

Seeing at sea

Before man ever put to sea, he was able to walk upright; since then the horizon has for him been a guarantee of direction and arrival. The result is a visual world of perception, which since the late 18th Century has been referred to as panoramic, i.e. spatial in the widest sense: Every view can extend horizontally to right and left, to the point of all-round vision and beyond. In the horizontal we humans recognise above all differing contrasts, soft progressions and shadings. In the vertical on the other hand lies everything essential for man, making the critical difference between shades and contours of animals or plants, which in stumbling, fleeing, hunting and transporting is necessary for survival. For sea travel, such early human conditions have of course been preserved: The art of sailing is a vertical activity requiring maximum concentration, and the most important devices for orientation at sea are directed at angles of elevation. Exactly the same applies to taking pictures – at least since Plato's allegory of the cave: The shadows can extend horizontally into the infinite depth of space, the only important thing is the interaction between man and shadow, here and now, in the near distance, vertical.

The photographer Herbert Boettcher likes to say that the panoramic view of his camera corresponds to natural vision – and yet the pictures he presents here are artefacts of high precision and sophisticated composition. And they are organised exactly as required by the viewing conditions at sea and on land: in the foreground, at the lower edge of the picture clear and sharp, on and above the horizon rather soft and undefined. The first result, the first sight of the picture is therefore an irritation: Above the horizon the perspective appears to be a different one to that below it. While at the lower edge of the picture the containers, loading areas, hatch, gangways, the bow, the stern and many other details quest to the side in stark alignment and arouse the impression of being drawn into the depths, the elements of the overcast sky are strung together apparently calmly, as if hardly wanting to diverge at all. Whoever looks closely will notice the difference between the sharp and the blurred: Many of the clouds have double contours, at exactly the same distance as the surge of the waves and its depiction in the photography. Anyone who has travelled by ship a few times knows this effect from looking with the naked eye at twilight, and several seascape painters of the 18th Century used the same duplicating effect to increase the dramatic impression.

But Herbert Boettcher produces his images as a photographer, and a great difference to painting is represented here in the colours: Container ships have white bridges and red decks, the containers themselves shine out in the standard colours of metal paints, mostly red, blue or white, and also serve as advertising space, with logos, typography and instructions in all the trading languages of the world. For the colours of the sky and the water, he can rely on the characteristics of the film used, which register short-wave light particularly sharply. The result is a consistent trinity of blue, red and white – for good reason the colours of sea travel. This harmony of colour appears particularly clearly in one of the central images of the book: The white bridge with the black cables and red crane parts, set against the deep blue sea. If the yellow of the artificial light at night is added, one arrives at the modern palette of the constructivistic artists of the beginning of the 20th Century, at Theo van Doesburg and Piet Mondriaan, and also at Wassily Kandinsky of the "Bauhaus". These artists had banished the green – together with all other earth colours – from their palettes, because it was no longer in tune with the new, technical age. Long before the advent of the aeroplane, the ocean steamer had become the last resort of modern constructivity, no longer needing any tie to the earth. If Herbert Boettcher uses the same colour scheme in his sea images. This serves rather as a reference to the fact that shipping is one of the last strongholds of heavy industry, which alone can be used for its transport. The colour scheme also places the imagery of the photographer in a definite relationship with the modern, although today rather as a quotation than in naïve belief in progress.

In the salons of the 18th and 19th Centuries, seascapes were amongst the most expensive works, and not only because the collectors of the time had enormous purchasing power: The quality of a seascape was measured in comparison to the drama – or the tranquillity – of a scene above all by the conformity of the technical details of the ship and the meteorological details, and the painter therefore had to know his craft just as well as the joys and hardships of sea travel. These images always contained a breath of

what is easily associated with the concept of romanticism, a self-contentment in the aspiration to create and the hoped-for meditation when viewing the result. Some of the images in this book lead in this direction – typically those in which the creative possibilities are limited: almost monochrome views of blurred waves with traces of light from other ships or buoys. In the context of the present image essay they have a specific task: They point all the more clearly to the modernity of the action as a whole. And they are a necessary counterpart to another genre, which seascape painting was only able to find in the 20th Century, in the form of photography: The night image with artificial light and streaked and stroboscopic motion lines. Here Herbert Boettcher's photography presents itself as radically modern, as a genuine successor to those hopeful views of large American cities from the 1920's, which were introduced into photography by architects such as Erich Mendelsohn and Knud Lönberg-Holm, and which the multi-media artist László Moholy-Nagy enhanced in 1938 by the same colour scheme also used by Herbert Boettcher. With night images, these artists made their reference to that other art form, which as nocturnal itself was definitively modern: the film and its showplace, the cinema.

