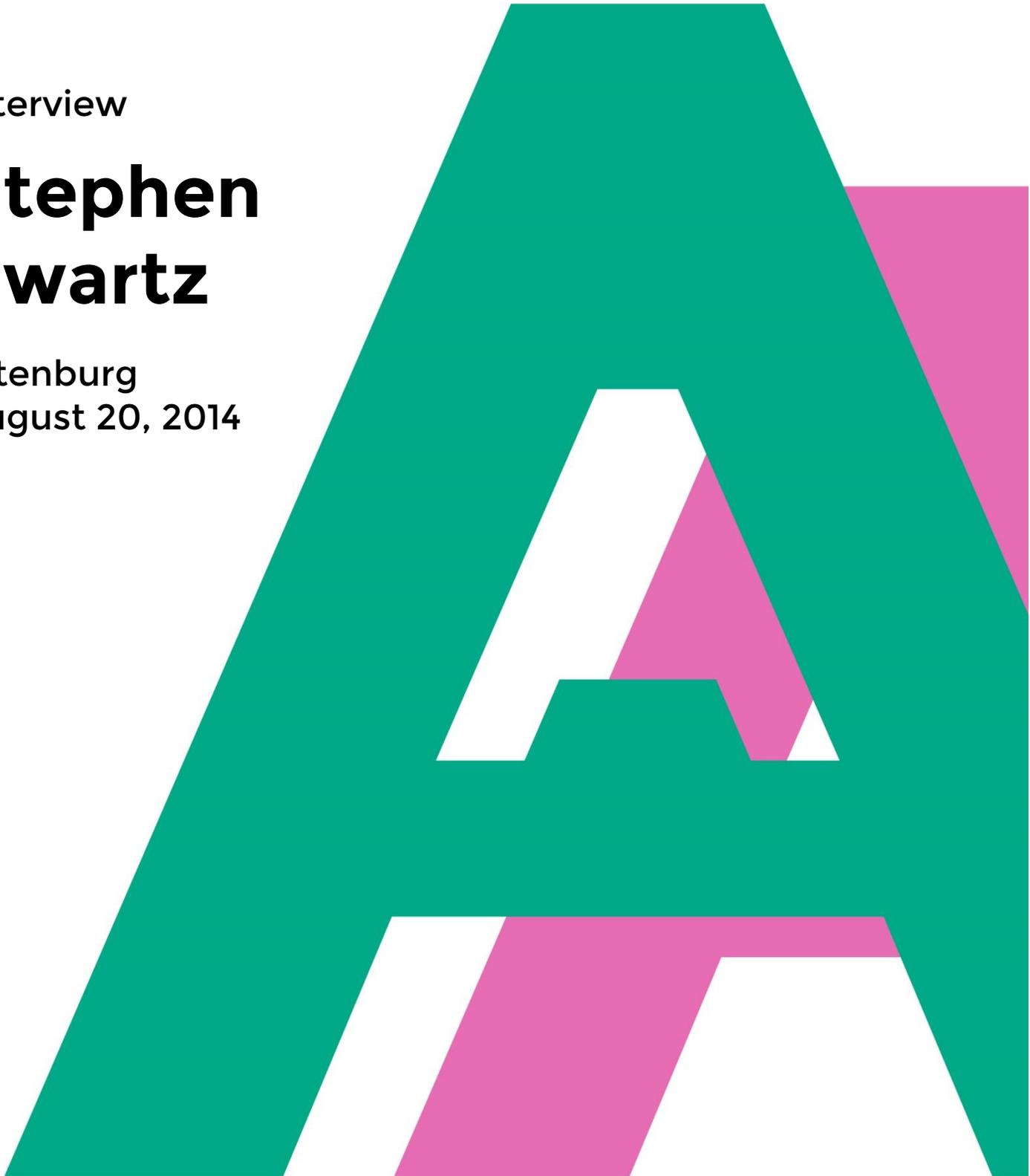


# Age of Artists

Interview

## Stephen Swartz

Altenburg  
August 20, 2014



Interview was conducted by Dirk Dobiéy (Age of Artists, AoA) on August 20, 2014 in Café Domizil in Altenburg, Germany. This text represents a copy-edited version by Melissa Visintin from November 18th, 2014.

