

Chosen

Fotomuseum Winterthur

Christoph Merian Verlag



Pattaya
Sept. 1991

Family

Less alone together

Chosen

Family

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Nadine Wietlisbach

08

A Personal Foreword

With any exhibition, the person curating it must sooner or later address the question of how they arrived at precisely this or that selection of content or – if it is a solo exhibition – why they opted for this or that particular photographer or artist... In the case of this exhibition and book, it is impossible to pin down the point in time at which the idea was born. That said, the personal inspiration motivating or impelling me, as a curator, to engage with the themes of family and community has been with me for a long time. It first manifested in 2017 in the two-person show *Familienbande: Glück und grosse Unwetter* (Family Bonds: Happiness and Tempest), an exhibition of works by British artist Jonny Briggs and Italian photographer Salvatore Vitale at Photoforum Pasquart in Biel. Briggs is a master of staging and illusion, who casts both of his parents in the starring roles, while Vitale is a painter of light who uses sombre images to mirror his relationship with his father. The artists' distinct biographies and radically divergent visual languages revealed different approaches to the idea of family that still fascinate me today.

Every story has its own silence.

09 The question of how family constellations are cemented, how they develop together or drift apart and how people build the bonds of trust that give rise to strong communities is not just a personal concern. Rather, it affects all those of us who live in social constellations with our own norms and sets of rules. The Covid-19 pandemic, which became prevalent in February 2020, has been a particular challenge to the idea of family and community. The double burden of working from home while at the same time caring for children or other vulnerable people in the same household has revived role patterns that are to some degree entrenched. On top of that it has become increasingly evident that there is a crisis in our traditional notions of living together. Yet, by the same token, many people have reported that being cooped up with members of their own family has strengthened their personal relationships. The extended environment has become more important, especially for people who were unable to visit their own family because of the distance involved or the restrictions and regulations necessitated by the pandemic, or were happy to keep their distance, as was certainly the case for some. With everything suddenly feeling uncertain, life has pivoted around the milieu of friendship. The flip side of this situation has been less edifying: domestic violence has increased, and youth psychiatrists are still snowed under with enquiries. Currently, many people are wondering if and when they will ever see their family again. Russia's military campaign in Ukraine, which felt completely unreal to start with, has left us dumbstruck and bewildered. Ukrainian photographer and writer Yevgenia Belorusets put up the following post on Instagram on 8 April 2022: 'When I started this diary, I was convinced that I would keep it up for only a day or two. My faith in the impossibility of such a senseless war was strong. Now I travel onward, moving kilometers farther from the ongoing violence, while looking out the window of the train at another country's sprawling landscape – and suddenly find myself fearing for this place as well.' When a country that has been regarded as home and a place of anchorage for families and friends suddenly becomes a site of destruction and devastation, the world unravels – it has not only tested Ukraine and the people living there

but also reverberates around the world, putting on trial the ideal of cooperative solidarity between people. Who is willing to take someone in, and under what conditions? The images that are now reaching us from cities like Kyiv and Mariupol are no different from those we see of other conflicts, although this certainly doesn't make them any less horrifying. For me, they trigger memories of the period when refugees from the former Yugoslavia were arriving in Switzerland and being forced to build a new life here with their families (which had often been torn asunder by the war).

If you misunderstand me, you've understood me correctly.

In *All About Love: New Visions*, her groundbreaking work from the year 2000, literary scholar and writer bell hooks, who died in 2021, makes reference to John Bradshaw's book *Bradshaw on the Family: A Revolutionary Way of Self-Discovery* (1988). Bradshaw – a theologian, psychologist and successful host of several TV programmes in the US – played a major part in defining two ideas in public debates: the concepts of the 'inner child' and the 'dysfunctional family'. hooks inserts Bradshaw's definition into the frame of her reflections on the functional family, which makes happiness part of our collective consciousness: 'A functional, healthy family is one in which all the members are fully functional and all the relationships between the members are fully functional. As human beings, all family members have available to them the use of all their human power[s]. They use these powers to cooperate, individuate and to get their collective and individual needs met. A functional family is the healthy soil out of which individuals can become mature human beings'. hooks goes on to say that a functional family teaches self-esteem and maintains a balance between autonomy and dependency. 10

