

**PRESSBOOK**

Heinz MACK

*Sculpture Magazine*

*November 2013*



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**Sarah Gold & Karlyn De Jogn**





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A Conversation with

**HEINZ MACK**

## Seeing the Light

BY SARAH GOLD AND KARLYN DE JONGH

A pioneer of light, land, and kinetic art, Heinz Mack, who lives and works in Mönchengladbach, Germany, and in Ibiza, Spain, has been pursuing his utopian synthesis of aesthetics and science since the 1950s. After graduating from the Düsseldorf Art Academy, he teamed up with Otto Piene in 1957 to establish a new artistic direction; their "Zero Hour" experiments with kinetics and light soon formalized into a movement that attracted the interest of Jean Tinguely, Yves Klein, Lucio Fontana, and Piero Manzoni. From ZERO to desert expeditions, to silver reliefs, prisms, cubes, and rotors, Mack's diverse investigations into the perception of light, space, and color are now inspiring a new generation of artists.

Opposite: *Lamellen-Steie (Steie with Slats)*, 1966/2002. Anodized aluminum, 300 x 30 x 20 cm. Above: *Lichtrelief (Lightrelief)*, 1960. Aluminum and hardboard, 30 x 42 x 4 cm.

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**Sarah Gold:** *I love your statement, "Light is decisive for my art. As far as light is concerned, I want to go to the limits of the possible." When did you become aware of this fascination with light?*

**Heinz Mack:** Light has made a big impression on me since I opened my eyes for the very first time, which was 82 years ago. During the war, another light fascinated me — man-made light, created on the night when the city of Krefeld was devastated by heavy bombardment. When light dances on the moving surface of the sea, an infinitely large relief comes into being, and the old gods Poseidon and Apollo return once more. I myself am a medium for light.

**SG:** *You have stated, "I don't have any theories; I have ideas, which I take with me into the studio." What are your ideas? And have you been able to express them to your satisfaction?*

**HM:** My ideas fall from the sky like stones and jeopardize my life—I create birds out of them and let them fly again. It gives me great satisfaction when coincidence guides my hand and something is created that I would never have expected.

**Karlyn De Jongh:** Duchamp said that the viewer finishes the artwork. In your case, it seems that "light" finishes the work. What is the relation between the sculpture as a material object and the changing, reflecting light?

**HM:** Light enters into the marble when the night leaves and the stone uncovers itself—that is the transformation from materiality into immaterial appearance.

Above: *Light experiment*, 1968–97. Aluminum, dimensions variable. View of work in the Wahiba Sands, Oman. Below: The artist unfurling his flag, 1968. Metallized Ultraphan film, 1.2 x 8 meters, Action in Tunisia.





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**KDJ:** You have said that "light never goes around the corner, but always shines straight ahead." Light has often been used as a metaphor for knowledge, for truth. You have always asked questions about human existence: observing its state and trying to change it.

**HM:** The human condition is a metaphor for my life, for my creative work. People say that I am a radical humanist. In my work, I recognize who I was, who I am, and who I may become, when I will no longer be.

**KDJ:** In the 1950s and '60s, you and Otto Piene attempted various utopian projects. Do you think that any of them have a chance at being realized? Is it possible to change life through art?

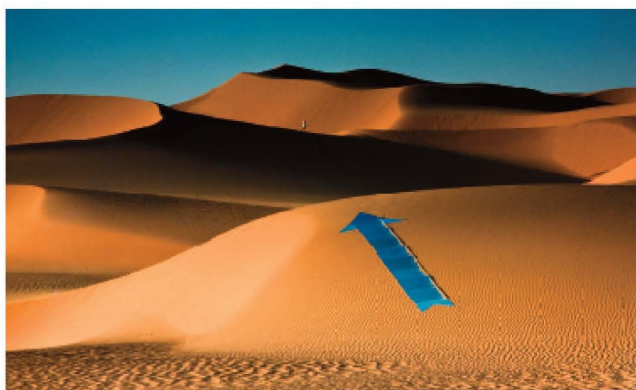
**HM:** Rilke's poem about the torso contains the line: *Du mußt dein Leben ändern* ("You must change your life"). No one knows the parameters of utopias or of the unknown spheres that we dream to enter without crossing the dialectic border between being and not being. But our bold expectations, our waking dreams, our ideas, and our actions will unravel, vanish, and eventually betray themselves because we are willing to entrust our works to the confused inventory of the world. Cultural institutions, thought to protect our interests, demonstrate the unchanging nature of cemeteries. Our attempts mislead us and only sponsor their conservation. Here is one of my favorite lines from Seneca: "Only he who is awake, can report his dreams."

