

1h—An Introduction to a Photographic Project by Hans-Christian Schink

MARTIN HOCHLEITNER

7 This book is a documentation of the project *1h* by German artist Hans-Christian Schink. The series, begun in 2003, now encompasses almost forty photographs, created as so-called solarizations. First described by William Henry Jackson in 1857, solarization distorts a photographic image through extreme overexposure to light, which then triggers an exact reversal of chemical processes on the light-sensitive layer of the negative. Light that is too strong causes the darkening process to weaken, so that bright areas ultimately appear dark in the final positive. Solarizations can only be made through a purely analogue process. Using digital photography results in overexposed images or even completely white pictures.

For his *1h* series, Schink photographs the sun using an exposure time of exactly one hour—hence, the title of the series. The length and intensity of the exposure leads to the black sun streak that characterizes all of the photos. It represents the movement of the sun—that is, the rotation of the earth—which otherwise cannot be perceived by the human eye. In some cases, the bar is fragmented by clouds moving across the sky during the long exposure time.

Each gelatin-silver print on fiber paper is given a title that provides information about the date of the photograph, the exposure time, and the latitude and longitude of the site where the picture was taken. In combination with the various landscapes, the different types of vegetation, and the variety of architectural elements, the geographical data communicates to us the information that Schink realized the project at diverse sites of his choosing from around the globe. In fact, the artist has been traveling in intervals since 2005 in order to shoot photographs at particular times in the northern and southern hemispheres.

A variety of observations and experiments ultimately led him to develop the project as a whole. Schink first came to solarizations in 1999, while working on an art project intended to accompany a piece of architecture. Throughout the ensuing years, several grants, trips abroad, and special experiences with nature provided more stimuli for further research. Additionally, before actually beginning the project in 2005, the artist found it particularly challenging to find the proper type of film. In terms of content, the concept was essentially inspired by a photo taken by Minor White in 1955, *Black Sun* (p. 83, fig. 3). This historic photo came about because the camera shutter froze, producing a solarization and making a “black sun” appear.

At first glance, *1h* is clearly different than any of the artist’s previous photo series. In the nineteen-nineties, Schink was especially interested in photographing the transformation of the former German Democratic Republic territory. Born in 1961 in Erfurt, Schink began studying photography at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst in Leipzig before the fall of the Berlin Wall. He remained in Leipzig as a graduate student until 1993, developing an approach to photography that was expressed in the following years in his matter-of-fact, documentary-style photos of the changes in landscape and architecture that occurred after the political situation changed in 1989. He photographed the conversion and dramatic transformation of East Germany, documented industrial

architecture in Chemnitz, Dresden, and Leipzig, and finally, in 2004, published his long-term project *Verkehrsprojekte Deutsche Einheit* (Traffic Projects German Unity), which captured on film the streets, bridges, and railroads of the newly created infrastructure in eastern Germany.

Taken as a whole, these series represent an amalgamation of artistic, documentary, and socioanalytical intentions, and in combination with his use of color photography, this makes them very different from Schink’s solarizations. Nevertheless, there are still a few fundamental congruities between *1h* and *Verkehrsprojekte Deutsche Einheit*. For one, both series present clear impressions of unreality; they also examine the specific function of landscape in each image. Whereas in *1h* the black bar of sunlight, embedded in a bright corona, is sharply distinguished from the landscape, in *Verkehrsprojekte* gigantic support beams, monumental bridges, hill-shaped deposits of earth, and artificial terracing contrast with lifeless natural spaces. *1h* is blanketed with sites that manifest in a transitory state between image and reality, while Schink explores one of the key issues of photography: the ability to create an image of reality.

In a third parallel, both series open up historical spaces. In the case of the *Verkehrsprojekte*, this means that the series had a kind of “elective affinity” with a concept from nineteenth-century painting: in the way they capture massive interventions in nature, many of the works bring about a paradoxical sense of yearning that refers to the “destruction of nature in the forms of its mythical manifestations”—a sentiment often linked to the Romantics’ views at the “beginning of the modern era,” as well as to Caspar David Friedrich.¹ Additionally, Schink’s works in this series represent the exact status of photography, which, at least since the nineteen-nineties, has been interpreted more and more in terms of painterly qualities. The *Verkehrsprojekte* illustrate a transformation that has given the photographic image an increasingly important role in the debate over “painting without painting”: large formats, color, specific visual compositions, and brilliant planning make photographs look almost like paintings.