This complex relationship between autonomy and dependency is also evident in the history of photography, namely in those pictures that families take to depict themselves. These types of family photos can also be located in time on the basis of technical developments in the medium. The earliest family portraits were made in the 1840s in the form of daguerreotypes: unique photographic works that were treated and stored like paintings. In the early 20th century, developments moved forward at an accelerated pace with the introduction of the box camera, which made it possible for anyone to make a photographic record of important events in their lives. Today, we store thousands of snapshots and videos in the cloud or on hard drives. Family, every stage of parenthood, childhood and adolescence are represented in all their many facets in photography and art, so, as you can imagine, the research that goes into an exhibition of this kind is primarily a question of what to leave out. The social and political dimension of family constellations was a main criterion governing our choice of works for the exhibition and the authors appearing in this book.

Some of the family constellations and communities mentioned in the book, explored in the essays or discussed in scholarly terms are distinctive in that they do not just offer an affirmative reflection of the concept of chosen family but rather look at its problematic aspects from a critical standpoint. This also applies to the selection of works on display in the exhibition. There are so many ways of relating to other people with all their different shades of affection,

dependencies and, in some cases, dark secrets – and this is, it would seem, what touches us emotionally as individuals and as part of the social fabric. Whether we like it or not, we are all affected by where we come from and how we define a sense of belonging.

Even fantasy is autobiographical.

Swiss writer Aglaja Veteranyi often tackled the subject of relationships and family or families in her work. Born in Bucharest, she toured with the circus as a child and went on to become an actor and author, before dying by her own hand in 2002. Taking on the role of my imaginary interlocutor, her thinking on the subject of family played a part in realising both the exhibition and this publication. Her contribution here was twofold. Firstly, Veteranyi was an author who wanted a text to have an ‘intravenous’ effect on the reader. By this, she meant that prior to any consideration of the text, it was important that the initial response to it be a vivid impression or feeling – a reaction so spontaneous that it takes hold of the body faster than thinking. This is the intention behind the micropoems included in this text, which are all taken from Veteranyi’s work *Wörter statt Möbel* (Words Instead of Furniture), published in 2018 by Der gesunde Menschenversand in Lucerne. I have also set out to achieve this kind of effect with the works presented in the exhibition and in this book. Secondly, although Veteranyi’s canny observations of interpersonal relationships are often only one line long, they do not seem rudely truncated but rather incisive and precise. Dripping with sarcasm, the poems are deeply sad and consistently beautiful.

- 11 It is almost impossible, of course, to create resonance without adopting a conceptual approach. The exhibition brings together different narrative strands, which were used as a basis for selecting the photographers and artists: the approach to one’s own biography; the collaborative exploration of communality in conjunction with members of one’s chosen family; and the very act of taking pictures, as a fleeting yet fundamental element in the mix – an accompaniment to intimacy that documents and successfully captures it. Some of the selected artists combine all these aspects in their work, while others make particular use of a systematic way of working or narrative style that can be clearly identified.

In her *Experimental Relationship* series, Chinese-born photographer Pixy Liao has been making a playful record of her relationship with her partner Moro for more than ten years. It is a relationship that initially met with disapproval from her family: Moro is a few years younger than her and comes from Japan – neither of these circumstances went down particularly well with her family at first. Then there’s Japanese-born photographer Seiichi Furuya, who took regular pictures of his wife, Christine Gössler, between 1978 and 1985, capturing many different facets of her person. Today, these images also resonate with the pain of loss and are a reminder of the hole that Gössler left behind when she ended her life in 1985. With very few exceptions, the powerful black-and-white portrait shots present Christine alone, often showing only her face with all its emotional expressiveness. Swiss photographer Annelies Štrba has also focused her attention on her own family for decades; her intimate photographs are reminiscent of watercolours, their luminosity reinforcing the impression of timelessness and weightlessness. In many cases, it seems as if her

