

Hans-Christian Schink in conversation with Dorothea Ritter

(Published in: Hans-Christian Schink – 1h, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern 2010)

1 DOROTHEA RITTER: Let's talk about the origins of your work *1h*. We know that you were aware of the solarization works by photographers such as Minor White and Hermann Krone, for instance. When you first started working with solarization, what interested you about this phenomenon as it relates to your visual concepts?

HANS-CHRISTIAN SCHINK: The first time I used true solarization for one of my own works was in 1999. I had been invited to participate in a competition for a work of art for the astronomy and physics department building at the University of Jena. My concept, which was later realized, consisted of two multipart works. One is made up of three panels featuring abstract color gradations of a sky during the day, a sky at night, and the course of the sun, which appears as a solarized, black line on a white background (fig. 1). The idea for this came from a photograph taken by Hermann Krone in 1888, published in 1982 in the catalogue *Medium Fotografie*, for some reason as a negative image (fig. 2). Unlike Krone, however, I pointed my camera straight at the sky, in order to get a clean, linear image of the sun. But after that I didn't continue working on the theme, since at the time I was concentrating entirely on my series *Verkehrsprojekte Deutsche Einheit* (German Unification Traffic and Transportation Projects). It wasn't until 2002 that I had an opportunity to think once more about using this phenomenon for a visual concept. I received a grant to spend three months at the Villa Aurora in Los Angeles. On a trip to the Mojave Desert in California, I was so fascinated by the landscape and the blazing light everywhere that all I wanted to do was to make something that could reproduce this almost unreal impression. I remembered Minor White's photo *Black Sun*, which shows a winter landscape and the sun as a solarized, black dot—an accidental effect created when the camera shutter briefly froze. I wanted to try to use this effect, but with a longer exposure time—as I did for the piece in Jena—but I wasn't sure if any of the landscape would be recognizable at all.

DR: The earliest photo from your series was taken in 2005, but not

in the Mojave Desert. How do you explain the leap in time and the change in location?

HCS: After I returned from Los Angeles, I started making the first test photos for the project in spring 2003. It turned out that the film I had used until then produced the degree of blackness that I wanted for the line of the sun, but just barely captured the impression of the landscape. And none of the other kinds of film using modern technology could even get close to the result I wanted. At the time, though, I was not working very persistently on realizing this idea for several reasons. For one, I was very busy working on other projects, and for another, I doubted whether it was possible to construct a solid concept from what was, for me, a rather atypical approach. Various technical and contextual issues, such as the exposure time or the use of different lenses, had still not been cleared up. Above all, though, I wondered if it would be possible for this kind of project to become something more than just a technical game.

Nevertheless, I was still interested, and so I finally settled on an exposure time of one hour, since it's the most commonly used unit of time. Also, I decided to work with only one lens because it seemed to be the best one for balancing out the length of the sun line in relation to the whole image. Bit by bit, I also became aware of this project's hidden potential, since it deals with two of the most essential aspects of photography: light and time. And it does so in a very unusual, almost abstract way. I could reproduce the light of the sun without it being recognizable as such at first glance. I could depict the passage of time without it being immediately apparent in the photo. These pictures show a completely different reality of their own that is only perceivable through classic photographic means, and this, in turn, touches upon one of the key issues of the medium, namely, the ability to depict reality.

I'd planned another two-month stay in Los Angeles for the summer of 2003, mainly to finish the series I had started while at the Villa Aurora, *LA* and *LA.Night*. But I also wanted to keep working on this project. So I actually did take a series of photos in the Mojave Desert, using



fig. 1
Hans-Christian Schink, *untitled* (1999)
Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Jena

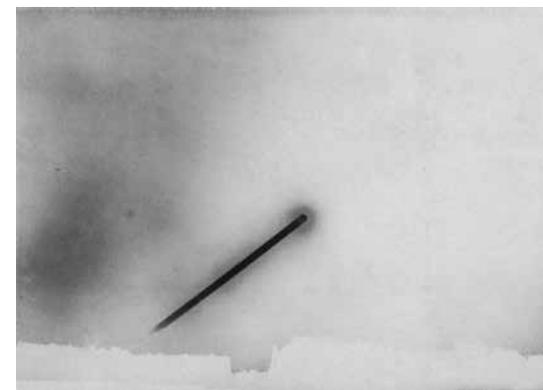


fig. 2
Hermann Krone, *The Sun Apparently Moving toward the Horizon* (1888)

the film that had produced the best results up until then. The images, however, were still far from what I had in mind. One technical problem I couldn't solve was that the processed film showed a lot of horizontal lines (fig. 3).

