

Siegfried Zielinski: Opening Address at the Exhibition *DeepTime*

This exhibition is entitled *DeepTime*, and it is something of a paradox that I will be talking to you about the depths of time in a relatively short space of time. This relates to the fact that time is persistently that which we do not have—an experience beautifully embedded in this photographic collection by Tom Fecht. Still impressed by the wonderful guided tour through your museum, I would like to emphasize one point in advance: I am not at all surprised that you are fascinated by the work of Tom Fecht.

The phrase “I don’t have time” is as implausible as the phrase “I have time.” Time cannot be possessed. On the contrary, time possesses us and time uses us, just as much as it possesses and uses all other objects in existence. Time reveals the way it runs, ticks, rumbles, and performs its work both above- and underground. Time consumes us as a living, constantly nascent material. This should be reason enough for modesty—all the more so in a world under great time pressure, where the conscious experience of the present or of time expanding within the now (e.g. in aesthetic pleasure) has meanwhile become a luxury.

Stephen J. Gould¹, a paleontologist and biologist I greatly admire, coined the term “deep time” in the second half of the 20th century, explaining it by means of an unusual parable: imagine that anything we are able to perceive as the world, this pluriverse around us, equals the volume of our individual bodies. Now stretch out your right hand, take a nail file in your left, and brush once across the tip of the nail of your middle right finger. What is seen falling there, that tiny speck of white dust, is equivalent to our humble significance within the entire meaning of the universe.

Deep time—the luxury to sensually grasp the depth of time—somehow makes us fall down to our knees. It resembles a temporal dimension that stretches far beyond our own existence, a dimension that we cannot fully grasp, even if we learn how to measure it. In this sense, deep time—and this also plays an important role in Tom Fecht’s work—is something that I will refer to as a *Denkding*, or *res cogitans*, a conceptual crutch to our imagination. It helps us realize that this world is substantially more than we ourselves are able to represent as mere thumbings in it.

However, as Tom Fecht’s work clearly shows, deep time is an aesthetic matter, a profound aesthetic experience. In a very unique manner, his work implements what constitutes, in my opinion, the most important dimension of art: to remain or to become sensitive to the other, to otherness, or to that which we persistently cannot grasp. His *Incertitudes*, for example, which are shown in this exhibition, are the strongest expression of this gesture. Referring once again to Stephen Gould’s parable: the photon dust of the stars falling down from outer space, the innumerable particles of light, inscribed on the photographic negative during hours of exposure, originate from a time in the past that can only be measured within certain limits and visualized in our imagination at best. In its actual depth, the chronological time we are able to experience has a tendency to grow beyond itself. It is inclined towards infinity, a duration reaching far beyond our earthly existence, and which we are therefore unable to witness. The ancient Greeks had a beautiful term to describe this, namely *aion*. *Aion* was the youngest offspring of Chronos, the Greek personification of linear time, who—and obviously not only in Francisco Goya’s² famous painting—devoured his own children, driven by a fear of losing his place as a ruler over their human life span, a fear of experiencing the mercilessness of time running irreversibly.

The artist may sensitize us to *aion*—to this mode of time that we cannot witness directly as it is so much greater than us—by pushing the deep-time dimension within the artificial image experimentally over the edge. Without technological prosthesis (this constitutes the paradox in these works), the invisible cannot be rendered visible. In Fecht’s case, photographic technology helps us to recognize something that is otherwise inaccessible to the naked human eye.

Deep time operates as a seismograph and manifests itself in a vertical direction. Its magical and destructive potential inspired Alfred Hitchcock’s most famous movie *Vertigo*³, the aspect of madness being objectified in the protagonist’s whirl of hair. Tom Fecht’s *Star Pointer*—which is perhaps

¹ Paleontologist, geologist, and evolutionary biologist, who was born in New York in 1941 and died there in 2002.

² Painter, who was born in Fuendetodos, Spain, in 1746 and died in Bordeaux, France, in 1828.

³ *Vertigo*, a movie by Alfred Hitchcock which came out in 1958.

the star of tonight's exhibition, the black-and-white frozen image of a flamenco dancer⁴ connecting heaven and earth within the micro-universe of her straight posture—produces an experience of verticality in the spontaneous event of dance. The elegantly outstretched spine of the dancer connects her left hand, pointing above to the stars, with her right hand, pointing down to earth behind her back.

