

When a human being believes he has finished,  
he has only just begun,  
and when he reaches his goal,  
there are shortcomings everywhere.

Jes Sir 18.7

Exhibitions featuring photography as an art form have long been established in galleries and museums – a medium invented in the 19th century and initially criticized as a mechanical form of image reproduction that is neither artistic nor creative, and therefore incapable of artistic expression; today the multifaceted concert of art genres is unthinkable without it.

From its very origins, photography was destined for a major evolution, both technically and artistically. As it progressed, it evolved from a purely technical medium for the visual reproduction of what is seen, through the deliberate imitation of painting styles – as seen, for example, in pictorialism – and the conscious choice of a subject, to the objective, conceptual form of expression inherent to the works of the Düsseldorf School of Photography led by Bernd and Hilla Becher, towards an art form that evokes its own visual language rooted in the medium, and which continues to evolve through digital and AI-based tools, and will continue to stimulate and challenge the art viewer with new creative forms of expression. These few opening remarks hopefully suffice to attune oneself to the visual language of Bernd Radtke's works.

For this exhibition, the artist chose a theme which he expresses with the Latin title 'in statu nascendi', commonly translated as 'in the state of becoming'; a linguistic title that seems almost anachronistic in an age when in this country the validity of Latin as a curricular subject has been called into question. The standard translation could, however, also be expressed using the verb construction "to be born": in the state of being born – this would convey the act of creation more strongly as a personal experience and would free the state described thereby from an all too constricted technical understanding. It is more than clear that the newborn is distinguished from the parturient and yet, despite all differences, an enigmatic bond exists between them, such that neither can truly be understood without the other. 'In all beginnings dwells a magic force', as Hermann Hesse already knew, and whose quote can perhaps be further extended to the effect that this beginning is invariably connection. It is precisely this magic, which is inherent in every beginning and vouchsafes it, that one should seek to sense in the works presented here. The exhibition invites the viewer to discover these works from the artist's oeuvre, not so much as art in the form of results or finished products, but rather to enter through them into a quiet, almost meditative inner sanctum of mystery where the power and character of the works are essentially understood from the very threshold of their inception and also situated within it. On closer inspection of his photographic art, the viewer may be afforded insights that draw their fascination largely from an exterior form of life brought into one's own inner self. They are glimpses into the quiet and fascinating

essence of nature or a symbolic moment in which people engage with life: existence, a journey through life, in short, the very pulse of life, all these moments that are perceptible in Radtke's works and yet elude any attempt to explain them definitively. It is almost reminiscent of that dramatic mythological tale of the nymph Daphne from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, who eludes Apollo's pursuit by transforming herself into delicate laurel green – a figure to whom Gian Lorenzo Bernini, in turn, dedicated a sculptural monument of profound intimacy in the Galleria Borghese in Rome. Perhaps here, too, the viewer can be transported into a state that allows the intimate moment to be witnessed, in which the photograph – born from the artist's inner perspective – is truly seen: in statu nascendi!

This perspective, reflected in his photographic art, is clearly linked to his life story. It reveals a journey marked by his dedication to mastering a wide range of technical skills. One need only consider the virtuosity with which he masters the various analogue possibilities of photography and artfully deploys them! Particularly impressive in this context are the works he has created using the historic wet collodion process, which, so to speak, takes us back to the very beginnings of the history of photography. In commercial photography, where he worked for a while, intimations of his creative visualisation strategies – which today help define the character of his works – begin to surface. The exhibition, therefore, also offers the opportunity to understand his works as art through the medium of photography as a process of artistic genesis and to reflect on their impact.

The show provides an opportunity to discover Radtke's works as they were originally conceived in the art of photography, where the concepts of idea or inspiring perceptions are woven into an inexplicable process of design that gives the viewer a sense of the motif's state of creation or birth, less in a technical sense than in the serenity of the artist's eye. Visitors are thus drawn into a secret that rarely reveals itself to a fleeting glance or in passing; rather, it requires the courage and patience to linger, so that the intrinsic power of that which is seen can slowly unfold and enchant the viewer. It is, therefore, hoped that this exhibition will inspire in all visitors the approach tenderly expressed by Hilde Domin in her poem 'Do not grow weary':

Do not grow weary  
but hold your hand out  
quietly to the miracle  
as if to a bird.

