

Stella Weinert

## TEENS TOGETHER: HANGING OUT

Stella Weinert

BY BOB SHERRIN

Teens Together: Hanging Out  
A collaborative photo project by Stella  
Weinert with Surrey teens

BY CHRISTINE LAWRENCE

Artist's Statement (1999)

STELLA WEINERT



**Stella Weinert**

By Bob Sherrin, 2001

Stella Weinert was born in Seattle, Washington and came to Vancouver, BC at the age of 18. She later moved north and settled in Dawson City, Yukon Territories where she lived for the next 12 years. She and her family then moved to Salt Spring Island, B.C., so they could live in a rural setting but still be close to the cities of Victoria and Vancouver.

Weinert's introduction to photography came through her father, a serious amateur photographer who worked in black and white. He taught Weinert essential darkroom skills and the techniques of printing black and white negatives, though she now works with a

Stella Weinert

*Johnathan, Corey, Tyler & Lance. 104th Ave. & Guilford,  
August 1999, 1999*

chromogenic photographic print on paper  
(42.4 x 58 cm)  
SAG 2001.0.01



An Open Book

a catalogue of artworks from the Surrey Art Gallery's Permanent Collection

medium format camera (6 cm x 4.5 cm negative) and produces large colour prints that are rich in detail. Through her father, Weinert also came into contact with the work of such important photographers as the American Walker Evans – most famous for his Depression era WPA photographs – and the Swiss-American Robert Frank who is best known for his book *The Americans* (1959). Evans and Frank, who are both recognized for their powerful compositions and social insight, remain two of Weinert's favourite photographers. Her photographic training also includes studies with Roy Arden at UBC and Diane Evans at Emily Carr Institute of Art & Design.

Stella Weinert focuses on contemporary life as it is lived in public spaces and therefore is drawn to such sites as malls, coffee shops and other locations where people congregate and socialize in highly visual and subtly vigorous ways. As Weinert says, "I am interested in the recording of popular culture but also in conveying an underlying psychological dynamic."<sup>1</sup> In order to grant the viewer access to this dynamic, Weinert plans her work carefully but leaves ample room within her creative process to respond to her subjects' suggestions and interest in her projects. This responsiveness also reflects Weinert's concern in getting to know people before she photographs them, not only to seek their permission but also to allow them to reveal themselves comfortably, thus with a significant degree of honesty.

A fine example of Weinert's work is *Teens Together: Hanging Out*, mounted at Surrey Art Gallery from September 1999 through January 2000, that resulted from the Gallery's call to regional artists to present exhibition proposals that centred on the youth of Surrey and that would involve them actively in the exhibition. Weinert met Surrey teens in a variety of ways: by consulting youth workers, by speaking

about her project at local high schools, and by befriending local teens whom she met on the street or in malls. As intended, a number of these teens became active volunteers in her project and directly contributed to the exhibition. To produce her latest series of photographs, Weinert traveled to Japan in July, 2001, where in Tokyo's Yoyogi Park she photographed teenage girls who participate in a local form of hanging out that focuses on the band X Japan. Although Weinert began showing her work only in 1998, she has already had exhibits in Vancouver and Surrey, BC and has published her photographs in *Adbusters*, *Mix* (The Vancouver Sun), *Maclean's Magazine* and *Saturday Night*.

As a public school teacher, Stella Weinert has used the camera to engage her young students in various forms of portraiture, and currently she's involved her grade three and four students in the use of a digital camera. With them, Weinert is planning a digital video project on the history of the Fulford Harbour area of Salt Spring Island.

In *Teens Together: Hanging Out*, Stella Weinert creates what she calls "social tableaux."<sup>2</sup> Tableaux is the plural of tableau, derived from the Old French word *tablel* which itself evolves into the word *table*. However, by 1699 *tableau* was used in English to refer to a form of painting: a scene that depicts either actual people or fictionalized individuals.<sup>3</sup> Often these individuals – be they actual or fictional – were also understood to depict different types of people, even to the extent of being allegorical: in other words, people who represent ideas, conditions, even particular events that might be historical or mythic. Clearly, these first tableaux required that their viewers recognize the individuals or types in the scenes, and this requirement encouraged viewers to

employ their imaginations in order to understand and enjoy the images.

Like many modern and contemporary photographers, Weinert employs the word social to further focus her body of work. In *Teens Together*, she concentrates on a group of people defined, and sometimes vilified, by virtue of their age and their marginal status within “mature” society. As well, Weinert explores the fact that teenagers represent not only the transition between childhood and adulthood but also the lifelong, ongoing transition between who we are internally and who we are seen or assumed to be externally - thus, her concentration on private lives conducted in public spaces. Weinert’s photographs complement those of Lewis Hine and Mary Ellen Mark, the former noted for his work with poor children in early 20th century New York, the latter for her images of street kids in Seattle. Like Hine and Mark, Weinert’s photographs suggest that public space is not only a social environment where diverse people come into contact but also that people – the photographer included – may use public space to question, defy, or comment on the power of public spaces to shape behavior or require that we play by the rules of unseen and unapproachable authorities.