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## Introduction

Hotel California, a great song by the Eagles, was playing at one point in the background while this interview was being conducted at the Café Domizil in Altenburg, Germany.

The song is about California, Los Angeles specifically. In the mid-70s, LA was full of high expectations and promises, and thousands of people migrated there in droves in search of warm sun, wealth, money and fame – expectations that ultimately went unfulfilled. They found the dream to be a mirage.

After the band's success, money, excessive partying and drug use took its toll, they found they had become "prisoners of their own device." Granted, this song is ultimately about the decadence, excess, wealth and self-destruction of the southern California culture in the 70s.

Today is not the 70s and Stephen Swartz is not from California but from Columbus, Ohio. But he also migrated. Not to California but to Altenburg in Germany and so this interview offers a perspective of someone that knows both, the old and the new world, and at the same time provides great insights into Stephen's attitude and approaches as an artist that focuses not exclusively but mainly on photography.

Some of the works of Stephen Swartz can be accessed at:

<http://www.stephenswartz.com>



## Interview

Age of Artists: What brought you to art and your practice?

Stephen Swartz: As I was a small child, I **always enjoyed drawing. It was one of the few things I was actually good at, and as I grew, it was one of the things that always stayed with me.** I wasn't a sports kind of guy, I was more creative. I took to it very easily. When it came time to make a career choice, there really wasn't much of a choice for me. I originally wanted to be an architect, but my high school guidance counselor told me that my math scores weren't good enough. This was back before everything was done on computer. I had taken many mechanical drawing classes, and drawing and plotting was very interesting to me. Because I didn't have the math scores, he turned me away from a possible career in architecture.

So he asked me what else I was good at, and I said, "I can draw." So I submitted a portfolio to the local art college, and I got a scholarship and I came out on the other end 6 years later, 6 years of a 4 year program - with a bachelor's degree in media studies, major area of study was photography with a minor in advertising.

Age of Artists: There was no doubt or question that this was what you should do?

Stephen Swartz: Well there was. When I started university, I had never really picked up a camera. After the first two years in college, I decided I didn't want to be an illustrator. I took one photography course, and fell in love with the medium.

Age of Artists: How long did it take you to go from drawing to photography as your final decision?

Stephen Swartz: Two years.

Age of Artists: How have you developed the way you practice photography?

Stephen Swartz: **I've specialized in my brand of photography now for 17 years. When I pick up a camera, I know what I want to do with it.**

I do a lot of figurative study – abstract nudes – combined with (surprise!) architecture, with structure. A lot of my work is about the organicism of the figure, juxtaposed against a structured form. Architectural elements in a room, and because it's abstract and my photos are all double-exposures, there is still an element taken away from pure photography. This is something I had to teach myself, practice become skilled at knowing exactly what I will get when I pick up a camera and take two pictures.

**I am a practicing artist – I draw, I sculpt – but the work that truly expresses my work and my feeling is my photography, and that is my emotional outlet.**

Age of Artists: What emotions are there?

Stephen Swartz: My work has a lot to do with my emotional state. I generally use women as models. People generally think “of course you want to use women in nude photography,” but for me the women represent my emotional state. In our culture and society, men are always seen as strong, macho and outwardly confident and they're not supposed to be emotional. On the outside there's a typical man, but on the inside there's emotional turmoil or conflict that needs to be expressed. **And I express that emotion through my photography, depending on what the emotion I'm feeling at that moment.**

Age of Artists: In order to become an artist, do you think there's a certain attitude that you have that distinguishes you from other people?

