



Fig. 1 *Sea Calm*, 2003, FH 001, from the series "Beginning of Time"

Win Labuda

Journey to the Beginning of Time

50 Years of Photography - a Review

*To a greater or lesser extent, almost all of the photographic works presented over the past decades refer to previously known content presented in a different way or from a new perspective. This is also a legitimate means of preserving and continuing the culture which has been handed down to us. I wanted to look for new ways to rework what is already known and to create something new from this promising material. Through my pictures I first comment on the work of well-known photographers. These pictorial comments are divided into two categories – those offering an alternative approach and those representing a further development. "Journey to the Beginning of Time" is primarily meant to be an interpretation of the photographic works of Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908 - 2004), Brassai (1899 - 1984), Paul Caponigro (*1932) and Hiroshi Sugimoto (*1948).*

The series "People Today" comments on the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson in that it frees the photographed individual from the "decisive moment" – basically the focus of a photojournalist – and instead focuses on the essential nature or "decisive stance" of the photographed individual [1].

The series "Pictures and Signs" relates to the part of Brassai's work in which he turned to photographing graffiti and scatchings on walls. Like others, I also sought to continue Brassai's work in his sense over the past decades [2].

The series "Home of the Gods" is inspired by the work of the



Fig. 2 *Shepherdess in Palestine*, 1980, FP 017, from the series "People Today"



Fig. 3 *Children without Borders*, 1980, FP 066, from the series "People Today"

American photographer Paul Caponigro, who travelled around Ireland in the 1960s to photograph the megalith architectures there. While Caponigro pursued an object-oriented approach in his photography, I tried to achieve a greater reference to space and a transcendental connection by including the sky and certain cloud formations in my photographs, in accordance with the supposed religious nature of people of the Stone Age [3].

The series "At the Beginning of Time" comments on Hiroshi Sugimoto's "Seascapes", yet it also represents a break with these works as far as content is concerned. Not without reason did I change the middle horizon of Sugimoto, this metaphor for the subordination of nature under a single, geometrically determined and also unfamiliar plane of vision. I usually composed the horizons of my "Counter-Seascapes" to appear off-centre, and solely for this series, I chose colour photography as medium. Moreover, like in "Home of the Gods", I placed stronger emphasis on the sky and space [4].

The four series which comprise the cycle of this book are chronologically arranged against the backdrop of the history of the earth and of man in the sense of a journey back into time:

- 1st series – Contemporary man, the self-determined being
- 2nd series – The era of the beginning of public communication
- 3rd series – The era of the building of the first (sacral) structures
- 4th series – Earth before its appropriation by living creatures.



Fig. 4 *Girl in the Afternoon*, 1965, FP 002, from the series "People Today"



Fig. 5 *Girl with Ladies' Shoes*, 1967, FP 001, from the series "People Today"

About the Origin of the Series in "Journey to the Beginning of Time"

Series *People Today*

The series *People Today* has its origin in my youth, when I first began to work artistically. My first "art" photograph shows the portrait of my friend Eckhardt Machens, taken in the St. Mauritius Orphanage in Cologne, which was a good home to me for several years. In 1956 Machens and I both became members of the photography club of the neighbouring Kolping House. From the beginning, I created photographs which although not perfect, were not without aesthetic charm. At this time I devoted myself to photographing people with the enthusiasm of youth. In my photographs of people I wanted to show what goes beyond the mere physical existence of the person photographed – individuality, dignity, and the aura of each person, even under adverse living circumstances. Consequently, in 1981 the "distinctive" individual was also the central theme of my travelling exhibition "People of this Earth", which was shown by the Bayerische Vereinsbank in eighteen German cities. Since that time I have seldom engaged in photographing people. It was not until 1998 that my attention was drawn to this theme again through the works of Andreas Gursky. His photographs often show people as if they were mass particles, in which the individual has lost every significance – a concept that is diametrically opposed to my approach. Years later, however, I took several pictures of people taking a walk and tried in my own way to reflect on Andreas Gursky's work.