**KDJ:** You often wear silvery materials, giving yourself a material surface similar to that of your sculptures. How do you see the relation between yourself and your work?

**HM:** My shining aluminum clothes were not costumes; they complied with my desire not to enter the spaces of the desert and the Arctic in civilian, urban dress. Besides, aluminum is ideally suited to reflecting not only light, but also great heat.

**KDJ:** In the 1960s, you placed some of your light stelae in the Tunisian desert. They look like beautiful Fata Morgana in photographs. Layers of air at different temperatures changed the "shape" of the objects as you created them. So, light does not always connect with "truth"; sometimes it creates illusions. What role does optical illusion play in your work?

"TOP: LEMUS (OPPOSITE PAGE) - TUNISIA, 1968"



Above: Large Space arrow, 1976. Silver aluminum plates, 15 meters long. Work in the Algerian Sahara.

Below: Light-stelae in the desert, 1968. Aluminum, Perspex, and stainless steel, max. approx. 7 meters tall. View of work in Tunisia.





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**HM:** Optical illusions are a sort of pointless luxury.

**SG:** Some people have mentioned that your projects could be seen as Land Art. Would you agree with this designation?

**HM:** My Sahara-based work was documented in "Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974" at MOCA Los Angeles and later in Munich. Since my work is of a plural nature and so diverse, it hasn't yet been classified within art historical drawers.

**KDJ:** You did several projects in which your light stelae are the only "things" on the horizon. The vertical lines of your "totem poles" reflecting light, land, and sky are the only things interrupting a vast landscape. Why did you choose the totem form?

**HM:** I have always avoided figurative sculpture, but the stelae remain a last formulation of man, standing upright—with dignity—in space. To me, the Greek grave stele is the vertical counterpart of the horizontal grave. The no longer visible, the dead pure and simple, lies under the surface of the earth, adapting to the earth's curvature. The visible, the admonishing, that which is not to be consigned to oblivion, stands upright, mediating between earth and sky.

But even earlier, humanity had already erected signs, vertical manifestations, as fixed points in the endless expansion of

*Light Architecture*, 1976. Model for a floating Arctic research center, 94 x 140 x 80 cm.

space, setting up slim stone rectangles, constructing towers, crowning mountains. In this ancient, archetypal sense, my stelae also stand for the upright standing, hieratic man—the *stabilitas loci*, the moral self-evidence of the Renaissance and of the Enlightenment.

Greek stelae, Egyptian sculptures of the gods, and the medieval kings of Chartres present themselves frontally, like all figures whose abstraction is an expression of mental manifestation. The frontal view permits a direct meeting between work and viewer, and their dialogue permits the spell of instantaneous fascination, as well as meditative seeing. My stelae also show this same confrontation.

**KDJ:** Placing your works in the desert or in the Arctic requires travel and encounters with different cultures. Did your understanding of light and life change through these encounters?

**HM:** People who stay for some time in such remote locations must, with a very elementary vitality, be able to give up everything that makes no sense there.

**KDJ:** When you and Piene founded the ZERO movement, you were best known for metal constructions that reflected light. Now, 55 years later, your works burst with color. What happened?

**HM:** There is a sensual polychromy in some of my new paintings. Color constellations enter into dynamic relationships and effect harmonic structures, dematerialized by the aura of the colored light. My colors are luminous colors.

**KDJ:** In the desert, the light is very strong, and I can imagine that its strength influences your physical condition. Is light mainly a visual experience, or are your other senses involved, too?

**HM:** All senses react equally to the light, extreme heat, borderless space, and timeless time, to the absence of all conceivable odors, to extreme drought, and to extreme silence, sometimes stirred up by the music of the wind.

