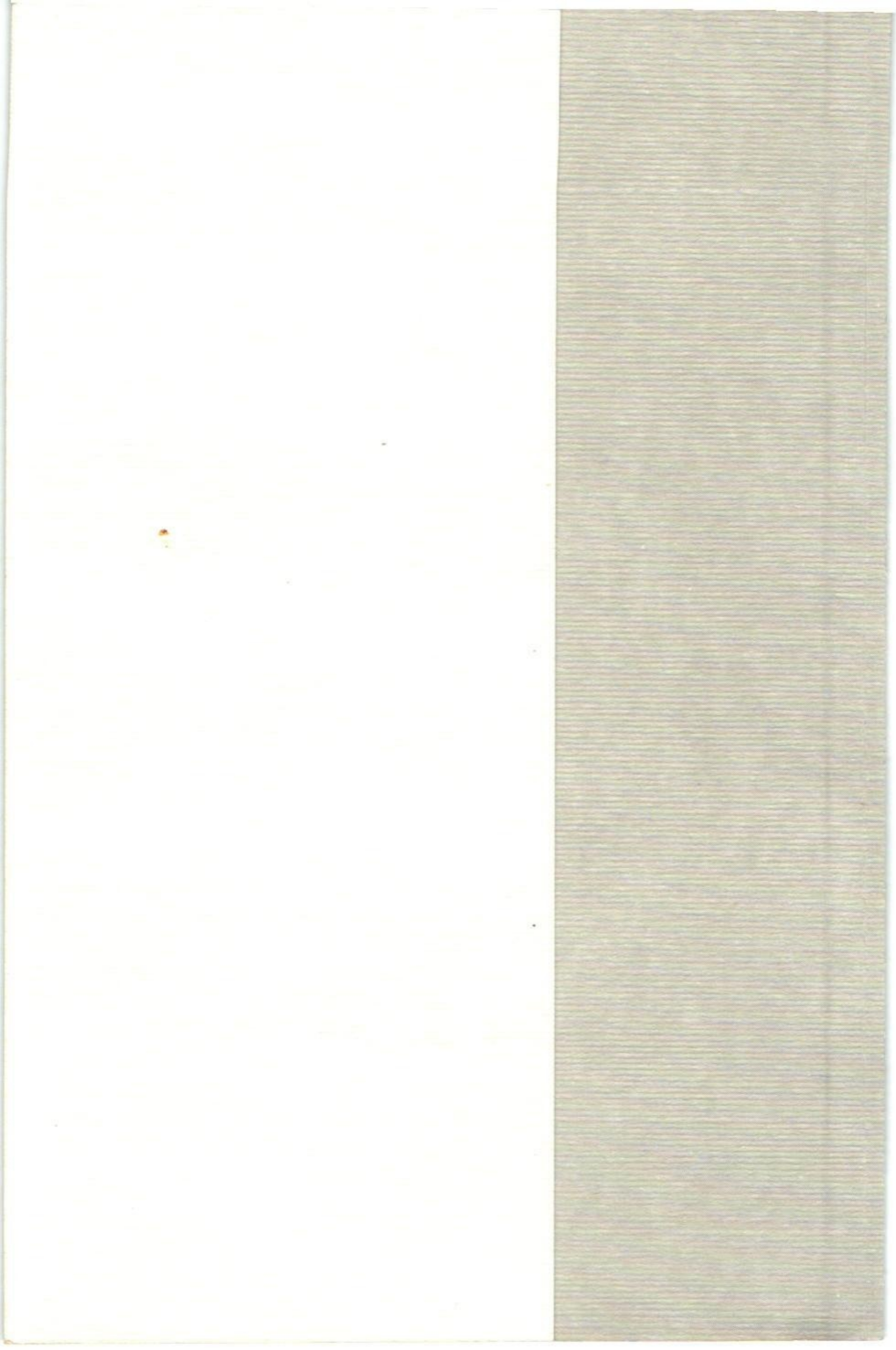


THE LEARNING PHOTOGRAPHER

Scholarly texts
on Hans Georg Berger's art work
in Laos and Iran

ANANTHA PUBLISHING

Luang Prabang



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HANS GEORG BERGER is a photographer and writer born in 1951 in Trier, Germany. From 1988 his photographic work focuses on world religions, including Theravada Buddhism in Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, and Shi'ite Islam in Iran. These projects embody what Berger describes as an aesthetic of "community involvement" which is in part inspired by the teachings of Joseph Beuys. As Berger has written, this aesthetic "explores borderlines, plays with contradictions, and incorporates into art the flow – or even the inexistence – of what we call 'I'". More specifically, this method posits the artist as an outsider who seeks to blend in with the community he desires to represent. Towards this end, the artist strives to bracket his artistic autonomy by inviting the community to teach him where to look, what to portray and how to portray it.

Goethe's definition of a subtle process of "learning by doing" that, by virtue of its high identification with a subject, finally becomes a theory may well apply to Hans Georg Berger's specific method of art work. The four essays and two interviews assembled in this book explore Berger's artistic experiences in Laos and Iran. An anthropologist, a critic of photography, an ethnologist, an urbanist and two fellow writers investigate the radical nature of his reconsideration of the relationship between artist and subject.

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„Es gibt eine sanfte Empirie,
die sich mit dem Gegenstand
innigst identisch macht
und dadurch
zur eigentlichen Theorie wird.“

Goethe



LOOKING THROUGH THE OTHER'S EYES

Francesco Paolo Campione



ຫ້າມຈໍາໜ່າຍ



In photography more than in any other form of visual art, the freedom to create new images is dictated by the contingencies of the solid materiality of things and by the rules of optics. Through the application of a series of criteria for interpretation, both technical and conceptual, the photographer focuses his attention on a large or small detail of the overall visual field, underlining, a priori, its conceptual and aesthetic relevance. Deciding from what angle to photograph, choosing what to focus on and controlling light, he brings into being formal hypotheses that come from him as an individual. Selecting his images from the infinite number of solutions possible within space, simplifying them from the complicated vastness of the landscapes, his intention is to give back significant images to the world. The reality that he represents is our own immediate reality, but, at the same time, his creative act expresses an attempt to explore the universe with all the other possible realities open to the human mind. The photographer cannot, in other words, create from nothing. In some way, he enriches his pre-chosen detail, adding something to make up for the context from which he has extracted the detail. Once his image has been framed, his selected piece of the world can show us details that in the whole original context were confused or indistinct. The ability of the photographer, perhaps his art, depends, therefore, for the most part, on the added value that his subjective interpretation of the world confers on the photograph, when he offers it to the observer, taking him beyond the simple empathy he has built up with his object. What the photograph cannot do is, by definition, cut off from what it is representing - if the photograph does itself risks becoming something it is not.

The interpretive choice of the photographer, whether it be intentional or unintentional, frees up a multitude of circumstances and values that are latent in the subject to be photographed. If the photograph is not stylized or abstract, if it retains some reference to material reality, it can become an efficient vehicle to narrate the everyday and to explain cultural and historical facts; it can recall to mind symbols and archetypes, it can describe a personal or collective condition, it can excite emotions, affections and memories. The manifestation of what is latent,

is realized in virtue of the ideological coincidence that exists between the value system of the person who represents, and the system of collective meanings assigned to the object represented. Subjective values and shared collective meanings can be of a universal or a more particular nature. In the first case, the interpretive capacity of the photographer can operate regardless of the cultural conditions in which he expresses himself, realizing itself in a conceptual dimension that is philosophical in character, that has, as its first point of reference the aesthetically relevant question of style. In the second case, the photograph as the representative of a certain ethos has relevance only if it is conceived with a deep respect for the rules of the culture and, in this specific case, the functional interaction of the three main anthropological elements at play: the subject/photographer, the object/culture photographed, the observer/end receiver of the product of the subject/object dialectic.

If the photographer, what is photographed and the observer of the image belong to the same culture, the problem (efficacy) of communication is limited to personal differences in interpretation and, in particular to the capacity of the subject to interpret reality and the ability of the observer to perceive the peculiarities of the object depicted. But this is only one possible case. When a photographer takes pictures of people and cultures, he may not be part of the culture he is depicting. In turn, the image depicted may be observed by individuals who share the same culture as the photographer, but not the culture photographed, or by individuals who are part of the culture photographed, but not that of the photographer, or even by individuals who belong to a third culture. It is clear that the perception of the meaning and values of the same image are different, indeed very different, according to the various possible cultural combinations of subject-object-observer.

Western photographers have often taken and continue to take numerous pictures that have "the Other" as their subject, and have then put these forward for examination by their compatriots. In the majority of cases this has been done regardless of the effective

capacity to interpret the object shown, and without paying particular attention to the culture of the observing public. Those who have photographed "the Other" and his culture, have often done so in order to document diversities in lifestyle, and these images have made their way into the archives of museums of ethnology. Otherwise, equally often, western photographers have taken pictures of other cultures to show to fellow western observers the fascination of the exotic and marvelous: to evoke, that is, feelings and memories that in fact have little to do with the subject and end up misting rather than clarifying the image of the subject and his culture. In consequence, photographs of other cultures have been and continue to be, for the most part, an excuse to communicate phenomenological universes of the subject and the observer to the detriment of the real capacity to interpret the formal and structural data of the object represented. In this way, if from an ethical and cultural point of view, we have got into the negative tendency of emphasizing the ethnocentrism of non interpreted records, from the creative point of view, we have let go of the conditions that allow the artist to harmonize the object represented with his own subjective interpretation of the world, which in turn prevents the image from expressing emotions, meanings and values.

The photographic works of Hans Georg Berger are a happy exception to the usual way in which western artists represent other cultures and are, in our opinion, a comforting sign of true ethical and intellectual progress. Berger spent many years in Luang Prabang, learnt the Lao and Pali languages, lived with the monks in order to better understand the deep sense of the existential and spiritual experience of those living in the over sixty monasteries that still exist there. His images are the deliberate outcome of a long period of research, inspired by the desire to understand others and to intimately understand their reasoning.

None of the over fourteen thousand photographs taken in Luang Prabang by Hans Georg Berger were created by coincidence. Every occasion to depict reality was first studied for its human and spiritual meanings, for its ritual significance, for its conceptual

and aesthetic dimension, for how it fitted in a particular dynamic of space. The preparation of each image was accompanied by discussions with various people, where each person was allowed to freely express his or her point of view, to give a more precise sense of vision and light to the shot. The photographer has never forced the timing or the pose pre-chosen by the person to be photographed; he has never interfered in the process of the positioning of the individual in space. Every shot and every position of the camera was discussed and agreed upon with the older monks in the community of the city and with the person who was to appear in the photograph. In this manner, the representation of reality became an occasion for meditation, not only for the photographer, but also for those who, as part of the image began to ask themselves questions about the values of their own identity.