Stephen Swartz: That's a funny question, **because I think that being an artist is about attitude nowadays.** There are plenty of people who can scribble on a canvas, hang it on a wall, and **due to their attitude and how they explain that scribble on a canvas, they make it into art.** I'm a bit of a traditionalist when it comes to art, because I studied art and I learned there are norms in design and structure that either need to be there or need to be broken with a certain amount of knowledge or sensitivity. I think a lot of people have an attitude about being an artist, but to me they're not necessarily artists. I think the line between art and craft has become a bit blurry now.

Age of Artists: What is the real attitude of an artist?

Stephen Swartz: I don't want to generalize for a lot of artists, and I know many other artists. For me and my personal ideal, it is that I **need to create something whether or not someone understands it or buys it. It's the act of purging, getting it out of me and onto paper, that frees me for the next creative idea. I don't care if I sell, or if I'm famous or well-known, I will make art regardless.**

Age of Artists: What about freedom and independence?

Stephen Swartz: Once you become "known" for something, then people expect that from you. There's the painter Neo Rauch, here in Leipzig, and once he became popular, everyone expected his style to continue the way it always had been. He was to continue to produce pieces along that line, because there is an audience and a market. And once you set an expectation with an audience and market, and that expectation will influence the artist whether they admit it or not. **And the only person who puts any expectation on me, is me. I'm free to create.**

Age of Artists: Do you have a position as an artist?

Stephen Swartz: I learned the classical definition of photography before the advent of the digital era, so I work with film, with analog. This has created problems for me when I exhibit my work because people look at my work, which is visually abstract photography, and they think it's something that has been composed and altered on a computer. This is something that I have battled often, and I have to make statements that this is analog photography. I have one negative, for the double-exposure. There is room within that for a broad margin of error. I go into it with an idea I want to express, but I know that overlap isn't going to be 100% accurate every time. I only have the memory of the initial exposure and how that looked, to put the other exposure on. **I like to call it a "moment of grace."**

If I step out of my tried and true practice - my methodology of how I do my work - I found that it lacks a certain amount of spontaneity that some of my early work had. Early on, I would find nice surprises because I was trying different things, I was a bit more experimental and I was able to shoot more regularly. Now, with two small children, living in a small town, and without the large pool of models that I used to have, I can't turn things around as quickly. There's a lot more planning involved and it takes longer from idea to execution. Because of that, I tend to go on the more secure side.

Age of Artists: What does your working process look like?

Stephen Swartz: **The process can start several ways. Sometimes it's sparked by an emotion, if I'm having conflicting emotions, then I have an idea about how**

**can I pose a figure so that this conflict becomes apparent.** I also have to take into consideration who the model is: do they have dark hair or light hair, what's their physical body type, which location should I use, what can I use as the background? It's an ever-changing process, and I don't stress about it, I deal with it as it comes. If I discover a place, like a garden, **I think about how I can tailor my idea to that place. There's a lot of compromise, give and take.** Earlier in my endeavors, I could realize the idea in a much shorter period of time so it was a bit more pure to my initial thought and feeling. Now there are many elements I need to take into consideration, and compromises I have to make, just to get something on film.

Age of Artists: The feeling that needs to get out - the concept that you create - how do you think up your concepts and move through the idea, the compromises?

Stephen Swartz: **I usually take some time for myself and contemplate. I don't really do sketches anymore, but I did at the beginning because I used to do more complex constructs.** I used to use body painting, and use more rigid, geometrically-dependent structures, and I had a studio at the time so I could build things and let them sit there for a time until the shoot. **But now I'm a little more spontaneous, more open. I decide the moment I'm there and I have the background, model and lighting in my head. With enough years of experience, I can predict within 80% how it's going to come out.**

The architecture in Europe is enticing for someone who comes from a country that's only 200 years old. We don't have such amazing pieces of architecture, and the constraints on society's perception of nudity in the US compared to Europe - that was problematic for me, exhibiting in America - because currently people think that nudity is pornography, and someone can't be nude without being sexual in the United States.

Age of Artists: How important is it for you to exchange with the audience when they see your work?

