

More than 150 years after the camera caught on, there are still very few galleries devoted to photography. But in a quiet suburb on the Danube, one German-American collector has returned to the streets where he grew up to carve out a spectacular exhibition space. **Liz Jobey** goes to Neu-Ulm to get the measure of the Walther Collection

An unlikely picture palace  
The White Box, where visitors enter the Walther Collection. The Green House is to the left, the Black House to the right

INTELLIGENT SHOTS

# COOL, CALM & COLLECTED

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PHOTOGRAPHS STEFFEN SCHRAGLE

**E**VEN THE PEOPLE who live in Ulm, the old Bavarian city with the tallest church spire in the world, think it surprising that Neu-Ulm, its twin across the Danube, should be the site of a new international art museum. “Neu-Ulm und kultur?” queried the local listings magazine with mock-incredulity. Usually, it’s Legoland, a dozen miles away, which is cited as Neu-Ulm’s nearest cultural attraction. But there is also a sense of pleasure that one of its more successful sons, who left for America 30 years ago, should have decided to settle his art collection back home, in the house he grew up in.

Well, almost. In fact he decided to knock down the old house and build a modern white cube in its place, but despite its cool blankness, the cube is of the same modest proportions as the red-roofed family houses that surround it and, like them, sits in its own garden plot.

This is in Burlafingen, one of the outlying districts of Neu-Ulm. A small farming village before the second world war, it has grown since, but is still little more than a residential pod ten minutes’ drive from the centre, with flat green fields on every side. Artur Walther grew up in Burlafingen. He was born in Ulm in 1948, when the war had destroyed four-fifths of Neu-Ulm, including all the bridges across the Danube, which meant that the infrastructure of the city had to be rebuilt in the 1960s and 1970s. There was an American army

base there from 1951 to 1991 – by which time Walther had become a successful investment banker in New York. He retired from Goldman Sachs in 1994, and one of the things he planned to do was follow his interest in photography.

He took a course at the International Centre of Photography (ICP) in New York and gradually, then more systematically, began to collect. In 1997 he met Bernd and Hilla Becher, the German couple who had worked together since the late 1950s building up a unique archive of photographic studies of industrial structures – blast furnaces, mine-head winding gear, grain silos, water towers, gasometers – which were disappearing from the landscape of Europe and the United States. The Bechers are renowned for the clarity and precision of their photographs, which they often present as series, or “typologies”, in comparative grids. It’s not every admirer of the Bechers who can say of them, “we photographed and printed together”, but this seems to be what happened to Walther. When he talks about them, it sounds as if it was their dedication and methods that he admired, as much as the actual images. “What I liked about the Bechers is that they were unbelievably focused, determined, systematic in what they were doing, and they used that globally,” he said. “It was their encyclopedic approach, their interest in form, object and function, that attracted me and started my collecting.”

What began with the Bechers soon extended to other German photographers for whom classification was an important working model: portraits by August Sander (1876-1964), whose ambition had been to make a portrait map of German society, ordered by class and by occupation, and plant studies by Karl Blossfeldt (1865-1932), a sculptor and a teacher, who spent 30 years photographing plant specimens with a homemade magnifying camera, so that his students could observe their structural details. “In all of these works”, Walther says, “the intention is typological classification and the viewpoint is objectifying. It does not allow any experimental artistic aesthetic...[it] is systematic,



**Going underground**  
 ABOVE The main hall, with portraits by Samuel Fosso from “African Spirits”  
 LEFT Photograph by Zwelethu Mthethwa from the series “Interior”

serial, objective, classified, structured. And I loved it.”

From here his collecting went in two directions: to Africa where, inspired by the portraits of the Mali photographer Seydou Keita, taken in the 1940s and 1950s but rediscovered and published in the early 1990s, he began to investigate the work of local contemporary photographers; and to Asia where, after making frequent trips to China, he began to recognise artists whose work he wanted to buy. With his expanding European and American holdings, his collection took on a highly distinctive character.

Apart from his mother, who still lived in Burlafingen, Walther had little reason to go back to Ger-

many. He had become an American citizen, his children lived in America, and he was on the boards of several New York institutions, including the Whitney Museum of American Art – and ICP. As chairman of the exhibitions committee, he had launched the ICP Triennial of Photography and Video in 2003. He had, he said, turned his apartment into a clean white space where he could hang his collection on the walls.

“I had no connection with Germany. Then my mother was sick, and I started to go back. And when she died I thought, ‘Should I abandon everything?’ and it just didn’t feel right.” So he decided to keep his property in Burlafingen, remodel and extend the house he had grown up in, and move his collection of photographs there.

The tradition of private museums is much stronger in Germany than in Britain, even allowing for >



it grow up to the roof.” He renovated the interiors of the open-plan bungalow where his parents had lived since the 1970s, to make another set of galleries, with a living area that opens out on to the garden. Finally, he took over a second house along the street, on the edge of the site, where there are offices and a guest apartment.

