

# The Biel/Bienne Festival of Photography 1997–2022

Founded in 1997 by a group of friends, the Biel/Bienne Festival of Photography is this year celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Since its creation, with its commitment and programming renewed each year in a bilingual city, the festival has continued to make an impact on the Swiss and international photographic scene.

Three people were at the origin of the project: two young photographers, Mirei Lehmann and Olivier Evard, as well as Vincent Juillerat, an art history student at the University of Lausanne. They came together to develop an event for the general public that would celebrate photography in Biel/Bienne, a city that already had links with the photographic medium, as the home of Perrot Images SA since 1878 and the headquarters of Leica and Hasselblad since 1984, as well as being the home of the Photoforum Pasquart.

In 1997, Lehmann, Evard and Juillerat founded the association Fous d'images with the intention of organizing the first Biel/Bienne Festival of Photography. Encouraged by the city authorities – in particular by Francis Siegfried, deputy for cultural affairs and the founder and director of the Photoforum Pasquart – they developed a partnership with the Photoforum Pasquart which made possible the creation of several exhibitions. With the support of Carine Zuber, who was in charge of press relations, the festival had a strong impact outside of Biel/Bienne.

From the start, the founders opted to hold the festival annually. It is organized as a walk through the city, promoting the Swiss photographic scene, the local region, and the historical and unconventional monuments that the festival occupies in order to make it possible to experience the image in different contexts.

Stefano Stoll joined the team for the second edition in 1998, and the organizers put the emphasis on a single theme linked to current events. In 1999, the association Fous d'images was dissolved and the Biel/Bienne Festival of Photography Association was created, with the aim of bringing big names in photography to Biel/Bienne. Under the leadership of Juillerat-Stoll, the festival team laid the foundations for the event.

Since the 2000 edition, the Schwab and Neuhaus museums have also collaborated with the Biel/Bienne Festival of Photography, and together with the Photoforum Pasquart form the museum component of the festival, completing the old town pole and reinforcing the idea of a photographic stroll.

In 2000, Stefano Stoll, co-director of the festival, joined the artistic direction of Expo.02, the sixth Swiss national exposition. There he created collaborations with the festival, which was given a platform on the Arteplage in Neuchâtel, where the *Copy&Paste* exhibition has been presented since May 2002. It also participated in the group exhibition *Photographie à la carte*, organized by the Photoforum Pasquart.

Following the 2002 edition, Vincent Juillerat and Stefano Stoll created a permanent management position and left the organization, and in 2003 Barbara Zürcher took over the management of the festival. Building on the collaboration with Expo.02, the Biel/Bienne Festival of Photography collaborated in a second joint project in 2003, Museums 03. Spuren, and considered its future programming.

Barbara Zürcher wanted to support Swiss photography by working closely with art and photography schools, and to develop a platform for meeting and promoting

the festival. It forged new links with other cultural events and organized touring exhibitions during the year, an initiative that enabled it to reach out abroad (to Berlin, Mozambique, Altdorf, Johannesburg, etc.).

From 2004 to 2012, the festival published an annual catalogue.

In 2007, Hélène Joye-Cagnard and Catherine Kohler took over as co-directors of the festival. Both art historians, they proposed themes arising from issues related to current affairs and the photographic medium. They solidified the festival's commitment to emerging Swiss and international photography.

They also developed activity programmes for the public. In 2008, an outreach programme was inaugurated for schools and festival-goers, including workshops, guided tours, competitions, etc.

Since 2012, the festival has intensified its programme of activities for photography professionals through various initiatives (Meeting Days, conferences, round tables, etc.) which have helped to strengthen its reputation and position it on the international scene.

From 2012 to 2015, the concept of Undercover Photography was born. Dealers and actors of the city were invited to design their own exhibitions, events or shop windows during the festival.

In 2014, Catherine Kohler left her post, and Hélène Joye-Cagnard continued as director of the festival until 2018 with a programme that, since 2011, has been composed of approximately 50% Swiss photographers and 50% international photographers. She directed the 20<sup>th</sup> edition of the Biel/Bienne Festival of Photography, for which a retrospective catalogue was published (to consult).

In 2018, Sarah Girard was appointed to head the festival. Trained as a photographer and cultural mediator, she set up a festival network project, further strengthening the links between programming and public outreach. The new director has maintained a programme that presents emerging Swiss and international photography in order to create a regional, national and international dynamic. Girard works closely with Biel/Bienne institutions and artists who are invited to collaborate with the festival. In 2019, she set up annual artist residencies in schools and developed new regional and international partnerships.

In 2019, the festival contributed to the launch of two new prizes: the Taurus Prize for Visual Arts, in collaboration with the Taurus Foundation and the Photoforum

Pasquart, and the Bernese Jura Photographic Survey, in collaboration with fOrum culture, the magazine *Intervalles* and the Fondation Mémoires d'Ici.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 24<sup>th</sup> edition of the festival, planned for 2020 under the title *Cracks*, was postponed to 2021. The festival management therefore mobilized its resources during this period of semi-confinement, and in 2021 began the process of organizing the festival archives in order to donate them to the city of Biel/Bienne. Following this classification work, the records of the first fourteen editions (1997–2010) were deposited in the Biel/Bienne municipal archives and made available for public consultation. This archiving project will continue annually.

On the occasion of its 25<sup>th</sup> edition, the festival launched a new website to improve its online visibility and to enhance its previous editions. It can be found at [www.bielerfototage.ch](http://www.bielerfototage.ch)