In contrast, the historical references in the series *1h* allude more strongly to media-specific phenomena in nineteenth-century photography. This not only includes historical examples, such as Hermann Krone’s solarization (1888) (p. 82, fig. 2), but also the fundamental effect—on three levels—of the photos themselves. First of all, they are characterized by a very particular fascination, as was also true of the early photographs of motion by Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey, for example, or the experiments in ballistics photography by Ernst Mach and Peter Salcher, or the first X-rays. Furthermore, these pictures suddenly made it possible for the human eye to perceive things it ordinarily could not, and consequently, demonstrated that photography had a special ability to expand our experience of the world to new perceptual and scientific levels. Second, these visual discoveries, or revelations, had a utopian character, or else they permitted false ideas to arise concerning the ability of photography to create images of assumed or extrasensory and paranormal phenomena, as with the various kinds of ghost and spiritualist photography. Schink’s pictures from *1h* also have a strange, unrealistic effect. Again and again, they

9 question the amount of truth in the situation, as well as the reality of what they depict. Third, Schink's photos recall, again and again, nineteenth-century travel photography, thus referencing historical photography's strong urge to discover new ways of capturing reality.

All told, many of the references in *1h* are recalibrations: historical photography, geography, science, and art are blended into images that, although their titles precisely identify their spatial and chronological positions, nonetheless represent, through black-and-white technology and its iconography, a space-time continuum all their own. This is the focus of Schink's attention, along with the concept of reality treated in the series. Even though specific groups of works by Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, and Wolfgang Tillmans show that there is a whole range of contemporary photographic works dealing with astronomical/physical themes, the particular quality of time in the *1h* series is specific to Schink's conception. Once again, a crucial component of this is the way he handles landscape in his photographs. In contrast to the sun streak, it seems fixed, immobilized in one state. Thus, in every picture, two different layers of time seem to meet.

This observation lifts *1h* out of a purely historical or theoretical context and shifts the pictures into a highly topical field of discourse on media-specific connections and the interplay of space and time. Other possible examples of this include projects by David Claerbout and Fiona Tan. In recent years, these two artists have realized pieces that blend photography and film, very deliberately working with traditional concepts of time in the two media. Tan's *Tuareg* (1999), *Countenance* (2002), and *Correction* (2004), as well as Claerbout's *Untitled (Single Channel View)* (1998–2000) and *Rocking Chair* (2003), repeatedly showcased films that, at first glance, looked like projected photographs. Only more careful observation reveals that the slowly changing image is a film.

These two artists' works are connected to Schink's through the way they restore time to the photographic image. Tan and Claerbout succeed at this by subtly interweaving two types of media. Schink achieves it through photography alone. By implementing solarization and a long exposure time to produce a black bar of sunlight, he creates a critical contrast between the passage of time and the static condition of the landscape. Consequently, in every picture of the *1h* series, two different levels of time are correlated. Instead of a single space-time continuum, each element of a picture conveys its own sense of space and time, thus achieving an effect that shifts around among documentation, imagination, fiction, confusion, poetics, and melancholy. Two things arise out of this difference: one is a definitive break with the ontology of the photographic image as a phenomenon that marks a particular moment, and the second is yet another essential basis for constantly questioning the factuality of photographs. In this way, questioning reality occurs not only in the content, but also on the level of the photograph's time, as well as through the opportunities presented by analogue photography. Comparable digital photos could only be produced as pure constructs.

This allusion to technology takes us back once again to the structure of the work titles outlined at the beginning of this piece. Even though that information is all evidence of

the photographic factuality of an event, it never manifests in the picture as scientifically ambitious documentation. Instead, within the context of contemporary art, Schink's concept for the titles is analogous to the textual layers in the works of Hamish Fulton, for example. Since the late nineteen-sixties, the British artist has pursued an artistic practice involving the physical action of walking as he hikes around the world, and he also links some of his photographs to precisely identified places and times. When combined with Fulton's photographs of landscapes, streets, and paths, this information produces a layer that provides each picture with the tension that vibrates between the documentary and poetic form of one's own experience; this tension is also characteristic of Schink's work.

Besides the fact that Schink also travels to very different places around the world in order to realize his series, the comparison with Fulton allows us to formulate a final approach to interpreting *1h*. An essay published in 2001 by Angela Vettese placed Hamish Fulton within a tradition that relates to the aesthetic theories of American philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952) and is founded upon the central concept of the "experience of the artist during the actual process of creation" and "on an empirical, intuitive process."² Vettese identified the antithesis of this as the mathematical, deductive principle behind some artistic practices.

As a series, *1h* impressively elucidates that these various aspects can definitely be interwoven into a single project. Schink's concept is as analytical as it is experimental, as planned as it is accidental. Ultimately, his solarizations evince technical and thematic references from photographic history not only because he implements these references, but also because his way of thinking about photography latches onto highly controversial debates about the status of photography as it relates to space, time, the character of reality, media, and authorship. *1h* is comprised of pictures that record a phenomenon with intelligence and great technical competence, and whose conception and effect leave behind a lasting impression.

¹ Matthias Flügge, "Verkehrswege," in *Hans-Christian Schink: Verkehrsprojekte; Traffic Projects* (Ostfildern, 2004), p. 108.

² Angela Vettese, "Du wanderst immer allein," in *Hamish Fulton: Walking Artist* (Düsseldorf, 2001), p. 143.