Stephen Swartz: It used to be more important because it used to be a social aspect for me, but I was young. I was the cool art guy and people knew me in my town. I grew up, went to college, and lived in the same town for years. I made a name for myself and people knew who I was. **People often think that being an artist is about going to martini parties, hanging out with really strange people, not knowing what the night would bring - that idealized perception isn't true - but I think a lot of people want that, because it's how Hollywood and the NY art scene portray it. I came to learn through my own experience, that people didn't want to necessarily look at the work or talk about it, they wanted to come and be part of the atmosphere.**

Here in Germany, people actually talk to me about the work, they see beyond the nudity and they want to engage men about the technical aspects like how I

did something. I have less conversations, but those conversations are more about the piece itself, like “who is that” or “where did you shoot that.”

I don't get feedback often. I think perhaps because my work isn't very straightforward. There's a lot of room for interpretation and sometimes people don't know what to say or ask. In the United States I **had a great group of friends, all artists, and we'd get together weekly and share what we had done, drank some wine and had a nice evening of discussion. I got very good feedback because we could talk about conceptual ideas and whether or not I was conveying them accurately enough that an outsider could perceive that.**

Age of Artists: How far did the influence of artistic community you had in your hometown go?

Stephen Swartz: **It went very deep. It helped me find my personal methodology. Anyone could come in and discuss ideas openly. People encouraged others to try things, see what happened and we'd talk about it next week.**

For me, this interview is an opportunity to have a discussion about art, which I don't have in my daily existence and I suffer from that. In the last ten years I've suffered from not having that community, I was spoiled by having it in my earlier artistic years when I was developing. I feel that my development has stagnated greatly in the last ten years, because I'm not as flexible, my schedule isn't as flexible, **I don't have the community and because of that, I have grown maybe two years' worth in ten years.**

Age of Artists: Do you actively engage with your audience, or is it a coincidence when you get to speak with them?

Stephen Swartz: It's not me, I don't seek that out. Many people find that it's arrogant when an artist sits in a corner and doesn't talk to anyone. I don't necessarily do that, but I don't brag about what I do or play it up and animate the audience to make them interested. I figure, the audience can have their own experience. **My experience is creating it and putting it on a wall.** The experience they have isn't me coming to them and asking them what they think - I'm a more reserved person.

There's an event coming up in Altenburg, there will be music and an exhibition of four photographers from Altenburg in an old water pumping station. This is a small town, and people know me because I'm the only American here. And people know me as “the guy who takes the pictures of the naked girls” so I've already been pigeonholed here, and that's why I don't really engage the people.

Age of Artists: Is this why artists go to the big cities?

Sure, but I can't really say, because forming a group wasn't really something I was interested in. I was fortunate to have friends in America that did that naturally. We didn't want to form a club, that's elitist and closes certain people out. That's what I found as far as my exposure in Leipzig. I don't fit the mold, I'm some crazy American guy who does something they've never seen and they can't classify it, so it's easier for them to just forget it in a corner. Occasionally I can surprise some people and make them think they've never seen anything like my work. But the community over there seems very closed.

Age of Artists: How was the feedback offered in the group you were with in America?

Stephen Swartz: Several of us went to the same college, but we only met after college. **We were used to the formal art school critique structure where you hang up your work, and wait for people to tear it apart and say bad things about it. It's a competition, and everyone wants to be better than everyone else - that's the world. It's easier to do that than find something positive or find something that really works so you can develop it further. And that kind of critique doesn't really work. So we did it our way, where it was a discussion and we'd ask questions and we'd help each other out. It was a very good dynamic and everyone was willing to offer advice and a hand.**

Age of Artists: In business, this is also what happens, when a group of people come together and share a passion.

Stephen Swartz: I think in business that's hard to find, there is the underlying tone in many business scenarios that everything we're doing here and now is about money - making money, losing money, buying and selling - if it's not approached the right way, like a think tank where no money is riding on the line, there's still that "we have to come up with a new idea." That goes back to the expectation of an audience, when you become well-known, they expect a certain thing from you, and that is a monetary platform.