Such contemporary Canadian artists as Jin-me Yoon, Jeff Wall, and Sorel Cohen also pose questions about various social environments. Like Weinert, their strong compositions and the scale of their works focus viewers on what lies behind the image, thus encouraging viewers to engage with, or “complete,” the work. Weinert narrows her question to one of identity and the need to express it, for her teens propose that below the surface of social activity in public places lie less obvious yet fundamental purposes: temporarily claiming space for oneself, and controlling that space. Thus, they reveal that

public space is actually defined by the private use of it - even by groups of people who wish to hang out together without being supervised or controlled by others. It’s this contradiction, or irony, that makes Weinert’s *Teens Together* so compelling. She depicts what seems to be the very ordinary, but by presenting tableaux, she allows viewers first to see what is familiar but then, through contemplating the images, to recognize their own desires to defy in large and small ways the boundaries that public space imposes. The ages of Weinert’s subjects reinforce this recognition because most viewers will have experienced teenage life and recall the limitations, frustrations, and stereotyping that often accompanies it. This recollection leads to the reinterpretation of the images on a more personal, intimate level, creating in the public space of a gallery a very private and complex act of communication between viewers and Weinert’s work - plus all the issues and experiences it brings forth for them.

**Johnathan, Corey, Tyler & Lance, 104th Ave. & Guildford, August, 1999**

Weinert combines her forceful composition with her interest in the social position of her subjects. The strong lighting suggests the documentary approach used by many contemporary photographers who work spontaneously in public spaces and highlight such issues as transgression. Here, the bold declaration on the wall behind the young men hints at trespass on their part since they are neither customers nor are they parking in the usual sense of that word. Weinert, moreover, fuses notions of trespass and acceptance. Her own shadow intrudes into the composition, and the postures of the young men make clear they welcome her or, at the very least, accept her for the moment. Weinert, thus, is observer and observed at

the same time, by virtue of her shadow and by virtue of the fact that the young men scrutinize her as she scrutinizes them. Not only does she record the social life of her subjects, but also Weinert becomes part of it - both while making her photographs and while they are contemplated by her audience.

### Jimmy & Andrew, Sullivan Station

This photograph first emphasizes Weinert's compositional talent in working with ambient light at night, while at the same time places her work within the contemporary practice of artists who make and elicit comments, often ironic, through their images. The darks and lights of this photograph create of it an architecture that mimics the actual structure of the gas station. Weinert's use of scale emphasizes the boys' relative smallness with respect to the station and the corporation that owns or controls it. Yet the



Stella Weinert *Johnathan, Corey, Tyler & Lance. 104th Ave. & Guilford, August 1999, 1999*  
chromogenic photographic print on paper (42.4 x 58 cm) SAG 2001.01.01

captioning that the image allows tends to undermine that silent authority, the word Self momentarily attached to the boys, their skateboarding a brief takeover of this public place for private pleasure, their solitary presence a claim upon an environment normally reserved for the servicing of automobiles by those who drive them. Weinert, consequently, tends to reverse or subvert what is expected from a medium most commonly seen as objectively truthful, thereby echoing one current practice among photo artists who strive to show that the photographic

image is constructed - a form akin to fiction or social commentary that employs irony, requires interpretation, and even provokes debate.



Stella Weinert *Jimmy & Andrew, Sullivan Station*, 1999  
chromogenic photographic print on paper (42.3 x 58 cm) SAG 2001.01.02

**Daisy, Tara-Lee, Kimberly, Marpreet, Brenna, Katherine & Nadia, Fleetwood, August, 1999**

Here Weinert opposes the basic compositional elements of horizontal line and circle in such an obvious way that they may be at first dismissed by viewers. However, as in the contemporary tableaux work of Jeff Wall, for example, Weinert offers a form of visual code to be deciphered or simply to be recognized as code. She employs a classically positioned horizon line, her subjects centred, circled, and placed in the foreground. However, the photograph's clarity and depth-of-field give the background line of suburban houses as much presence as the young women in the

foreground, and within the language or code of this photograph they "speak" to one another, creating a visual tension that may be translated, or deciphered.<sup>4</sup> Weinert juxtaposes the straight-line, "synthetic" formality of the houses with the circular informality of the young women; placing them completely within a "natural," "unstructured" public space. There they spontaneously and momentarily occupy it with the conversation that viewers imagine; there an inward facing circle opposes the outward facing, fort-like, supervisory houses; and there they privately enjoy a plot of land that might some day be transformed as was the property beyond them. Here the impersonal



Stella Weinert *Daisy, Tara-Lee, Kimberly, Marpreet, Brenna, Katherine & Nadia, Fleetwood*, 1999  
chromogenic photographic print on paper (42.5 x 58 cm) SAG 2001.01.03

and personal, the private and the public, engage in a form of conversation or visual tension that, ironically, viewers themselves must occupy in order to decipher.

