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IN CONVERSATION WITH BIRGIT EUSTERSCHULTE

Since 1997 you have undertaken several journeys to the tropical rain forest to do your own photographic or visual research in scientific research camps. How did you discover the tropical rain forest as your subject of research?

I have always been interested in biology, natural history and how science explains the world to us. I feel that I am both an artist and some kind of visual researcher. I always approach my subject from two different perspectives. The tropical rain forest became the subject of my research because its diverse environment fires my imagination and also attracts me intellectually.

Can you describe the working situation in the camp? What does your working day look like?

I always walk a lot in the forest. For me it's a good working method. It's a good way to observe, to think about my work and to gather visual information and things to photograph. If I see an interesting animal, or collect a plant to photograph, I usually go straight from the forest to my studio, which is normally located at the station's ambient laboratory. On the way I try to imagine what the picture could look like.

Sometimes I focus more on the landscape. These days are hard physically if I'm working further away from the station and off-trail. I also work at night because I really like the forest at night and many animals are nocturnal. I set up lights to attract insects, try to find night-flowering plants, capture bats with scientists or just spend my time walking. Everything looks and feels so different at night. Early misty mornings and rainy days are great for working too.

In a series of works you took photographs of objects found in the rain forest in a portable miniature studio. The pictures were of small animals, insects or plants, first isolated against a white background, and later the setting of the staging remains visible. A method of presentation that is close to classical nature photography is transformed into a mise en scène on a stage which heightens the exoticism and strangeness as well as the magic of the objects. How did this idea evolve?

My first idea was to intensify the presence of the photographed subject. I thought that when the animals or plants are removed from their original settings they become somehow special and you look at them more like individual beings. In the studio I was able to carefully portray their details, colours, shapes and external structures. Then later, in 2000, the stage became part of the picture. Right from the start the setting was really as you see it in the picture. The curtains, for example, have a practical significance. They cast shade onto the sides of the photographed objects and thus add three-dimensionality to the picture. I wanted to use the stage to link the viewers' interpretations more closely to my own ideas. Before I started using this method the interpretation of my pictures was more open. I wanted to link the pictures more to my ideas about arranging nature, directing a play, being in control, to still-life tradition, to science, and at the same time to fiction.

Does the theoretical thinking of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel Foucault have a special significance for your work? You mention Lévi-Strauss in several texts. In what way did his writings accompany the development of a more conceptual approach in your work?

I really don't know the answer to this question. I very much respect and admire Claude Lévi-Strauss's way of explaining human behaviour and the irrational, and his work in South America. His idea of the *pensée sauvage* fits well with artistic work because artists collect knowledge at the level of the sensory perceptions and experiences. *Pensée sauvage* – the concrete logic – tries to create hierarchies and a kind of total understanding about the environment, unlike science, which divides a problem analytically into as many small parts as are required to solve it. So it's very far removed from expert thought or engineering, in a way similar to artistic work, I believe. I rather see myself working like a Renaissance person or a dilettante. Lévi-Strauss reminds us that people can apprehend the world by different means. I agree with the French structuralists that scientific truths, cultural discourses and practices are open to argument and to change.

Your work takes an analytical approach in Field Studies and Private Collection on the one hand, and a panoramic, sometimes mystifying approach in the "landscapes" on the other. How do you see the relationship between these different perspectives, practices of observation?

In my landscape series I try to reflect the opposite perception to the world to the scientific. The forest is present as something that we cannot quite reach or explain. It's uncontrolled and chaotic. The early landscapes from 1997 to 1998 are my first impressions of the forest. In the *Dark Forest* and *Cloud Forest* series questions relating to space, perspective and light are important. The entire reality of the forest seems to be created by the light. When the light disappears or when weather conditions alter the perspective the immense disorder of the forest becomes clear. The forest in the photograph becomes more like a surface and no longer gives any information about itself. It's like a stage set after the play has ended. These different series of mine are really quite diverse. They reflect my thought as it moves between the romantic and scientific.

I would like to come back once more to the working situation in the field stations. Your approach is not only to scrutinize your own working methods but also those of your scientist colleagues. How does the exchange between you and the scientists in the camp work? Does a dialogue evolve regarding questions of objectivity and representation or on methods used in the sciences and arts?

There is dialogue, especially with those people I have met several times at the biological stations. Many scientists agree that there are limitations and that it is certainly an impossible task to understand the diversity and the complexity of the tropical forest. The enormous abundance of species was recognized hundreds of years ago and still we don't understand the origins, mechanisms and maintenance of the rain forest. Researchers agree that both their and my methods appear absurd, especially when you suddenly see yourself with the eyes of a lay person or if you are able to look at your work from a distance. Although I am critical of scientific one-sidedness and specialization my criticism is always accompanied by admiration. Occasional misunderstandings and collisions also give me new ideas. Humour is generated also because of the fact that people are tired after the very physical and demanding conditions of work in the field.

*You mentioned the year 2000, when the stage became part of your photographs. In the same year you directed the camera towards yourself, in *Untitled (Self-portrait)*. This shows the encounter between the staged subject, the photographer and the photographic apparatus. As far as I know it is your first self-portrait. It clearly shows how your perspective changed.*

The photograph shows the complexities of representation. I wanted to portray my own perspective and myself as an artist with my subject – that is the photograph itself and then secondly the frog. The moment portrayed in the photograph became very dense and concentrated. What I like about *Untitled (Self-portrait)* is that the situation was not carefully planned or staged. I feel fortunate when chance comes into my work and I am able to work spontaneously or intuitively.

Another photograph that seems to be central in this context is Private Collection, 2003. A white screen is stretched out in the forest by night. Brightly illuminated, it attracts moths and other insects. We can see you in back light making observations. Are collecting and analysing as artistic and scientific methods equated with each other or seen as parallel activities?

I think the methods can be similar but the results are very different. I see myself as a visual researcher and also as someone who possesses a private collection of artistic knowledge and images. I am interested in how private collections – cabinets of curiosities – from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a starting point for museums and the study of nature in general.

What significance do irony and humour have in your photographic inquiries?

Scientific research in the field, as well as my own projects, often seem humorous or absurd to me. One cannot adequately describe the various aspects of reality in a rain forest, or express them numerically or visually. The forest is so diverse and full of species that our ways of approaching them easily seem limited. The selected viewpoint in relation to what is looked at decides on the result that is presented as a truth. An artist's viewpoint is different to that of a scientist. In the artist's toolbox, chance, irony, humour and imagination are good instruments.

*A very new work you show in the exhibition is the video *Orchid Bee Males*, 2005. It shows bees attracted by scents to a petri dish, and how one population of bees is gradually pushed away by another and clearly bigger species. In the context of your works, this video, which could also be a scientific one, can be read as a scene from a science fiction film or more generally as a parable.*

These Orchid bees are really amazing. I think they look like jewellery with their bright metallic shiny appearance. And when you look at their rapid manoeuvres, aggression and combat it reminds you of video games or science fiction. Also the construction of the space in depth and the light creates this effect of a play. I always enjoy discovering that reality is something even more amazing than fiction. The video refers to the methods used by science. The researcher's hand comes, touches, and changes things and the course of events. The experiment starts.

Finally I would like to ask you whether you have any plans for future trips?

Yes. Probably as soon as spring 2006. The project is in evolution.