Series *Pictures and Signs*

The development of humanity would not have been possible without pictures and signs including, in particular, the scripts of the various cultures. Communication among people has always included signs that were generally understood and were painted or carved on publicly accessible surfaces. Good examples for this are the fish as sign of Christianity or the



Fig. 6 *Abstract Wall Picture II*, 2001, F 137, from the series "Pictures and Signs"



Fig. 7 *Explosion, Wall*, 1997, F 074, from the series "Pictures and Signs"



Fig. 8 *Poul nabrone-Dolmen I*, 2002, FM 005, from the series "Home of the Gods"



Fig. 9 *Stone Circle Carrowmore*, 2002, FM 004, from the series "Home of the Gods"

large encircled A as sign of anarchists. In the context of this series I photographed many kinds of signs on walls in the cities of Europe. In doing so, I found a special kind of graffiti which I would like to call "art graffiti". These are signs and drawings on walls that appear to be art, created by an unknown person, and which capture our attention. In looking for scribbles that were interesting in this sense, I rediscovered forms which were familiar to me from 20th century painting. There I found the iconographies of Paul Klee, Barnett Newman, Antoni Tàpies, Cy Twombly and many other painters. There were also forms which had come into being through the influences of time and weathering on the old walls without any conscious human contribution. In 1990, two of my works from this series were selected by the National Centre for Photography in Paris and displayed in the exhibition *Oeil de la lettre* in the Palais du Tokyo.

Series ***Home of the Gods***

This series contains photographs of monuments of the European megalith culture. It includes the first known megalithic stone circle in Carrowmore, Ireland, which is about 8000 years old, and also a number of menhirs and dolmens which date back to the beginning of the Bronze Age. Two aspects were important to me for my photographs of the Stone Age monuments: first, to show a relationship of the objects to the sky and clouds and, second, to show a relationship to the surrounding landscape. Had not the Stone Age people, with the erection of their menhirs, revealed an intellectual and emotional world directed towards the heavens? At the same time, with the top stones of the dolmens, which often give the formation a marked horizontality, they had realised their

natural integration into the surrounding landscape. For this series I decided to work with middle-format cameras. This format granted me a more flexible photographic technique than with large-format cameras. Thus, I was even able to take into consideration rapid changes in the formation of the clouds in my photographs.

Series *Beginning of Time*

This photographic series consists of horizon pictures in which the sky and sea touch at the line of the horizon, thereby on occasion creating interesting interfaces. The beholder is given the impression that nature is in a state of anticipation before its imminent appropriation by living creatures. Just as I was starting to work on the horizon pictures I learned of Hiroshi Sugimoto's black-and-white, minimalistically composed "Seascapes", and was then given the opportunity to view the original photographs. To consciously photograph a landscape is for me, in essence, a religious act. The landscape photographer selects a viewfinder image which seems essential to him out of the endlessness of the given world and thus determines a new field of viewing, which now becomes the entire image for the beholder. The new image thus created not only contains man's inner striving to reflect back on a world far removed from our form of living, but is also a reference to the harmonious quality of the cosmos, thus creating meaning.

Earth and Human History as Meaningful Concept

Originally, I owe my wish to create a cycle of photographic images to Ernst Haas 5, although I gave my cycle a different conceptual direction. The Old Testament story of creation is not the conceptual basis for my imaginary "Journey to the Beginning of Time". Instead, I have based my imagery on



Fig. 10 *Horizon 14*, 2008, FH 088, from the series "Beginning of Time"



Fig. 11 *Departure into Time*, 2005, FH 023, from the series "Beginning of Time"

the history of the evolution of the earth and man. For this purpose, I have identified periods on the timeline of the earth's history, whose end, from today's perspective, marked a significant evolutionary step. I begin this journey back into time with the photographs of the series People Today and lead the viewer back chronologically, stopping at two stations for reflection and contemplation, to the Beginning of Time. This series symbolically shows the original state of the planet Earth, depicted through the primordial elements of sky, earth and water.

