



Fig. 1 Nadja and Win Labuda, 2006

Nadja Labudda

In the Course of Time

Nadja Labudda - Conversations with
my Father

2006

Nadja Labudda is a daughter of the passionate photographer, graphic artist and object designer Win Labuda. She studied art history, theatre and economics. From early on, she has explored the theoretical basis of her father's photographic work and has written a number of essays on the subject (see list of references). This interview, conducted on 26 June 2006, elaborates on the topics discussed in these essays:

Nadja Labudda – In describing your photographic series *People Today* you once wrote that you show man as a “unique individual” – in contrast to Andreas Gursky, whose work shows man in the context of his lost individuality. Is your approach to the theme of man based on a perception of man's individuality that is characteristic of your generation? Or behind the emphatic gaze, is there a conviction – unrelated to generation - which imbues all of your work?



Fig. 2 *Horizon 26*, 2008, FH 092 from the series “Beginning of Time”

Win Labuda – To answer this question we need to place my generation in the timeline of the development of art. I am a child of the first half of the 20th century. Thus; seen as a generation, I therefore still belong to the vestiges of a cultural tradition which was determined by the idea of genius. During my lifetime the development of art was accompanied by a shift in political power. From the 19th century on until today, the industrialised world has developed from a culture determined by the artist's genius to a culture of democracy. Art production is determined less and less by the single genius acting alone but rather by collaborative efforts, which are perceived as acceptable. Artist collaborations as are represented today by Bernd und Hilla Becher, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Fischli-Weiss or Gilbert and George, to name some examples, have been gaining in importance since the 19th century. This is also a phenomenon that has first taken root with the increasing democratisation.

In many areas of art, this global democratisation has led in the last seven decades to the involvement of social classes in the discourse and decision-making who do not yet have an elite consciousness fostered over generations, whose taste is still being formed and who generally assume anti-aesthetic positions. A levelling of art down to artistic banality is the first consequence. This is accompanied by the fact that insight and doctrine are no longer expected from art. With each new teaching, people are afraid that the faith of the disciples will be betrayed yet another time. In a certain sense, that is the primal fear of the homo artis.

Perhaps art has lost something in the last fifty years – namely the accomplishment which results from the elitist striving for genius. But something has also been added: Let us call it a return to archetypal forms in the sense of overcoming bana-

lity. What is gained from returning to these archetypes may even be greater than the loss of aesthetics. Various artists have gone in this direction: some examples are Antes, Kriester and Moore and, if you so will and in another sense, also minimalists such as Andre, Mangold, Rückriem and Stella or, in significant parts of their work, the photographers Callahan, Fontana, Giacomelli, Hervé and Siskind. The wall pictures of Brassai could also be included here. And perhaps, in a transformed sense, the work of Andreas Gursky could also be added to the above mentioned.

To answer the original question unambiguously: My roots as member of my generation and my faith in the uniqueness of the individual – in equal measure – form the basis of my concept of individuality. Of course, this can also be seen as a limitation. One should not fail to recognise that mass phenomena like the World Cup Football Championship in 2006, with the increasing possibilities of television and computer technology, play an ever greater role in our lives. Directing this new global sentiment into artistic avenues is the concern of the generation creating art today – of which Andreas Gursky, in my opinion, is one of the outstanding figures.

NL – The democratisation of the art world that you mentioned has not only led to a banalisation of art motifs like in pop art or in street photography. At the same time, because photographic equipment and processes have become simpler, there has also been a democratisation of the technical means. Given the glut of images we are confronted with, how can photography as art be distinguished, for example, from holiday or family photography?

WL – What in the media is designated as art is ultimately determined by the opinion of gallery owners, art historians and art theorists. They make their decision based on profound specialist knowledge of art history and their visual refinement, both of which go far beyond the knowledge and comprehension of occasional viewers of art. In essence, art is what is considered to be art. Art is also subject to the acceptance of the majority of viewers of art and the spirit of the times. In this sense, art can also be defined as what brings a museum large numbers of visitors. Who today is still interested in Cesar's "Thumb"?

