

Visual Spaces of Change

Photographic documentation of environmental transformations



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Eye on Time¹

by Michael Ruetz

"Time is the author of Authors" – Francis Bacon

EN ROUTE TO THE LAST DAY The picture of the Hydra is a metaphor of time. The Hydra never stops growing. Like time, it is immortal, it is forever there – although nobody knows exactly where time is to be found. Time cannot even be stopped by Hercules. Each photograph is an attempt to stop the Hydra growing. It is an attempt to bring time to a sudden stop, to fix it forever, to speed it up or finish it off – somehow to grasp it. These attempts reveal nothing but our impotence. The Hydra grows, unwavering. Time remains unimpressed and marches on. Our efforts do frustrate us. At the same time, we base of all our hopes on influencing the march of time. Time is an invisible power dragging all of us along. Time is a plague for which there is no cure. Time is a scourge which we can't stop lashing us.

The **TIMESCAPE**-project, being a by-product of time, will reach its end exactly when the scourge of time is over – at the latest on the Last Day. Thus, the project will remain unfinished and in flux, both young and seasoned – always 'fitter for new projects than for settled business', as Bacon said of youth. Time is the raw material of the **TIMESCAPE** images. Time is their only component. **TIMESCAPE** deals with time and nothing else.

SLOW PHOTOGRAPHY It may be said that among the arts photography (if only in a certain sense of the word) may be what fast food is in the realm of eating. The **TIMESCAPE** project, on the other hand, is something like slow food – slow photography. It rather resembles the archetypes, the original forms of cinematic art. **TIMESCAPE** picture sequences are exceedingly short films about infinitely long time spans. Such a sequence is the fastest of all films – depending on the eye of the beholder. It flashes past – much faster than the painstakingly slow process of its production has taken. Being the only actor, time plays the leading role in all of these films. All objects in the picture sequences are minor parts, nothing more than extras and facades. They serve as a backdrop even when placed in the foreground – easy to replace and to exchange, none of them indispensable. Rooms, structures, cities, whether in decay or forming again: just rubber masks which time relishes to put on.

¹ English short version of the work originally published in Steidl Publishers, Göttingen, 2007.

Who, except we humans, occupies himself with time? Who, apart from us, claims not to have time, despite time's abundant supply? Who takes his life instead of time? Who needs a bit more time, who takes his time? Who fills time, who saves time and kills it? Who is pretending to be timeless, or rather to be up-to-date? Who dares to define and battle with the Zeitgeist, the spirit of his time? Who pretends to understand the signs of time? Who babbles on about "Our Time"? Who jabbars about "time's countenance" and about "innopportune time", pretending "it's not time"? Who claims to make time visible? Who writes and reads novels set in some "distant time"? Who can enter a subscription to The Times? Who sings "Time marches on" triumphantly, at the same time marching straight into the abyss? We do. We, the users. We never lose time – but against time we are forever losers. We are no Heraclids. Being the victims of the Hydra TIME, we finally give in.

THE CLOCK We have many means to measure time. Yet measuring time will never make it visible. We do not even really know what it is we have measured: there even is no answer to the question what it is. The ever-popular picture of the clock is nothing but a picture of the clock. A clock obviously does not show us time. It is just a piece of evidence, an exhibit. As 'the picture of time' the clock is nothing but a corny joke, a mediocre pun.

In the TIMESCAPE image sequences, time is driven out of its hideout like a fox from its hole. Nevertheless: what we see is never time itself. It wears an infinite number of magic hats and rubber masks, like the enigmatic Shakespeare in Droeshout's famous portrait. Why is time invisible to us? Because we ourselves are time. To ourselves – whilst staring at black mirrors – we remain invisible. We are time; we are what ravages ourselves and our cities, under the pretext of "building" them. And consequently, TIMESCAPE makes time and, equally, human beings visible. If we read between the lines of the TIMESCAPE pictures, we are on time's trail. Time never does reveal itself, it always changes shape – like rubber or water. Time: it ist the Grimm Brothers' Rumpelstiltskin and Kafka's Odradek – incognito and invisible, impalpable and omnipresent. We sense time is there – even if we cannot see it. What would we gain from seeing time?