I've worked in many artistic capacities for businesses in the past. After college I worked at a photo lab that was all about how can you Photoshop this guy's head on this body in as short a period of time - it was a race against the clock. Then I worked for a 3D animation company doing architectural renderings for water treatment facilities or power stations - it wasn't particularly interesting - but I gained experience doing 3D modeling and video production. Then I moved to another photo lab where I was just a worker bee, which tends to suit me. I don't really care to work as an artist. I Like working as a creative individual, but I don't like working as an artist - that's the pure creativity and that's for me and I want to save it for my art.

When I first moved to Germany, I taught English for 9 years - it was easy for me to do as a native speaker and I invested no creative energy in that at all. I hadn't wasted any creative energy doing that. That kind of job seems to be for me. I

would love to be creative and make money. Many people have asked me why I'm not a photographer, and to me, **there's a difference between a photographer and an artist that uses photography as a medium. I'm not really a photographer. I don't want to take pictures of your babies or your wedding, that's not interesting to me. That's not my journey.**

Age of Artists: You can't live off your art so you have to do things in between. Is this natural to you - to juggle multiple occupations?

Stephen Swartz: I generally don't say I am an artist; I don't put a title on myself. If I'm asked what I do, I have a return question to that: I say **"What do I do in life, or how do I earn money?"** in America, that's a very different question than in Germany. In America, you can work at a bookstore, and be a playwright - you can have this duality, and it's accepted and normal. In Germany, your job and career is supposed to define you. We live in a culture here where everyone's supposed to be a master in your job.

In art, it depends on the journey. Practice makes the master, they always say. As long as I have the time and funds to continue my practice, I'm happy. So I don't normally introduce myself as an artist.

**It's true there's a stereotype that all artists are starving. It's true. People in Germany shake their heads at some of the jobs I've had. I was a janitor at a strip club for two years. I worked from 4am to 8am every day cleaning a strip club, but after work, I had the entire rest of my day to be creative. As far as the career path goes, I've made plenty of compromises.**

Age of Artists: Do you think doing all those jobs has impacted your art regarding influence, curiosity and awareness?

Stephen Swartz: My time in the United States was a completely different era for me. I wasn't married, I was unencumbered and free to work any job and do anything I wanted, creatively. **Doing all those different jobs has shown me an appreciation for the functionality of diversity. You can do many different things, and still earn the money, which is the end goal.** I'm not just a photographic artist, I draw, sculpt and paint. I do anything I can in order to be creative and get that out of me. I'm a bit more flexible than I think.

**The diversity of doing different jobs, not only going to university and learning how to do one thing, and then doing that and applying yourself to only that. It's the idea of a means to an end. The end is there, and I don't have a problem getting to the end by any means necessary.**

Age of Artists: Did you look for diversity?

Stephen Swartz: It's something that just happened. There's a part of me that would love to have a stable job being creative, but that's not really who I am anymore, it's the idealism of youth and time gone by. I'm alive, my kids eat, I work and I don't have a problem doing a job. The diversity of my career arc has been so large just with all the different kinds of jobs I've done, and it baffles people in Germany, who stay on a straight path so often.

Age of Artists: This idea of a linear career, in business, is a role model of exactly the opposite of what you describe. Is it hard to tell how much those different jobs influenced your artistic practice?

Stephen Swartz: I can look back at pieces I did 15 years ago, and know exactly where I was at my career, my job situation or my life. Those pieces work as a signpost for me.

Age of Artists: What do you think that business or the global economy can learn from you and other artists?

Stephen Swartz: I think they could learn to **step outside the box every once in a while. That linear ideal, in business models it's functional, but for innovation linear thinking isn't always the way. It's very scientific, and I can appreciate that, but a lot of great breakthroughs happen when that scientist is in the bathtub or out of his normal element.**

Age of Artists: You said that the start of your work is feeling, can you describe that?

