PRESSBOOK

Heinz MACK

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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.
Sarah Gold: I now state, “Light is the limit of the possibilities.” Was due 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 — moonlight, light, created on the night when the city of Arles 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 act upon like pictures.” What were your ideas then and have you been able to express them to your satisfaction?

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

Karlyn De Jongh: Macke said that the silence finishes the artwork. In your case, it seems that light finishes the work. What is the relation between the sculpture on a vertical object and the changing, flickering light?

HM: Light enters into the marble when the night leaves and the stone unfolds itself — that is the transformation from material into immaterial appearance.
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KDE: You have said that “light never goes around the corner, it always shines straight ahead.” Light has often been used as a metaphor for knowledge, for truth. You have always raised 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.

KDE: In the 1950s and 60s, you and Elise Pechc attempted various unplan projects. Do you think that any of them have a chance of being realized? Is it possible to change life through art?

HM: Kefa’s poem about the line contains the line, “the light is a rich yellow.” (“You must change your life.”). No one knows the parameters of abacles or of the unknown spheres that we dream to enter without crossing the diabolic border between being and not being. But our bold expectations, our waking dreams, our ideas, and our actions will still remain, and eventually betray themselves because we are willing to entrust our work to the confused inventory of the world. Cultural institutions, thought to protect our interests, demonstrate the unchanging nature of circuits. Do attempts mislead us, and only sponsor their destruction? Here is one of my favorite lines from Eccles. “Only he who is awake, can report his dreams.”

KDE: You often work with window materials, giving yourself a material surface similar to that of your window. How do you view the relationship between yourself and your work?

HM: My vision of aluminum smog was no costumes, they complied with my desire not to enter the spaces of the desert and the Arctic in casuals, but still dress. Besides, aluminum is ideally suited to reflecting not only light, but also heat.

KDE: In the 1970s, you stood some of your light sculpture in the Tunisian desert. They look like beautiful foma elements in photographs. Lenses of air at different temperatures charged the “shape” of the element you created there. So, light does not always connect with “truth,” sometimes it creates illusions. What were the optical illusions you play with your work?


Below: Lightinfusion, 2006. Aluminum, Perspex, and stainless steel, 1 meter, 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 description?
HM: My Sahara-based work was documented in "Eclipses 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 any historical category.

KL: You did several projects in which your light stations are the only "points" on the horizon. The vertical lines of your "rotten poles" reflecting light, land, and sky are the only things intersecting a vast landscape. Why did you choose the rotten form?
HM: I have always avoided figurative sculpture, but the stelae remain a last formulation of men, standing upright—archetypal figures in the sky. To me, the Greek grave stone is the vertical counterpart of the horizontal grave. The no longer visible, the dead pure and simple, lies under the surface of the earth, adoring to the earth's curvature. The visible, the Abraham-like, that which is not to be consigned to oblivion, stands upright, mediating between sky and earth.

But even earlier, humanity had already erected signs, vertical manifestations, at fixed points in the endless expansion of 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 archetypal, the moral self-evidence of the Renaissance and of the Enlightenment.

Greek stone, Egyptian sculpture of the gods, and the medieval kings of Charlemagne themselves formally, 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 weaving. My stelae also show this same confrontation.

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

KL: When you and Pinto founded the ZERO movement, you were both shown for metal constructions that reflected light. Now, 55 years later, your works are with light. What happened?
HM: There is a sensual psychosensitivity in some of my new paintings. Color constellations enter into dynamic relationships and effect harmonious structures, dematerialized by the aura of the colored light. My colors are luminous colors.

KL: In the desert, the light is very strong. And one imagines that its strength influences your physical condition. Is light likely to influence your physical condition, or is light merely a visual experience, or are you in another season, another, somewhere?
HM: All senses are linked up to the light, extreme heat, borderless space, and timeless time. The absence of all conceivable odors, to extreme dought, and to extreme silence, sometimes stirred up by the music of the wind.

KL: Light determines the rhythm 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, where the position of the viewer changes.

KDE: It seems that you have always been open to “impossible” subjects. If you had no physical or financial limitations, what would you try to realize?

H.J.: Utopian designs generally distance themselves from given reality; it is assumed that this romanticism represents a worldview. In the end, however, 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, intangible, indescribable, inexplicable, unimaginable,

Right: Fire (next, 2011). Rendering for an unrealized project.
Below: River Stone Stone (River Stone Stone), 2010. Block granite, 4 elements, approx. 30 x 30 x 60 cm, each.
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 500-meter-long, but not very deep, slit on a large piece of floating ice, using a snow blower. From a helicopter, the 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 photogram pictures and fire sculptures, light pillars, rotors, relics, and cubes, you have also made monumental stone sculptures. You use Marbled, 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 works my ideas—one has to understand the language of the material to be able to speak with it.

KG: Sometimes your works were quite "playful," though you deal with serious topics. How does this strategy influence 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 shame are worked through without tragic consequences.

KG: Why are your works (literally) sometimes通过 a grid?

HM: During the time of ZERO, I tried to replace composition with structure (the grid) in order to get clear, isolating energy fields similar to those which emerge in scanning electron microscopes. In my later work, the vast spectrum replaced white and black and their continuous visual dialogue. This approached Gottleib, who renounced 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.

KG: What is the experience of creating your light shows in the desert most have been very different from using 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.

KG: Euphrosyn (Space-Mirror), which you made for Oman, shows its location changing—maybe "evolving"—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 Europe, Asia, you recently created the Japanese Trias (1959), which are three of your works. You made the first of these works in 1959. How did they develop?
HMA: Rotors are dynamic, kinetic objects. I developed them to overthrow 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 not clocks or clocks, but they don’t indicate time. Their continuous movement shows their own inherent rhythm, 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 1970s, you worked for a bit on the famous Dietrich-Driessen philosophy in Cologne. What brought you to philosophy, and how did you incorporate it into your work?

HMA: A child of the war, I was sufficiently familiar with death, fear, confrontations with nonexistence, the “fear of death,” and other basic existential experiences. To understand them philosophically, I turned to Aristotle’s “On the Soul,” as well as St. Newman and Kafka.

At university, in addition to required reading such as Aristotle, focused on the ontology of Nietzsche and Heidegger. I came to understand 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 Heidegger developed a kind of theory of reality in metaphysics in which the absolute is no longer conceivable.

Naturally, the light-based mystery of the cosmos is of great interest to me. Despite the ANU’s ‘secret’ view, the ANU sculpture had similar views, and he gives me food for thought. The speeches of Buddha, which impressed me as a schoolboy, might be sermons, but they are imbued with deep philosophical insight and great wisdom. I have also been influenced by the spirituality with which Seneca reveals his practical worldly knowledge.

SG: From 1993 to 1998, you worked on the “Silent Light” series, which is a chemically produced documentation of light on photographic paper. What have you learned from these works?

HMA: These black and white photographs and photograms reveal the original artistic fascination with the phenomenon of light. I have used the black and white medium of the photographic reaction as an instrument to develop sculpture—silver belongs to the chemistry of a photograph. Elements from reality and an enhanced perception of everyday objects inspire the creation 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 Jogn are curators of the “Personal Structures” series of exhibitions.