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## The Collection FG Simak

### Interview between Fritz Simak and Anna Auer<sup>1</sup>

**Anna Auer:** I know you as an artist with a great many interests. You are a photographer and began as a musician. Where does your far-reaching interest in photography come from?

**Fritz Simak:** It really began in 1970 with the photo gallery *Die Brücke* that you and Werner Mraz ran in Vienna ... or actually, already in 1968 – I was 13 years old at the time and on tour with the Vienna Boys Choir in South Africa. My parents had bought me an *Eumig super-8* camera and I was really keen on filming with it. That prepared my eye for conscious perception. You can still see the films today; they were shot using Kodachrome material, a film which – as you know – has excellent sharpness and unbelievably rich colours that hardly change after decades. One year later, on a tour of Japan, almost all of our Japanese travel guides had single-lens reflex cameras. I was allowed to photograph with them and was fascinated that one could see a picture in the viewfinder and then produce “precisely” that picture.

But, to get back to *Die Brücke*. When I went into the gallery on Bäckerstrasse for the first time, I saw photos hanging on the walls just like pictures – that was unique at the time. Along with Arnulf Rainer, Franco Fontana and Duane Michals, there were also works by Edward Weston and Ansel Adams; at the age of sixteen, I absolutely found no way to appreciate the latter two, in spite of Werner Mraz’s many attempts to change my mind. At the time, a picture by Thomas Landon Davies, *Lancaster Barn*, was much more important for me (fig. 1). What could not be clearly made out in the reproduction in Allan Porter’s *Camera* (No. 10, Lucerne: October 1972, 50) was easily recognizable in the original in *Die Brücke* (and, today, in my home): This nine-part picture is not a collage but a so-called maxi-contact print. This is produced when a strip of negative is laid on an 8 x 10 inch negative carrier and then enlarged instead of directly onto photo paper as a normal contact print. One can easily see the perforation and read the contact negative numbers.

Davies had the completed picture in his head before he even started to photograph. For me, that was an absolutely new approach to creating a picture. For several years, the 35mm contact print remained one of my preferred artistic means. The *Zaun Sequenz* (fence sequence – fig. 2), which Peter Weibel dealt with extensively in an article in *Eikon* (No. 58, 2007, 22–27), was created in the same year.

**fig. 1** Landon Davis, *Lancaster Barn*, 1972  
Gelatin silver, maxi contact print, 21 x 22 cm,  
Collection FG Simak, Vienna.

**fig. 2** Fritz Simak, *Zaun Sequenz*, 1972.  
Gelatin silver, concat print, 24 x 30 cm.





**Anna Auer:** The exhibition you curated last year *Landscape. Two Collections. Three Centuries of Photography*<sup>2</sup> in the Kulturfabrik in Hainburg in Lower Austria (1 December 2007 to 29 February 2008) was a major surprise for the local photo scene. Until then, you were only known as an artist and photographer but not as a curator and collector.

**Fritz Simak:** In summer 2006, I was approached by Mag. Friedrich Grassegger – from the Art and Science Section of the Province of Lower Austria – and asked to curate a photography exhibition in Hainburg from the holdings of the *Niederösterreichisches Landesmuseum*. He immediately became enthusiastic about my idea of juxtaposing these pictures with international works from my own collection. This gave me the first opportunity for presenting sections of the Collection *FG Simak*. It was not easy to organize the 700 m<sup>2</sup> large hall of the revitalized tobacco factory but, in collaboration with the architect Reinhardt Gallister, a magnificent form of exhibition architecture was created inspired by driftwood in the river.

My assistant, Christoph Fuchs, had the excellent idea of building a huge *camera obscura* one can walk in. When one was near the *camera obscura*, one could look through the window at the Danube and its floodplains and one saw precisely this view depicted in the *camera obscura*. At the same time, you could see the ‘Donau-Auen National Park, Hainburg’ as well as the ‘Water’ and ‘Sky’ sections on the adjacent partitions (see fig. 3).

