you can find the migrant workers and the breadlines. As many documentarians of the Great Depression noted at the time, the crisis was not readily apparent in most parts of the country — especially in the cities — and thus not easy to record. As our current world experiences more and more crises deriving from such abstract forces as aggressive finance capital, inalterable climate change, and rising fascist politicians, it is increasingly difficult to “report” visually on these phenomena. In a real sense, this is what contributes to the disbelief expressed by many people of the problems’ very existence.

One of the most groundbreaking photographic series in recent memory is Taryn Simon’s *American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, of 2007. An attempt to document subjects within the clandestine precincts of government agencies, private research institutions, and protected technological sites, *American Index* takes us on a macabre tour of inbred tigers, decomposing human bodies, hymenoplasty surgery, vials of HIV, and rotting contraband at JFK airport. While Simon’s project was ostensibly about the “privilege of access” (in-

deed, as much of the artist’s time was spent researching these secretive entities and petitioning for access as actually photographing), the result is a measured, chilling encounter with those levers of power we would not normally see nor perhaps even know about. In a sense, Simon’s project is the exact opposite of the singular news photograph: rather than a split-second of surface, shown out of context, Simon’s is a series of exposures of underlying causalities — the complicated and disturbing inner-workings of a world we too readily take on its face.

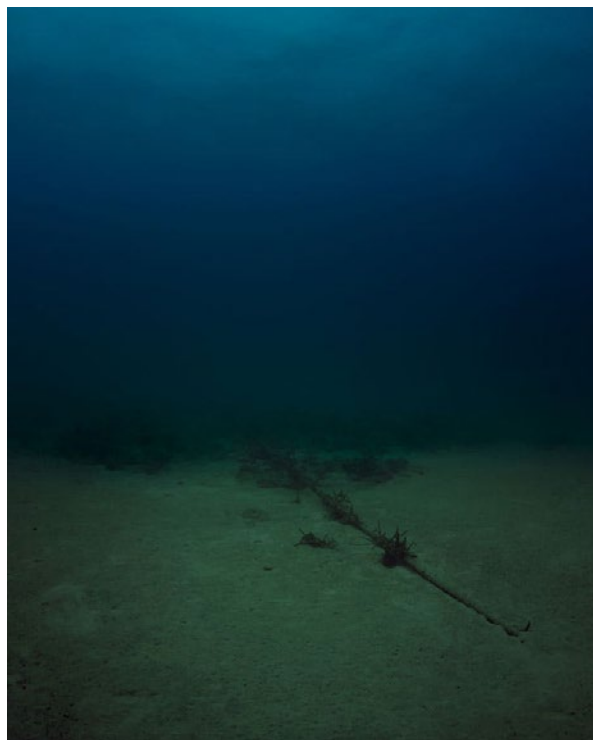


**Taryn Simon:** *White Tiger (Kenny)*, *Selective Inbreeding*, Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge and Foundation, Eureka Springs, Arkansas, from *American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, 2007 (Courtesy the artist and Gagosian Gallery, New York)

No current artist working in photography visualizes hidden power better than Trevor Paglen. His various series attempting to picture the unseen — secretive government renditions, the deep-sea cable network comprising the internet, stealth military installations — are sometimes aided by high-powered telescopes and diagrammatic visual techniques. But the larger purpose of such innovation is to call attention to a singularly complex and ominous subject: the surveillance state. Like Simon, Paglen’s use of photography proposes a new kind of documentary, one that looks beyond the social — the human fallout of a given political circumstance — to the systemic machinations that result in a political circumstance. He looks not at the puppet but at the puppeteer. Not at the tortured, nor even the torturer, but at the system that deems torture necessary and something to keep quiet. Paglen’s style of documentary compares most succinctly — and quite literally — to reading the night sky: to reading the given data and



seeing meaningful patterns. His effort is cumulative and encourages us as viewers to comprehend cumulatively — to understand our world through an expansive leap of making connections between images and information rather than simply consuming our daily media, as has become custom, as hors d'oeuvres.



**Trevor Paglen:** *Bahamas Internet Cable System (BICS-1) NSA/GCHQ-Tapped Undersea Cable Atlantic Ocean*, 2015 (Courtesy the artist and Pace Gallery, New York)

All of the recent use of “systemic” (as in “systemic racism”) is but a reminder of the need to pull ourselves out of isolation, to see the long-established connections between things, particularly at the intersections of conflict and power — everything is systemic, intersectional, interconnected. Walter Benjamin envisioned truth as “the encircling dance of represented ideas” — like identifying the Big Dipper as it moves through the sky, if you know how to find it. Rather than seeing our experience as flashes of symbolic insight, we must work toward understanding our reality as evolving toward new realities, much like individual images in a film layer one frame over another. One moment must yield to the next just as we must yield to our best collective instincts. And we cannot do this in the isolation of an instant.