Progress as Concretisation of Time

In this cycle I endeavour to convey my personal view of the world through photographic images, seeking to give the viewer profound insights into the meaningful course of the history of the earth and of humanity. Hence, with my photographs I want to make a meaningful contribution to the concept of "meta-physics of progress". What is artistic about my work is not merely that my photographic compositions are aesthetically pleasing or instructive, but rather that they at the same time convey an optimistically oriented, historically founded world view on the basis of the notion of a meaningful, evolving world determined by progress. In this context I think of the words of Eduardo Chillida, the Spanish sculptor (1924-2002):

I am a religious man. The questions of faith and my problems as an artist lie close side by side. Of course, my conception of space has a spiritual dimension, just as it also has a philosophical one. [6]

What Chillida says about himself and space I would like to relate to time. It is not the limitation of space which causes

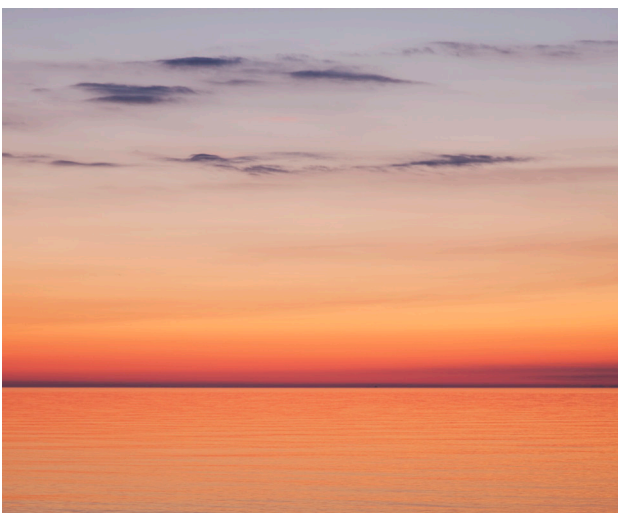


Fig. 12 *Horizon 31*, 2012, FH 097, from the series "Beginning of Time"

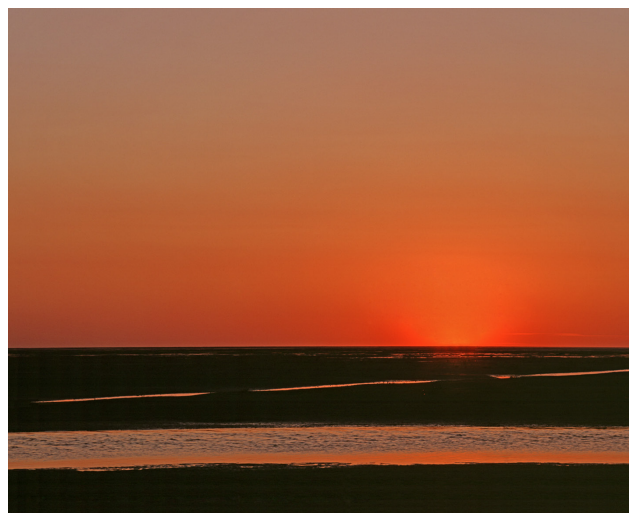


Fig. 13 *Evening Sound I*, 2006, FH 058, from the series "Beginning of Time"



Fig. 14 *Kilclooney-Dolmen IV*, 2004, FM 036, from the series "Home of the Gods"

the tragedy of our human existence, but rather the unfortunate antagonism resulting from the limited time we have to live in the "earth system", although our imagination of it is unlimited. Consequently, any meaningful thought must be anchored in the time category. Progress is change within the context of the concretisation of time in conjunction with decreasing social entropy. Each of us is involved this process with small contribution units. This also shows a possible interpretation of Confucius' statement that "the journey is the destination".