Stephen Swartz: **Logic prevails on a daily basis - you use your head. But to say that you don't feel anything the entire day, even if you go through your daily process, those emotions are always there. It's an internal dialogue you have with yourself that you don't share with everyone.**

If you do something unkind to me, I'm not necessarily going to call you an asshole and punch you - I have restraint - but I'm still going to take something away from that exchange. That feeling of hurt, that emotion, can weigh on you if you don't have an outlet. Some people have an outlet through conversations with loved ones, or they complain about the bad day they had. I find that type of purging doesn't always work for me. I was raised by my mother and my father was present, but he wasn't emotionally available. My mother was a very emotional person and she taught me that it was OK for me to feel things. In the 70s in America, it was prevalent that boys don't cry, and my mother let me cry, and let me know that it was OK to cry. There as a time when I was very emotionally driven in everything I did.

**I was always a very emotional individual. As I got older, I found there wasn't always a place for those emotions. As you grow older, you take on certain**

**responsibilities, you're in mixed company, and putting your emotions on the table isn't something you can do.** So I started to stuff them all inside, and I had to find an outlet. I think it was around that time in college, I was 20 and learning what it means to be an adult, and the photography allowed me to visually express what I was feeling. The illustrations I did were for a class assignment, but there wasn't a lot of emotional outlet there for me, I was just practicing my illustration skills. With photography, we could do anything – just go out and take pictures. For me that was very freeing, to be able to just be creative. All the other courses I took were very structured, and photography just let me do it. And I put a lot of emotion into it and I ran with it.

Age of Artists: Do you think empathy is important for what you do?

Stephen Swartz: Yes, as I deal with the models. I'm a man photographing nude women, usually in a strange setting where just she and I are there alone. I don't have a problem with that, but I have to be sure she feels comfortable, it's part of my nature to make sure everyone is ok, because if there is a level of discomfort that comes through in the pictures. I can look back through my portfolio and I can see when it was the first time she modeled for me, despite my attempts to make her feel comfortable I can see there is a level of discomfort, and I understand it. It's not easy taking off your clothes in front of a camera, with some man who is taking pictures. There is a level of discomfort and I respect that, and I know that.

That is why I have developed a practice of conducting an interview with her, beforehand, where I tell her exactly what to expect, and I tell her what the photo shoot is about. I tell her at any time if she wants to stop, we stop. So there is this empathy, and I am very sensitive to the women who pose for me. I can tell when someone is holding themselves in an uncomfortable fashion, or if there is a certain amount of muscle tension in the shoulders or neck, and I can see that and I have to be sensitive to that.

Age of Artists: How much intuition do you think is there on your part as things come out of you onto a picture?

Stephen Swartz: **The planned photo usually lasts for the first two shots. Then beyond that, I have a feeling of the scenario and space and I fly on autopilot because I'm practiced. There's room to alter within the shoot. If I see something that's working a bit better I can ask "try this pose" and I can adapt to the setting,** I can be flexible. Improvisation doesn't work for me in Germany like I could in the states. In America, I could ask a model to come over at a certain time, we're going to take some photos – I could improvise – and no one asked, we'd just do it. In Germany it's a little more formal and structured, because of the culture. Even if I've worked with the model 4 or 5 times they say, "what are we doing" and with some of them I can just tell them the location we are going to. Other models want to know the exact plan, and that stifles me a little bit.

My work is about juxtaposition and contrast, and this is typical of what I go through. In the states I had the ease of models and the difficulty of settings. Here in Germany, I have the difficulty of models and the ease of settings, so it's always a tug-of-war.

I don't have the ability to develop the film at home, because I don't have the room. I have to do that at a lab. I collect my film from the last 9 shoots and then make one trip. I haven't printed a picture in 12 years. I develop the negatives, and then I scan them. I have a digital darkroom, due to space constraints. I had to adapt the way I get to a picture on a wall, based on the constraints I have.

References cited in this interview:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo\\_Rauch](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo_Rauch)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altenburg>