

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **ANTON STANKOWSKI**

*“What if...?” (Was ist wenn) / 38 variations on a photograph*

*& selected vintage prints, 1925-1953*

November 5 – December 23, 2015

Deborah Bell Photographs is pleased to present vintage photographs and photo-collages by Anton Stankowski (German, born 1906 in Gelsenkirchen; died 1998 in Stuttgart). During his illustrious career as a photographer and graphic designer, art director for periodicals and a creator of corporate logos, Stankowski was also a prolific abstract painter whose work shares strong similarities with that of his Swiss contemporary, Max Bill.

To most Americans, Stankowski is infamous for the clean, minimal logo he designed for Deutsche Bank in 1974 at the age of 68: a simple diagonal stroke contained within an open square. He is also renowned for his 1968 design of the “Berlin Layout,” the graphic identity for the city of Berlin.

The exhibition will feature two aspects of Stankowski’s work with photography: his earliest photographs, dating from 1925-1938; and the suite entitled *Was ist wenn (What if...?)*, a sequence of 38 variations on one image that he conceived and re-worked between 1932 and 1953. The basis of this series is a single photograph, dating from 1932, of a tailor’s form bearing a man’s suit jacket. Stankowski referred to these groups of sequences as “visual plans.” Through darkroom manipulation such as image-reversal, solarization, montage, enlargement of details, multiple exposure, printing the negative through decorative screens, and reassembling the prints in hand-colored photo-collages, he created 38 variations on the original photograph.

The son of a miner, Stankowski received his artistic training in 1920-26 at a Düsseldorf studio specializing in church painting and decorative painting. His immersion in photography, graphic arts and typography stems from 1926, when he attended seminars at the School of Arts and Crafts (later the Folkwang School of Design) in Essen, Germany. In 1927 he began studying there with the photographer Max Burchartz, who exposed Stankowski to the work of avant-garde artists such as El Lissitzky, Kurt Schwitters, Piet Zwart, Herbert Bayer, and the Bauhaus masters.

Stankowski’s earliest photographs and photograms of the 1920s reflect this era of heady innovation and identify him as one of the “new photographers” of the Weimar era. Using the camera as if he were drawing in a sketchbook, his bird’s-eye views, worm’s-eye views, oblique framing and abstract close-ups infuse his compositions of everyday subjects with energy and tension.

The legendary international exhibition *Film und Foto*, held in Stuttgart in 1929, served as an important turning point for Stankowski and launched his career. In addition to exhibiting his own photographs, Burchartz organized a section of the exposition to feature works by students in his Commercial Art and Photography Class. Max Dalang, founder of a progressive advertising agency in Zürich, saw the photomontages Stankowski exhibited at *Film und Foto* and promptly recruited him. Soon Stankowski left his job as an advertising consultant for J. Canis in Bochum, and moved to Zürich to join Dalang’s famous agency.

During his early years in Zürich, Stankowski was a highly prolific photographer. Despite the universal celebration of photography, however, the appearance of photographs in modern graphic design was not yet common. As a result, Stankowski's photographs were often merely the basis for an ad or story, but were not often reproduced. Illustrations made from photographs remained the norm on magazine covers and on the inside pages of even the most lavish publications until well into the 1930s. Photomontages made from Stankowski's own photographs became the basis of his early work for the printed page in the 1920s-30s. He was not concerned with sanctity or preciousness of the photograph as an object, or with photographic technique. Instead, Stankowski looked for, and extracted, the qualities he espoused throughout his long career: order, aesthetics and visual communication. His unique contribution to graphic design evolved to become the creation of graphic signs and designs distilled from a photographic image, achieved through successive stages of reduction and simplification.

In 1940 Stankowski was drafted for military service and became a prisoner of war. In 1948 he was released and re-settled in Stuttgart, and from 1949-51 he worked as a journalist and editor at the *Stuttgarter Illustrierte*. In 1951 Stankowski opened his own design firm in Stuttgart and soon became known as one of the most influential designers of the postwar period. He began teaching at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm in 1964. Throughout his career as a designer and teacher, Stankowski asserted that there was no distinction between "pure" and "applied" art. His guiding principle was that "aesthetics is order" – such as the beauty found in nature's own orderly forms. In 1983 he established the Stankowski Foundation, which honored the American artist Donald Judd with a Stankowski Foundation Prize in 1993.

Stankowski's photographs are held in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA); the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), the Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina; and numerous private collections and institutions worldwide.

**ANTON STANKOWSKI** *"What if...?" (Was ist wenn) / 38 variations on a photograph & selected vintage prints, 1925-1953* will be on view from Thursday, November 5th through Saturday, December 23rd. Gallery hours are Tuesday-Saturday, 11-6. Please contact Kat McElroy, Director, for further information and high-res scans at [info@deborahbellphotographs.com](mailto:info@deborahbellphotographs.com) or by phone at 212-249-9400