But there is a good filter for ascertaining what 'art' is for me. That is the time filter. I have viewed many thousands of photographs during my lifetime. However, when I'm away from my bookcase and want to remember certain ones, only about fifty photos cross my mind. Which ones are these? It is an interesting exercise in self-awareness to determine which photographs remain in your visual memory. I would define art as the pictures that – in a positive sense – you don't forget.



Fig. 3 *Irish Light*, 2005, FH 037



Fig. 4 *Skulpture Photo 1*, after A. Rodin "The Scream", 2003, FS 001



Fig. 5 *Skulpture Photo 2*, after A. Rodin The Storm", 1985, FS 002

With this simple formula you can relatively easily distinguish, in your own mind, art photography from holiday photos. You only need to look at a relatively large number of photos, and after two weeks see which ones you still remember. These are then 'art' in the sense that art is what evokes lasting emotions or essential thought-provoking impulses.

NL – If we look at your photo series Home of the Gods and the sculpture photographs in the collection Photo Varia, what seems to fascinate you in the broadest sense is the sculptural aspect. To what extent can parts of your work be viewed as the quest for sculpture, or to say it in a different way: Is your interest focused less on sculpture and rather more on the content which sculpture can convey?

WL – The kind of sculpture I'm primarily concerned with is the figurative architecture of noble sentiment. Its sole purpose is to represent the spirit intrinsic to it and as such to have a lasting impact on us. This sculpture, for example, is represented by the work of Rodin, Despiau and several other sculptors such as Bourdelle and Lehmbruck, among the "modern" sculptors also by Moore, Chillida and Caro. However, I don't see any fundamental difference between the content a sculpture can convey and, for example, the content of a drawing or an oil painting. Merely the fact that the sculpture makes demands on

space in contrast to a drawing, painting or a photograph and that it frequently does this in quite prominent locations gives it a higher degree of presence than other art forms. Although sculpture conveys to me a highest degree of three-dimensional presence, it fails to give me, in the same measure, a slightly suspended flow of its artistic content into the spaces of my imagination. It shows me limits which are mainly due to sculpture's occasional lack of colour and movement. Using the means of photography, I therefore sometimes attempt to convey to the viewer an illusion of movement. I achieve this by moving my camera at the time I take the picture. This creates a "movement blur", quite as if the object itself had moved. Occasionally I also use the possibility to compositionally combine a sculpture and its surroundings and the light falling on it so that a new pictorial idea emanating from the composition is recognisable.

In a curious way, photography and sculpture are forms which are related to each other. One is the form and the other is its image. The image always remains a child of its form. Through the photographic technique of blurring the form, for example, the solid sculpture suddenly takes on the illusion of the original figure; in a certain way it is resurrected out of the inert world of the fixed figure.

As photographer, my interest is the extension of sculpture in the sense of liberation from the torpor and visualisation of a dynamic, intrinsically flowing being. This is what I'm attempting to achieve with the photographic technique I have chosen. But the result – and this aspect seems to lead the whole endeavour to absurdity – is then no longer sculpture. I only use sculpture for my final purpose, for me it has become an interim product on the way to a form liberated from the forces of gravity.

NL – Nearly all of your series deal with forms and structures man has created in a certain context or environment. The only exception is the series Beginning of Time. How is this part of your work, which exhibits almost abstract dimensions, to be understood in the context of your work as a whole?

WL – The sequence of my series must be viewed in such a way that the series Beginning of Time is at the very end, taking sixth place. It must therefore be seen symbolically as the primeval mass, as the beginning of human history out of which everything evolved. That is its quality, and thus at this point in time, it may not yet be structure. It is the unformed state, in which no one is living, so-to-speak the primeval state before it was appropriated by humans. The series that follow exemplify human activity in selected areas of human history. This development continues until People Today, which looking from the beginning is the first series of the cycle.



Fig. 6 *Horizon 9*, 2008, FH 083 from the series "Beginning of Time"

NL – When looking at the series Beginning of Time, what comes to mind are concepts like endlessness, primeval time, eternity. To what extent is your photography concerned with the dimension of time, and if it indeed plays a role, how is this dimension reflected in other parts of your work?