pictures have sprung from a dream. Nan Goldin's photo series of her close friend, the actor and writer Cookie Mueller, includes images of her wedding and her son and of the coffin in which Mueller, who died of AIDS-related complications in the late 1980s, was buried. These are single, relatively unplanned photographs whose immediacy amplifies their intensity. At the age of 19, Richard Billingham embarked on a project that spanned some seven years, taking pictures of his family in Birmingham, UK, whose seemingly dead-end lives were characterised by alcoholism and violence. The work gave rise to the photo book *Ray's a laugh*, published in 1996 by Scalo Verlag in Zurich. Twenty-two years later, the artist transferred his experience – and his characteristically intense imagery – into *Ray & Liz*, his debut as a film director. In both visual media he succeeds in producing a sensitive portrayal of mundane dreariness that is both tragic and, at times, comical. Larry Clark's photo series *Tulsa*, meanwhile, is rooted in the 1960s and 1970s. It shows the photographer and filmmaker – who was born in the city after which the work is named – spending time with his circle of friends. It is a picture of suburban adolescence, with young people hanging out together, going from one house to the next, expressing their love for one another, taking drugs, as part of a community whose destructive aspects are rendered visible. Many photographers still consider *Tulsa* to be of major importance in any discussion about photography's ability to be authentic and the question of how and whether the medium can succeed in depicting 'reality'. Mark Morrisroe's lifelong project of taking portrait shots of his friends and lovers – on occasion he can also be seen in the picture himself – are equally full of energy. The content and technical verve evident in the pictures from his estate, which has been in the holdings of Fotomuseum Winterthur since 2006, attest to his passion for experimentation and the delight he took in exploring different photographic methods. He often wrote in the white margins of the Polaroids, which were then gifted to his intimate acquaintances as small presents. Dayanita Singh, for her part, gives vivid expression to her relationship with her close friend Mona Ahmed in photographs that seem to burst dynamically from the frame. The pictures in the series *The Third Sex Portfolio* were taken between 1989 and 1999 at the exuberant birthday celebrations Mona organised for her adopted daughter, Ayesha, with parties that would go on for days. In 2018 and 2020, German-born photographer Anne Morgenstern took shots of people involved in different kinds of relationship and transgressing traditional gender roles, an expression of the fact that love and intimacy can come in many forms, textures and colours. Aarati Akkapeddi's project *Ancestral Apparitions* (2020) only has a cursory connection to classical photographs of Indian families: the artist and programmer uses software to generate new images from scans of thousands of analogue photographs, drawn from their own archive and from the Tamil Studio Archives. The images were subsequently exposed once again on old photographic paper and thus returned to an analogue medium. For Akkapeddi, the pictures are also an expression of life in the diaspora, of feelings that hover between intimacy and distance. The photographic techniques used in their work are a metaphor for the intergenerational time frame of the series. The artist Leonard Suryajaya, who grew up in Indonesia, uses well-known, traditional family images as a basis for developing colourful,