The smallest picture in the exhibition was a loophole view from the First World War (11 x 8 cm), whereas Wolfgang Reichmann’s monumental work *Dobratsch*, with its total of 182 sections, measured a considerable 4.6 x 13.8 meters. I was given complete *carte blanche* in my planning and was able to organize an exhibition with complex points of reference freely in following my feelings as an artist and not as a scientist. In December 2007, Timm Starl described this superbly in an article about the exhibition.

**Anna Auer:** But, it is really an exception that an artist concerns himself so intensively with the collection of photography. How does your artistic activity influence your passion for collecting?

**Fritz Simak:** I can’t answer the question like that; I do not have a split personality! It is just that, through my artistic and professional photography, I have practice in looking at pictures, and analyzing and judging them. There are two categories of photography for me: One that arouses my interest and one that doesn’t. When I make a closer study of a picture that interests me, I believe that I have understood some essential aspects of the photograph – whether these

are essential or not, is anyone's guess. In a manner of speaking, I recreate each picture for myself and believe that I understand why it was made that way and no other. It's almost like I was standing personally behind the camera each time. That means that I only collect those pictures I would like to have taken myself.

**Anna Auer:** Are there any priorities in your collection?

**Fritz Simak:** I am really interested in everything – as long as it has some sort of importance for me. There are actually no limitations in connection with origin, time and subject; the constraints are more of a financial nature. Despite that, certain areas of emphasis have crystallized over the years: landscape, nudes, still-lives, death and sexuality. I am fundamentally interested in the combination of pictures. In this way, one can approach what I have *seen* without the medium of language. The combination of two pictures can trigger a number of associations.

**Anna Auer:** If you remember, we once exhibited together; at *Wiener Blut 83. Eine Gesellschaftskomödie mit Paten und Kindern*<sup>3</sup> (Viennese Blood 83. A Social Comedy with Godparents and Children) (GGK-Galerie, Villa Vojsik, Vienna, 24 March to 16 June 1983). I was Renate Breth's "godmother" and you were nominated by Ernst Haas. At the time, Haas drew attention to your connection to music: "I have been following Fritz Simak's development for several years and can recognize a very personal vision in his works. He is a musician who became a photographer. There is music in his pictures." You were a member of the Vienna Boys Choir and studied trumpet. Ansel Adams and Paul Caponigro were accomplished pianists before turning to photography. Fritz Henle once stated that music and photography were closely-related arts. How do you see that?

**Fritz Simak:** In his statement, Haas was mainly referring to my sequences (such as the already-mentioned *Zaun Sequenz*). The possibility of reading a series of pictures upwards and downwards and, at the same time, from left to right, reminded him of a musical score. In addition to the obvious parallels such as treble / highlights and bass / blacks, it is, of course, necessary to be able to interpret a picture correctly like a score. The nature of music cannot be seen in the notes – it is hidden in them. If not, a machine could interpret a piece of music. The interpretation of a picture is no different. Each generation has to make a new attempt at deciphering the pictures. That's why I was particularly concerned with creating a musical



atmosphere for the opening of the Hainburg exhibition. I was the trumpeter in a combo of seven and we performed Miles Davis' numbers from the 1970s along with Franz Lehar's *O Mädchen, O Mädchen. Wie lieb' ich dich* (Oh maiden, oh maiden. How much I love you) from 1928 with resounding success – so, we interpreted an 80-year-old song in our manner and it ended up in a blues.

**Anna Auer:** How do you estimate the present situation of photography in Austria for collectors and mediators? What do you feel absolutely needs to be changed?

**Fritz Simak:** If there was just a fraction of the number of photo seminars dealing seriously with photography as an independent medium as there are of wine seminars, the situation for photographic artists would be changed from one minute to the next. As you know, a certain amount of effort and energy is necessary if one wants to decipher pictures; this, and more passion for the cause, is what I would also wish from curators and art mediators. You simply need more time to be able to meaningfully experience pictures – record numbers of visitors are definitely no help in this case!

If a radiologist shows me small shadows and changes on an x-ray of my lung, I can follow him and recognize the nuances on the x-ray, but I would only really be capable of understanding this picture if I had previously analyzed thousands of similar ones. In addition to fewer wine – and more photo – seminars, I would also like to be able to curate photography exhibitions more often.

