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The Photodebut network of photographers is based in London but boasts a wide variety of nationalities among its members, who have worked all over the world. This image of Rose Street in Glasgow (below) is from a series taken by German photographer,

Vanessa Wenwieser. "This photograph creates a distance and vantage point evocative of Lowry's paintings," she says, "where the matchstick people are observed as if on a stage, further enhanced by the dramatic light"

Mark Sinclair meets the founders of London-based collective, Photodebut

# Group Photographs



Esther Teichmann's Viscosity series, a study of night bathers cooling off in a lake in Germany during the hot summer of 2004 (below), is part of the Minus 7/Plus 18 exhibition that will show at the Lounge Gallery in Shacklewell, London from 1 April. The

show will also feature work by another Photodebutant, Valentine Schmidt (see images 19&20). German-born Teichmann co-founded Photodebut with fellow countryman, Jan von Holleben, in 2003

"A while ago, we had a chart where we tried to work out who was the average Photodebut photographer," says Jan von Holleben, co-founder of the non-profit organisation that was formed in late 2003 as a network for emerging photographers. "But we had about 12 different nationalities: from Swedish and Iranian, to Australian and Irish." With this many countries represented in a membership of just 22, homogeneity is not a noticeable Photodebut trait. A wide range of creative styles, skills and experiences, however, are much easier to detect, becoming the major factor in the collective's growing success.

"It's a real mixture at Photodebut," says Esther Teichmann, who founded the organisation with Holleben, both having met working for portfolio website, Young Photographers United. "Almost everyone works within the photographic industry, some are freelance commercial or editorial photographers, but generally it's people who balance photography with other things: being a photo editor, an agent, or working in a picture library, people who work across the board with real careers." Many frequently make the mistake, as von Holleben points out, of thinking that

Photodebut is an agency, or merely a collective where photographers can submit work for inclusion on a website. Certainly, it can take a while to "get" what they do, but largely because so few people have successfully tried to do it before.

In an industry that's so fiercely competitive and where the creative aspects of a project rest squarely on the shoulders of an individual working on their own, it's rare that such a community spirit should have permeated. But that's exactly what Photodebut is all about; connecting people, sharing ideas and experience for the greater good of the members and also – almost unthinkable – sharing commissions.

"It was difficult in the beginning to introduce Photodebut to the industry," says Holleben, "because everybody tried to pigeon-hole us: What are you? Are you an agency? What are you selling? We said no, hang-on, we just want to do projects and commissions together. Nobody seemed to understand us. The photography industry is much more commercially driven than the art industry, and in that sense, the perception of an organisation such as ours can sometimes be very different." ►

#### How does Photodebut work?

Photodebut is a non-profit organisation that acts as a network for its members. The experience that each member can bring to the group is as important as their photographic skills. Unlike the traditional work ethic of the lone photographer, the Photodebut concept is to share the collective knowledge arising from its members' variety of backgrounds (from fine art to agency work and PR) and to pass on any work opportunities that come in via a member. Their first group exhibition, *It Went Dark and I Saw*, was staged at the London College of Communication's Well Gallery last November. Photodebut also organises a number of community projects (see CR [passim](#)).



Photodebut has a current membership of 22, boasting photographers from all over the world. All are resident in the UK and represent a variety of backgrounds and levels of experience, all of which contribute to the success of the group's work. Below is a

selection of work from the members, which includes fine art and documentary photography, editorial work and commercial projects. 1. Untitled by Richard Mosse (Ireland). 2. Elsie by Scotia Luhrs (US). 3. Fairlane For Sale by Aaron Schuman (US).

4. Laura by Lisa Barber (Australia). 5. Bus Stop by Alys Tomlinson (UK). 6. Luke in Studio by Jet (UK). 7. Untitled by Maxine Beuret (UK). 8. Two Black Bin Bags With Grass by Jesper List Thomsen (Denmark). 9. Mobil by Ralf Oberfell (Germany).

10. Javier and Selina by Patricia Niven (Australia). 11. Ellie's Chair, Never There by Gael Roussel (France). 12. Gayle on Toilet by Parisa Taghizadeh (Iran). 13. Katherine by Stephen Ledger Lomas (UK). 14. focus.unfocus by Nilu Izadi (Iran). 15. Santa's

Factory by Vanessa Wenwieser (Germany). 16. Untitled by Sue Meures (Germany). 17. Endgame by Michelle Sank (South Africa). 18. The Rider by Jan von Holleben (Germany). 19. A Line Has Two Sides 4, (from the Plunge series) by Valentine Schmidt (UK).

20. William (from the Elevate series) by Valentine Schmidt (UK). 21. Field by Emer O'Brien (Canada). More examples of work from the Photodebut photographers can be found at [www.photodebut.org](http://www.photodebut.org). The group can be contacted on [info@photodebut.org](mailto:info@photodebut.org) and

are currently preparing a second group show and additional community work

«Even if an artist is open to the idea and philosophy of a working collective, there are obligations and contradictions that exist in being a photographer that naturally restrict the level of team involvement. Photography is, after all, "a single person exercise," as Teichmann says. "Even if you're working within a company, and I worked for Rankin which involves a huge company making his work, the work is always very much about the one person. Now, as we've started taking on new members and know more what we're looking for in a person, we ask people what they expect to get from Photodebut and, at that same time, what they're going to contribute. People who go on to work in the group are people who can think about both. Some are better off just finding an agent, which is not what we are."

It's a mutually beneficial relationship. The group, collectively, gains knowledge from the variety of working backgrounds of each member (Ralf Oberfell works as a PR for a design company, for example, and Sue Meures works on a magazine and studies history of art) while each member can show their work to the group for intelligent industry-specific feedback in critical

appraisals and know that other members are there in case they need extra equipment, a last-minute camera or even an assistant. Photodebut itself, truly is greater than the sum of its many talented parts. "It's a professional network," confirms Teichmann, "as, when jobs come up, we share them round and you can go to people when you need help or advice. But it's also very much a social and photographically critical, practical network that produces work. It's two things that merge."

Despite the large number of applications they receive to join the group, it can be quite a task finding new members. Once work was out about the organisation (von Holleben estimates he received 80 emails last year related to joining up, and there have already been six Photodebut photographers featured in previous issues of CR) there is a process that the group go through when considering new members. The photography must be good, of course, and an applicant's working experience of benefit to the group as a whole, but there must also be a drive to work on social and educational projects, the kind that both Teichmann and von Holleben are determinedly committed to.

After the success of many of their own solo exhibitions, as well as *It Went Dark* and *I Saw* (their well-received group show) Photodebut have become an attractive group to be a part of. But the hard work that goes into self-funded projects like the workshop they organised with Tannery Arts, where they installed a dark-room at The Drawing Room in east London, means that they aren't doing it for personal gain. In fact, in moving into more educational work, arranging lectures, portfolio reviews and workshops for young photographers in colleges, Photodebut have just begun to make their mark in the industry. But by doing so from the ground up, the group will no doubt help the careers of many more photographers in the making. ■

