

Foreword

Ludger Derenthal* (Preface to the photo book "Journey to the Beginning of Time" by Win Labuda)

Win Labuda's creative research work in the field of technology has always been accompanied by his great interest in art. Starting with early photographic experiments while still at school, he has since worked continuously on his unique artistic oeuvre, which in addition to photographs, prints and paper bas-reliefs now also encompasses wood and bronze sculptures. This book containing the four-part series "Journey to the Beginning of Time" is devoted exclusively to his main photographic work, which for Labuda is not only the core of his artistic activity but also describes his principal conceptual approaches and areas of focus. For this key photographic work he turned to traditional artistic genres: landscapes, wall pictures and photographs of people. The works of photographers he selected and to which he refers in his own work do not serve him as mere models. Rather, he sets himself the challenging task of continuing the history of photography by expressing his own artistic commentary. Here two examples shall illustrate this – pars pro toto – i.e. the part representing the whole.

As Labuda emphasises, his portraits are based on the attempt to free the individuality of the photographed persons from "the decisive moment, i.e. the focus of a photojournalist", and instead contrast it with the "focus of the decisive stance". Only occasionally does he seek direct eye contact with the persons shown; nor do his photographs reveal him to be a secret voyeur who comes across situations simply by happenstance. The personal relationship between photographer and model recedes into the background in favour of formal criteria that facilitate an ordered image structure. With a sophisticated play of light and shadow, Labuda rhythmically transforms the content of the image into surface compositions that are rich in graphic contrast but are always in equilibrium. If these at first glance are sometimes in tension with the dense, symbol-rich iconography of the image theme, its deeper meaning may appear to be abstracted, particularly by means of the image itself, thus interweaving several layers of meaning. The stooped posture of a Palestinian woman sitting on a stair step, darkly veiled and with a torn, light-coloured scarf, is reminiscent of

a figure of a mourning Madonna in a wall by the wayside. By placing the black abaya with the veil in the centre of the image without any recognisable surface structure, the physical presence of the crouching figure is not only negated as reference e.g. to the position of women in Islamic fundamentalist circles. Rather, the light-coloured scarf framing the figure concentrates the viewer's attention on the black area, which seems to be almost cut out. This black area is the magical centre of the picture and opens up for the viewer a wide spectrum of associations on various levels. The traditional portrait subject – the face as mirror of the personality – is demonstratively withdrawn from the portrait, and it is shown how the photographer's model withdraws from the gaze of the onlooker while being observed. She remains elusive and at the same time dependent on the projections of the viewer.

This interpretation of the photograph may well be in tension with Labuda's self-understanding as an artist, who sees himself rooted in a generation that based its assumptions on the uniqueness of the individual, a concept of the 19th century which declared genius to be the driving force of artistic work. His artistic response to the graffiti photographs by Brassai can be interpreted as a sign that he is indeed committed to tradition but, notwithstanding, is still never afraid to test his image concept, which is determined by academic rules, and to reflect on his role of artist with a personal view on the current discourse. One of the photographs in Brassai's cycle which has become famous shows a head with a fool's cap scratched onto a wall. While in the iconographic tradition the artist as figure of the fool plays an important role, Win Labuda places an "I" as opposed to this alter ego of the artist in a photograph. In 1992 he discovered the word "je" on a wall and created a photograph of it. It was covered by an entangled web of scribbles and scratched signs, overlapping each other in several layers as if on a blackboard. He places the written scrawl in the centre of his image and thus opens up the debate about the role of the artist and about various work process strategies and image concepts.

Win Labuda's series of images seek to commence a dialogue with the history of photography; they evolve out of the analysis and interpretation of established image concepts. For him, however, a key concern is to create his own approach to the medium. Hence, the interested reader and viewer of this volume of photographs and texts has the

stimulating and rewarding task of following Win Labuda on this path and of making discoveries of his or her own.

Ludger Derenthal

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