Fig. 7 *Horizon 13*, 2008, FH 087 from the series "Beginning of Time"

WL – Time is the dimension on which all of my work is based. Here the reader may interject that this is a trivial assertion, because naturally all earthly occurrences take place in a temporal sequence. My cycle *Journey to the Beginning of Time* must, however, be understood historically. I register with my camera what I recognise, in an emblematic sense, as the traces of terrestrial and human history, without making any claim to completeness. At the start of this journey from the beginning of human history (*Beginning of Time*) into the present there is only time and matter, and at the end there is contemporary man (*People Today*). In between, in the pictorial-narrative sense, I find traces of evolution and human existence in the following areas: evolution (*Primordial Forms of Life*), in the worship of gods (*Home of the Gods*), communication (*Pictures and Signs*), and inventions and discoveries (*Blessing of Technology*). I could also have found other examples, such as the cosmos, the development of life or birth and death. But for now I have decided on the six series mentioned above to comprise this cycle.

I didn't plan the existing series arrangement in my cycle from the outset. The series grew naturally, at different times and during periods of varying length. This occasionally evokes criticism from people who seek a chronological sequential arrangement in my photographic series. But I began with pictures of people in the 1950s; then I photographed the series *Pictures and Signs* whilst working on the collection *Photo Varia* at the same time. I didn't start work on the series *Home of the Gods* until about 2000 and after that I added the other series. The historical element of my cycle emerged rather late and has grown in fits and starts. Be that as it may: I don't think that everything that later appears sequential must necessarily have developed sequentially.

NL – Many of your photographic series are associated with journeys. Significantly, you have given your photographic cycle the title *Journey to the Beginning of Time*. To what extent is the journey to a theme part of the photograph which is then created?

WL - Travel is an important part of my life and of our photographic work – a state of being and of discovery. During a journey I leave the firmly established structures of my home environment and let something new occur and become recognisable in me. On a journey I can reflect on this unhindered by the constraints of everyday life at home. I prepare my

journeys in such a way that they will take me to the places to which I have devoted myself intellectually and spiritually beforehand. Once there, I know more or less what to expect, and the rest is then photographic routine and – with increasing age – of course also a physical challenge.

I almost never travel alone. My wife Yuko organises the technical aspects of our travels. She is a genius at planning, and thus I can concentrate completely on the photographic task. This frequently involves waiting a long time for the right photographic balance between sky and landscape. I never relax while travelling except during our usual extended evening meals. I really tend to be much more restless than at home. For me it is important to make contact with the people of the country we are in at the moment. For instance, I try to talk to taxi drivers, or with the waiter and the barber. I have the impression that I photograph better when I view the place of our sojourn as our home while we are there. The presence of my wife is also very important to me as symbolic figure of the new-found place. Everywhere we travel I study the real estate listings, because I always consider having a second residence for us there. This is part of the ritual I need to feel close to the country we are in and to its people, and also to assert myself as photographer. A feeling of foreignness impairs me in my task and makes my photographs appear less vital.



Fig. 8 Yuko and Win Labuda at the stone rows of Carnac/ France, 2004

NL – Is the journey as such always a quest, or is it clear from the outset which motifs and series you wish to pursue? Is your approach to your work more dynamic or conceptual?

WL – When travelling, I divide my photographic production into two categories: Of primary interest are the photographs which fit into the concept of our journey. For example, on the Isle of Lewis in Scotland this aim was to photograph the megaliths of Callanish. We usually decide on the concept of our journeys about six months before we leave. Apart from this, I find a number of interesting objects which don't fit in with any of my current themes and which I nevertheless find fascinating. Then I photograph them anyway, simply out of pure joy in the form. They end up in my archives, where they await discovery. My approach to my work is thus both dynamic and conceptual.

NL – You began with your photographic work at a time when this art form did not enjoy anywhere near the recognition it has received in the last ten to twenty years. Why did you, despite this, choose photography as your personal artistic medium?