Hans Berger's interpretive choices, the reasons that made him choose the forms and sequences to which he has reduced the infinity of choices of how to depict the universe, make up part of a pathway of knowledge and initiation. Berger has metaphorically explored the pathways of Lao culture, learning to walk, on tiptoe, in a new ideological space and reflect back its essence, in the complexity of its rules and relationships. Taken together, Berger's images make up a true and real cognitive universe: if they are put next to one another they define, almost physically, the area in which he moved to acquire knowledge. From his centre of gravity made up of his willingness to understand others and their beliefs, he set off daily along different roads, to return, before sunset, within himself, internally enriched. Whenever he found obstacles to overcome, he returned, often several times, until he was able to take the next step or give up his ambition, humbly realizing that he was not going to be able to carry out his plan. With time he began to feel at home with the reality of representation and began to compose the paragraphs of his ethnological treatise without words. The problem of the fruition of his work was resolved by Berger in the only way possible. He took his photographs for the monks of Luang Prabang: for the only people, in the end, capable of judging the harmony of the contents of the photographs and the congruity with which the different paragraphs made up

the whole of his treatise. By doing this, Berger carried out a surprising symbolic inversion. By constantly trying to put forward in harmony the real meanings of the object and the values expressed by the observers, he clearly defined the subject, that is himself, in the role of "the Other" and in consequence consciously worked to overcome his condition of exclusion. He recognized the universality of cultures, starting out from a consideration of his own diversity, not of the diversity of others, and he made this into an opportunity for inner growth and a chance to improve the dialogue between different populations. The best proof of the validity of his assumptions is the fact that the monks of Luang Prabang keep his photographs among their few personal effects, that they use them for reflection and introspective meditation. They take spiritual advantage of what Berger's photographs represent.

If the main *raison d'être* of Berger's work is the substantial unity that runs between the object represented and the public for which it was conceived, to put them on show outside Laos is an arbitrary operation, which weakens one of their essential values: their capacity to hermetically express the meanings of a culture, and so to permit the observer of the image to recognize himself or herself in the value systems of the object represented. But on the other hand, it is exactly the capacity to not ideologically interfere in the process of building up the images, that has allowed Berger to reach a second, and even more important result: that of harmoniously connecting the beliefs of "the Other" with his own spiritual growth. This is, in our opinion, a result of paramount importance that places Berger's work amongst the highest moral creations worthy of consideration, both from a philosophical and a doctrinal point of view. It seemed opportune therefore, in agreement with the author, to imagine the organization of an exhibition organized at the Museo d'Arte Siamese, in Cagliari/Italy, in 2001, in terms of the journey of initiation of a young novice monk: from the moment when, dressed in his white habit, he leaves the house of his family to that when, at the end of his journey towards maturity, he is depicted with the signs of his newly acquired status. The experience of the monastic life, just like the existential experiences of each of us, is marked by a series of passages,

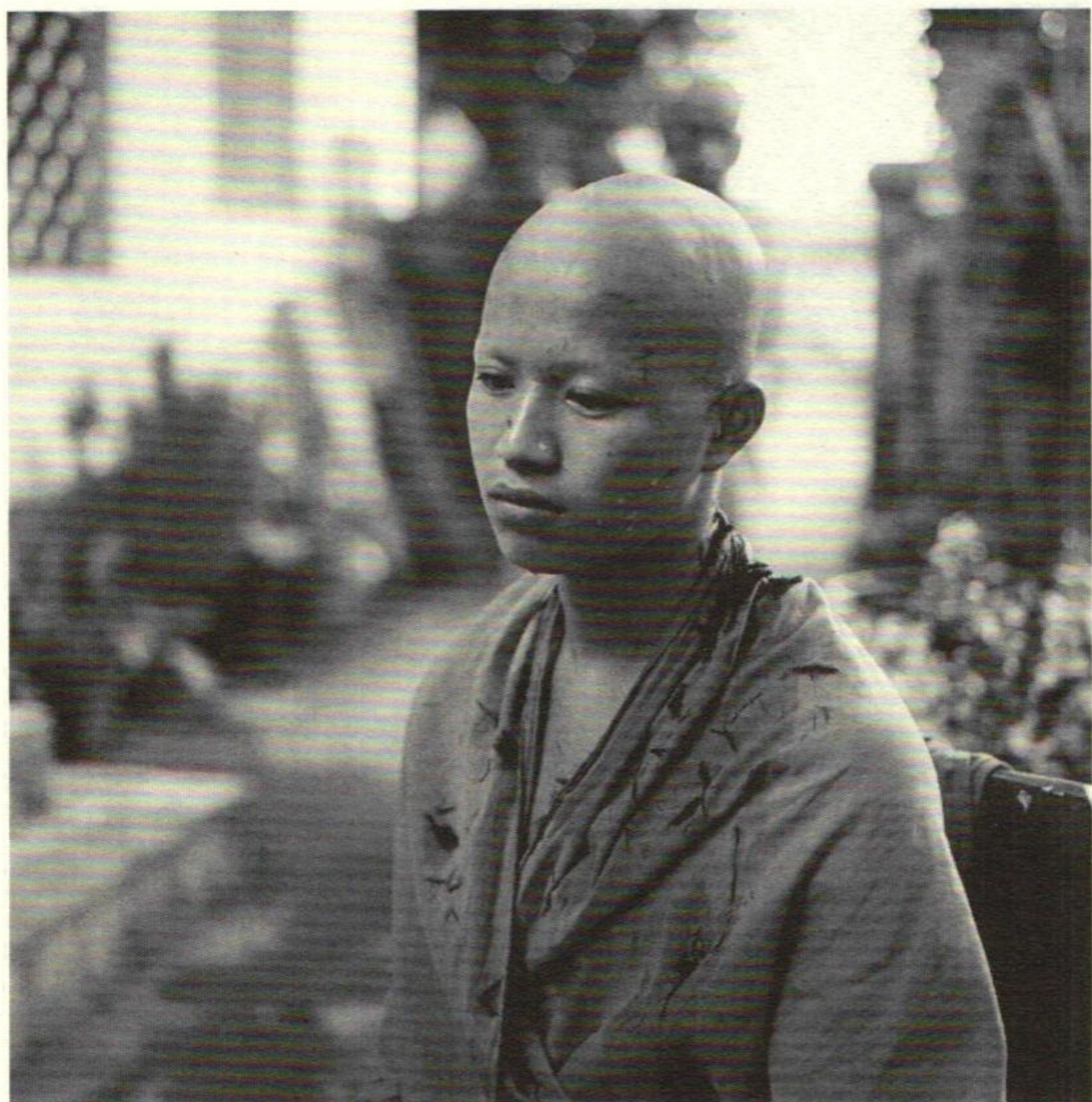
every one of which carries with it the meanings and values of deepest ritual. The novice who has come to the end of his journey represents a man able to elevate his interior faculties to a higher spiritual level.

The images are the portraits, more often the symbols and archetypes, of the reality that we discover every day with new eyes, if we are able to progress along the road to consciousness. They represent natural physiognomies able to project themselves in a space that transcends the physicality of things, where the temporal dimension and the materiality of history fade, until they become abstract forms that send the observer to a universal heritage of philosophical and existential reflections that unite him with the artist and with the people depicted in his portraits.

For the monks of Luang Prabang, Hans Georg Berger's photographs are elevated expressions of the spiritual beauty of the world and, in as much, precious works of art able to increase the joy of being. For all of us, I hope, they can represent a special opportunity to walk along the paths of tolerance, accompanied by the ineffable trace of beauty.

(2001)





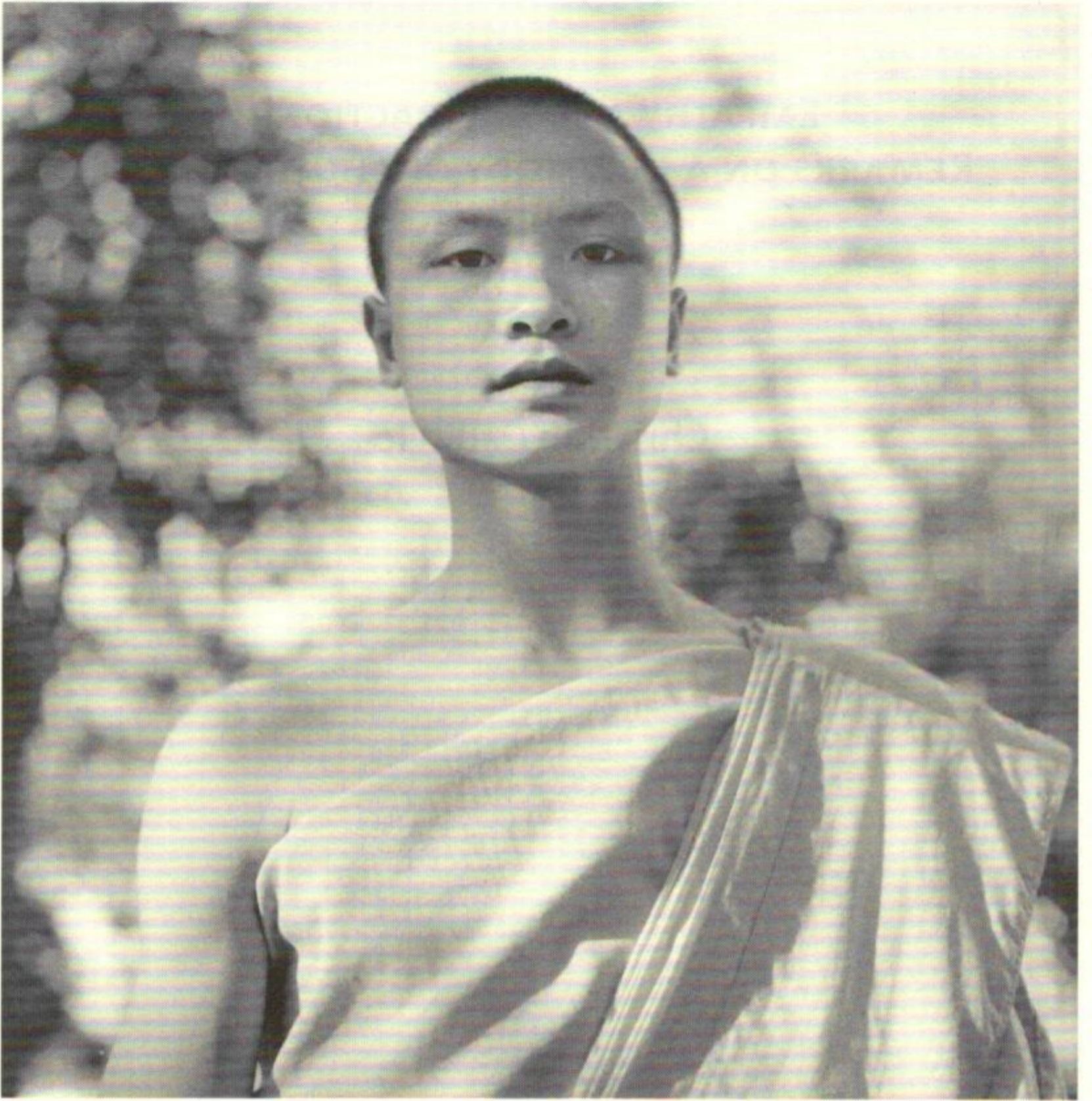
EMPATHY AND ABSTRACTION.
REMARKS ON A NEW BODY OF PHOTOGRAPHS
FROM LAOS

Christian Caujolle



24 / VII

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If I can be forgiven the analogy - which will seem out of place in the context of these Buddhist lands - anyone fortunate enough to have visited and stayed in Luang Prabang will have experienced something akin to what Catholics commonly refer to as Paradise. If Paradise exists anywhere on earth, it may well be found on the banks of the Mekong, where understated beauty combines with the abiding charm derived from meeting the gentle monks and visiting the ever beautiful temples with their open courtyards, which always hold their share of surprise. One must witness, at dusk, the groups of orange-robed novices with their black umbrellas, follow the road that skirts the Mekong en route to pray with the eldest monks, to understand the extent to which - in a completely natural way - this particular culture's aesthetics, discipline, philosophy, relations with others and religion all combine to enable man, who is not wise at all, to become that little bit wiser.