As a method, photography is of dual nature, consisting of both a documentary and a historicising component. With the aid of photography states can be depicted, which while the picture is being taken are still in the present; immediately after the picture has been made, however, these states are in the past. Every photograph, after it has been taken, is a historical document of continually increasing historicity [7]. The approach I have chosen to pursue in my cycle is more comparative: taking photographs of artifacts which have come into being within the historical reference period using a comparable canon of forms. Like in a Wild West film, this method conveys a similar visual, conceptual proximity to the given environmental conditions and the prevailing form structure of the respective period. Hence, this is how I proceeded with my images of the shells of sea snails as primordial forms of nature and also in the series "Home of the Gods" with the dolmens, menhirs and stone circles, which during millennia have hardly changed in form and which are still to be found on the original site where they were erected. Similarly, this also applies to the instruments, machines and apparatuses which I photographed in the series "The Blessing of Technology".



Fig. 15 *Ring of Brodgar I*, 2004, FM 035, from the series "Home of the Gods"

Essentially, my photography seeks to convey meaning through the study, observation and internalisation of form. This way of attaining insight requires a willingness to a synthesis of form and the "underlying ground", as an anonymous French writer formulated in the sentence "La forme, c'est le fond, qui remonte a la surface." (Form is the underlying ground brought to the surface). Therefore, from the form we want to elucidate the underlying ground, i.e. the possible cause for why the sequence of geological eras was marked with such progress; we want to recognise "the universal meaning during building" and place the enigma of creation there. Again: The journey is the destination. The emergence of reasonable doubt which we owe to the Age of Enlightenment, resulting in a shift of the myth and the loss of faith is accompanied by a search for meaning in life and for a sense of being protected in the manifest structures of our "system of earth". In particular, I see in a deeper understanding of evolution, as in the history of the earth and of humanity, a justified cause to reflect on an evolutionary based, metaphysical world view which is not solely characterised by faith. Nowhere can we find more "fond" than

in the process of earth or human history, which we have had nearly three thousand years to observe and document.

Photography – in particular microphotography and astrophotography – provides the tools for appropriating the structures of the microcosm and macrocosm. According to the present state of technology, these tools have developed to such an extent that insights are forthcoming and attained in the cross-disciplinary areas shared with philosophy. Thus, taking this perspective into account, the natural sciences and the humanities may one day be reconciled with each other.

The Aesthetic Foundation

In his laudatory address, Eckhard Schollmeyer placed my artistic work in the context of Western philosophy [8]. For this reason, I will limit myself in the following to exploring the phenomenon of aesthetics and will do so only insofar as there is a reference to the works discussed here.

For me, beauty is the basis of all artistic work, and so I strive for an aesthetic composition in all of my pictures. Anti-aesthetic positions have played a key role in the visual arts since the 20th century, probably in connection with the attempt to question the established social order and structure. It cannot be disputed, however, that the constant repetitive use of aesthetically perfect forms leads to a tedious feeling of *déjà-vu*.

At the same time, a straightforward, easy-to-comprehend form language emerged, which was generally accessible to all social classes. This is evident in the return to primordial forms and to a beauty based on simplicity. The Bauhaus, the Concreteists such as Max Bill and later the Minimalists such as Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt and Robert Mangold, but also on another level generations of Scandinavian designers have made their contribution to this. Seen for themselves and as individual elements, these forms are beautiful in the original meaning of the word, but for example in an architectural complex they often lack the narrative component relating the spiritual with the human. Here is the cause for the general feeling of uneasiness our architecture conveys.