WL – When I was 16 years old I first had the wish to express myself artistically; but I lacked the opportunity to do so. I learned freehand drawing from my father, who was enthusiastic about drawing animals. I was less talented in this discipline,

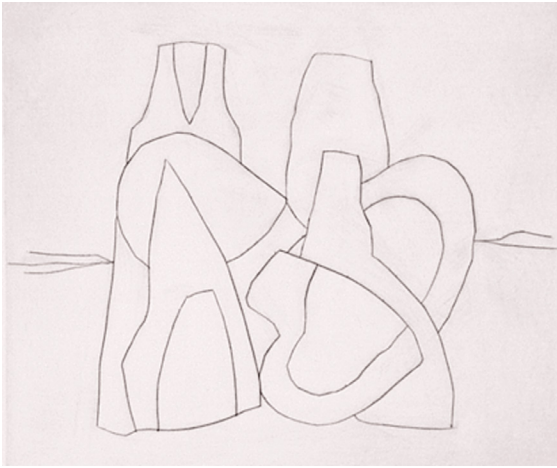


Fig. 9 *Freyanar*, line etching, 1990

but on the other hand I was good at constructive drawing. At that time, however, this wouldn't have allowed me to be active artistically or indeed to earn my living from art. Not until much later did I learn of the existence of Max Bill, Karl Pfahler, Jean Dewasne, Victor Vasarely or other constructivists. At some point my father gave me a camera and I began to take pictures. I took my first 'artistic' photograph in 1956.

Both back then and now I have never had the feeling of creating 'art' whilst photographing. For me it is like breathing; I hardly notice when I'm doing it. I really can't say definitively whether photography is 'my own artistic medium'.

I've also worked as a graphic artist for many years (14,15). Categorising my work as 'art' or 'non-art' is alien to me. I make a reproducible photograph with a technical apparatus – my camera – and reproduce this photograph mechanically. Whether the product of my work is considered 'art' is solely the decision of the viewer. No one else has the right to determine what art is except the viewers in their entirety. I don't believe any artistic technique is 'art' on principle.

I deliberately do not limit the editions of my photographic works, because I feel it is counterproductive to artificially limit the edition of an easily reproducible photograph just so someone will pay more for sharing the joy of my photographic work with as few other people as possible. This does not correspond to the true process of modern picture production, nor is it in the democratic spirit of photography. In principle, I do not want to limit the circle of viewers who appreciate my pictures; on the contrary, I expressly want to enlarge this circle. I am a true product and enthusiastic adherent of the age of reproduction. Without reproduction, all of us would not be what we are today. If I were the one to decide, all limiting of editions would be abolished. Photographers such as Ansel Adams, Caponigro, Cartier-Bresson or Pentti Sammallahti have resisted the market's propensity to limit editions and have sold well nevertheless. Often the buyer of a limited photograph deceives himself, in particular when the volume of sold photographs is far less than the limitation of the edition. This is not a rare occurrence and should give cause for thought. I like to work with the most modern technology available. Digital photography has opened up possibilities for photography which previously were simply inconceivable. Moreover, digital photography has a neutral effect on the environment, as do the pigment printing processes which I exclusively use.

NL - In your series *Pictures and Signs* it is quite apparent that you play with artistic references. What impact have artistic movements – and also artists, musicians and men of letters or even scientists – had on your photographic work?

WL – I often don't know right away whether I've been influenced by the work of a well-known artist, but sometimes I do discover this much later:

In my first attempts as a photographer I was very much influenced by Cartier-Bresson, and I think this can be seen in my series *People Today*. That doesn't mean I wanted to photograph exactly like Cartier-Bresson did. In a certain way he sees man in the culmination of a course of events. Someone once said that Cartier-Bresson had the mentality of an archer. I hold that to be a good description of the phenomenon of Cartier-Bresson. According to my idea of photographing people, a course of events should neither be strikingly emphasised nor avoided. I strive to photograph people in the 'dignity of the moment' – not posed, but nevertheless as if for a painting. In doing so, I definitely want to avoid fixating as permanent anything incidental, thoughtless or momentary in the photographic image. That is why I feel a great aversion towards what is known as 'close-to-life photography'.

From Ernst Haas, the ingenious Austrian photographer, I learned how to work in large cycles. His book *The Creation* was the second photography book I ever owned and I've always held it in high esteem. Haas was something of a virtuoso of colour photography with the 35 mm camera. He could do everything, and he always did it a little bit better than everybody else. That is a good basis for great achievements – especially in photography.