It is us and not clocks who are the measure of all things and thus the measurement of time. Like air, time cannot be seen itself. Reaction and precipitation make it visible. The wind leaves its impression on the surface of the water, as people engrave themselves on the earth. The phenotype of time is similar to that of air: both are fleeting, not immediately recognisable, noticed only with the passage of time. TIMESCAPE shows the flow of time: multiple metamorphoses to be deciphered in layers like a palimpsest. Like all pictures, the TIMESCAPE metamorphoses reduce visible reality by one dimension, from three to two dimensions. On the other hand, they add to those two dimensions another one, the fourth dimension, which is time. If we look at the image-sequences, we make them three-dimensional.

MNEMOSYNE Without photography, we would know very little about time. Photography enables us to keep an eye on time. A photograph inevitably shows things past. The present is barely immortalised in a photograph, as it is already past. This is our motivation to hold on to the everlasting present. Things shown in a photograph die during birth, "navigating the tightrope between imminence and absence, being at once accessible and unobtainable, perpetually present and at the same time distant enough to create a chasm ...". Francine Prose wrote this about muses, in particular about Edward Weston's third and last muse, Charis Wilson. This assessment could apply to all muses and no less to time. Time: what is it other than a muse – the muse of photography? If photography even has a muse, this muse must certainly be time. Most likely it is Mnemosyne, the muse of memory, the mother of all muses.

Time is the most important subject and theme of photography. Is it ultimately the only one, the bottom line of any photographic effort? The history of photography is the history of endless attempts to seize time: reaching into an empty profusion, into an overflowing vacuum – nevertheless and therefore always repeated. Photography is the perfect way, if not the only one, not only to seize the visible but along with it the invisible: time. If we do exactly this, we will be able to understand Max Beckmann's paradoxical demand: "If you want to grasp the invisible, penetrate the visible as deeply as you can." In order to do this, a remarkable number of photographers repeatedly try to make their time visible and recognisable, to get hold of it in their pictures. Even if they do not mean to, they do this in every picture. It is simply unavoidable.

IDENTITY AND CHANGE In the 24 layers of the **TIMESCAPE**-Palimpsest No. 313, only the line of vision and the location remain the same. These elements are the ostinato, the steady beat in what may be called a *Passacaglia* of Time. After the millions of minutes between Phase 0 and Phase 23, a few visible elements have changed. But by no way everything. In no sense does *Metamorphosis* 313 show the "same thing twentyfour times". This cityscape exists almost completely in Phase 1, still in some parts in Phase 10. In what is currently the last phase, it does not exist any more.

For this and other reasons, that location is not given a name. A verbal description of where it is, something like an address, would certainly be misleading. It would draw the attention from the fact that time alone is the theme of the **TIMESCAPE**-metamorphoses. Replacing images with words is always somehow contemptuous. By putting words in place of pictures, one seeks to fence off the picture, one attempts to diminish its impact. **TIMESCAPE**-picture sequences are accounts of time and not of places. "In words pictures serve no purpose," Edward Weston said. Only the temporal definition is important. That is why it is given as accurately as possible. The observer's own ability to read pictures is sufficient to solve the riddle of the exact location ... if it is important to him or her. Isn't an unsolved riddle far more interesting than its solution?

"Time is the longest distance between two places." This is how Tennessee Williams described the intertwinement, the equation of time and space. Richard Wagner said just the same in Parsifal: "Zum Raum wird hier die Zeit". Which places and which spaces? How far apart are the two points in time and thus, in space? The two "places" bearing the same location name, 313.0 and 313.23 – Berlin, Marx-Engels Platz, February 2, 1991 and Berlin, Schlossplatz, May 1, 2006: they are in no way the same. Do they have anything in common? Not much more than geographical co-ordinates, N 52° 31.057', E 13° 24.077', and the line of vision SW 219°. The Schlossplatz and its atmosphere no longer exist the way they did fifteen years before. They do so only in a rudimentary way, occasionally in a vague suspicion or memory. If buildings and atmosphere at other locations remain unchanged and intact, then decay is just taking its time. It has just practised with patience. Like Pascal, it simply has no time to be brief or abrupt. For once the process was not quick. It may take a bit longer, but it will definitely take its course.

