

OFFSET

IN THE SERVICE OF ART



Göttingen-based Steidl uses the **KODAK SONORA XP Process Free Plate** to print exclusive art photographs, literature, and diverse publications by internationally renowned brands.



A passion for book printing and publishing

Casual visitors who happen to stroll down Düstere Strasse in Göttingen, the medieval university town in Lower Saxony (Germany), will probably not even cast a second glance: behind the unassuming facade of Number Four are the offices of Steidl, a printer and publisher with an excellent international reputation in the field of photography and art books.

Conditions for Gerhard Steidl are cramped in this four-story building: he and his 45-strong team are hard at work, with past and present jobs in various stages of completion laid out in every room. "I'm passionate about books. My hobby is my profession. Apart from books bearing the name Steidl, we also print a whole series of attractive products for customers around the globe – products that are made to keep," the Managing Director asserts.

Deeply committed to literature and handpicked art between book covers

About 160 or 170 visual books – mainly photography plus a few on architecture and the fine arts – and some 50 literary titles are published every year by Steidl (www.steidl.de). All of them are printed directly on the premises. "It's a very simple principle:

"All the things I value most when it comes to precision and repeatability, that plate does them for me better than any other."

– **Gerhard Steidl**
Managing Director, Steidl

every book that has the name Steidl on the cover is made here in Göttingen, Germany, in Düstere Strasse 4. We never print anything that hasn't been personally approved by me," he continues. "I dub the books we create here haute couture – after all, it's an individual process that is overseen by me and no-one else. That's what our reputation as a publishing house is founded on."

In addition to the book titles published in-house, Steidl also prints books on behalf of photographers, artists, and art publishing companies as well as catalogs for international fashion houses and special publications for global corporations. Inquiries are received from all over the world – far more than the firm can actually handle. "Theoretically, we could keep several print shops busy full-time," Steidl adds, "but I made a conscious decision to limit my capacities. Any growth we experience is growth in quality. That's why all work we get from external customers is the outcome of a selection process."

The longstanding cooperation with Thames & Hudson (T&H) of London, the specialist publisher of books on photography, architecture, art, and design, is just one example.



Printed proof of the *Chanel Magazine* – produced, like everything else, with the SONORA XP Process Free Plate.

Twice every six months, a list of titles T&H is currently preparing arrives in Göttingen. From this list Steidl chooses a number of high quality book projects to produce, which he finds interesting both artistically and in terms of content.

Yet how did the Göttingen printer and publisher come to be so revered in the global photography and art scene? Steidl, a self-taught, self-made man who originally aspired to a career as a photographer, soon abandoned his camera and darkroom in favor of graphic techniques. "I decided to work for artists. I've always attempted to meet the artists who trust me with their work at eye level. In other words, I want to comprehend their ideas and have a clear concept of how they wish them to appear in a book or any other form of print. From then on, I operate in the background and experiment until I'm convinced I can live up to each artist's expectations. There are plenty of printers and publishers around who see artists simply as troublemakers who they're forced to accept as part of the job. My attitude is that the artist is entitled to be difficult and complicated. I never let myself forget that, in the end, it's the artists who pay my bills."

Decade-long collaboration with leading artists

Steidl has been collaborating with leading international artists for several decades now. He started out back in 1968 working with Klaus Staeck, later President of the Berlin Academy of the Arts, whose posters were screen printed by Steidl. Staeck was also the author of the very first book Steidl ever published. Entitled *Befragung der documenta* (Questioning documenta), it appeared in 1972 to coincide with the famous Kassel art exhibition. His work with Joseph Beuys was another formative experience: Beuys' multiples and prints were likewise produced in a silk screen process and using other art printing techniques.

In 1986, author and artist Günter Grass published his first book with Steidl: *In Kupfer, auf Stein* (In Copper, on Stone). The future Nobel Prize laureate was seeking a publisher with its own print shop for his graphic work; this turned out to be the start of nearly thirty years of fruitful cooperation that only ended with Grass' death. Grass' literary oeuvre has also been published by Steidl ever since 1992, and in 1993 the company acquired the worldwide rights to his work as an author. "From his first novel onward, Günter Grass always insisted on being involved in the creative process: he helped choose the fonts

and the paper types, conferred with typesetters and book designers, composed the covers. We gave him the freedom to do all of that; he was a regular visitor here and we worked together very closely," Steidl reports.

1993 was also the year when Steidl began cooperating with Karl Lagerfeld, the fashion designer and photographer whose photo books are published in Göttingen. Gerhard Steidl has a long track record of publishing projects with Lagerfeld, including regular contract work for Chanel.

Steidl affectionately refers to these four big names in the art world as his private professors, who over the years have taught him much of what he knows today. Many more artists and photographers on all continents willingly place their work in the printer-cum-publisher's hands. They frequently travel to Göttingen in person, often for several weeks or even months at a time, to supervise and support the transformation of their oeuvres into print.