richly patterned theatrical scenes involving his parents, sister, aunts and uncles, his partner Peter, and his friends. We are shaped by our relationships, which help establish our identity: in Suryajaya's tableaux and installations these relationships become complex pictorial worlds made up of people and of objects with social and cultural connotations. US photographer Charlie Engman likewise sees his practice as a collaborative undertaking, played out in his interaction with his mother, Kathleen McCain, and expressed in the shared visual universe he created with her over a period of 11 years. Their incisive project is captured in the artist's book *MOM*, which was published by Edition Patrick Frey in 2020. In it, the two protagonists successfully challenge society's reductive perception of women, embodied by the one-dimensional figure of the nurturing mother. Entering into dialogue with material from her own family archive, Alba Zari probes into her personal history in her ongoing work *Occult* (2019–), a study of the fundamentalist Christian sect 'The Children of God' and the propaganda it produced. Zari was born into the sect in 1987. The elements of the work, here compressed into an installation, tell the complex story of dependencies and solidarity within a controversial movement. South African Lindokuhle Sobekwa uses the medium of the photo book to drill down into his sister Ziyanda's biography and, by extension, his own. *I Carry Her Photo with Me* combines archival images with personal notes in an attempt to explain his sister's disappearance and her subsequent return. Diana Markosian is a Russian American artist of Armenian descent. Operating at the intersection of photography, film, text and installation, her multilayered project *Santa Barbara* deals with her personal history and her family's emigration from the former Soviet Union to the USA. Her short film, devised in collaboration with the writer of the well-known and much-loved television series *Santa Barbara*, reconstructs the challenges the family faced at the time, with the protagonists played by actors.

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Many of the works shown in the exhibition have been adapted to suit the space at Fotomuseum Winterthur. The works of the above photographers are interspersed with works from the museum's collection – an adventure that exhibition makers typically relish. This is particularly true when the photographers are committed to the idea and ready to embark on a process of dialogue with patience and perseverance. The texts for the publication were likewise produced by an invited team of writers, and here too we found our collaborators to be receptive and, as a result, acutely focused.

A person should be able to write with their eyes.

The book examines certain aspects of the exhibition in depth. Drawing on a specific selection of photos in which photographic images are themselves the subject, Lucy Gallun, a curator at MoMA in New York, writes about memory and the empty spaces that people are able to fill using photographic means. Gallun begins with a daguerreotype dating from 1850 that shows a man and a woman with a daguerreotype, before moving on to a picture by August Sander, in which we see a photo of his son Erich, and to Takamatsu Jiro's series *Shashin no shashin* (Photos of Photos), produced in the early 1970s. She finishes with a photograph taken by Dayanita Singh in 2014, showing a picture of Mona Ahmed, who also features in the exhibition. In her conclusion Gallun reflects on a photograph

by LaToya Ruby Frazier, whose magnificent series *The Notion of Family* (2001–2014) tells the story of her own multi-generational family from Braddock, Pennsylvania, a small working-class town near Pittsburgh.

Stefan Länzlinger, head of the Swiss Social Archives in Zurich, discusses the preservation of historical family images and the way they ‘swim along’ with us, as well as their undisputed importance for us as a society. He also outlines a hypothetical vision of the archive of the future. Patricia Prieto-Blanco, a lecturer in digital media practice in the University of Lancaster’s Sociology department, uses specific case studies to explain how digital media have changed the way we handle family images photographically and the opportunities this offers us today. As she describes it, we are becoming part of a system of circulating images: ‘The WhatsApp chats, email threads and online albums where family photographs are shared become places devoted to familial engagement. This doesn’t mean that every single family member will participate in equal measure but they are all invited to look and thus their membership of the group is sanctioned.’ In conversation with Andrea Maihofer, emeritus professor of gender studies at the University of Basel, I discuss the way the family is changing as a social structure. Together, we look into the welcome development that today many people have the opportunity – and the privilege – to decide for themselves how they want to define and ‘live’ their family. Journalist and author Benjamin von Wyl, who was awarded the Swiss Literature Prize for his novel *Hyäne* (Hyena) in 2021, begins his text with a sentence that makes me, for one, think of a song with a catchy hook, ‘Families, those are the people who can fit their week-ends into two cargo bikes.’ And somewhere in the middle of his text comes the statement, ‘Families are a constant source of friction. No matter where they are.’ Author, journalist and artist Meredith Talusan shares her own story with us in a deeply personal text, reflecting on what elective family means to her as a trans person with albinism and describing the role that Diane Arbus’s photographs have played in it. Her shrewd dissection of Susan Sontag’s 1973 critique of Arbus is particularly successful because it emphasises something that should actually be self-evident, namely the fact that every person – and every community – has the fundamental right to find themselves in images, to feel seen and represented.