2 day, I still don't understand why. I came to a point that I was about to give up the whole project.

For more than a year I did not pursue the idea, until finally, during a stay in Dubai in April 2005, I started experimenting with it again. This time I not only used black-and-white film, but also a type of color film. Again it did not result in any convincing photos.

A little bit later, though, I discovered a kind of film available only from a small niche firm; it had all of the characteristics I had been hoping to find—it even exceeded my expectations. Not only did the line of the sun appear deep black, but the film also caused a clearly visible corona to form around that line. And despite the extremely long exposure time, the finished negative always had enough gradations to make the landscape recognizable.

In June 2005, I received another grant to go to the United States, to the Center for Land Use Interpretation's residency program in Wendover, a little town on the border between Nevada and Utah. That's where the breakthrough I had been longing for finally occurred—at least as far as the technical results were concerned (fig. 4). Even though none of those pictures wound up in the final selection, they provided the impetus to continue with the work.

DR: In the end, though, you moved away from the original idea of realizing this project in just one location. How did you choose your travel destinations and the individual standpoints for each shot? On one hand, you obviously consider it important to move beyond culturally connoted and traditional regions, and you don't name any specific locations; but on the other hand, if you look for the coordinates on Google Earth, you realize that they are not always isolated landscapes or towns far from any tourist destinations.

HCS: One of the most fascinating aspects that manifested during the long experimental phase was the extremely different angles of the sun line, which depend on the latitude of each location. So I decided to expand the project to cover the whole world and therefore began checking to see if the destinations I had already selected would be

suitable for taking pictures for this series. And I also started looking for places that fulfilled certain criteria. I wanted a photo from the northernmost and southernmost points that could be reached with a reasonable amount of effort. I wanted a picture of the midnight sun, photos from places along the Tropic of Cancer and Tropic of Capricorn taken during the solstice, a picture shot from as close to the equator as I could get, and one taken along the International Date Line. And I wanted to shoot a broad spectrum of photos of very different landscapes all over the globe. However, since the photos are not about the individual places per se, I decided not to mention the specific locations in the title, because, after all, they would always evoke some sort of visual association.

Google Earth was my most important research tool. For instance, in order to find a suitable place along the Tropic of Cancer, I was able to investigate the topography of all of the regions located along that latitude. That's how I came across the Hoggar Mountains in Algeria (fig. 5). But other sources were important, too—from the Internet to illustrated tour guides—which provided a lot of material to look through on my search for potentially interesting sites. Admittedly, pragmatism also played a part. I traveled with two large-format cameras, two tripods, and some other equipment, sometimes for several weeks. So I always had to take into consideration such issues as accessibility, infrastructure, or, at the very least, practical transportation methods.

DR: Realizing this project took a great deal of logistical preparation. Film had to be sent out in advance, the route had to be planned, flights booked, and vehicles and lodgings had to be reserved. How much room was left for chance?

HCS: Chance played a very crucial role. It might sound paradoxical, but in order to make room for chance, I first had to come up with a very carefully planned foundation. A lot of it would get mixed up anyway, merely by accident. As a matter of fact, it almost became a rule that the really good pictures were never taken at the sites that had been mapped out in advance. I had sought out some of these locations because they seemed spectacular in one way or another, whether through their geographical locations or the subject matter of the images themselves. But then it would turn out that the place was not that interesting or that the spectacular subject matter drew so much attention to itself that the line of the sun became almost irrelevant (fig. 6). Gradually, though, I came to believe that I would simply find the right subject along the way. And that was what happened,



fig. 3
Hans-Christian Schink,
7/14/2003, 6:03 pm – 7:03 pm, N 34°52.812' W 115°04.284' (Mojave Desert)



fig. 4
Hans-Christian Schink,
6/29/2005, 6:23 am – 7:23 am, N 40°44.396' W 114°02.801' (Wendover)

most of the time.