MACERATION The **TIMESCAPE**-project can be regarded as a chain of metamorphoses, a sequence of stocktakings. In scientific terms, **TIMESCAPE** is a bit like the minutes of maceration. One after the other, the parts are photographed and consequently disappear. Whether the thing as a whole remains or dissolves away – it is of no consequence. Everything changes, and thus it stays the same. To be or not to be: here this question is not even asked. The way things are shown in the metamorphoses is only temporary, their finale is only provisional. The earthly life of the little bit that remains will be long or short. We cannot know it; we have no influence or power over it.

Time's basilisk-like stare is fixed and steadfast. Time is intouchable. Time is cold and incorruptible as are camera and film. We, who use them, interpret with emotions and warmth. We establish our losses, we welcome in the new. The **TIMESCAPE** chronicler identifies with a few figures in the art world. One is Goethe's friend and servant Eckermann. In some ways Eckermann took on the role of Goethe's muse, like the above-mentioned Charis for Edward Weston, or Lee Miller for Man Ray. What would Goethe be without his Eckermann?

INVENTIONS To invent something new, and to create something previously unknown, inventors always use methods which are already known. The inventor uses elements which are readily available and which he does not have to create anew. He simply transfers his material into a new order, into useable systems. This is what Klaus Honnef means when he writes about the invention of photography: "The individual elements of the photographic process had been known for a long time ... Assembling them equals the invention of photography." In a similar way, the **TIMESCAPE**-project uses intellectual and technical concepts which are familiar to some of us. Being a scientific system the project develops out of random ideas. **TIMESCAPE** goes far

beyond the concept of "before and after" pictures, as it uses specific methods, gives a precise definition of the concept, and offers very precise documentation. It is something new through its geographical, intellectual and temporal dimension – but also through the unusual quantity of the pictures, which turns into a unique, specific quality. It is an ocean of pictures, in which one could almost drown – first of all the author. Photography, the most representational of all the analogue arts, is art and science in one. Photography is a contamination of these two qualities. The science of seeing and recognising: in photography, it becomes an art.

ABRIDGED VERSION / BLURB

Max Beckmann recommended painters to do what photography can do, alone among the arts: to penetrate the visible as deeply as possible, so as to catch hold of time, the invisible. This is the driving force and motive behind photography: constantly reaching out towards time, towards the invisible, into the overflowing vacuum and the empty profusion – in vain and with rich rewards. *TIMESCAPE* is an early form of cinematic art, a series of metamorphoses like Muybridge's studies of movement, an extremely short film about infinitely long time, where time is the leading lady and spaces, structures and objects are the window-dressing, in a continual process of decay and rebirth. *TIMESCAPE* is three-dimensional photography: it reduces visible reality from three to two dimensions, but it adds to the photographs another dimension, that of time.





Timescape 101, 6 Phasen, eine Doppelseite1 Thu, July

0 Mon, June 12, 1989, 4:31 pm

1 Fri, May 25, 1990, 4:53 pm





Timescape 101, 6 Phasen, eine Doppelseite1 Thu, July

5 Fri, June 28, 1996, 12:35 pm

6 Mon, July 13, 1998, 2:24 pm





Timescape 101, 6 Phasen, eine Doppelseite1 Thu, July

8 Sat, July 3, 1999, 2:07 pm

11 Wed, May 9, 2007, 2:29 pm



Timescape 2040, 3 Phasen, eine Seite

1 Thu, July 16, 1998, 12:41 pm

6 Tue, May 9, 2000, 2:26 pm

14 Tue, June 13, 2006, 4:23 pm







Timescape 162, 6 Phasen, eine Doppelseite
0 Mon, February 2, 1991, 5:30 pm





Timescape 162, 6 Phasen, eine Doppelseite
2 Sun, November 28, 1993, 11:45 am





Timescape 162, 6 Phasen, eine Doppelseite
5 Thu, February 1, 1996, 1:10 pm
10 Sat, April 13, 2002, 11:08 am





Timescape 162, 6 Phasen, eine Doppelseite
11 Sun, April 25, 2004, 10:43 am
13 Thu, July 26, 2007, 12:46 pm



Timescape 211, 6 Phasen, eine Doppelseite

0 Thu, May 24, 1990, 2:00 pm

1 Sat, January 11, 1992, 2:41 pm

4 Sat, May 6, 1995, 1:11 pm



6 Sun, June 30, 1996, 1:39 pm
8 Thu, January 14, 1999, 2:09 pm
10 Tue, January 19, 2016, 11:50 am