## A Museum of One's Own: Alice Sachs Zimet, Pioneering Photography Collector

By Jessica Robinson

“I don’t want easy listening in my photos,” says Alice Sachs Zimet, a trailblazer in photography advising, collecting, and educating. Long before it was fashionable, profitable, or even considered a major art form, Zimet began collecting photographs.

In December of 1984 she attended an exhibition at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, New York. She had come with Sam Wagstaff, the partner of Robert Mapplethorpe. They were there to see a flower exhibition from Wagstaff’s vast and groundbreaking collection.



**Andrew Bush:** *Columbines*, 1982

That’s where Zimet saw an image by contemporary photographer Andrew Bush titled *Columbines*. It was love at first sight.

“I tracked it down at the Julie Saul Gallery and that was my first purchase.”

But she could not stop with one. So she bought a second Bush piece titled *Studio Kitchen*. “I bought two pieces because I thought the first one needed a partner. Looking back, I realize that was the seed of a manic collector. You can’t just have one. To this day I still buy in pairs. Or even threes,” says Zimet, spoken with the passion of a true collector.





**Andrew Bush:** *Studio Kitchen*, 1982

That was a time when the photography market was still in its early stages. There were not nearly the number of photo galleries or photo-only auctions as there are now. “I had to defend my love of photography as most people said ‘it wasn’t art.’”

Today Zimet’s collection numbers around 300 museum-quality pieces from the mid-twentieth century to the present.

Alice Sachs Zimet’s ties to the world of fine art go back to her birth. To celebrate her arrival her parents purchased a series of 13 Bonnard lithographs, titled *Quelques Aspects de la Vie de Paris*. Indeed, art in her life goes back even further. Her great uncle, Paul Sachs, was the Associate Director at the Fogg Art Museum and created one of the first museum studies courses at Harvard.

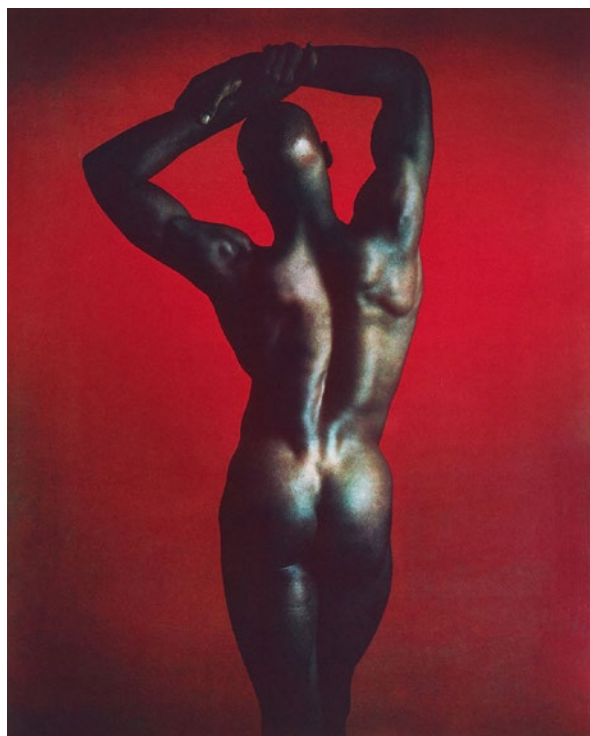
Zimet’s excitement about photography was launched with an internship in the very early days of the International Center for Photography. “It influenced me tremendously,” she says. “But collecting was far from my horizon. I didn’t know how to collect.”

That was to take a few more years and a fascinating professional journey.

Armed with two degrees in Art History, she decided on an unexpected career path: philanthropy. And she landed a job in, of all places, The Chase Manhattan Bank. “I go for an interview dressed as an art person, long hair, no suit or Hermes scarf. I could not imagine they would hire me,” says Zimet. They hired her on the spot.

She was soon invited to create the first arts sponsorship program in a commercial bank. It was there that her trailblazing instincts flourished. Here she was able to convince the conservative

management to pledge money to everything, from the arts to the AIDS crisis.



**Robert Mapplethorpe:** *Ken Moody (nude with red background)*, 1985

After seven years she rose to Worldwide Director of Cultural Affairs. She was traveling the world, creating lucrative programs — “to do good and to do business for the bank.” There were Halloween performances in Paris with Martha Graham, events with Twyla Tharp and Paul Taylor. In those days programs like these were almost unheard of in commercial banks.