Dr. Arno-Lutz Henkel, Bonn

in statu nascendi – on the gradual realisation of a visual concept through the camera

#### The camera – an instrument of awareness

Intuitively, an image forms in my mind before I even look through the camera's viewfinder. I perceive moods, shapes and lights, which I then catch with my camera. For me, photography is more than just capturing a moment. The camera is not merely a technical instrument, but a medium for seeing, exploring and understanding. With the camera, I see more consciously; in a way, this creative process is reminiscent of Heinrich von Kleist's idea that thoughts only take form when spoken\*. In the same way, ideas for a finished image often only take shape in the making, through observation, testing and experimenting with the camera. The view through the viewfinder becomes a dialogue with one's own perception, one that unfolds with every passing moment. I often then discover details in the finished photograph that would have escaped me with the naked eye.

#### The Concept

An idea is a fascinating aspect of human thought and creativity. Unlike a nocturnal dream image that slowly fades over the course of the day, an image begins with a vague yet steadily refining idea. It is this first, initially somewhat elusive idea that I seek to capture. Visualising an idea is, therefore, a matter of photographing something that is generally regarded as unphotographable. Attempting to do so was challenging and equally motivating. And then, in the spring of 2022, while moving into my new studio, I discovered ten seriously outdated AGFA small-format slide films. I suddenly grasped how, for realising my project, the pieces of the puzzle were slowly falling into place. I chose my old, analogue Nikon F3 HP camera. Now all that was missing was the right lens. Inspired by a friend, I constructed my own: using a 'gutted' teleconverter and an eyeglass lens from my old nickel-rimmed glasses, I created a lens that produces images with a distinctive visual character. This unusual construction allows the viewer to literally see the world through my glasses.

#### The Power of Coincidence

Sometimes it is the unexpected elements that make a photograph extraordinary, such as a chance play of light, an unexpected stir or an unusual reflection. It was precisely this added dimension I used to make the process of my image-making relatable to the viewer. From mid-2022 onwards, my makeshift equipment accompanied me through my work as a photographer for close to two years. Only after exposing all films, did I proceed to develop them. No intermediary results were to interfere with the realisation of my project. And so, the exciting anticipation stayed with me until the developed films finally lay before me on the light table. What joy I felt to see how wonderfully vision and realisation had connected!

#### The vision grows with the process

Analogue films undergo a maturing process that culminates in the breakdown of the light-sensitive layer. The fact that my films are over 20 years old and aged makes the result appear as if composed of random dots of colour. The image captured by the eyeglass lens is sharp in the centre only, while the edges fade into a soft blur – for me, a perfect visual transformation, and, at the same time, an aesthetic stylistic means by which to express the fleeting moment of an impending idea for an image. This is exactly how I feel when a vague idea finally matures into a concrete photograph. Unlike my previous series, this exhibition does not showcase images with a common theme, but rather a range of very differing subjects. The resulting images are an attempt to convey the intangible, invisible nature of an idea.

Bernd Radtke

\*"On the Gradual Formation of Thoughts During Speech" is the title of a well-known essay by Heinrich von Kleist. In this short but profound text, Kleist describes the idea that thoughts often only become clear during the act of speaking. He argues that it is only by voicing ideas boldly can one truly reflect on and gain new insights.

#### in statu nascendi – According to Duden:

Latin = in the state of being born, of emergence

Meaning = in the course of emerging, in the process of becoming

The term describes the nature of a substance or compound [chemistry] the very moment it is formed.

#### Idea – According to Duden:

1. a) In Plato's philosophy, the pure concept of things underlying phenomena  
b) A concept or representation of something at a high level of abstraction
2. A model that determines a person's thoughts and actions
3. [Creative] thought, concept, good idea

Origin: partly influenced by the French idée < Latin idea < Greek idéa,

originally = appearance, shape, form;

according to Platon = archetype, from: ideîn = to see, to perceive

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Editor

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