

SABINE WEISS × NATHALIE BOUTTÉ
TRIBUTE
22.06.2024– 12.01.2025**1. INTRODUCTION**

“What I don’t understand is how I could do so many things at the same time. It’s just incredible! And they were all so different! It was a beautiful life. I wouldn’t want to do it again because it can’t be done over again. But I don’t regret anything.”

To celebrate the centenary of the birth of Sabine Weiss (1924-2021), Photo Elysée is presenting an exhibition in honor of the photographer and has invited visual artist Nathalie Boutté (France, 1967) to engage in dialogue with her work.

A major figure in French humanist photography, Sabine Weiss was driven by an insatiable curiosity about her medium. As a street, fashion and advertising photographer, depending on the moment, as well as a photojournalist for numerous international magazines, she explored all aspects of her craft with passion for over 60 years. In 2017, aware of the importance of preserving her work, Sabine Weiss chose Photo Elysée to conserve and showcase her entire archive, which joined the museum’s collections at Plateforme 10 in early 2024.

Whereas Sabine Weiss built up her body of work by photographing the street “and everything that went on there”, as well as through commissioned work in her studio, Nathalie Boutté does not take photographs but instead creates works out of paper inspired by pre-existing images. Her process is meticulous: she cuts hundreds of strips of paper with texts related to the chosen image – in this case, quotations by Sabine Weiss – before assembling them to recompose the original photograph. The shades of gray on the paper strips produce gradations, similar to pixels on a digital screen. Up close, the text reveals itself, but it is when you stand back that you can see the image.

By opening up the Sabine Weiss archives to Nathalie Boutté, Photo Elysée invites the public to discover her work in a new light, revealing a little-known aspect of her career: studio work. In addition to presenting some of the photographer’s most emblematic works, the exhibition unveils previously unseen archives – working documents, contact sheets, advertising layouts – that give an insight into the richness of her photographic output. Focusing on the first decades of her career, the 1950s and 1960s, the exhibition highlights the years during which Sabine Weiss consolidated the foundations of her craft, combining prolific studio work with her urban explorations.

The exhibition features some of the treasures of Sabine Weiss’s photographic collection, which includes all of her negatives (160,000), contact sheets

(7,000), most of her vintage prints (2,700), late prints (1,300) and work prints (4,000). Added to this are thousands of slides and all of her documentation, including press archives, supporting documents, correspondence, films and audio recordings. Since the Sabine Weiss photographic collection is currently in the process of being documented, this presentation outlines a few avenues of research that will enable Photo Elysée to open up new areas of study in the future based on the photographer's work.

2. BIOGRAPHY

1924

Birth of Sabine Weiss (née Weber) on July 23 in Saint-Gingolph, Switzerland.

1935

Buys her first camera with her pocket money.

1942

Undertakes an apprenticeship at the Boissonnas photographic studio in Geneva, one of the most renowned in Switzerland at the time.

1945

Graduates with a degree in photography and opens her own studio on *rue du Marché*, Geneva.

First published news story on American soldiers (GIs) on leave in Geneva.

1946

Settles in Paris where she becomes the assistant to fashion photographer Willy Maywald until 1950.

1949

Meets the American painter Hugh Weiss. Together, they frequent the artistic milieu of Montparnasse.

1950

Marries Hugh Weiss. Their daughter Marion is born in 1964.

Goes into business for herself and begins to take on numerous commissions, including portraits of artists, musicians and writers.

1952

At *Vogue*, Robert Doisneau discovers her photographs and suggests that she join the Rapho Agency, of which he is a member. That same year, she signs a nine-year contract with the magazine for fashion and reportage photography.

This period also marks the start of her work for advertising agencies and prestigious magazines in the USA and Europe. In the following years, she works for *Paris Match*, *Life*, *Time*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Town and Country*, *Fortune*, *Holiday*, *European Travel & Life*, and *Esquire*, covering countries in Europe, Africa, America and Asia.