This diminutive, red-head’s career was on fire. Her department became a rainmaker for the bank, working across 14 countries and generating over \$2 billion in new business. Her red-hot work in the field of cross-over marketing and philanthropy continued for twenty years. The projects she managed became a model for what corporate sponsorship is today.

Today Zimet is totally immersed in the world of photography. She is the Chair of the Photography Curatorial Committee at the Harvard Art Museums. She serves as Chair of the Acquisitions Committee at the International Center of Photography, is on the Board of Magnum Foundation, and runs her own advising company, Arts+Business Partners, a consulting boutique focused on corpo-

rate sponsorship as well as the fine art photography marketplace.



*Living with Art, Zimet's Apartment in New York City*

Zimet's collection is largely made up of black-and-white photographs, although there are several in vibrant color. Why black and white? "One reason is it's easier to hang, you can have multiple images together, so you can be obsessive in black and white," says Zimet.



**Lisette Model:** *Singer at the Cafe Metropole, New York City, 1946*

Zimet is more than just a collector. With her enduring drive and unerring eye for quality, she exercises an acute form of connoisseurship. Her collection goes beyond personal. It is her autobiography.

Her first early theme was France. Her grandfather had lived there for 50 years and Zimet herself spent a year in Paris. Indeed, that first purchase of Andrew Bush's *Columbines* reminded her of her mother's garden. "It was the kind of post-impressionistic work my parents collected."

Her second early theme was artist's portraits. It began with the purchase of Bill Brandt's image of Cezanne's studio. Another was Cecil Beaton's shot of David Hockney with his friend Henry Geldzahler (whom Zimet interned under when he was the first Curator for 20th-Century Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art). "Like my comfort level with France, artist portraits were a natural given. I had two degrees in art history and my first job was at the Metropolitan Museum."



**Christer Strömholm,** *White Lady, Barcelona, 1959*

About 20 to 25 years ago the theme of artist portraits "morphed into portraits of people who are living their lives," says Zimet. "I have images by Swedish photographer Christer Strömholm of young men dressed as female prostitutes in the late 1950s / early 1960s in the red light district of Paris. Many eventually became women, and I befriended two of them, Nina and Jackie, as I learned more and more about Stromholm's work. Sadly they have both died over the past few years. Those



## A MUSEUM OF ONE'S OWN continued

two ladies were amazing human beings and certainly an example of people living their lives !”

This was decades before such images were widely seen. These are images she refers to as “portraits that are not easy listening — sometimes tough, but always about humanity.”

Another group of “not easy listening” portraits includes South African photographer Zanele Muholi, an artist who uses photography as a social activist to chronicle the queer movement in post-apartheid South Africa.



**Zanele Muholi:** *Vuyelwa Makubetsu, Kwa Thema Community Hall, Springs, Johannesburg, 2011*

As Zimet became more widely known as a “guru” in the photography world, *Arts+Business Partners* increasingly focused on the fine art photography marketplace. The mission is to bring her expertise to nascent collectors. She offers what she calls “boot camp” classes (virtual these days) to help young collectors navigate today’s marketplace, from advice on acquisitions to help with sales at galleries, art fairs, and auctions, Zimet takes the word “daunting” out of collecting. “I don’t tell people what to buy, I tell them how to

buy. My hope is to empower others to have confidence and to be smarter.”

As if that’s not enough, she offers another workshop specifically for photographers. Here they are given an insider’s peek into the collector’s mind. “How you communicate your work is critical,” says Zimet.

So, how does a photographer fine tune their communication skills? Perfect their “elevator pitch?” Land on a collector’s radar screen? Ask Alice.

What is the best advice the guru of photo collecting can offer? “Buy with your heart and buy with your brain, but you should never buy with your ears.”



*Alice Sachs Zimet taking a class through the AIPAD Photography Fair*

Zimet shares her experience and enthusiasms so intensely I can feel the collector’s passion in her. I am sure her students feel the passion too.

You can [learn more about Alice](#) at the [Arts+Business partners’ website](#).

A version of this article was originally published on Berkshire Fine Arts. All images in this article are from the collection of Alice Zimet.





## SAVE THE DATE FOR THE PHOTO REVIEW BENEFIT AUCTION

The Photo Review Benefit Auction will be held on October 24 — virtually this year. Details will follow but we already have some amazing prints for sale.



**Harold Feinstein:** *Boys Running into Surf*, 1954/c. 1970



**Helen Levitt:** *NYC*, 1990s



**George Krause:** *Swish*, 1979/later

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