These sentiments, based on my regrettably brief visits to Luang Prabang, are rekindled as I look through the photographs that Hans Georg Berger brought back from his many and prolonged stays in Luang Prabang. In his square-shaped images, which document both temple life and key moments of religious festivals relating to the seasons, the elements, the ever present water and moments of prayer, I rediscover the overwhelming sense of peace that I experienced upon arrival in this city. The deportment of the locals - the slow gestures, the distinctive way they carry themselves and the display of mutual respect shown for each other - personify peace and contentment.

What strikes me as significant is that this long work of visual investigation was carried out at the very time when, in Laos, Buddhism is enjoying an exemplary revival. During this revival, hundreds of young people learn from their elders, who have preserved intact the memory and practice of a religion oblivious to masochism, the essence of an altruistic philosophy. From this perspective, Hans Georg Berger's work constitutes an irreplaceable document.

The work's greatest value, however, derives from the fact that, by being accessible to Laotian schoolchildren in a schoolbook

format, it will enable those children to acquaint themselves with their country's culture and tradition after many years during which the teaching of those subjects had been banned. In my view, this surpasses even the quality of the work.

The square format of the photographs adds to the impression of poise that one gets from surveying this work. The work records in black and white the variations of light on both subjects and locations. It is, at first glance, documentary in nature, giving shape to and recording the activities that occur during the year, and enhancing our knowledge in the process. In this approach to photography, which has yielded a unique corpus, there is a marked humility that has its origins in both the locations and the subjects of the photographs. This oeuvre reminds us of two things. Firstly that if you want to achieve quality in photography, you have to consider time as a partner. Secondly, it brings to mind the current developments in a genre of photography, scorned for a long time, that has been called, rather condescendingly, 'ethnographic photography'. It is remarkable to note the extent to which, by refusing to restrict themselves exclusively to a descriptive point of view - even while continuing to be documentary - a small number of authors, in the last five years, has revived this genre. In the 1930s and at the time of the great ethnological missions, the practice of photography consisted mainly in creating records to be taken back as testimony and as objects to be studied (compare the plundering of statues or ritual objects). This contrasts with a 'new' ethnographic photography, which has chosen a different set of objectives. This kind of photography is respectful, seeking both to describe and to understand. To this end, it eschews, vis-à-vis its subject, an outside stance so as to convey not so much the subject's difference or otherness but, rather, its internal coherence, logic and lines of force. Such a project implies a rigor of form, which can sometimes be repetitive, and an absence of spectacular views. Berger's choice of the square format supports such a calm and respectful approach, and sets down precise choices of the distances from which the photographer views his subject. The photographer, though an outsider, tries to blend in with the community as much as possible in order not to disturb the unfolding of events

to which he has been granted access. The optimal distance will be that from which the photographer can reproduce the unfolding events without exaggerating them, which he will occasionally translate into sequences or series. The choice of black and white not only avoids the pitfalls of glossy exoticism, but also evokes an ambience that makes us aware of the all-pervading harmony in which everything is bathed. In these images, we follow the profoundly rich traditions that the inhabitants and monks of the old capital of the 'kingdom of a million elephants and the white umbrella' have preserved: from the ordination of monks to funerary rites; from the rowing festival to the rites of newborn babies.

In this collective memoir, formed over five years of campaigning shots, we must look separately at two discrete sets of images. First, there are the documentary images relating to the architecture, objects of ritual and manuscripts written on palm leaves. These constitute a remarkable set of images which, together with the current restoration work taking place in the city, will protect a priceless cultural heritage against disappearing.

Second, there is the set of images, perhaps the richest part of the oeuvre, which consist of posed portraits - of individuals and groups alike - often taken during key moments of religious life. In these calm one-to-ones, a rare thing in portraiture, there is a surprising relationship of equality between the individuals on either side of the camera, which makes it difficult to use the formulaic phrase, to 'take' a photograph. Rather, one has the impression that, between the photographer and his subjects, the usual situation of confrontation is substituted by an exchange where the people on both sides of the camera freely give to each other whatever they have.

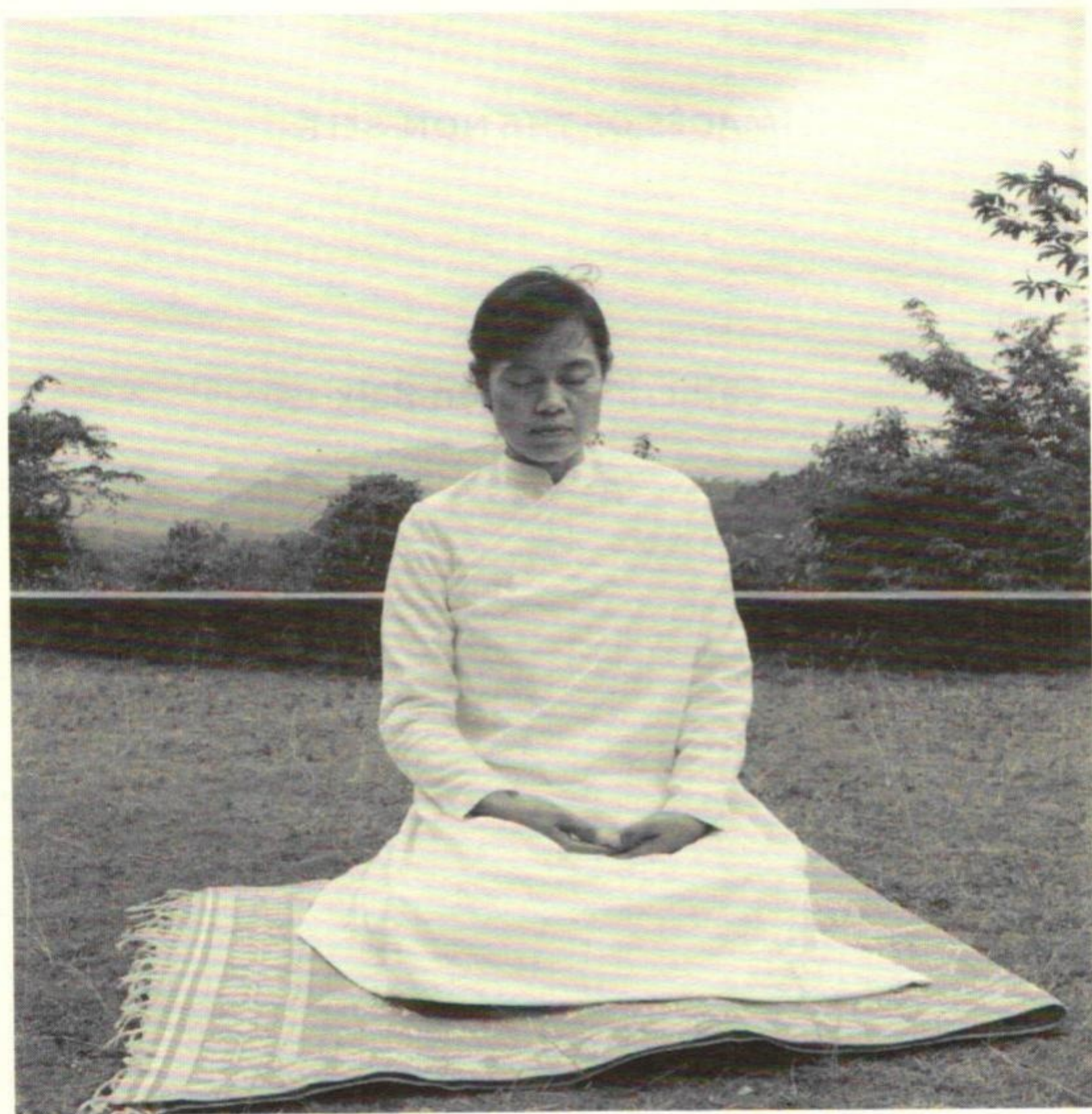
One remarkable achievement of Berger's work on the sacred rituals of Luang Prabang is to remind us that these traditions, long preserved by memory before being captured by photography, are above all founded on the principle of mutual respect.

(1999)



IMAGES OF THE NON-SELF

Catherine Choron-Baix



Can photography be both an artistic and at the same time a documentary medium? This question, a highly controversial one in the social sciences in particular, elicits very different responses. Hans Georg Berger, who has made a speciality of photographic portraits in a wide range of cultural and social contexts, considers the question somewhat irrelevant and artificial. The work of this "photographer and writer", as he describes himself, straddles the frontiers between various disciplines and cannot be labelled as falling within any one category. Involving both artistry and documentation, it combines two approaches which underpin each other and defy academic categorisation.

Hans Georg Berger sees photography as a means of communication between an author and his subjects, a means of establishing mutual acquaintance, a process of reciprocal discovery, generating a collective rather than an individual opus. This is one of his principles, which presupposes a special relationship between the photographer and his subjects and the participation of the latter in the photographic process, or "community involvement", as he calls it. Hans believes that the photographer should immerse himself in the life of his subjects and be receptive to their habits and practices so as to encourage their active participation in the creative process. "The photographer, who is an outsider, seeks to blend in with the community he seeks to photograph to avoid disturbing the unfolding of activities to which the community has given him access. Toward this end, the photographer brackets his own artistic vision by inviting the community to teach him where to look, what to portray, and how to portray it".¹ Mimesis and receptiveness, giving expression to the point of view of the subject in the creative act, these form the basis of Hans Georg Berger's work, which thus involves the interaction with an environment that is characteristic of site-specific art or "art in situ" as Raymonde Moulin calls it,² but which also singularly reflects the epistemological and deontological approach of ethnology. Hans Georg Berger sees photography as involving a meeting of cultures that requires ways of achieving mutual comprehension similar to the methods of ethnography and its model of participatory observation, and he claims a shared authority for the works whose idea is tending to prevail in anthropological writing today. For him, therefore, the

pursuit of knowledge is embedded in the artistic enterprise. Indeed, it is a precondition for it: without this connivence with the subject, the image cannot be "right", it cannot be "beautiful".