When the building work was completed last summer, this idiosyncratic complex became the Walther Collection, a private museum of contemporary and modern photography, open to the public three days a week, by appointment. Officially the galleries are now known as the White Box, the Green House (the one with the ivy), the Black House (the bungalow, in fact painted a dark mushroom-grey), and the Grey House (the offices). They are linked by paved paths that cut across the lawns planted with young fruit trees which, when I visited, had just produced their first crop of rosy apples.

If the neighbours had been irritated by all the

furt, all of them an easy drive or train-ride away, all with thriving communities of art galleries and collectors. But obviously the Walther Collection hadn't yet become a destination on the taxi-driver's map.

THE COLLECTION COULD have been a private storehouse with an ad-hoc selection of works on show, but instead it is much more structured. Each year a guest curator will be invited to put together an exhibition across all nine galleries drawn from the collection. The first exhibition, which opened in the summer and runs until the end of April, is dedicated to portraiture, and draws on the African part of the collection, and on the cross-fertilisation of ideas that comes from being shown alongside works by the Bechers and August Sander. The curator is Okwui Enwezor, a Nigerian academic and critic, former artistic director of documenta 11, the international art exhibition that takes place every five years in Kassel. He is also founder and editor of *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, and the author of several books about African contemporary art. His exhibition encourages viewers to study cross-cultural similarities in different styles and periods of portraits, to recognise signs of transition within colonial and post-colonial societies, and to see how

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building, they showed no sign of it now. “Good morning!” a middle-aged woman called to me cheerily from the yard of the house opposite as I got out of my taxi. The driver, it has to be said, had taken ages to find it, mystified by the warren of narrow residential streets. Neu-Ulm is surrounded by a semi-circle of cultured cities: going clockwise from Munich, there is Zurich, Basel, Strasbourg, Stuttgart, and, farther north, Frank-

photographs map cultural change. It's an intellectual as well as a visual challenge, and not for the faint-hearted.

So, in the Green House, one floor is given over to portraits by Seydou Keita, taken in Bamako, the capital of Mali, during the last years of its colonisation by the French, the other to the 60 portraits that make up Sander's first book, “Antlitz der Zeit”, published in 1929. Keita's stately black-and-white portraits have become favourites with photo enthusiasts because of his strong visual style. This has little to do with colonial views of the “native” but reveals much about the ways traditional >

South Africa's lost middle class  
Portraits from “The Black Photo Album”, gathered by Santu Mofokeng



> the Saatchi Collection, which, in its first incarnation in Boundary Road, north London, was a much more modest affair than the huge semi-public institution it has become, and closer to Walther's way. Walther says that the way his project developed was completely serendipitous. He had made no plans to set up a private foundation in Germany; he could just as easily have done it in America. He had no model in mind. But there are comparisons to be drawn between his idea and other private art collections – especially the Sammlung Goetz, in Munich, which houses the contemporary art collected by its owner, Ingvild Goetz, in a specially commissioned building, one of the first by the architects Herzog & de Meuron. Or, to take a more ambitious example, the Insel Hombroich, outside Dusseldorf, a 62-acre park with 15 pavilions designed by the sculptor Erwin Heerich and a former NATO rocket base converted by the architect Tadao Ando: all this to house the art collected by a real-estate broker, Karl Heinrich Müller. What these private collections have in common is that although they do open to the public, a wide audience is in no way crucial to their existence. And their visitors are, mostly, respectful art professionals and students.

The space Walther has created is much the same. “At first it had nothing to do with the public,” he says. “I thought to use it as a studio, the big focus was in

Parting shots  
Portraits from the series “Ecstatic Antibodies”, taken by the Nigerian photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode in 1989, the year he died aged 34

creating a space where I could conceptualise my work, look at the work of others, develop ideas, put things together...Then, when the plans with the architect were finished, I was leaving for China. I was on the plane and I thought, ‘This is wrong. It doesn't fit in.’ The new building was going to overpower its surroundings. I know the neighbourhood, I grew up there. So I abandoned the idea and went back to the architects and we decided to turn the original plan upside down, and build the main gallery underground. That turned into a huge engineering job, involving tons of steel, because the structure is sitting in ground water: the Danube is only 2,000 metres away. The white building is really just an entrance, with all the gallery space below.” The building was designed by an Ulm-based firm of architects, Braunger Wörtz, in line with Walther's own ideas, influenced by the Tokyo-based SANAA group, winners of the Pritzker prize in 2010.

Then he took over the next-door house, which was empty. “Originally I was going to tear that down, too,” he said, “but we decided to turn it into a clean white space inside, but leave the ivy on the outside, let

> culture in Mali was being infiltrated from the West: it is there in the clothing, the jewellery, the make-up, the accessories; the way that pairs of women – friends or sisters – stand, holding hands together; but also the way men opt for Western suits, or caps (or, in one picture, disturbingly, pith helmets), to suggest their new ideas of status. Keita's outdoor studio, with its boldly patterned backdrops – often the only real guide to when the picture was made – offered sitters a wide array of props, including scooters, telephones, radios, handbags, wrist-watches, even a car, all of which indicate the seductive arrival of consumerism. Sander portraits, too, tell the story of a cultural transition, in this case from a 19th-century rural agricultural economy to an early 20th-century urban, industrialised one and the new social and political hierarchies that developed within it.