Right from the start we thought it was important to extend our reflections on family photos to involve the people in our immediate environment – by which I mean not only the city that is the beating heart of our museum but also Switzerland as a whole – a country small enough to still count as ‘immediate’. We put out an open call, asking people to come forward if they would like to share a particular family picture or even one or more albums with us – accompanied by any associated story or stories. The pictures that came to us through this channel likewise show moments of happiness and experiences of loss, revealing the fullness of life with all its empty spaces. Photography plays its own distinctive role here too. The exhibition and book are intended to point to the diversity of photographic and critical approaches to chosen families and their idiosyncrasies, passions and shortcomings. They represent an invitation to come together to reflect on how we want to live as a community and how we can empower each other in the process, regardless of whether we live as a couple and/or in a family

group, with or without children, have a ‘blood relationship’ or have chosen one another. Because as enriching as it may be from time to time to be self-sufficient, in the face of all life’s challenges we are simply less alone together.

Pixy

Pixy Liao, *Find a Woman You Can Rely On*, 2018, from the series *Experimental Relationship*, 2007–, archival digital print, 150 × 115 cm
© Pixy Liao

Pixy Liao, *Some Words Are Just Between Us*, 2010, from the series *Experimental Relationship*, 2007–, archival digital print, 75 × 100 cm
© Pixy Liao

Pixy Liao, *Things We Talk About*, 2013, from the series *Experimental Relationship*, 2007–, archival digital print, 75 × 100 cm
© Pixy Liao

Pixy Liao, *It's Never Been Easy to Carry You*, 2013, from the series *Experimental Relationship*, 2007–, archival digital print, 37.5 × 50 cm
© Pixy Liao

Liao

What does a modern-day romantic relationship look like? How is it influenced by individual expectations and social beliefs? Pixy Liao examines these questions in her long-term photographic project *Experimental Relationship*, which she has been working on since 2007. In it, the Shanghai-born artist, who lives in New York, photographs herself with her Japanese partner, Moro, with the two of them staged in a variety of settings. They are shown variously in a serious, humorous, vulnerable or self-assured mood, but they invariably seem to subvert the rigid, idealised notions about heterosexual relationships that have been reinforced in our minds by the photographic image and perpetuated in art.

When Liao – as a 25-year-old graduate student of photography in Memphis – met Moro in 2005, she soon found that he did not conform to the conservative ideas that had formed part of her socialisation. This conditioning holds up the man as a decisive, dominant, responsible provider, often older and more highly educated than the woman, who assumes a passive role, always devoting herself uncritically to the man. So what happens when there is a sudden shake-up of supposedly fixed gender roles? This question got Liao thinking and prompted her to examine the development of their relationship – and the cultural and social dynamics encoded in it.

In *Experimental Relationship*, therefore, it is Liao who supports Moro as he lies across her shoulders or undresses him down to his underwear and – fully clothed herself – tweaks his nipple. It is Liao who lays his naked male body across the table like a platter before eating a papaya from it. Typical gender stereotypes and clichés are not simply upended in Liao's work; the protagonists question the power dynamics between them, exploring them together in the act performed in front of the camera. The multifaceted image of their own relationship, which now comprises around 100 analogue photographs, has thus evolved through playful negotiation, developing nuance and balance in much the same way as the relationship itself. In several pictures, Liao and Moro slip into what looks like a single garment and merge with one another to become a symbiotic creature. All the photographs were taken using a cable release with the couple posed in an intimate setting at home or on the road: the specific situation determines whether the shutter release is held by Liao or Moro.

Liao's image titles articulate another narrative level: they can be descriptive, poetic, or incisive and witty. This humorous exploration of gender hierarchies – translated into sophisticated, colourful and often geometric compositions that hark back to Liao's early training as a graphic designer – is continued in her installations and sculptural works.