This view of photography as ethnography is of course the cumulative result of evolving intellectual and artistic ideas over a lifetime's work. Extensive stays in various parts of the world and the close contacts he developed with local communities gradually transformed Hans Georg Berger's approach to his work: far from being mutually exclusive, the cognitive and the sensory in his photographs combine in a creative act which he seeks to accomplish with the complicity of his subjects.

While this amalgamation of the methods of the photographer and those of the ethnographer deserves closer consideration, what is even more striking in Hans Georg Berger's approach is the heuristic function of empathy, and the balance between the reflective and the sensual, between the subjective and the objective - or objectivity -, between the particular and the general in the photographic process.

Hans Georg Berger's development as a "photographer and writer"

Hans Georg Berger was born in Germany in 1951 and studied comparative religion and drama there. He was the director of the Munich Theatre Festival from 1977 to 1983 and the co-founder, with the composer Hans Werner Henze, of the Münchner Biennale music theatre festival. It was also during this period that he developed an interest in photography, which he sees as an excellent means of developing closer relationships with those around him. He was strongly influenced by the writings of Roland Barthes and was a close friend of Hervé Guibert, with whom he published a work that combined text and images in 1988,³ and during this period he first developed the idea of the photographic portrait as a collaborative process between the photographer and his subjects. His collaboration with Joseph Beuys, in 1975, greatly influenced his conception of art. This view of art became for him an integral part of life which he has consistently applied in his work.

In 1988, he began to explore, through photography, the world of religion in which he had always been interested. He embarked on a series of long-term photography projects involving world religions, including Theravada Buddhism in Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, as well as Shi'ite Islam in Iran. These projects embodied his conception of "community involvement," particularly in Luang Prabang, the former royal capital of Laos, where, between 1994 and 1998, with the assistance and involvement of the city's people, he documented Luang Prabang's sacred rituals and monastic life. His black-and-white photographs of local architecture, ritual objects and festivals, and his posed portraits of monks, nuns and novices were subsequently displayed in nine of the city's sacred sites and published in a book which appeared in 2000.⁴

This first investigation of the world of spirituality through photographic images prompted him to continue along this path. In 2004 and 2005, he travelled to Iran and was accepted at a number of Quranic universities normally closed to non-Muslims, at Mashhad, Qom and Isfahan. There, he photographed and videoed the forms and methods of study of Shi'ite Islam. "Photography in my concept is part of a process of communication (...)", he explained. "I use photography as a tool to get acquainted with people (...). The camera forces me to concentrate on what can be seen in its frame, and photographic images I produce give me and the people I am working with a rather solid base from which to start a discussion of contents, meaning, judgements and, finally, truth".

During this period, he returned to Luang Prabang, where he embarked on a new project which occupied him until 2006. He participated in an art and education programme⁵ which provided logistical and financial support for the organisation, on the initiative of the town's religious authorities, of training in Vipassana meditation.⁶ The meditation retreat, whose purpose was to initiate the monastic communities of Laos into techniques of introspection and meditation that had been in abeyance for more than thirty years in that country, was intended to revive a Buddhist tradition of achieving increased awareness, dating back more than 2500 years in India, of which Luang Prabang used to be a leading centre in South-East Asia.

The retreat took place at Vat Pa Pon Pao, a "forest temple", on the outskirts of Luang Prabang.⁷ In this sheltered and remote setting, the retreat provided the monks, especially the novices and younger monks, with a refuge from the materialistic values and consumerism to which they are increasingly exposed through the media and the booming tourist industry, to the detriment of monastic discipline. Far removed from urban life and its temptations, this "forest school" provided the sangha⁸ with an appropriate setting for teaching the basic concepts of meditation and Buddhist thought.

Continuing the collaboration begun with him at the beginning of the 1990s, the abbots in charge of training asked Hans to document the retreat in its entirety.⁹ Starting in June 2004, he participated in the preparatory work for the retreat, establishing a sort of preliminary fieldwork comparable to that familiar to ethnographers. He was then present throughout the retreat and photographed each stage in detail. Because, as he explained, "they, rather than myself as an outsider, know the meaning and significance of their actions", he regularly consulted the monks and relied on their knowledge in capturing the images, carrying out the subsequent selection procedure with them. His working method, as he likes to point out, "reverses the usual roles of the photographer as the active, deciding component and of the portrayed as the largely passive component of the communication process codified by the camera." Through the involvement of his subjects in the photographic process, he shares with them what Henri Cartier Bresson calls the decision and, for this purpose, familiarises them with the use of the technical instruments and equipment employed.

Technical equipment at the service of a method

His equipment consists of two cameras whose use he alternates in accordance with the circumstances and his purpose. His main camera is an analogue middle-format Hasselblad, which he prefers for a number of reasons. It is a camera which, he says, makes it impossible to take surprise "snapshots" of people. It promotes collaboration with the monks, who learn how to use it, see them-

selves in the lens and, with him, frame the shot. The Hasselblad also produces square images - the square format is highly characteristic of Buddhist cosmology, art and architecture (a stupa must be set on a square base, for example) - which capture nicely the static and "calm" aspect of the postures of the meditating monks. In using the Hasselblad, he also opted for black and white, reflecting his refusal to pursue easy effects and producing in particular the effect of abstraction which he seeks.¹⁰ The choice of black and white film initially puzzled the monks, who found this rejection of modern technological advances strange, but they eventually came to agree with it. "Colour can be deceptive", one of the senior abbots conceded, agreeing with Hans that black and white, in what is ultimately a "very Buddhist" way, "goes deeper than the surface of things" and reveals the full complexity of reality.

Alongside his analogue camera, in situations where rapid-reaction shots were required, Hans also used a small digital camera to capture the meditation sessions as they unfolded. The colour shots of the various stages of the exercises were later used in the production of a schoolbook, published in ten thousand copies distributed throughout the country by the National Library of Laos.¹¹ Some of these photos were also included, so as to introduce elements of colour and movement, in the black and white series which has been on display at the city's former Royal Palace since October 2006.¹²

A strict method and the avoidance of artifice are thus the guiding principles of Hans Georg Berger's work. He takes care not to intervene in the settings: he never uses artificial light and does not change the positions of those being photographed, except in the case of posed group portraits that have been decided upon with the subjects. He uses 400 ASA film, which makes night or very early morning photography impossible. "I find such limitations of means helpful in my process of creation," he says. "These decisions probably were the most solitary ones I took in the process."

In the same spirit, he adapted to the particularities of the terrain and climate. November and December - the winter months in Laos - are marked by significant variations in temperature and humidity (early morning is humid and quite cold, with rain-like dew in the forest, midday is sunny and hot, the humidity drops

sharply in the afternoon, and fog sets in again before sunset, with the evening coolness). These changes in humidity, light and temperature affect the film and the analogue camera, as do the wind-borne sand and dust. All of this inevitably has an impact on the film and its chemical composition, particularly the gelatine of the negatives, inside the camera box as well as during storage and transport after exposure. Traces of these influences are perceptible in some photos, but Hans regards them as "a token of authenticity" and chose not to delete them from the negatives.

The considerable body of photographs taken during the retreat is thus the result of a calculated approach, based on thoroughly considered processes, and it documents the Vipassana tradition in a way that it had never been documented before.

Photography versus ethnography

Hans Georg Berger provides consistent and systematic coverage of an entire sequence of events making up a meditation retreat and records the various techniques set out in the Sattipattana Sutta, the canonical text that outlines the practice and the meaning of Vipassana.¹³ He has captured, in a totally new way, the everyday life of a forest monastic retreat. His photographs are arranged by theme, reflecting his concern for orderly classification.

One series, for example, is devoted to the objects and accessories used by the monks in their day-to-day lives: alms bowls, saffron robes and meditation parasols with mosquito netting.

Another series records gestures, postures and movements. The meditating monks are photographed standing, sitting, lying, from the front and back, in profile, motionless or in motion, with the whole series forming a complete corpus of Vipassana meditation. Walking, in single file with a group or alone, which represents the concentration exercise par excellence of the Vipassana tradition, is a particular object of study for Hans Georg Berger. He has photographed it in great analytical detail, from the lifting of the foot and its forward movement to its contact with the ground, capturing in each shot both the slowness of the movement and the effort of consciousness which it involves.

As always in Hans Georg Berger's work, portraiture is central and is conceived as a dialogue with his subjects. The photographer never takes his subject by surprise. He seeks, through the photographic process, to establish a relationship. Whether posed or taken in the course of the action, individual or collective, the portraits he took during the retreat are all consensual, "offered", he says, and composed with him, in the personal interchange with him. These faces of monks invoke the invisible face of the photographer. Everything transits through the look exchanged between the photographer and subject. Hans always asked the monks to look at him directly during the shot - "one of the few things I asked of them", he adds. This eye contact reaffirms the interface of which the photographer forms part, it attests to the reality of the exchange.

The 5000 or so photographs taken during the retreat provide a comprehensive record of a Vipassana session, reflecting its natural setting and practical organisation, its human components and interpersonal aspects, its technical arrangements and the sequence of events that make it up. Alone or in groups, against the backdrop of the forest, the monks are shown performing their corporeal and spiritual meditation exercises and their day-to-day activities. The collection of photographs records the perambulations, the controlled movements of the body and the static nature of the postures, with the placing of the hands, the head and the gaze, that accompany the achievement of mental concentration. The photos record for posterity the techniques of an ancient tradition, which was long known only to its adepts and which is now, thanks to them, being made accessible to the wider community. They are therefore of unique documentary value, both to the Lao sangha and to the world of Theravada Buddhism and its experts as a whole.

The "right" image

The photographs do not only have this informative function. They also have the particular virtue of evoking a sensory world, visual but also tactile, almost sonorous and olfactory, immediately

perceptible to the observer. The photographs provide a palpable sense of the thickness of the air or its lightness, the softness of the dead leaves under the feet or the hardness of the stone under the bodies, they let one hear the silence of the forest and sense its rustlings and smells... By thus eliciting non-visual sensations, they recreate a sensory world which projects the viewer into the individual experience of the meditator and that of the photographer alongside him.