The most difficult factor to reckon with, of course, was the weather. During the preparations, I researched that intensively, too. All statistics and predictions, however, are worthless when they don't reflect the actual conditions of a given situation. That started early on, in the Mojave Desert, where a thermal updraft occurred during the day, which caused such a heavy wind to blow—mostly from the west—that it was impossible to take any pictures of the setting sun. And regardless of whether there was suddenly heavy snowfall on the island of Spitsbergen, a tropical cyclone on Samoa, vast weather extremes in Patagonia, the heaviest rain in living memory in the Australian outback, or just two weeks of totally overcast skies on the Antarctic peninsula—they were all conditions over which I had no control, but they were also the conditions under which this series was created.

Still, over time I developed a more relaxed attitude, even toward the weather conditions. I left the cameras up when the sky became overcast, even when the clouds were so thick that the sun was hidden for long periods, which broke up the line, of course. That's how some of the most interesting pictures came about. And in the few cases in which I repeated a shot on the next day, the first photos always turned out to be the best ones. However, I did return from a few trips empty-handed, or with pictures that I tossed out later. Some of the situations really required a certain amount of forbearance.

There were also moments, though, that compensated for all of the frustration and setbacks. And not just after I had returned, when I was pleased with a successful photo. The hours I spent waiting next to the camera, often just observing the landscape while the sun did its job, were fascinatingly intense, sometimes unforgettable experiences. Some of them I'd count among the best experiences I've had in my work up to now.

DR: You once talked about "staging the line of the sun." The sun follows an unchanging course, so what exactly did you mean?

HCS: In order to explain that, I have to describe the steps I took before actually shooting the photographs. The first thing I did after arriving at each destination was to take out the compass and figure the coordinates of the places where the sun rose and set. Keeping these facts in mind, I then went looking for subject matter that might be suitable "stages" for the drama of the setting or sinking sun. I had most of the day to do that, since in most of the places, it was only possible to take a photo at the beginning and end of the day—that is,

before the sun had risen so high in the morning that within the hour-long exposure time, it would reach the edge of the picture, or before the time of evening when the sun was so low that it would touch the horizon. It's only within the Arctic Circle in the spring and fall that you can take several photos in one day, because of the low position of the sun. I only had a very brief window of time in which to decide if a subject could be suitably combined with the line of the sun. And because I could only judge the final results when I was at home in my darkroom with the developed film in my hands, some of my decisions turned out to be wrong after the fact. It takes a long time to get used to accepting that, though. Still, as I gained experience, it became easier to predict the results beforehand.

DR: Your travels have been quite a developed aspect of your work for a long time; especially the final tour for this project automatically reminds me of travel fiction, such as *Around the World in Eighty Days*—which seems practically leisurely, considering the speed at which people travel these days—but that's actually how long you were underway. What does travel, being on the road, mean to you?

HCS: The last tour was actually ninety-one days. Even though it might sound like a cliché, I think it is a privilege to be able to travel around, experiencing the world like that. Of course, I take these trips for specific purposes, and so I have to leave out other worthwhile things—I avoid almost all of the usual tourist spots, anyway—but that's probably exactly what I like about it. In a certain way, I think that this project in particular has a connection to nineteenth-century travel photography. Those pictures provided images of places that most people of that period would never have been able to see with their own eyes—many people didn't have any clear idea of these places at all. Today, the results of my travels are images of a phenomenon that could never actually be perceived by the naked human eye.



fig. 5
Tassili du Hoggar, Algeria, 2008



fig. 6
Hans-Christian Schink,
6/25/2005, 5:58 pm – 6:58 pm, N 34°02.498' W 118°13.804' (Downtown L.A.)