1954

First monographic exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, subsequently shown at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Bard College (New York) and the Nebraska Art Center in Lincoln.

1955

American photographer Edward Steichen chooses three of her photographs for the exhibition *The Family of Man* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This legendary exhibition subsequently travels to over 160 museums around the world and is visited by over 10 million people.

1961

Begins to travel the world, dividing her time between commissions and personal work.

1978

First retrospective exhibition at the Centre Culturel Noroit in Arras (France)

1987

Exhibition at the Musée de l'Elysée, Lausanne, Switzerland

From 1987 onwards

Is awarded several prestigious distinctions, including *Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres* (1987), *Officier des Arts et des Lettres* (1999) and *Ordre national du Mérite* (2010).

2016

Retrospective at the Jeu de Paume – Château de Tours, France

2017

Wanting to have her archives preserved in her native Switzerland, she chooses Photo Elysée to preserve and showcase her work.

2020

Receives the Women in Motion Award for photography from Kering and the Rencontres de la photographie d'Arles, for lifetime achievement.

2021

Exhibition *Sabine Weiss. A Photographer's Life* at the Rencontres de la photographie d'Arles in the presence of the artist. This exhibition is subsequently presented in Venice (2022), Genoa (2022-2023), Reggio Emilia (2023) and will be on view in Berlin in the fall of 2024.

Sabine Weiss passes away on December 28, 2021, at her home studio in Paris at the age of 97.

3. THE STREET

Sabine Weiss is associated with the so-called “humanist” photographic movement that emerged in France after the Second World War, alongside other emblematic figures such as Édouard Boubat, Brassai, Robert Doisneau, and Willy Ronis. Like them, she photographed impromptu scenes of everyday life and the street in black and white.

Sometimes accompanied by her husband Hugh Weiss, who served as her model and assistant, this seasoned wanderer was always on the lookout for unusual scenes, atypical faces, singular expressions and the play of light and shadow, determined to capture the essence of the world around her.

4. THE STUDIO

While her street photography eloquently expresses her role as a witness to her times, her studio work, which she experimented with and perfected from her early years in Geneva, reveals her ability to construct a universe from scratch.

Sabine Weiss described herself as a photographic craftswoman rather than an artist. An outstanding technician, she had acquired the essential skills of her trade and put them into practice by imagining scenes, making sets, choosing models, orchestrating lighting, framing and composition.

Working mainly in her home studio, which she shared with her husband, the American painter Hugh Weiss, she operated as a solitary artist, taking on all the responsibilities, from finding the models to making the sets and special effects.

5. ADVERTISING

A significant part of the Sabine Weiss archives now housed at the museum is dedicated to her advertising work, which spans her entire career. Over the years, she meticulously preserved all traces of her work: magazine clippings, brochures and mock-ups.

This collection reflects the wide range of subjects she tackled on a daily basis, from baby food to printers, laundry products to jewelry, cigarettes to razors. These archives bear witness not only to her expertise and versatility but, above all, to a constantly renewed creativity combined with a great sense of humor.

6. FASHION

In 1946, Sabine Weiss left Geneva for Paris. Through the intermediary of a cousin, she visited photographer Willy Maywald, and became his assistant for three years. Under his guidance, she perfected her printing techniques and grasped the importance of natural light. She became familiar with fashion photography, taking part in prestigious events such as Christian Dior's first fashion show in 1947. Living in the heart of Montparnasse, on *rue de la Grande Chaumière*, she immersed herself in the artistic buzz of her time.

Several years later, her street photography attracted the attention of Robert Doisneau, who opened the doors of the Rapho Agency to her. She was soon hired by *Vogue* magazine, for which she worked from 1952 to 1961. Throughout her career, Sabine Weiss organized numerous photo shoots for prestigious fashion magazines, both in France and abroad. Her photos, in color or black and white, elegantly capture the aesthetic and refinement of the fashion houses of the era.

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