**KDJ:** Light determines the rhythms of the day: you get up with the sun, rest when the sun is strongest, sleep when it disappears. Do you consider these cycles of light in your work?

**HM:** My light-reliefs, in particular, change their appearance as the light becomes weaker

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or brighter, when the angle of the incoming light and the angle of the reflected light correspond, when the position of the viewer changes.

**KDJ:** *It seems that you have always been open to "crazy" projects. If you had no physical or financial limitations, what would you try to realize?*

**HM:** Utopian designs generally distance themselves from given reality, and it is assumed that this romantic remoteness implies a worldview. In the end, however, all utopias are oriented toward a paradise. Even when this is only a projection, only a dream, it is at least already anticipated as a last possibility.

Maybe the best dreams are those that question their realization. As long as those dreams do not have a place, a time, or borders, they are closer to paradise than any attempt to materialize and realize the immaterial, untouchable, indescribable, inexplicable, unimaginable,

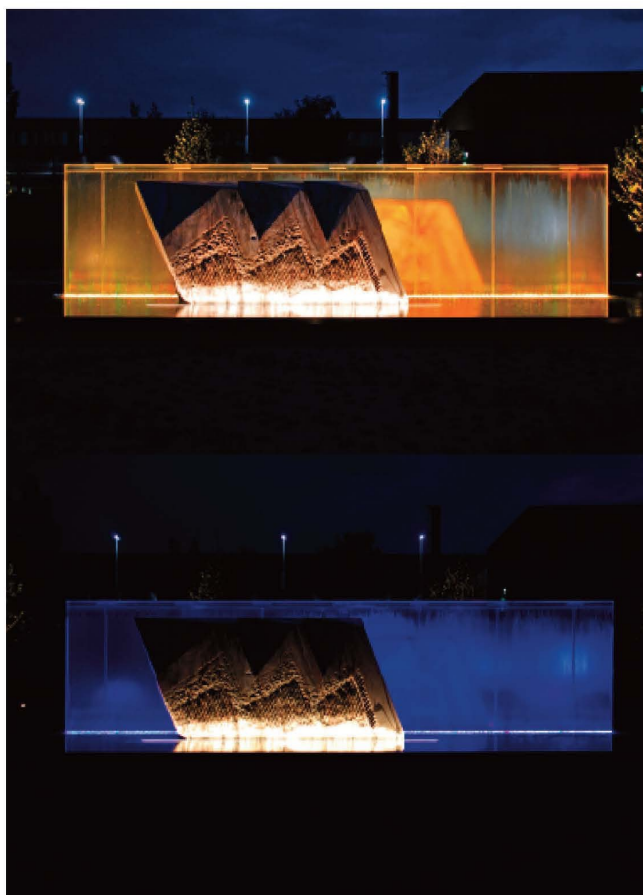
Right: *Fire crest*, 1975. Rendering for an unrealized project.  
Below: *Vier Stein-Stelen (Four Stone Steles)*, 1995. Black granite, 4 elements, approx. 340 x 60 x 90 cm. each.



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*Stone Water Glass Sculpture*, 2007. Marble, Perspex, water, and lighting, 3.2 x 20 x 10 cm. 2 views of work installed at Santander Consumer Bank AG, Mönchengladbach.

unattainable. Because none of my actions met these demands, they remained utopian ideas, particularly the idea to project a large light-spectrum on an ice surface through a large prism, possibly close to the South Pole.

For some time, a totally different idea seemed to be realizable in the Arctic, but it was thwarted by objections from the Danish Ministry of Defense. I had proposed to create a 300-meter-long, but not very deep, slit on a large piece of floating ice, using a snow blower. From a helicopter, this slit was to be filled with paraffin and petrol, which would be ignited at dusk.

**SG:** As an artist you use very diverse materials and techniques. In addition to phosphorus pictures and fire sculptures, light pillars, rotors, reliefs, and cubes, you have also made monumental stone sculptures. You use Plexiglas, aluminum, and wood, even oil paint. What are your criteria for choosing specific materials?

**HM:** They might correspond to ideas, maybe to materials. Often the material evokes my ideas—one has to understand the language of the material to be able to speak with it.