In the Black House is a group of typologies by the Bechers, a series of portraits by Malick Sidibé, a studio photographer from Mali 15 years younger than Seydou Keita, and photographs by the Nigerian J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere, who, in the face of the fashion for straightened hair and wigs that came from the West in the late 1960s, recorded hundreds of traditional and neo-traditional hairstyles. These elaborate arrangements of plaits and twists and loops, carefully lit and framed, are presented in series that beg comparison to those of the Bechers.

The fourth work here is "The Black Photo Album", a collection of portraits of black South Africans, salvaged from houses in the townships or rural villages, where they had survived for decades. It is presented as a slideshow by Santu Mofokeng, a South African photographer who has spent years piecing together information about the people in the pictures. Most of them were taken at the end of the 19th century, before black South Africans were disenfranchised by apartheid, when some families owned land and others were part of an educated

middle class. So used are we to seeing ethnographic photographs of "natives" that we have little idea of what black South Africans really looked like in those days. And here they are, some of them in their colonial Sunday best, the women in long flounced dresses, the men in waistcoats with fob watches, collars and ties. For Mofokeng, the portraits pose many questions. Were these aspirant families challenging the preconceptions of their white colonisers, or making a bid for parity with them? As he points out, these portraits were being taken at the



A collector's role model  
"Gas Tanks" (1963-83) by Bernd and Hilla Becher, who inspired Walther

bitation, my concentration was broken every so often by the sound of Michael Jackson songs, chanted, or so I thought, by an unaccompanied teenage choir. This turned out to be Candice Breitz's video "King (A Portrait of Michael Jackson)", a tribute to the unifying forces of pop culture. It shows 16 young people, of different ethnic origins, standing alone in a booth. Starting with little grunts and moans, they begin to make their moves, then sing along in that disembodied way people do with headphones on, to tracks from "Thriller". Their individual performances have been spliced together on video, so that they appear to be performing in consort, except they're all interpreting the song in different ways. One or two have dressed for the part and obviously think they are Michael Jackson; others are more reserved – the more uptight they are, the more northern-European they look. The video lasts for 42 minutes, the entire album, and though it sometimes gets in the way when looking at other parts of the show, it's quite hard to leave.

In the upper floor of the white cube is a study room, which offers a sanctuary from everything going on below. Here is a series of self-portraits by the Nigerian-born artist Rotimi Fani-Kayode, made in the 1980s, before his death from an AIDS-related illness in 1989. Although the large, richly coloured tableaux border on the kitsch with their use of ripe fruit and flowers, Yoruba symbols, feathers and body paint, they are gorgeously and defiantly homoerotic, suggestive of Caravaggio and Robert Mapplethorpe, but with a mix of vulnerability and bravado that recalls the first decade of AIDS, and all the fear and tragedies it brought with it.

"It was a difficult step, moving beyond the familiar. I struggled with each individual picture because it was something completely new to me...very foreign. I had to get out of myself and my preconceptions, borders and limits. My existing senses and emotions didn't work in these cultures." Artur Walther was talking about Chinese art when he said this, but he could just as easily have been describing what visitors might feel, faced with this exhibition. To force people to move beyond their preconceptions and think about the cultural implications of what they have seen is the intention here. And for those who can't visit, there is a rather beautiful book, with a full complement of essays, biographies and a selection of pictures which, as far as possible, replicates the whole experience. ■

*The Walther Collection (www.walthercollection.com) is open by appointment, Thursday to Sunday, 11am to 5pm, e-mail info@walthercollection.com or call +49 731 1769143. The exhibition "Events of the Self: Portraiture and Social Identity" is on until April 2011. The accompanying book, "Contemporary African Photography from the Walther Collection" by Okwui Enwezor, is published by Steidl (www.steidlville.com).*

same time that racist policies were being formed against black South Africans. Until more research is done, this can only be a partial index of a society that disappeared.

The wow factor at the Walther Collection lies, without doubt, in the huge underground gallery, which extends beneath the lawns almost to the boundaries of the entire plot. The ceilings are high, and natural light streams down the wide staircase from the glazed box above, though the pictures have to be artificially lit. Here Enwezor has curated a group show of 24 contemporary African photographers and video-makers from many different countries (including artists of African origin who live and work in Europe). South Africans are in the majority, ranging from the 80-year-old landscape photographer David Goldblatt to the young portraitist Nontsikelelo (Lolo) Veleko, but there are also portraits of Dakar by Boubacar Touré Mandémory, swirling streetscapes from Nairobi by James Muriuki, video works from the British artist Grace Ndiritu, and staged portraits by Samuel Fosso, from Cameroon. In so many of the works, Africa's colonial history feeds into its present, as in the collages by Sammy Baloji, from the Democratic Republic of Congo, which combine archival photographs with contemporary landscapes, or the huge panorama by Romuald Hazoumè, of the local goat market, on the site of a former slave market, in Benin.

While I was going round this part of the exhi-



Starting something  
Candice Breitz's video "King (A Portrait of Michael Jackson)"