In an intuitively astute curatorial move, this work—which can be seen immediately at the vanishing point when walking up to the rooms containing Tom Fecht's images—forms a quasi-spatial dialogue with two large-scale horizontal photographs dedicated to the enormous fascination of natural electricity in lightning bolts. Tom Fecht calls them *Electric Cinema*. And they do, in fact, contain drama. For the flamenco dancer's gesture—this connection of one hand to the stars, to the cosmic, and the other to the ground—is nothing but an embodiment or allegory of the lightning bolt's tremendous discharge. The dancer's body becomes a sculpture of energy in this picture. We encounter a similar experience in *Electric Cinema*, works that somehow transmit their energetic charge onto us. During the short instant of lightning—an extreme opposite to the concept of deep time (even though lightning originates in the depth of time)—the microcosm of our planet and the macrocosm of the pluriverse are short-circuited in the exact moment of discharge.

A minimal point of contact can have enormous consequences, as all of us may know from everyday routines. It can be productive and destructive. A horrendous, sudden event generating an interplay of broad horizontality with vertical depth, as in Fecht's images. For this infinitesimal moment, the lightning bolt opens up the horizon to a brief moment of perception. The vertical and the horizontal cross each other in the flash of lightning.

In Fecht's large-format triptych *TIME*, the horizon has been pushed up to the margin of the photographic print like a small boundary to the vast, restless, and fluid body of the sea. This is earthly time, the time of our planet, determined by the oceanic, making us think of the Atlantic Ocean that Fecht is so fond of portraying. *Mare externum*—the open and simultaneously deeply opaque ocean—confronts us like a black mirror in this triptych. Of course, we see the contraction of this huge organ of the sea; at the same time, however, it appears like a mirror, inviting us to play our infinite game of recognition, delusion, and misjudgment.

These are powerful, meaningful images, but it is a fortunate circumstance that the curators chose a completely different work to place at the start of the exhibition. I am referring to Le Corbusier's *glasses*: a miniature scene forming a stark contrast to the images that follow—the sequence of seascapes in the *TIME* triptych, for example. However, this photograph is also closely connected to the others, since the dark glasses of the famous Bauhaus architect—placed against the light on a white background—cast a delicate shadow, and this shadow forms the figure of infinity. It is a wonderful coincidence and so typical of Tom Fecht's work. His artistic oeuvre is not defined by a futile search but by lucky findings, which naturally presuppose an endless amount of patience and a great porosity of perception with regard to the other; that is the artist's signature. If I translate this into my language and perception: the shadow of Le Corbusier's glasses writes infinity in a manner that refers to another figure, familiar to those of you interested in alchemy. I am thinking of the ouroboros figure, a double snake biting its own tail, devouring itself to create new life. This inspired mathematicians of the 17th century, leading to the symbol of infinity, as we know it today: the double circle coupling into an infinite movement ∞ .

In my eyes, this is a beautiful and subtle hint, a small sensation in this exhibition. It signifies a reference to the practice of alchemy, an approach that Tom Fecht not only practices throughout his work, but which he incorporates in the true sense of the word. Experimentally conducting research and fabricating images in his laboratory in Brittany, Tom Fecht can rightfully be referred to as a modern-day alchemist of photography.

Deep time: I would like to finish with this spontaneous thought. Deep time is a term that not only captures Tom Fecht's exhibition, but it can also prototypically stand for this museum. This museum is home to an abundance of concretized time from countless centuries; and, even more remarkably, when we truly descend deep into time, then the very horizon of events also widens. By immersing ourselves into deep time, our cultural experience expands and becomes enriched. We do not remain in one singular culture—namely, our own. Indeed, it is incredible to discover Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Iranian traditions among idiosyncratic German avant-garde artists and to witness all kinds of cultures, schools of thought, and artistic expressions in dialogue with each other. Congratulations on this successful aleatoric encounter, to this wonderful museum, and above all to Tom Fecht for this phenomenal art exhibition. I would like to wish you all a wonderful "deep-time experience."

⁴ The dancer is Ana Fernández Molina (Ana Parilla), who was born in Jerez de la Frontera, Cadiz, Spain, in 1953 and died in Madrid in 2004.

⁵ Le Corbusier: Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, a Swiss-French architect, who was born in La Chaux-de-Fonds, France, in 1887 and died in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France, in 1965.