Many thanks for the interview.

- 1 The content of the private collection FG Simak is widely diversified, focussing the 20th century. The similarities between the pictorial motifs and structures are confronted with each other according to the 'Pairs of Images' principle with the goal of developing a new understanding of their content and interrelationship. The interview took place on 12 June 2008.
- 2 Friedrich Grassegger, Fritz Simak (eds.), *Landscape. Two Collections. Three Centuries of Photography*, Vienna: Brandstätter 2007.
- 3 *Wiener Blut 83. Eine Gesellschaftskomödie mit Paten und Kindern*, GGG-Galerie, Villa Vojsik, Vienna: 24 March to 16 June 1983.

**fig. 3** Exhibition view. *Landscape. Two Collections. Three Centuries of Photography*, 2007–2008, Hainburg.





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**fig. 4** Floyd B. Evans, *Threatening*, 1937.  
Chlorobromide, 31.5 x 42 cm,  
Collection FG Simak, Vienna.



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**fig. 5** Minor White, *Sand Dune, Eel Creek, Oregon*, 1966.  
Gelatin silver print, 29.5 x 19.5 cm,  
Collection FG Simak, Vienna.

**fig. 6** Ernst Haas, *Arizona*, 1962.  
Dye transfer print, 32.5 x 49.2 cm,  
Collection FG Simak, Vienna.



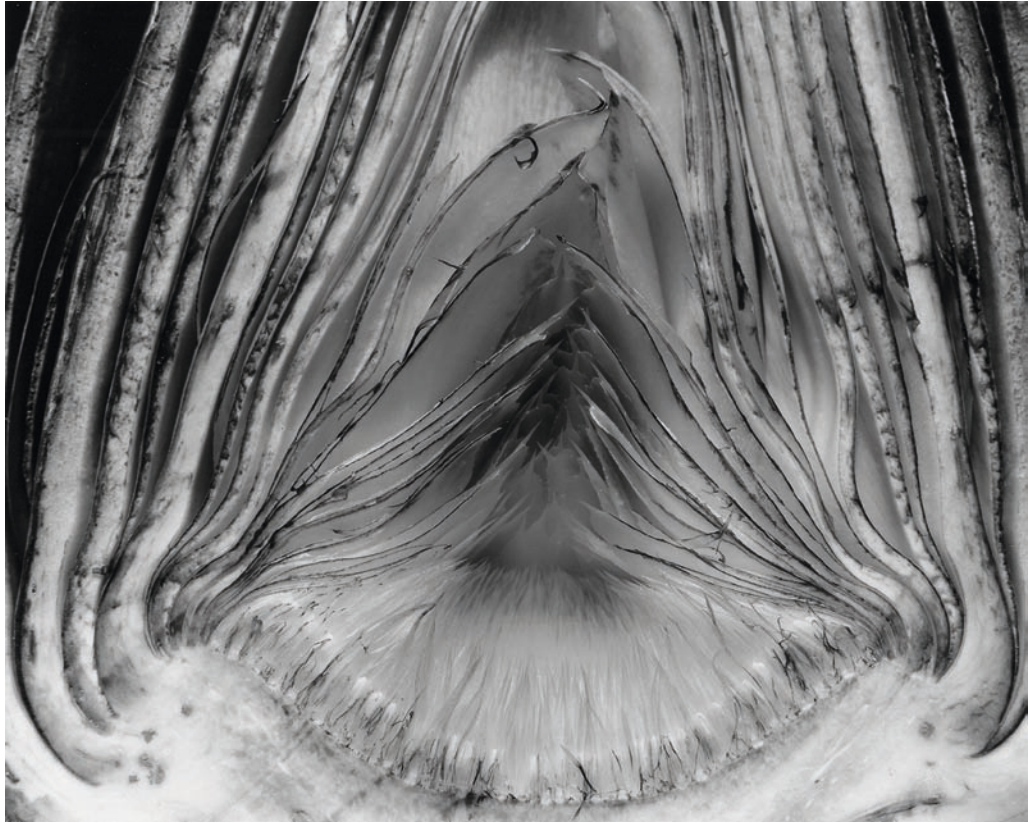




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**fig. 7** Elsa Thiemann, *Onion*, 1930s.  
Gelatin silver print, 23 x 17.2 cm,  
Collection FG Simak, Vienna.