**KDJ:** Sometimes your works seem quite “playful,” though you deal with serious topics. Does this playfulness reflect your ideas about life?

**HM:** It is about the aesthetics of Friedrich Schiller, who said that the playing man is the human man. In play, guilt and atonement are worked through without tragedy.

**KDJ:** Why are your works frequently structured through a grid?

**HM:** During the time of ZERO, I tried to replace composition with structure (the grid) in order to get clear, vibrating energy fields similar to those which emerge in scanning electron microscopes. In my later work, the visible spectrum replaced white and black and their continuous serial dialogue. This approached Goethe, who reconciles observing thoughts and thoughtful observation. The concept of beauty as a metaphor of order and vital harmony can be perceived by the senses only in painting.

**KDJ:** The experience of creating your light stelae in the desert must have been very different from seeing them placed in the German countryside. How does location influence the experience of your work?

**HM:** The particular space and the various positions within that space influence perception, just as they affect the visibility of objects in space. Every space has its own light, its own dimension, and its own time.

**KDJ:** *Raumspiegel* (Space-mirror), which you made for Oman, mirrors its location, changing—maybe “expanding”—space. What is the relation between light and space?

**HM:** They are interdependent. You know it is a very complex relationship when a physicist like Stephen Hawking describes it by quoting Einstein who, in his later years, declared, like Galileo: “For the rest of my life, I will reflect on what light is.”

**SG:** In Bregenz, Austria, you recently exhibited the *Japanische Trias* (1970), which are three of your rotors. You made the first of these works in 1959. How did they develop?

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**HM:** Rotors are dynamic, kinetic objects. I developed them to overcome the static state of the artwork. The influence of Duchamp, who in my opinion is greatly overrated, reached me through his colored, visually illusory works. My rotors are suns or clocks, but they don't indicate time. Their continuous movement shows their own immanent ritual, the way we turn in a dance or the wind forms a spiral. And there are a hundred more characteristics, of course.

**SG:** *in the 1950s, you studied fine art at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and philosophy in Cologne. What brought you to philosophy, and how did you incorporate it into your work?*

**HM:** A child of the war, I was sufficiently familiar with dread, fear, confrontations with nothingness, "being-toward-death," and other basic existential experiences. To understand them philosophically, I turned to Camus's *The Rebel*, as well as Sartre and Kafka.

At university, in addition to required reading such as Aristotle, I focused on the ontology of Nicolai Hartmann. He started with Husserl's phenomenology and developed a metaphysics in which the timeless being of classical ontology becomes an abstraction and no longer an absolutely essential, universal, perfect being only reflected by objects and things. I believe that Hartmann developed a kind of theory of relativity in metaphysics in which the absolute is no longer conceivable.

Naturally, the light-based mysticism of Plotinus is of great interest to me. Dionysius the Areopagite had similar views, and he gives me food for thought. The speeches of Buddha, which impressed me as a school-boy, might be sermons, but they are imbued with deep philosophical insight and great wisdom. I have also been influenced by the sincerity with which Seneca reveals his practical worldly knowledge.

**SG:** *From 1953 to 1998, you worked on the "Silverlicht" ("Silverlight") series, which is a chemically produced documentation of light on photographic paper. What have you learned from these works?*

**HM:** These black and white photographs and photographs reveal the original artistic fascination with the phenomenon of light. I have used the black and white medium of the photo-technical reaction as an instrument to develop sculpture—silver belongs to the chemistry of a photograph. Moments from reality and an enhanced perception of everyday objects inspired the expansion of artistic media. So the black and white recording—now already obsolete—of my own work becomes the most accurate representation of my artistic intention.

*Sarah Gold and Karlyn De Jogh are curators of the "Personal Structures" series of exhibitions.*

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Above: *Karo-Stele (Chequered Stele)*, 2000. Embossed anodized aluminum, brass, and wood, 600 x 25 x 25 cm. Below: *Silver Doublerotor (Entwurf 61)*, 1998. Aluminum, wood, glass, and steel, 155 x 307 x 24 cm., motor base: 70 x 152 x 28 cm.

