

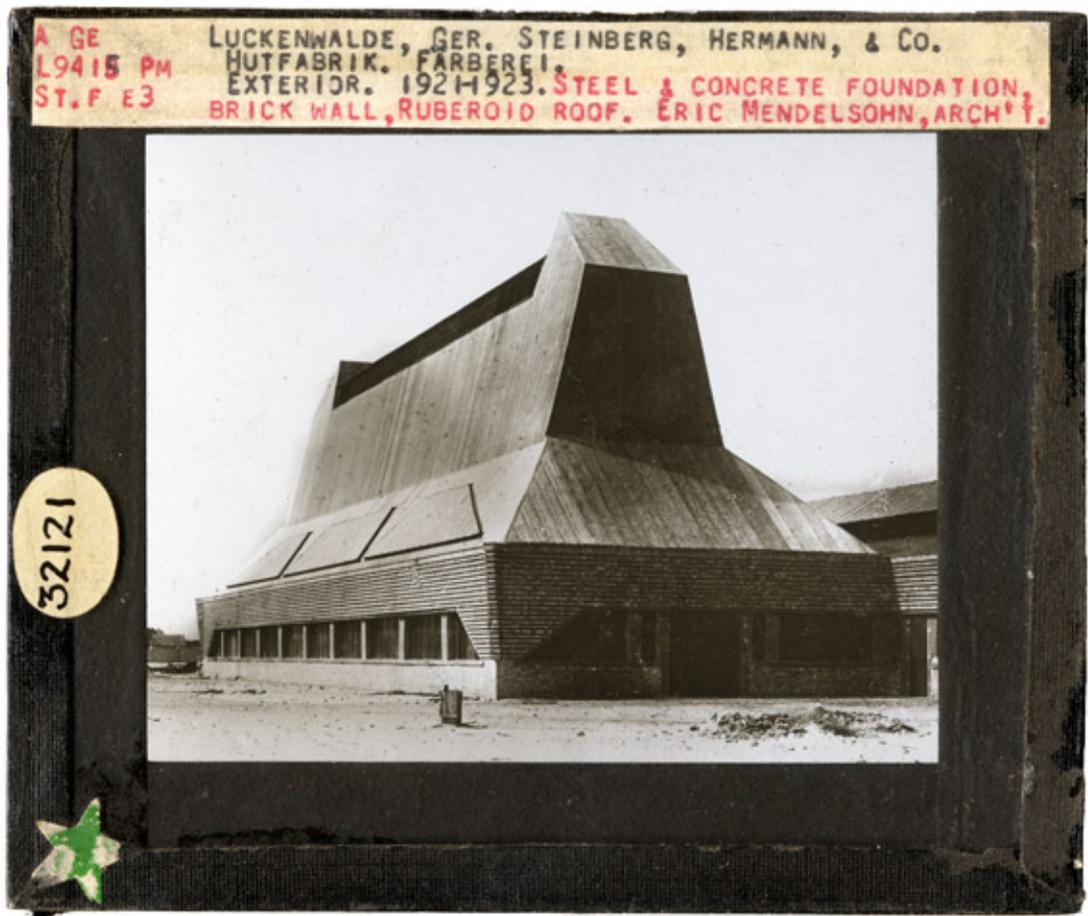
CARNET DE MIART

Nicola Ricciardi interviews Linda Fregni Nagler



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For our 8th issue of Carnet de miart we've decided to bend the rules of this column, which so far has focused exclusively of collecting as seen by full-time art collector. This time we've tried to expand a little bit the definition to include an artist, Linda Fregni Nagler, who has spent a great deal of time collecting—even if she finds hard to identify with the term “collector” (“I relate better with the idea of gathering”, she told Carnet de miart’s editor in chief Nicola Ricciardi, “of bringing together images that belong to the same category”). The subject of Fregni Nagler’s work is often anonymous amateur or commercial photographs from the 19th- and early 20th-century, typically of Japanese or American origin, which she gathers in great quantities. Her interest in these images lies in their lack of authorship, and her resulting opinions about collecting brings a new and refreshing perspective to the table. On the occasion of miart 2015, Linda will take part in the miartalks series, in a panel titled “Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before”, together with Thomas Seelig, Director, Fotomuseum, Winterthur, and Francesco Zanot, Curator, Camera, Torino .