Some images by Herbert Boettcher are redolent of the cinema, and for good reason. It is cinema plots which are being recounted here, images of travel and loading, of journeying and stop-overs, of coming and going. Yet the medium of this book is photography, and this conveys a radical editing of time – according to the popular theory since Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes. Herbert Boettcher is one of those photographers who have never accepted such a technical limitation as incontrovertible: With Vilém Flusser, he is happy to face the contrivance, or even better: He foils the modern, by exploiting its means to the very limit. Two levels of time can be found in all his images: The long shutter time used for creation of the image and the short time of accurate object registration by the human eye. The difference between them is the actual guiding principle in his work. In the night-time arrival or departure from port, the hull of the ship and its cargo are reproduced sharply and accurately, down to the smallest screw of the last container, as if in a still sports shot or a studio production for industrial products. On the other hand, lamps and lights on the horizon or in the vicinity of the view mark out long tracks across the sky and water surface, often to the point of forming a textile pattern of stripes, yet always in strict central perspective with an exactly defined vanishing point on the horizon. It is an effect which is used in film by animation studios, by which they construct different speeds of the film action above and below the horizon; here however the differences are frozen in a single image, and the cinema takes place in the mind.

For the images of this series, Herbert Boettcher uses a wide-screen camera, whose optics are calculated for the extreme aspect ratio of one to three, and which therefore records every detail right into the corners of the field of view with minimal angular errors and low light loss. This instrument too – not for nothing are nautical and photographic devices named along with creators of mechanical music – has long been featured in painting, as the camera obscura forms the basis of a perspectively accurate veduta painting for both architectural and technical subjects. Everything technical on and about the ships is reproduced with maximum precision, without distortion and decipherable down to the smallest detail. The contrast to the soft water with its apparently flat waves and to the limitless sky could hardly be greater: More confidence in the feasibility of container transport could not be conveyed. Photographic technique and the subjects of the images merge here in a way most recently used for the photography of large industrial plants. It is a largely unknown, yet actually existing world which is revealed to us in these images.

The images of Herbert Boettcher exist on two planes, firstly as pages in this book, and secondly as individual pictures on the wall. The difference is significant. For presentation as an individual work, the artist has found in the Diasac process a form which comes very close to the impression of sky and water in the photographs – the reflective surface of the acrylic glass mounting of this positive process ensures a similar depth in the spatial impression as the blurred contours of the bow waves and foaming wake, yet at the same moment looking just as technically precise as the ship superstructure in the image. In the book, the individual image is less important, but when leafing smoothly through the book – which all book-binders consider the ideal way – becomes part of a rhythm of observation, irrespective of the direction of leafing or the starting image. A picture essay is arranged according to completely different viewpoints than one in written text form, where we have still not got rid of the

habit of reading from front to back. In the picture essay the perspective views alternate – centred, vanishing to the left, from top to bottom – just like different colour combinations or the night, twilight or daytime images. Like the difference between the choppy water and cloud-strewn sky and the technical structures in every image, the rhythms in the books also follow enigmatic rules of series and sequences, such as characterise every musical composition. The observers themselves however can decide whose rhythm they want to recognise: The lead motif of Tchaikovsky, the passage of Mussorgsky, the sunrise of Sibelius and the night motifs as Boogie or Bebop – or something completely different.

To return to the anthropological terms of the beginning: Man had to equip himself with tools in order to survive in the world around him, and he needed skills and knowledge of all types to be able to get around throughout the whole world. Like nautical instruments, the camera is a reinforcement for the eye, in order to be able to prove to oneself and others that the world can be subjugated, be it only in the form of an image. The limitation of this action is now known to every person in the world – and this is exactly where the romanticism of the images of Herbert Boettcher begins. By celebrating one last time great the triumphs of technology, but also make them apparent by means of small breaches in every image and in the order of this book, they lead all those who can both admire the stupendous quality and make the effort to look more closely exactly where all good romanticism leads: to the understanding of the intimate relationship between human action and the forces of nature. Much of this is also illustrated in these images, and every observer can find this in them for himself, over and above all language.