Looking at these meditating monks, the observer senses the physical environment in which they are immersed. He senses the weightlessness and calm emptiness which emanate from their motionless bodies. A wave of fleeting or more enduring impressions passes over him, summoning up common cultural representations and personal memories and feelings. These silent faces inevitably evoke that of the Buddha himself. Mirroring the face of the Sage who, in the words of Sloterdijk, became a veritable "nirvanic icon", they are the very image of detachment, of compassion and of a "euphoric emptiness" which promises serenity (2002 : 196). More than a simple and straightforward physical representation, it is this state of "absence of desire", of harmony with nature and of peace which Hans Georg Berger's photographs seek to capture, and it is in this respect that they are artistic.¹⁴ They arouse in the observer an emotion similar to his first esthetic experiences, those experiences which, in the words of Serge Tisseron, open one up to something beyond oneself (2003 : 153). In contemplating these images of Vipassana, the observer has a feeling of transcendence and of attraction to what is hidden "within" or "behind".

This evocative power of his photographs stems, in Hans Georg Berger's view, from their "rightness". "In the course of my decade-long work with the monks of Luang Prabang, I learned that, in the context of the Lao and Buddhist cultures, to be 'right', an image must also be 'beautiful', and vice-versa. Whatever is not right and beautiful cannot bring merit and therefore is of no use in the development of insight-wisdom, which the learned Buddhists seek in order to understand the 'three characteristics of existence': suffering, impermanence and non-self". Hans considers that a right image is one which seeks to capture the very essence of beings and things and concentrates precisely on what the author

is focusing his attention on. A right image is a perfect balance between expertise and intention, and it has the power to bring the observer back to himself, to his own inwardness, and to bring about a transformation within him. It is in this power of communication that its beauty lies.

A permanent record

This way the photographer has of interpreting the meaning of the image reflects the personal, intellectual and emotional input he invests in his work. His portraits of meditating monks reflect not only the physical reality in front of the lens and the invisible atmosphere surrounding him, but also his own psychic reality. They are a reflection of his inner quest and his understanding of Buddhist spirituality.

Hans Georg Berger is familiar with the religious and philosophical concepts underlying Lao Buddhism, and his work with the Luang Prabang sangha is underpinned by this knowledge. Being fully aware of the devotional dimension of the contemplation of images in societies influenced by Indian traditions, he likes for example to refer to the Sanskrit polysemic concept of *darsan* - from the root *drsh*, "to see" - to explain his work. *Darsan*, whose meaning covers religious "seeing", "visual perception of the sacred" and "auspicious sight of the divine", also designates the sort of redeeming aura attributed to the images of temples and holy sites, of renouncers and saints.¹⁵ In the Indian context, as Hans knows, seeing is a sort of touching. The eye which touches the object represented transfers its vitality to the devotee,¹⁶ and, because the eye is "the truth", or *satyam*,¹⁷ it leads to knowledge.

This direct contact, through looking, and this "truth" which it seeks to achieve are precisely what the photographer is looking for. "My photographs", he says, "are a record of a process of communication which seeks to go beyond the frontier of words, (...) a record of the monks' and novices' spiritual development which I witnessed during a highly privileged moment in time among the initiates." His desire to create a permanent record of this personal experience through his images, to contain the object of his emo-

tion and to be contained in it himself is clearly enunciated here. An enterprise of the imagination through which the photographer marks his presence in the world, particularly this world of spirituality to which he aspires and which leads him to undertake this singular and paradoxical work: the sensitive representation of a technique of asceticism whose purpose is self-control and the relinquishing of emotions...

Hans Georg Berger's photography thus seems to oscillate between two different poles: on the one hand, a reasoned approach which seeks to document meticulously the social reality being witnessed, serving the purposes of description and ethnography, and on the other a deliberate and highly subjective expressiveness, in pursuit of art. The duality of intention makes for an oeuvre which is ultimately more esthetic than documentary, one which confounds narrow disciplinary limits and shows that they may overlap.

It would seem in fact that the photographer's borrowings from ethnographical methods, to which he himself never makes reference, are confined to the "assiduity" which Hervé Guibert noted¹⁸ in his relationship with his subjects and to the receptiveness to the milieu and the event which he makes the mainspring of his creative work. Although he shares with the ethnographer the desire to create resonance, the artist puts this to quite different use, seeking through it to exalt a sensual and emotional universe in which he has a particular interest. Hans Georg Berger's identification with his subject is complete and is fully assumed: he seeks to capture the way in which the monks engage in and achieve Buddhist meditation, which he sees as an ideal and presents as such to the observer. This personal vision, which finds free expression in his work, with the skilfully orchestrated assent of his subjects, is far removed from the distance which the ethnographer is supposed to display in his work, from the discipline of distancing to which he submits himself.

Both ultimately pursue different objectives. While the artist concentrates on the expressiveness of the image which contains both his experience and that of his subjects, the ethnographer seeks above all meaning and must, in order to reveal it, hold his

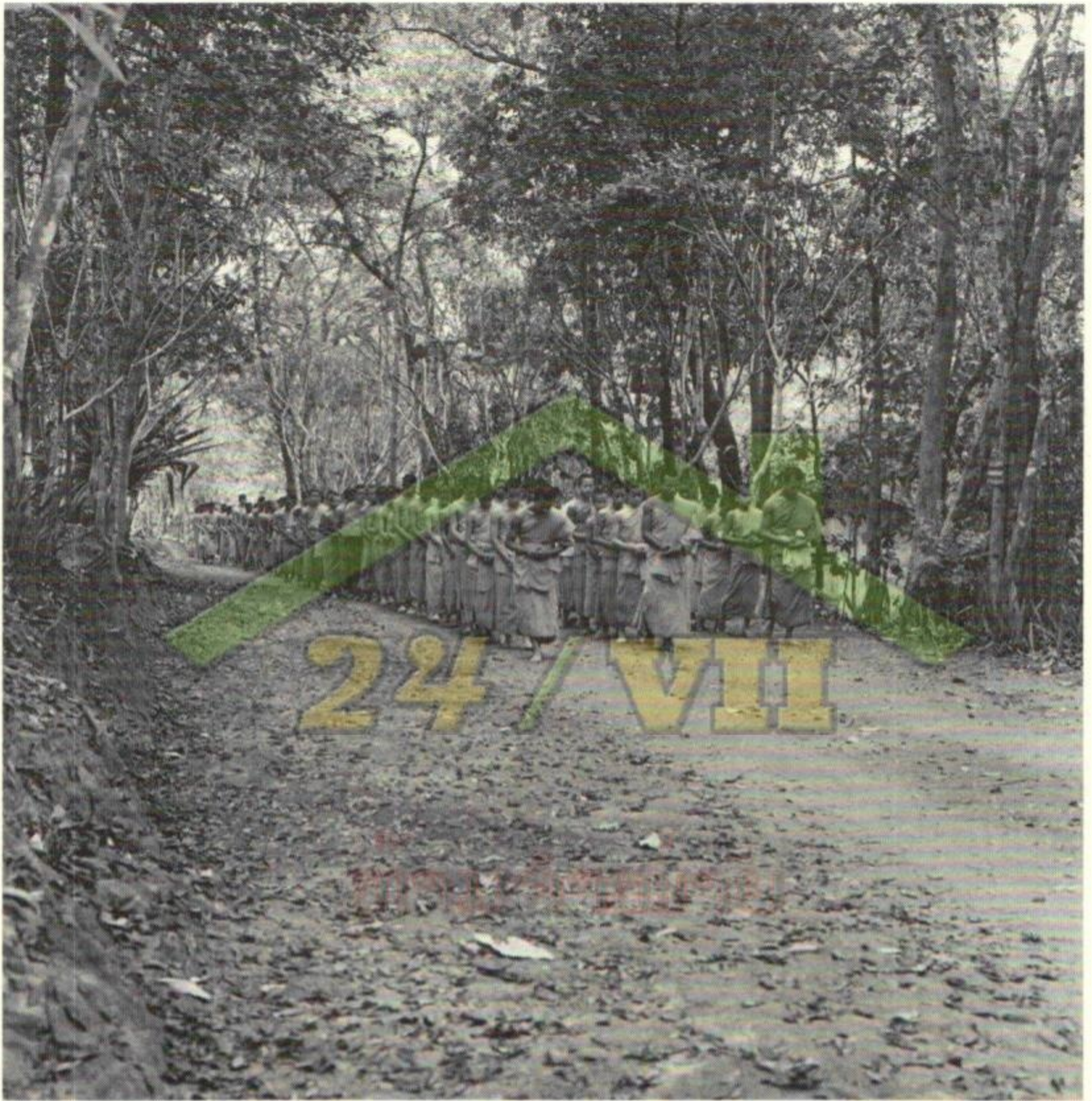
feelings in check. The one places the emphasis on the sensible, the other on the intelligible.

Both their approaches do, however, reflect a desire to clarify the world, to reveal the invisible and the unseen, and this is something they share. Both attempt to capture reality and cultivate a form of empathetic participation in the world in which their subjectivity is involved. The way they view the object of observation and the relationship they create with it reflect their own manner of apprehending it. If, as André Rouillé says, "créer, c'est cadrer" (2005 : 461), both work to this end, with the aim of accompanying rather than freeze-framing what they are bearing witness to. The dividing line between them depends then on the particular emphasis, whether intimist or maintaining a distance, and on the ultimate purpose, whether sensitive or analytical, which they give to their work.

Rather than a documentary opus, what Hans Georg Berger presents is "a documented point of view"¹⁹ which gives full rein to the imagination. Such an approach cannot be transposed, at least in identical terms, to ethnology, where empirical representation of the facts and faithful restitution of the category or categories to which the subject belongs are the overriding concerns. Should the two perspectives be considered to be wholly irreconcilable, however, or should they be seen, on the contrary, as being capable of interacting, responding to one another and enriching each other? Hans Georg Berger's photography suggests that features of the two disciplines can be combined, provided that their respective intentions are clearly in evidence. His work is also an invitation to reconsider how diverse the procedures for elucidating reality are and, nowadays, the interplay of art and science within them.