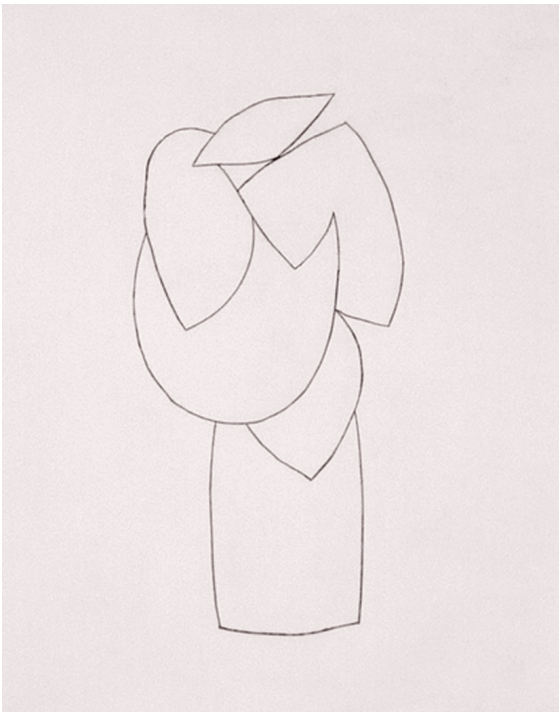


Fig. 10 *Waribari*, line etching, 1990

Since the seventies I have had a special relationship to the work of Herbert List. I'm especially fascinated by the emotional flow which characterises his photographs. This is particularly manifest in *Plaster masks I*, *Santorin 1937* or also in *Felice Caseratis Studio, Turin 1949*. The source of the flowing in his pictures – not clearly recognisable to me – is situated somewhere deep down in his own inner world, and then it always ends in transcendental space. His people and objects are bound in an unexplainable flow of being, which is not 'the language of God' in the direct sense, as with Ernst Haas' photographs of creation, but which still possesses an eloquent, even unforgettable expression.

From an ethical perspective, I have always been deeply impressed by Eugene Smith and Sebastião Salgado. Smith's *Minamata* series and the personal fate which he took upon himself with these works is even today, in my opinion, a heroic model for any honourable photo journalist. In his books, Salgado has conveyed to us the misery of the waves of migration in our time and has created in this context the most beautiful photographs of fundamental humanity.

For three decades I have devoted myself intensively to photographing landscapes, and during all of these years my unsha-



Fig. 11 *Calanish Stone Circle II*, 2004, FM 041 from the series "Home of the Gods"

ken model has always been Paul Caponigro, the great American landscape photographer. He has the ability to photograph a landscape which at first glance seems completely uninteresting, so that the magic of the creation emanates from it, a talent which only truly great artists have.

My sculpture photography, as is shown in the collection *Photo Varia*, was certainly influenced in its development by Edward Steichen's early photograph "Rodin's Memorial for Balzac". To me, this photograph with its impressionistic character was an unconscious stimulus for many of my works in this genre. Steichen did not, in fact, use a blur technique, but he stimulated me indirectly to attempt it in this way.

I did not become acquainted with the work of the great American photographer Harry Callahan until late in my life. I find his work in part exemplary in its concentration on sparse pictorial content; in this respect it seems almost minimalist. Until now, however, I have not consciously been able to implement this insight in my photography.

I feel comfortable in the spiritual companionship of the photographers whom I have mentioned and from whom I have learned; they have become my roots. That is why I have deliberately answered this question in such detail – and also to express my gratitude.

NL – Today in the art scene we encounter a lot of large-format photographs. In your opinion, to what extent does format convey meaning or even content? How great a role does format play in your photography?

WL – All my life I have unconsciously sought to exhibit photographs in the largest format possible. But I was seldom willing to go to the trouble of carrying such heavy camera equipment around with me. So I usually used either my Canon or my Hasselblad cameras. Finally, with the complete Mamiya 7.2 setup (6x7) I purchased, I found an acceptable compromise. My positives from this camera can be reproduced in a hybrid process and printed in top quality with a modern 8 colour pigment printer in a maximum size of 130 x 111 cm. This format is large enough to be viewed well anywhere, even with today's large formats.



