

Attempting



the Cosmos

to Photograph

Today the idea that atoms are the smallest building blocks of matter is already as proverbially out of date as the old teachings about the four elements of fire, water, earth, and air. However, a contemporary woman photographer, Gundula Schulze el Dowy, has devoted attention to the older of those two classic theories in work produced in Japan in 1996.

Ever since the fall of the Wall, this photographer, born at East Berlin in 1954, has spent her life travelling and working. She received crucial encouragement at the start of her career from the support given by Robert Frank, the legendary American photographer, whom she got to know during a long stay in the USA.

Life in New York changed her viewpoint fundamentally. Movement and superimpositions appeared in her photographs. She changed from black and white to colour. For Gundula Schulze el Dowy objects mainly served as a means of making living experience visible. A series of photos taken in America between 1991 and 1993 is entitled "Spinning on My Heels". The photographer recorded successive moments during her expeditions, utilizing multiple exposures on a single negative. The outcome was highly complex images where different impressions are simultaneously superimposed. Mysterious images which are more similar to riddles than to normal photographs.

After long stays in Italy, the USA, and Egypt, she travelled to Tokyo in 1996 so as to receive Japan's only international photographic prize: "The 12th Prize for Overseas Photogra-

phers of Higashikawa Photo Fiesta 96". In Japan too she remained for a longer period.

Japan is an island where volcanic fire seethes just under the earth's crust and the air takes the form of typhoons in regularly racing across towns and fields. Gundula Schulze el Dowy was mainly interested in the spiritual aspects of this culture. As photographer she wanted to record the cosmic dimensions she experienced here particularly strongly. The photos she took in Japan may depict what is visible but are devoted to the abstract. They are directed towards the observer's consciousness. Gundula Schulze el Dowy wants to open up people's receptivity to dimensions that basically elude photography. She seeks earthly phenomena with her camera, and she photographs them from an earthly standpoint, but the pictures are such that the observer's imagination jumps between two viewpoints, that of the camera and an imagined cosmic viewpoint.

The observer sees both the carefully raked gravel in the zen garden and at the same time the energy structures of magnetic fields. The year rings swirling around a hole in the wood of the temple steps is for a moment seen merely as the wood it is until the power of imagination suddenly allows something else to arise out of this step, polished hundreds of thousands of times. One imagines oneself outside the earth's atmosphere where the fire of galactic spirals can be seen at a great distance. For an attentive onlooker, who is responsive to this kind of visual magic, the concentrically spreading, light-flooded ripples of a still pond become a metaphor of creation.

To be able to photograph the element of air Gundula Schulze el Dowy produced soap bubbles, which because of Japan's high humidity perhaps last a few seconds longer there than elsewhere. After giving her own breath to this wafer thin enclosure consisting of de-tensioned water, in a flash she had to drop the tube used for blowing and deploy her camera. The photos show the soap bubble which turns out to be a metaphysically transparent mirror. With the camera recording a fraction of a second from the fleeting existence of this creation, our eyes can see what is otherwise not possible for them. In the beautiful eddies of colour, which are mainly delicate boundaries between inner and outer, are reflected the sky and the trees on this side of the bubble, so-to-speak behind the camera, while at the same time there appear through the delicate membrane the trees and sky on the other side. There are pictures of bubbles with a strange black mark in the middle where the photographer's shadow on the convex side is superimposed on the shadow's reverse reflection on the concave inner aspect.

The medially changed object enables our experience of time to call itself in question. Something that bursts very quickly in relation to us is suddenly timeless within that context, and our eyes can look, without any kind of rush, at what otherwise evades our gaze.

Like Monet who saw the sky in his water lily pond, the observer can discover the cosmos in stones, holes in trees, soap bubbles, and concentric ripples in water, and see his own shadow in its midst.

Ursula Werner

Further Reading:
Gundula Schulze el Dowy - Ägyptische Tagebücher,
Édition Stemmler, 8802 Kilchberg,
Zürich 1998,



Tokyo, 1996