(2008)







**THE ECOLOGY OF DWELLING,
PHOTOGRAPHY AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE**

Giorgio Conti



Laos is a state surrounded by other states and does not open onto the sea at any point. It borders to the northwest with Burma, to the north with China, to the east with Vietnam, to the south with Cambodia and to the west with Thailand. To the south the Annam Mountains form the frontier with Vietnam. The Mekong River, the main provider of water to the country, marks the border with Thailand and forms part of a wide flood plain (towards the west), while the rest of the country is mostly mountainous. Laos is a "buffer state",¹ but is far from being the "Switzerland of Indo-China" - it lacks mineral resources, and is not industrially or commercially developed. Instead it is one of the poorest countries in the world, its main economy is agriculture, and productivity depends very much on nature, on the beneficial seasonal floods of the Mekong, and traditional technology: the ancient Khmer hydraulic system which regulates and controls the water levels of the fertile paddy fields on the plain. The Mekong is the twelfth longest river in the world and is considered one of the rivers least "domesticated" by man. The source of the river forms on the high plains of Tibet at 5000 meters and it runs a total of 4350 kilometers before flowing out into the sea of Vietnam. During its long journey to the sea the river changes name many times according to the culture, cosmogony and geographic territory that it flows through: in China it is known as Lancang Jiang (the turbulent river); in Thailand, Myanmar, and in Laos Mae Nam Khong (Mae Nam meaning "mother of the waters"); in Cambodia Tonle Thom (great water) and finally in Vietnam: Cuu Long (nine dragons).²

In the religious cosmogony of Laos, both Buddhist and the more ancient animist religion, rites, ceremonies, and feasts are closely connected to the waters of the river and the rains.³ The iconology of Theravada Buddhism privileges the image of the "claiming for the rain" Buddha. This Buddha stands, is looking beyond and has his arms straight along his sides. The images, the statues of Buddha and the monks themselves are subjected to ablutions, during the rite-feast of the New Year, above all in Luang Prabang, the ancient capital of Laos. Stupa, cone-shaped constructions, are built in sand along the banks of the Mekong to celebrate the Buddha's entry into Nirvana. This rite is supposed to increase rainfall and

the fertility of the fields, and at the same time it is a symbol of renewal and spiritual purification.⁴ The Feast of the Pirogues on the Khan River is also considered a religious rite. The great canoes (with up to eighty rowers) are considered sacred objects and the boat race itself is religious in character: it placates and pacifies the mythical beings - half-man, half-snake - living in crystal palaces on the bed of the river. These beings are called Naga, and the flow of the beneficial floods that affect the fertility of the agricultural terrain and the safety of the settlements depends on them. If the feast-rite dedicated to the Naga has a utilitarian aim, that of the Feast of Lights, where boats made of bamboo and paper and decorated by the families and monks with thousands of candles are sent out onto the river, has a number of meanings. For the local population the beautiful boats are a sign of respect and a request for pardon from the river: it has had things thrown into it and been taken advantage of on a daily basis. Another theory for the rite is that it is an offering to the dead (the ashes from funeral pyres are sometimes thrown into the river), while the monks accentuate the slow flow of the river and the man-made beauty of the boats: a symbol and a preview of the moment when man, freed from the earthly bonds of passion, desire and pain moves into the supreme state of nirvana.

Paradoxically, the interpretation of the Buddhist monks recalls to mind one of the most beautiful pieces of Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse, where the prince (who has not yet become the Buddha: the Illuminated One) sits on the banks of the river and understands intuitively that "without the measure of time, the past and the future are always present, as in the river which at the same time is there where you see it, but is also at its source and mouth. The water that has already passed is tomorrow, but it is there already, in the mountains; that which has already gone by is yesterday, but there is more, somewhere else in the valley".⁵ The flow of the waters of the river is the "trans-flow" of time, not in its social, practical sense, but in a spiritual and metaphysical sense.

The westernization of Laos by its French colonial "protectors" has reinforced its role as a "buffer state". In the late nineteenth century, France, employed in military operations in Vietnam, convinced the prince of Luang Prabang to apply for the political status of a protectorate in order to prevent an attack from a group of Vietnamese rebels (called the Black Flags). The state of Laos was born in 1899. The name Laos derived from the plural in French of the word Lao, the most numerous ethnic group in the country. French colonialism was discrete - for about forty years it was limited to building new roads, using the occasional mine, restoring the most important monuments and introducing the new colonial architecture. The true revolution introduced by the French was linguistic. The most significant revolution was the change in the name of the river from Mae Nam Khong (Mae Nam meaning "mother of the waters") to Mekong, which was easier to pronounce. What may have seemed like linguistic simplification for practical purposes was in fact a deep *Weltanschauung* in the way of conceiving the cosmogonic importance of the river. If *nomina sunt numina*, that is "the name manifests the essence of god", the sacred river had been transformed into a banal geographical name. The "mother river", the main material and metaphysical entity that sustained and brought prosperity to the population and made up part of the rites of both Buddhists and animists, the two religions followed by the majority of the population, had lost all cosmogonic and anthropological relevance.

The American army, however, did find the time to study Laos during the Vietnam conflict - but only from a geographical point of view. It was strategically vital to block the flow of Vietcong and the movement of troops and arms through the so-called Ho Chi Minh Path, which allowed the army from North Vietnam (under Soviet and Communist hegemony) to fight in South Vietnam (which was under American/capitalist hegemony). Given the official neutrality of Laos, from 1964 to 1973 both sides fought a sort of "secret war" which, despite its name, was known to all. Laos again changed its name, for the Americans its name was to be eliminated from all official communications, and Laos was simply to be called "the Other Theater" (of war). During the fighting, the country known

before the arrival of the French colonials as Lane Xang, literally "a million elephants" was re-baptized by the journalists sent to the front "the country of a million insignificants". The country's seemingly passive neutrality, seen as political and civil cowardice, brought about special and hyper-destructive military strategies, particularly regarding the Rules of Engagement (ROE): "the ROE prevent bombing less than 500 meters from a Buddhist temple in Vietnam and less than a kilometer in Cambodia, but in Laos the bombers could destroy temples, hospitals and any other building they saw".⁶ At the end of the fighting it was demonstrated that the "secret war" in Laos had become one of the most costly wars in the twentieth century: two million dollars a day - for nine years - for the American taxpayer. It also proved to be one of the most destructive: 1.9 million tons of fighting material, the equivalent of 10 tons per square kilometer, or 500 kilograms per head of the population of Laos, without counting the effects of "agent orange" (or "yellow rain") the strong herbicide and defoliator that polluted the waters, stripped the trees, poisoned the crops and was the cause of numerous diseases that are still present in eastern Laos.⁷

A recurrent image in Buddhist iconology in Luang Prabang is the "tree of life", as can be seen in the temple of Xieng Thong, for example. And yet the new "liberators" who took over at the end of the Indo-Chinese conflicts in 1975, became the instigators of further annihilation even though on this occasion it was political rather than material. This time westernization took the form of the most intransigent Marxist-Leninist ideology: it was not the civil and religious settlements, the rural landscape and the forests that were destroyed, it was the religious culture of Theravada Buddhism, and with it its cosmogony, that was swept away like an ancient superstition. Even the most solidly Marxist members of the population rebelled at the "sacrilege" of the abolition of the alms-giving ceremony and the practice was brought back in 1976. The relationship between the State and the religious communities remained nonetheless marked by severe censure of religious literature and limitations on the teaching of monks, but there were often ambiguities in the conduct of the governors. Many politicians continued to give relevance - unofficial and personal

- to the earth spirits known as phi, or participated in the baci ceremonies, the most sophisticated and ancestral of the rites of the animist culture. In the same way, it was not infrequent to see an influential member of the regime taking part in Buddhist religious occasions. The ancient Buddhist and animist cosmogonies were "frozen", but not totally annihilated by the westernization imposed by the exogenous Marxist-Leninist ideology. In a country hit by an exodus of intellectuals and professionals, sometimes only the monks remained to make up for the absence of teachers and doctors.

The progressive reconciliation of the Communist regime with local religions, in particular with Theravada Buddhism, was a strong indication of the processes of democratization of the country which, since 1988 has progressively opened up politically and economically towards countries with market economies. In 1991, with the introduction of the new constitution and electoral law, the Lao Government also changed the symbols on the national flag: the hammer and sickle were substituted by a picture of That Luang, the most important Laotian religious monument. This strategy was encouraged by western countries through the policies of the great transport infrastructures and the increase in the tourist trade which used the Ho Chi Minh Path as the basis of its operations. Laos once again became a buffer state between the westernized Thailand and the restless (from a capitalist point of view) China, an emerging force in the global market economy. A great trans-Asiatic motorway was planned to connect Singapore and Peking. For the first time a bridge was built (thanks to a contribution from the Australian state) across the Mekong River to make connections easier between the capital, Vientiane and Thailand. The bridge was called Mittaphab, the "Bridge of Friendship". For the first time in their history it was the Laotians who this time changed the name of something - re-naming it the "Aids Bridge". It was the population of Luang Prabang who opposed the proposed route for the trans-Asiatic motorway cutting through the city, complaining that it would have divided the ancient royal capital into two separate parts.⁸

When Hans Georg Berger arrived in Luang Prabang for the first time, in 1993, he perhaps did not realize that his research visit would keep him there for many years. We see in the state of mind and the work of the photographer from Berlin at this time a double intention, comparable to the differences in attitude to the Grand Tour of Italy between Goethe and Heine. Goethe felt a strong need to know and describe, to reconcile human and scientific knowledge. His research methods were extrospective. Heine's intentions on the other hand were to know himself better: travel and meetings with "the Other" (with the unknown) were an opportunity for self-analysis and to feel personal emotions. They were the maximum of introspection. Berger had already carried out a photographic study - a lyrical, non invasive dialogue using a small Rollei 35 - that illustrated, rather than documented, twelve years of life and personal friendship with the writer Herve Guibert.⁹ When he came across the complicated ceremonies and feasts of Theravada Buddhism he did not allow himself to be overcome by the temptation to reproduce a kind of "bite and run" exoticism. He remembered his research project carried out in Egypt with his writer friend Guibert to rediscover the journey of Gustave Flaubert and Maxime Du Camp which began in 1849. Berger's and Guibert's Egyptian project was from its very start to be a literary and photographic "work in progress": "a dialogue between the intimist photographs of the observer and the letters that the author wrote (but never sent) to his friends in France, rather than a "visit" to Egypt and it invites us to reflect on the sense of traveling, today. The correspondents became actors on a journey that ignored the tour operators and the prescribed tourist circuits, to reveal, with a sense of pleasure and exasperation, a unique way of discovering a country".¹⁰ Berger wanted to discover in Laos, and particularly in Luang Prabang, memories of the artistic and ethical lessons of Joseph Beuys of the "amplified concept" of art and art anthropology, and of the "Kunst/Capital" at the rebirth of nature. "The only means of revolution is a global concept of art", maintained Beuys, "from which will also grow a new concept of science".¹¹

The revolution that Berger activated was that of changing the "Other" from observed to co-observer. In practice he created an

instrument of research-definition (and not of simple documentation) with the monks and native population of the identities, the ancient local cosmogonies, the rites, ceremonies, feasts and, above all the daily routines of the temple in the cosmic (oriental) sense rather than the linear (western) sense. To better construct this "social sculpture", Berger decided to become a novice, to "have the merits" as the Laotians describe those who undertake such a choice. Berger learnt at the monasteries the ancient Pali language, so that he could start to read the precious manuscripts that were to be found in the monasteries and which had miraculously escaped unharmed after centuries of war and invasion. In exchange for their hospitality he taught the monks the basics of photography and the English language. His photographic research became a dialogue. With the monks, the gift of interpersonal communication assumed a strategic meaning and value: "you give a word, you take it, you give it back and you take it back again". Speech as a reciprocal gift was to overcome the limits of the selfishness and individualism of man.¹² As Marcel Mauss has observed,¹³ in closed societies the universality of the triple obligation made to man is of great importance: to give, to receive and to give back, and is the foundation of the networks of socialization and solidarity. Utilitarianism and information are as important to the global village as giving and communication are to socially cohesive communities.