When we first met, two years ago, I remember you were carefully arranging the 997 photographs that constitute the “Hidden Mother” project, which you’ve presented at the Venice Biennale in 2013. Like that work, many of your projects involves the careful selection and tireless collection of amateur and commercial photographs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: from daguerreotypes and tintypes to *cartes de visite* and cabinet cards... Where does this interest in collecting come from?

I started when I was still in the academy, about fifteen years ago or so. At first, I didn’t consider it as “collecting” and it is actually still hard for me to use that term. I rather *gather* images, either as a source of inspiration or as “short-circuit” for the creation of a new imagery that I produce myself. Sometimes a photograph is just raw material, like in my last show, “Pour commander à l’air”, which opens on April 10th at Galleria Monica De Cardenas in Milan.

So you don’t see yourself as a collector?

I find it hard to identify with the term “collector”. I relate better with the idea of gathering, of bringing together images that belong to the same category—a category that is not necessarily preexistent or scientific— and that I combine. This was particularly striking in the “Hidden Mother” series, where I focused on a category that originally wasn’t even existing *per se*: it became historically relevant only later. For me, the idea of transforming the studio from the site of production to a place of reception is stronger than the idea of collecting. It is not the act of owning that interests me, but rather to the operation of bringing together different pictures—and by that transforming them into “something else”.

This idea of creating “something else” is intriguing. On the other hand one could say that you steal other people’s stories to build your own narrative. How do you feel about that?

Well, working with images makes you a thief by definition. A thief of several snapshots of the lives of others. That said, in my work, I don't care too much about narrative in a literary sense, but rather narrative by, say, iconographic proximity: a kind of narrative that has more to do with human representation.



And how do you feel, as an artist, about being part of a collection yourself? Does the fact that your own “collections” (sorry if I keep using that term) become part of someone else’s (art) collection interest you?

Actually, I am very interested in knowing that, in some cases, these collections that I put together find a home. In the case of the “Hidden Mother”, the work is now part of the collection of a museum. Everyone keeps asking: “How could you separate yourself from a project that took you 10 years to realize?” And I usually answer that I’m so much happier this way! The works are better there, archived with museum criteria and not in some boxes in my house where actually nobody can see them. As a matter of fact, for me the art is much more within the process than in the physical work. I don’t have a particular attachment to the final object, therefore it is not that hard for me to say goodbye.

Does that mean that you often have a good relationship with those who collect your work?

Yes, I’m very happy every time I build a relationship with a collector interested in my work. But don’t get me wrong: it is not indispensable. I’m a pathological “picker” of images. That’s my illness. But it has never been about ownership and control. I just need to have the photographs in my hands for a bit, so that I can analyze them, reflect on them and understand them as objects, not just as images but also in terms of their frame and support. But once this process has occurred I no longer need them. And I’m happy if someone else takes them in their home.

If I remember correctly, in your home there are works of art too. I mean, by other artists. Do you collect some of your colleagues? And if so, can I ask how do you choose the works and if it is similar to collecting photographs for you?

It is very different. As for the works of artists that I collect, usually there's affection. Some works are gifts of friends, others are gifts of artists I'm working with, some are pieces that I bought from younger generations that I believed were worth supporting and towards which I felt some empathy. The "affect" makes it completely different from collecting photographs. And in this case yes, I feel closer to a more traditional, canonical idea of "collecting". But, I must admit, I have no plans to build a real collection anytime soon...



Nicola Ricciardi is an art writer and curator. He received a MA from the Graduate Program at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College (CCS Bard) in New York in 2014, and a BA from the School of Arts and Philosophy at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (USCS) in Milan in 2007. He contributes regularly to Mousse Magazine, where he has also been in charge of the Starring column for the past year, and he's Editor-in-Chief at Carnet de miart. His writings have been featured in several art magazines and publications, including The Brooklyn Rail, Alla Carta and DIS. His latest work, a series of texts on British-Iranian artist Kour Pour, has just been published by NERO.

Cover photo: "Hidden Mothers", installation view at the 55th Venice Biennale, 2013.

All other images courtesy of Linda Fregni Nagler