**fig. 8** Edward Weston, *Artichoke*, 1930.  
Gelatin silver print, 18.8 x 23.5 cm,  
Collection FG Simak, Vienna.





**fig. 9** John Pfahl, *Pink rock Rectangle*, Lewinston, New York, 1975. Dye transfer print, 20 x 25,5 cm, Collection FG Simak, Vienna.

**fig. 10** Otto Schmidt, *AUS DER GAUL BEI LANA (SÜDTIROL)*, from: *Studienblätter für Künstler*, #21, 1893. Heliogravure, 18 x 23,3 cm, Collection FG Simak, Vienna.





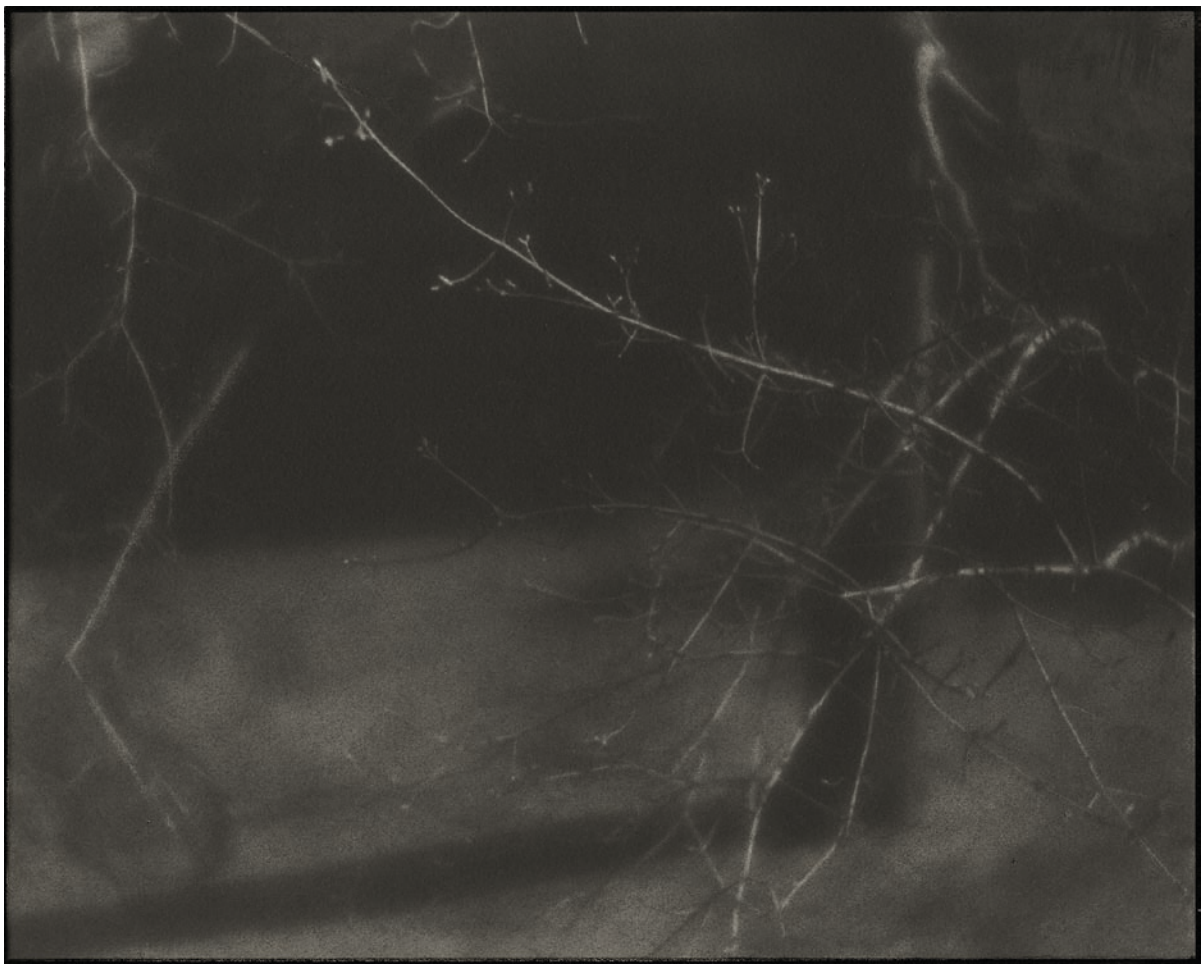




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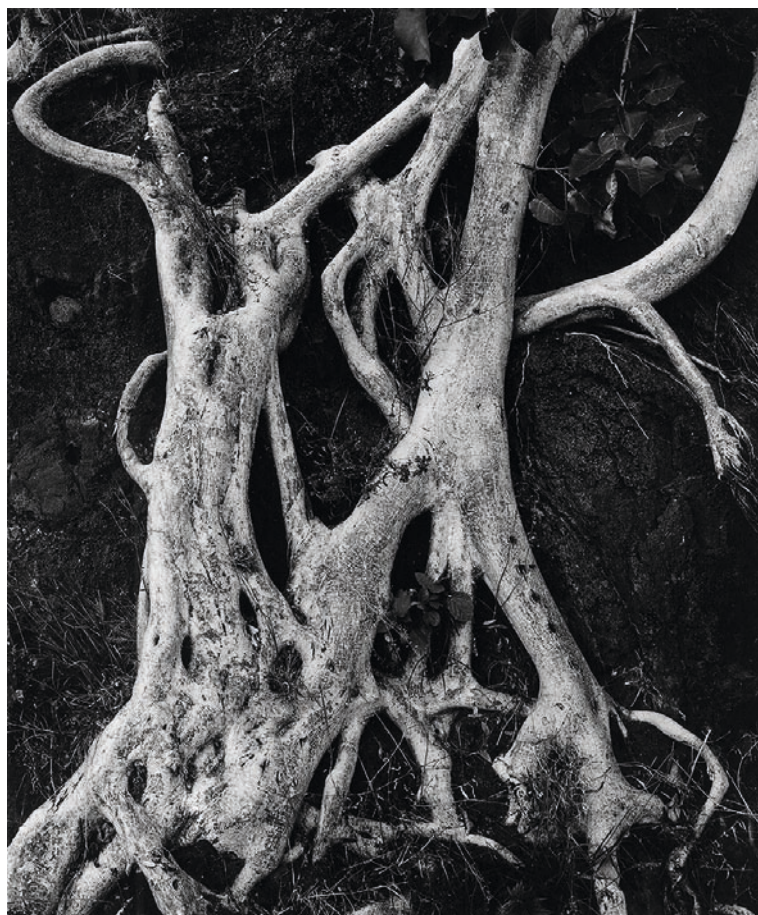
**fig. 11** Robert Adams, *Cottonwood Leaves, Boulder Country, Colorado*, 1995. Gelatin silver print, 20.1 x 13.3 cm, Collection FG Simak, Vienna.

**fig. 12** Paul L. Anderson, *THE WITCH TREE*, 1943. Multiple gum print, 19.3 x 24.3 cm, Collection FG Simak, Vienna.









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**fig. 13** Richard Kristal, *untitled*, 1969. Gelatin silver print, 49 x 35 cm, Collection FG Simak, Vienna.

**fig. 14** Brett Weston, *Tree Root*, 1973. Gelatin silver print, 23.7 x 19.5 cm, Collection FG Simak, Vienna.





**fig. 15** Ernst Haas, *Revolving Door*, 1965.  
Dye transfer print, 33 x 49 cm,  
Collection FG Simak, Vienna.

**fig. 16** Berenice Abbott, *Allan Street*, 1937.  
Gelatin silver print, 49 x 38 cm,  
Collection FG Simak, Vienna.