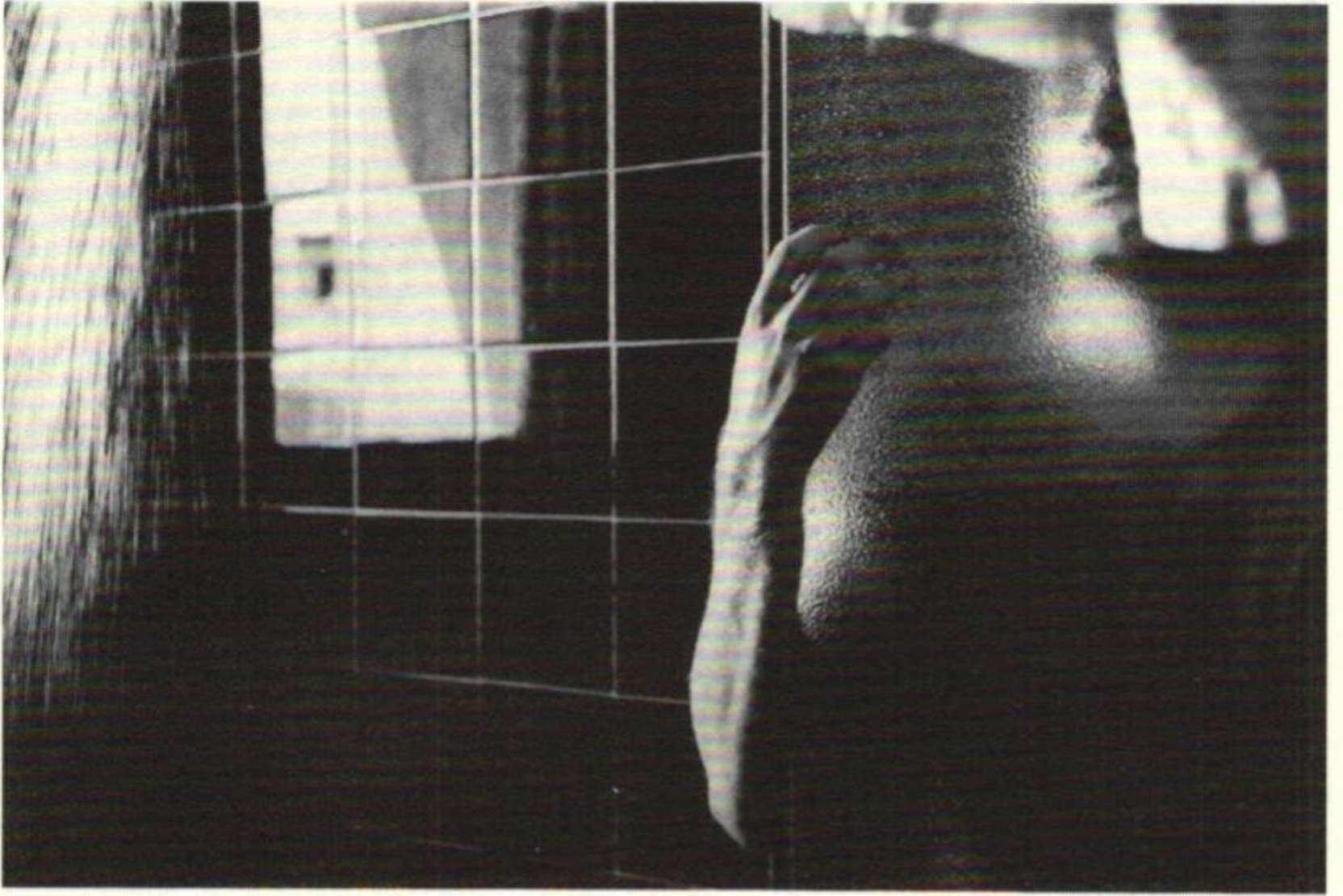
Conscious of the Durkheimian idea that "social life is only possible thanks to a vast symbolism", Berger explores with the patience of the novice monk and the compliance of an older one the symbolic and ethical value of Theravada Buddhist iconography in the temples and ceremonies of Luang Prabang. His precise and at the same time diligent work, which led him to take over 14,000 photographs, is miles away from the documentary works of most modern photo reporters who are always in search of the sensational or "world images" to feed to the mass media. We can see in him something of the spirit of journalistic inquiry dear to the Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski: "true journalism is intentional, that is to say it aims to produce some form of change". "This is not the right job for a cynic", claimed Kapuscinski.¹⁴

Berger's work is the reverse of the judgments passed by western journalists during the Indo-China war: "Laos, millions of insignificants". He gives meaning to the culture and cosmogony that westerners refused to see or did not take into serious consideration as another way of understanding the relationship between man and nature and between human beings themselves. In this sense, Berger's work can be compared, in its methodology, to the interpretative anthropology of Clifford Geertz,¹⁵ which has defined the work of the anthropologist not in terms of observation/description, but interpretation of the facts. An interpretative theory of culture that suggests possible worlds rather than producing distance between he who studies and he who is studied: "Seeing ourselves as others see us can be revealing. To see that others have the same nature as us is the least we can do. But it is much more difficult to see ourselves in others, as an example of the forms that human life has locally taken, a case amongst cases, a world within worlds, from which is derived that mental openness without which objectivity is self-flattery and tolerance a mystery. If interpretative anthropology has any role in the world it is that of continuing to re-teach this fleeting truth".¹⁶

In a world that -since the tragic terrorist attacks in New York on 11September 2001- has seen the sad collapse of the banal utopia of "the End of History", prophesized by Francis Fukuyama,¹⁷ in favor of the theory of "the Battle of Civilizations" (brought about by ideological and religious conflicts between cultures), put forward by Samuel Huntington¹⁸, the research work of Hans Georg Berger seems to offer a glimmer of hope, for he shows us cultures communicating and asking themselves questions about what it means to be part of the world - and what our relationship should be with nature.¹⁹

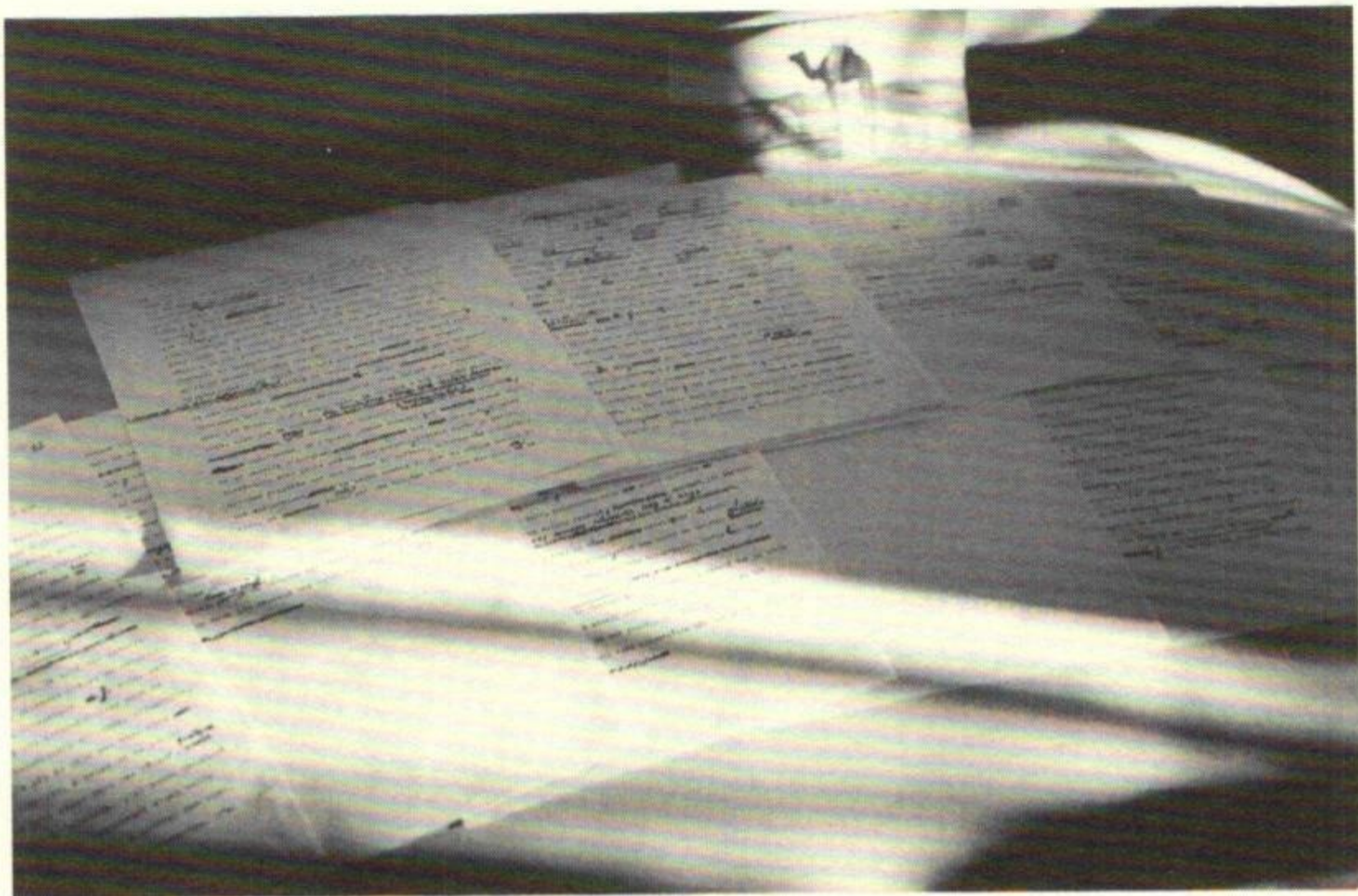
(2001)





**WHAT REMAINS FROM ART?
INTERVIEW WITH HANS GEORG BERGER**

Bianca Laura Petretto



Normally, when we go to see a temporary art exhibition, we do not know the artist personally. If he is still alive and we have not already seen photos of him, the artist becomes to us an imaginary entity, whose physical features we can almost imagine. Sometimes, I have an idea of the physical appearance of the artist based on the works on display. Deep down, to know what the artist looks like, to have a physical need to meet the creator of what we see on display is a perfectly normal reaction. Whoever appreciates a work of art, whoever has a feeling of empathy with the forms and colours of creativity, forms a relationship with the artist. It is an event which is extraordinary in its way, that breaks down the barriers of distance, language, religion and ideology and gives us an insight, even if only for a moment, into the soul of the creator. In this indescribable dialogue, the object talks to the spectator. Hans Berger could be blond or dark, tall or short, young or old, and yet the observer sees his energy, his subtlety, both his delicacy and his strength together: he sees an individual who has condensed his history, past and future, into an eternal spiritual present. His images recreate the breath of thought and the nocturnal immobility of meditation: they are images of full faces, deep set eyes that regulate your breathing, or that make you hold your breath for an infinite moment. They are oxymorons: vastness and horizons, shelters and caskets. They firmly give back appearances, they bear the indelible mark of the Other. They make us so curious that we set up a dialogue at a distance, in the hope of understanding more.