One particularly ambitious project in 2015 was a ten-volume boxed edition weighing thirty kilograms of photos by William Eggleston, documenting the American photographer's creative process during the period from 1976 to 1984. It was an undertaking that entailed five years of preparation. When asked about the highlights on this year's agenda, Gerhard Steidl mentions a project with Polish photographer Tomasz Gudzowaty. This large-format book, printed on specially made cotton paper and measuring 1 m by 1.5 m when open, will be produced in a limited edition of just 150 copies. These huge tomes will not be for sale as normal publications but are destined for an exhibition by the photographer, which Steidl is curating.

Offset in the service of art

Steidl has practised offset printing ever since 1980. Today, almost its entire production takes place on a Roland 706 six-color sheeffed offset press, which prints in 70 x 100 cm format and runs twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. A 50 x 70 cm two-color Roland 200 is used for all book covers and small-format products. "My personal definition of offset is that it's my extended photo lab. I've always considered offset presses as a way to realize artistic ideas in a reproduction process. I've forever been fascinated by the interpretation side and by the options printing opens up to support the artist," Steidl comments.

KEY ADVANTAGES

- Eliminates costs of processing chemistry and equipment
- Removes the variability of processing, providing better process control
- Fast imaging reduces time to press

“The main motivation for introducing the SONORA XP Plate was that it does away with the chemical processes and their inescapable variations”

– Gerhard Steidl

Offset printing at Steidl tends not to be shackled by narrow industry standards. The company typically prints its diverse black-and-white photo books in quadratone, for instance: depending on what it is the artist wants to express, Gerhard Steidl might choose one black and three different grays or two blacks and two grays. These inks may well be supplied by completely different manufacturers. At the same time, different line screens and screening techniques are employed to achieve an authentic reproduction or a deliberate visual impact; screening processes are combined in hybrid applications, papers are varied, and explicit use is made of rubber blankets with specific properties.

It's a work strategy that inevitably calls for a lot of proof printing and experimenting on the presses. There is at least one wet proof on the original production press with every second job. Steidl resorts to the KODAK SONORA XP Process Free Plate for proof and press printing. The process free thermal plates made their debut in the spring of 2014 and have overturned quite a few old habits in the meantime. The SONORA XP Plate can be mounted in the press immediately after imaging in the thermal CTP system. The traditional plate processing technology – and with it the consumption of power, water, developer, and replenisher as well as gumming solution and clean-out finisher – is now a thing of the past. And of course, since the plate is made entirely without chemicals, there are also none that have to be disposed of.

Steidl explains that he was just waiting for process free plates to appear in the market. He cites one particularly crucial argument aside from the environmental aspect: “The main motivation for introducing the SONORA XP Plate was that it does away with the chemical processes and their inescapable variations I grew up with in conventional photo labs.”

He admits that he was skeptical at first as to whether the non-image areas of the SONORA XP Plate coating, which are removed when the press starts up and carried away via the waste sheets, might prevent the dampening system from working properly. This is all the more important in that on some days – when we produce proofs of books with a large number of pages – new sets of plates have to be mounted in the press continuously after around thirty or forty proof sheets. Yet even this unorthodox practice has never led to any real problems. Gerhard Steidl continues: “I must confess, I'd have no qualms about switching instantly to another process free plate if I hit on a better product than the SONORA XP Plate – but the truth is, there isn't one anywhere. All the things I value most when it comes to precision and repeatability, that plate does them for me better than any other. I can't recall a single occasion in the last two years when we produced a waste plate. It makes no difference whether we're talking about the first, second, or third run – the results are invariably excellent.”

Steidl's production takes place almost entirely on a Roland 706 sheefed offset press



“That decision (to move to SONORA XP Plates) boosted productivity in the print shop by a good 25%.”

– Gerhard Steidl

Stability boosts productivity of new jobs and reprints

This outstanding stability is the reason why the printer stopped preserving and archiving printing plates for reprints after introducing the SONORA XP Plate. Reprints are a significant business asset and Steidl's long backlist comprises titles from five decades, many of which are printed over and over again. Top of the league among literary reprints is Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum*. Several ten thousand copies of this landmark novel are produced every year. Number one among the photographic oeuvres is *The Americans* by Robert Frank, first published in 1958 and widely held to be the blueprint of modern photo books, with anything from 10,000 to 50,000 copies reprinted annually.

“When we first began using the SONORA XP Plate and discovered what incredible precision it achieves in the platemaking process, it occurred to us that there was no longer any need to archive our plates; instead, we could make new ones for each new job. Together with the high platemaking speed, that decision boosted productivity in the print shop by a good 25%,” Steidl concludes.



Gerhard Steidl, at work in his office.

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Eastman Kodak Company
343 State Street
Rochester, NY 14650 USA

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