Matter and energy change when left undisturbed, according to the law of entropy, and always proceed from a state of order to a state of disorder. Accordingly, in order to maintain an ordered state or to attain a higher ordered state, work must be expended. If we attempt to make an analogy of social entropy to aesthetics, one thesis is that the respective state of a visual system, which to the greatest possible extent corresponds to the rules of aesthetics, is also the most ordered of all possible visual states. It therefore requires the constant input of work to maintain this state. It can also be concluded that without the input of work, the entropy, here in this case equated with "disorder" of the aesthetic system, constantly increases. It is true that the world's arrow of time aims toward



Fig. 16 *Stonehenge IV*, 2002, FM 021, from the series "Home of the Gods"



Fig. 17 *Horizon 11*, 2008, FH 085, from the series "Beginning of Time"

a maximum of entropy. Hitherto, however, the entropy consideration does not include e.g. the processes of self-organisation, but it does include those with external energy input [9].

In my socially oriented entropy definition I start from the observation that the particles (here as people) are in a state of increasing self-organization. This is clearly reflected in the formation of communities, in the establishment of legal systems, in education and in provision schemes for old age. Probably, the only people who will contribute work to preserve an aesthetic state are those people who will profit from it in some way. Today it is often the ad and product designers, who present us with a richness of forms; at least in the border areas their work no longer differs from visual art [10]. Were it not for these people, the world of forms and colours around us would probably be "noisy" in the same way that the world of silence is slipping away from us.

In the course of our development it seems we have learned how to coordinate our sensory perceptions with the cognitive states of "good" and "bad" or "better" and "worse". This insight essentially affects all human senses, and thus also the sense of beauty; which plays a role in coping with life – ranging from choosing a spouse to visually assessing the stability of objects. Accordingly, "beautiful" in many cases also means "good". Modern brain research is pursuing this topic as well, and soon we will know more about the relationship between the useful and the "beautiful" [11].

Bibliography

- [1] Cartier-Bresson: "My World". Lucerne and Frankfurt/M.: C.J. Bucher Verlag 1968.
- [2] Brassai: "Graffiti". Two conversations with Picasso. Berlin, Zurich: Chr. Belsler Verlag Stuttgart 1960. See also Nadja Labudda: "Win Labudas Mauerbilder", 2001 (www.classoon.de/12.11.10_Win_Labudas_Mauerbilder.pdf).
- [3] Paul Caponigro, "Megaliths", Boston: Little, Brown and Company 1986 (A New York Graphic Society Book).
- [4] Pia Müller-Tamm (ed.): "Hiroshi Sugimoto". exhibition cat. Düsseldorf Art Collection North Rhine-Westphalia and others, Ostfildern: Hatje-Cantz 2007.
- [5] Ernst Haas: "The Creation" Düsseldorf: Econ 1971.
- [6] Eduardo Chillida "obra grafica", Boisserée Gallery.
- [7] Levinson, Jerrold "The irreducible historicity of the Concept of Art", British Journal of Aesthetics, Vol. 42, No 4, October 2002. Ryan Dreveskracht, "A critique of Levinson" Aporia vol. 16 no. 1, 2006.
- [8] Eckhard Schollmeyer: "Technology, science and art, a laudatory speech for Win Labuda on his seventieth birthday", 2008, (www.classoon.de/19.08.10_Laudatio_Prof_Schollmeyer.pdf).
- [9] Rudolf Arnheim: "Entropy and Art - An Essay on Disorder and Order", Cologne: DuMont, 1979
- [10] Tanja Hartmann: "Advertising between art and manipulation, food for thought for personal confrontation with the polarizing nature of advertising". Diploma thesis FH Stuttgart 2002, Hamburg: Diploma Verlag.
- [11] Hirstein Ramachandran: "The science of art: A neurological theory of aesthetic experience" Journal of consciousness studies. Vol 6 nos 6-7, pp 15-51. Redies, Hasenstein, Denzler Fractal-like image statistics in visual art: similarity to natural scenes, "Spatial Vision" vol. 21, nos. 1-2, 2007, pp 137-148.

Translation: Carol Oberschmidt