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Source:

1 Stella Weinert, email to author, 7 December 2001.

2 Stella Weinert, email to author, 6 December 2001.

3 "Tableau." Def. 1, 2. Oxford English Dictionary. 1971 ed.

4 Depth-of-field is a function of the aperture, or hole, in camera lenses, which permits light to pass through them and be exposed on the film in cameras. The smaller the aperture, the greater the depth-of-field; the greater the depth-of-field, the more a photographic image will be in focus - from the centre point of focus ranging equally outward towards the background and foreground. The control of depth-of-field is a fundamental consideration of serious photographers.

## **Teens Together: Hanging Out - A collaborative photo project by Stella Weinert with Surrey teens**

by Christine Lawrence, 1999

The golden arches of McDonald's, the cover of Tiger Beat magazine, a baseball cap turned backwards, lip gloss and braces - all these symbols of youth culture remain unchanged from fifteen years ago when I was a teenager. What also hasn't changed among teens is the phenomenon of 'hanging out.' While Ralph Lauren has been replaced by Tommy Hilfiger and Matt Dillon by the Backstreet Boys, teens still claim territory at the mall, in parks, in front of convenience stores, near their schools and at the beach. This exhibition provides a glimpse into the subculture of teenage life through Stella Weinert's compelling portraits of teens in these places.

The exhibition came about when the Surrey Art Gallery responded to the international touring exhibition *Teenagers in Their Bedrooms: Photographs* by Adrienne Salinger by inviting regional artists to develop proposals for a photo-based exhibition that would involve Surrey youth and encourage their collaboration. Weinert's proposal, *Teens Together: Hanging Out*, reflected a process that allowed the youth to play an important part.

As an artist, Weinert was challenged to work in the community and intended to capture different perspectives and concerns of youth around the concept "hanging out." As a facilitator, she was challenged to gain the trust and respect of the youth in a short period of time. And as collaborators, the teens were challenged to talk about themselves: to document their world through video, audio recording and photography - each telling their own story, urging the viewer to compare and contrast. Respect for the

teens is evident in Stella's inclusion of their voices - through video, tape, text and photographs on display together with her work in the exhibition.

Having worked with teens in similar contexts, Weinert was able to help tell a story about teenagers in Surrey by seeking out individuals in their own environments and becoming an integrated part of their world. Her images are very personal because she observed from within that world rather than from outside. She was able to take the generic term "hanging out" and transform it to reveal perspectives on individuals. In most cases, it is obvious that Weinert has gotten to know and understand the people in her photographs, but that she has left it to the viewers to interpret the images for themselves.

Weinert's work is rooted in concept rather than form, and reacts to the world around the teens in an effort to understand how they place themselves in their surroundings. The photos are taken at close range; they are intimate images that capture emotions. Weinert's vibrant use of colour, her overall use of composition, and her use of large-format cibachrome prints permit the presentation of the works as tableaux. Each image is able to stand alone and tell a complete story.

Weinert's work effects a critique of traditional social documentary, an examination of two familiar currents in photography - the liberal humanist tradition of "concerned" documentary and the formalist celebration of a vernacular culture. Weinert brings a humanistic approach to her content and in effect creates narratives that address the diverse and changing concepts associated with teen culture - self-awareness, relationships, territory, image and identity.

Her work explores the dynamic interplay between art and life, and captures the extraordinary in the ordinary as it celebrates the spirit of youth.

(This essay was prepared for the exhibition *Teens Together: Hanging Out* - a collaborative photo project by Stella Weinert with Surrey teens, held at the Surrey Art Gallery from September 4, 1999 to January 23, 2000)

## Artist's Statement, Teens Together: Hanging Out

By Stella Weinert (1999)

This project began with approaching youth in a variety of settings around Surrey - high schools and learning centers, parks, malls, Skytrain stations, youth centers, basketball courts and skate parks. I was struck by the wide cultural and socio-economic diversity I found. Many teens were interested in being photographed, creating a video of their group hanging out, and photographing themselves with their friends. I found them willing to talk openly.

I met with some groups of teens at places they arranged, and others at the sites where I first made contact with them. All were aware of the camera and the intent of the photos. In this way, they became collaborators whether they consciously posed or not.

I find this age group interesting - a transition between childhood and adulthood. In my photographs, I am interested in communicating how they negotiate their way in the suburban landscape of Surrey; how they claim public spaces for their own (apart from school and home which are largely controlled by authority figures); and how they reflect their identity in the dress they adopt and the groups they join.

I am also interested in the way they present themselves to the world via the camera - a mix of vulnerability and bravado that I find poignant. As I listened to them express their experiences as teenagers, I decided it was important to include their voices as an audio component of the installation.

Some views were widely held, others diverged. All these teens call Surrey home. They aren't pleased with its stereotype and find it unfair. Many wished there was more to do, while others are active and content. Tolerant attitudes towards other groups of teens were prevalent.

In groups, they find companionship, identity and safety.

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