Giulia Bernardi















Seiichi

Seiichi Furuya,
Wien, 1983, from *Portrait
of Christine Furuya*,
Graz/Wien, 1978–1984,
gelatin-silver print,
37.3 × 25.2 cm,
Collection Fotomuseum
Winterthur,
gift Seiichi Furuya
© Seiichi Furuya/ Courtesy
Galerie Thomas Fischer

Seiichi Furuya,
Graz, 1980, from *Portrait
of Christine Furuya*,
Graz/Wien, 1978–1984,
gelatin-silver print,
37.3 × 25.1 cm,
Collection Fotomuseum
Winterthur,
gift Seiichi Furuya
© Seiichi Furuya/ Courtesy
Galerie Thomas Fischer

Seiichi Furuya,
Wien, 1983, from *Portrait
of Christine Furuya*,
Graz/Wien, 1978–1984,
gelatin-silver print,
37.4 × 25 cm,
Collection Fotomuseum
Winterthur,
gift Seiichi Furuya
© Seiichi Furuya/ Courtesy
Galerie Thomas Fischer

Seiichi Furuya,
Graz, 1980, from *Portrait
of Christine Furuya*,
Graz/Wien, 1978–1984,
gelatin-silver print,
37.4 × 25 cm,
Collection Fotomuseum
Winterthur,
gift Seiichi Furuya
© Seiichi Furuya/ Courtesy
Galerie Thomas Fischer

Seiichi Furuya,
Graz, 1979, from *Portrait
of Christine Furuya*,
Graz/Wien, 1978–1984,
gelatin-silver print
(print 1995), 37.3 × 25.1 cm,
Collection Fotomuseum
Winterthur,
gift Seiichi Furuya
© Seiichi Furuya/ Courtesy
Galerie Thomas Fischer

Furuya

The pictures Seiichi Furuya took between 1978 and 1985 shows the artist's wife, Christine Gössler. The two met and married in 1978; their son was born in 1981. Right from the start, Furuya was fascinated by Christine, to whom he felt deeply connected. For him, photography was a way of capturing the many different facets of his partner and the mother of his child. In this process, it was not so much the final image that mattered as the brief, rapt moment of being face to face. His photographic observations of his wife were also a journey of self-discovery. The relationship ended tragically when Christine, who suffered from depression, took her own life in 1985.

A major element of Furuya's work is the hundreds of pictures he took of his wife. Over the decades, he has repeatedly reorganised them, putting them together in new configurations, most notably in the five-part series that was published as *Mémoires*. His engagement with these images involves a process of grieving: it is a means, he says, of pursuing the 'truth', although ultimately he only ever encounters his own version of the story. More current projects like *Let's Learn Japanese!* (2019) and *Face to Face* (2020) include photographs taken by Christine. As Furuya himself is often the subject of these pictures, they engender a dialogue that goes beyond the visual relationship enacted in his early portraits.

Furuya's work encompasses black-and-white and colour photographs that span multiple genres, ranging from haunting portraits of his wife to street photos taken in Tokyo, Istanbul, Dresden, East Berlin and Amsterdam and Austrian landscapes. Some of the images are spontaneous, some carefully planned; some present a broader perspective of a scene, while others show intimate details. In Furuya's various series, the everyday is imbued with a complexity that bespeaks the boundaries which exist between people, cultures and political systems: between him and his wife, between his Japanese origins and his adopted home in Austria, between the different parts of a divided Germany.

Furuya studied photography in Tokyo but left Japan in 1973, dissatisfied with the country's political situation and unable to see a future for himself there. In 1975 his path led him to Graz, where he helped found the Camera Austria association. In addition to exhibiting his own work, Furuya has also organised shows for other, mainly Japanese artists, thus helping Nobuyoshi Araki, Daido Moriyama and Shomei Tomatsu gain an international following.

Matthias Pfaller