Fig. 12 *Stonehenge III*, 2002, FM 023 from the series "Home of the Gods"

Then about five years ago I saw the work of the British photographer Michael Kenna. His photographs all have a format of about 20 x 20 cm and have mounts measuring about 40 x 50 cm. I experimented with having my photographs presented in this format and discovered that both the large and small format develop their effect depending on the room in which the photographs are shown and the wall on which they are hung. The smaller room demands a smaller picture, and the smaller picture, when it is well-framed, appears more valuable

than the large picture. That is like the jewellery of a beautiful woman: A smaller diamond can often have a disproportionately greater effect. Kenna's photographs are like such diamonds in small format.

Basically, the format selected has something to do with the character and wisdom of the photographer and the subjects he tends to choose. Of course, the masses of people in Andreas Gursky's photographs or the library pictures of Candida Höfer have more effect in a large format than in 20 x 20 cm, and for Manfred Kage's radiolaria, a format of 4 x 3 Meter perhaps seems out of place in normal exhibition spaces. In MOMA, by contrast, it would have to be considered whether the larger format might be meaningful even for microphotography. The small format also allows you to hold the photographs in your hand, for instance when selecting photographs. You can hold them at arm's length, the right distance for looking at them.

That is a serious advantage over the large format photograph, which has to be laboriously mounted in order to show it. Most collectors of photographs tend to collect relatively small formats, and this explains why Michael Kenna's photographs are shown in at least two exhibitions every month. Finally I would say, the greater the intrinsic quality of a photograph, the stronger its impact regardless of format. A first-class photograph, in a small format and framed with sensitivity, possesses unsurpassable nobility. The large format integrates us into the pictorial event and has an almost palpable effect on us. It finds its meaning in that it is shown and viewed. A good collection contains all formats in the best quality and, if the collector has first-class format, photographs of previously unknown photographers.

NL - In your photographic work there are images that are purposely out of focus. To what extent do you view image sharpness as an artistic means and how does it influence the message of the picture?

WL – The meaning of my photographic work is solely to convey to the viewer my cognitive and emotional world. My aim is the same as a poet's, only on a visual plane. If focus is a prerequisite for understanding an image, then I will use the known technical means to create sharp images. Normally, however, I try to not to let the sharpness of my photographs be the main appeal for the viewer. In the moment when a viewer approaches my photographs and scrutinizes these up close like a gemologist, I know that the content of my photographs has not reached him emotionally. Ultra-high image sharpness is first and foremost a technical feature which is helpful in conveying some kinds of pictorial content. For other kinds of content, however, it is not effective in a good sense.

However: In the fine structure that is made visible of an object or of a countenance, something is revealed to the viewer



Fig. 13 *Stones of Stennes III*, 2004, FM 031 from the series "Home of the Gods"



Fig. 14 *Skulpture Photo 10*, after A. Giacometti "The Forest", 2003, FS 010



Fig. 15 *Skulpture Photo 14*, after G. Kolbe "Fountain of Dancers", 1981, FS 015

which remains hidden in normal presentation. That apparently has something to do with a heightened 'truth of the object' or also with the visible traces of the ageing process, which we unconsciously perceive as a gain of information. But this fine structure cannot be achieved through heightened image sharpness alone. It also involves rendering the finest colour transitions and nuanced shadows. I have experienced this effect especially when looking at the photographs of Jean-Baptiste Huyn, who takes his portraits with the 120 mm macro lens of his Hasselblad.

As I mentioned at the beginning, however, using photographic unsharpness has until now tended to interest me more than fine structure. As I said before, in my collection *Photo Varia* I occasionally work deliberately in sculpture photography with implemented unsharpness in the sense of blurred photo contours. This is how I attempt to evoke the impression of movement. In other pictures, by contrast, I use unsharpness to make the beholder focus on the content of the photo which I consider to be essential.

In this context, I would like to align myself quite emphatically with the classification you mentioned previously, which differentiates the way the viewer processes an image as either poetical or recognising. For the viewer to be able to process images poetically he must by nature have a visual sensitivity. If he does not have this, his friendly interest will focus on the recognisability of the photographed objects, the site where they were taken and the sharpness of the details. However, these are not artistic but rather technical aspects of the image.

Feininger divides people interested in photography into two categories: photographers and photo technicians. The latter group, however, is unsuited as an audience for the photographer. The photographer wants to convey a message to the viewer. The technician finds his satisfaction in an optimal use of the system of recording images. Unfortunately, this different way of seeing is again and again the source of misunderstandings and disappointments.