Hans Georg Berger, what subtle connections do you see between the different arts?

I probably have a much too personal answer to your question. Essentially, there is no difference to me between photography, literature and theatre. I don't even see the difference between creating art and building a garden, in taking part in an archaeological expedition or building up a friendship. In all these cases we are trying to improve the world and the conditions in which we live. The real term of reference of creativity is, I am afraid, suffering. It is terrible to realise that there is suffering wherever we look and that we are weak, truly weak in the face of suffering, both our own and that of others. Knowledge and consciousness are instruments to better the world. By not accep-

ting my powerlessness, I am putting my trust in art, in knowledge, in friendship, as a form of salvation. Art has made me a better person: perhaps, it can make us all better people? Perhaps it may make the world better? Robert Musil wrote: „Was bleibt von der Kunst? Wir, als Geänderte, bleiben“ (What remains from art? We remain, changed).

What connects art to the inner world, to the spirituality of a man or an artist?

May I answer that by telling you about an event in my life?

Of course.

Before starting work in Luang Prabang, I went to visit one of the senior monks. I had two presentation letters for him: one from a high-ranking official at the Ministry of Culture of Laos, the other from a Vientiane abbot. I knew that I would not be able to work without the approval of the monk, who was the abbot of one of the great monasteries of the city. He was then seventy years old and for almost fifty years he had followed the religious life. His eyes had seen all the recent history of his country: he had known the monarchy, the French colonials, the war in Indochina, the Vietnam war, the American bombings, the arrival of the revolutionaries of Pathet Lao, the death of the royal family, the people's Republic; he had seen the almost total isolation of Luang Prabang from the rest of the world and, finally, he had experienced the slow re-opening of the country which began in the 90s. Now he found in front of him a westerner he had never met before, who was asking for help in documenting what remained of the rituals and ceremonies of his city. Our first meeting was long and silent. Only I spoke, rather hesitantly, a bit irritated by the abbot's complete silence. He had read the letters and placed them on the floor of the room, where we sat at a good distance, one in front of the other. Round us were his things, countless statues of the Buddha, and dark, closed cupboards. Through photography, I explained, we could try to safeguard the cultural heritage that the city had been able to preserve, its rites, the deep values of the everyday gestures of its inhabitants. We needed to involve everybody, to face up to the changes that modernisation would inevitably bring... This was in 1994, and

Luang Prabang did not yet have electric lighting, or tourist hotels. Vast changes were about to brake down onto the sacred town and its inhabitants. The abbot listened and looked at me, without batting an eyelid. At one moment, there was an almost imperceptible nod of his shaven head. I was dismissed. He had agreed. I could start my work. I went to see him regularly and brought large contact sheets or prints of photographs taken, a dialogue started and with it, confidence built up. Two years later, another special meeting: again I sat cross-legged on the floor of the abbot's Kuti and explained why photography for me was the perfect tool to approach people, to understand a culture that was not mine. This time, at a sign from the abbot, the young monks present in the room got up and began to open the doors of the dark cupboards lining his reception room: they were filled to the ceiling with boxes, frames and files, they were full of photographs! Photographs of monks, of ceremonies, of visitors who had come to Luang Prabang, going back to the time when photography was invented. All sorts of different technical processes, hundreds, maybe several thousand historic photographs. The elderly monk was a photograph collector! He had hidden his collection away, protecting it from the war, from the revolution and during the isolation. Now he was offering it to me, who had come from afar, and who could perhaps understand...

The abbot became my most important referee and analyst. He greatly influenced my work, giving me a place inside special monastic rites from where to work, indicating the best moment when to take photographs, also taking me to ceremonies in far away villages that I would never had heard of. Regularly he looked at my contact sheets and commented single images, or indicated connections and links between images. More than that, he became a spiritual Master to me. He helped me to understand the rites and the meaning that image and representation have in the Theravâda culture, to go beyond the immediate information contained in a photograph, to look at its very meaning. Although he kept the distance necessary for a monk, with passing time I felt he also became a friend - which is of course a most non-monastic concept. He taught me the gestures that laymen have to learn when they visit the monasteries in order to gain merits and meet the monks. He never asked directly about personal matters but made me talk about myself through the themes of the

religious and spiritual life I witnessed. The abbot certainly was one of the most severe observers of my photographs. He left nothing to chance, he insisted that each image should be carefully studied, until it captured a truly important moment. He had seen similar images, taken by the monks themselves at the beginning of the century. He compared what I did with what he had seen before - and he agreed with my results. He accompanied me for most on my road towards understanding and my inner journey.

In this unlikely context, the impossible had become possible. At the outset, we seemed very far away from each other - yet art and work brought us together and formed a solid bridge. We even invented a common language and a system of communication where quite complex questions could be discussed. Art made this access to the innermost, spiritual areas of our thought possible.

To look at one of your photographs is almost like starting a journey through another journey. Where is Hans Georg Berger at the present time?

All cultures have a concept of travel: travelling is part of being human. Primitive man already traveled to find a more interesting and more seductive mating partner than those he would have found in his vicinity - this hasn't changed much up to our "civilized" times. In doing this we are following a genetic impulse - so much for freedom of choice! Man also travels to become healthier both in body and mind; we travel as pilgrims to get closer to the divine. The contemporary consumerist western idea of travel expresses only a small part of its overall meaning. While we stress pleasure, other cultures have maintained spiritual concepts of travelling. The westerner in his search of pleasure, relaxation and exotic comfort has restricted and stereotyped the idea of travel, though even so, somewhere, deep within us, there is still the memory of the pilgrimage without a particular end in mind, of a departure full of unforeseen risks, of the blind faith in finding unknown sensuality and reaching spiritual salvation. When I was a child, travel for me was pilgrimages to churches and monasteries where there was a different light to the one I saw at home: these were places where the silence was interrupted only by song, they were miraculous places. I lived on the Moselle, between France

and Germany, one of the most beautiful parts of central Europe. My first discoveries, as I wandered around like a solitary vagabond, were the vineyards, the sinuous river, the Roman ruins, the infinite forests of Hunsrueck. As an adolescent I escaped from home to go further afield: to Rome, Naples and to the islands in the Baltic Sea. It was as if travelling made the air easier to breathe, the food more tasty, conversations more exciting. I felt much stronger when I was travelling than when I was at home. Since then, I have always taken particular pleasure in "being somewhere else", even though the sedentary life is now beginning to interest me as an idea. If I had not travelled, I would have been a poorer person in both soul and spirit. Where am I at the present time? Still on the road, I hope.

Your journeys to Egypt, Morocco and Italy have stopped memory, frozen the moment, just before something was about to happen. Perhaps waiting for an event?

The journey to Egypt, together with Hervé Guibert, and my various trips to Morocco with Bernard Faucon, both of them masters of photography to me, helped me to build up confidence, to initiate dialogue and comparison with these two great artist friends of mine; they allowed us to „invent” an Egypt and a Morocco that was decidedly our own: parallel universes, often in contrast with reality. Christian Caujolle maintains that, in my Egyptian photos of Hervé Guibert, Egypt becomes a sort of theatrical background, a *toile de fond*, against which I develop my very personal interpretation and view of the other person. Guibert himself has said that my photographs are not portraits but photographic games, fun things that in the end become *jeu de massacre* and put him to death. We both admired Roland Barthes' vision of photography. Barthes himself had given us, as a gift, copies of his book *La Chambre Claire* that had just been published and presented us with a new, startling philosophical view on photography. Guibert had just written his own book on photography: *L'image fantôme*. Both books have, with their visions and analysis, influenced my work and taught me the importance to wait for the precise moment where intentions, technical tools and what can be seen or experienced coincide.

My travels in Morocco with Bernard Faucon were a real voyage of discovery: I analysed my friend, complex and unique as he was, just as I did with the landscape of southern Morocco and with its people. The event that I am looking for is a spectator to look at my images, the collection of outlines superimposed, a constructed vision that in itself is true, a definitive statement. The observer recognises the dialogue between those photographed and myself, a dialogue between artist-friends, friends-artists. He notices the game and its playfulness. He sees where we explore limits of self-portraiture and portraiture, and enjoys himself as he too takes part in it.

Is Luang Prabang, the sacred city of myths and legends, situated between the Mekong and the Khan, an open place, as well as a shelter?

Luang Prabang is above all a place with a lot of problems! We don't know what will happen to it in a few years from now. The politically driven isolation for almost 20 years has preserved much of its fragile heritage. It is a precious pearl, now a world heritage site, protected by UNESCO, now it attracts many people and many economic interests, and the city will find it hard to develop in a slow and intelligent manner. It is a fragile place under attack from modernization: in this, it is most contemporary. The city of legends and myths, for example, now only exists in the words of certain wise inhabitants who, we hope, will pass the stories on to their children. Will they listen? How deafening will be the cry of quick money, how thorough will be the commercialization of rituals? Other great and delicate places in the world have already been annihilated by mass tourism. Will this exceptional, highly dignified culture be able to resist global pressure to conform? Will the UNESCO project be sophisticated and intelligent enough to understand the overall importance of Buddhist spirituality for social cohesion, happiness and beauty? Will UNESCO help the monks on their spiritual path and in their social engagements, or will it just provide a nice frame for tourism marketing? Two years ago I produced a book for schools in Laos: the writings of Somsanuk Mixay with my photographs illustrating the legends and the spirit of the ceremonies. The book is now used in all the schools in the land. We explain to the children what really happens in the ceremonies they witness. Why do their parents want them to ordain as a novice? What

do the single gestures of the baci ceremony mean? What stories can be found in old manuscripts? There is an immense want for education and information. Luckily, the Lao government has a strong engagement for building schools in even the remotest parts of the country. Lets hope that, with some projects of development, there will be an accompanying effort in the fields of Lao culture and civilization. Then Luang Prabang might stay the shelter it definitely is at the moment.

It seems as if an evanescent and yet at the same time intense relationship has brought the artist without boundaries Hans Georg Berger to express his moments of friendship, complicity and love in the Hermitage of Santa Caterina on the Isle of Elba. Does solitude that cuts you off from the world make you feel more passionate and sensitive about life?

The Hermitage of Santa Caterina, at Rio nell Elba is a simple, humble place. But it is also a place where artists and researchers from all over the world have been able for some years to create a special kind of concentration, a sense of community with almost no regard for materialist obligations. Today Santa Caterina on the island of Elba is no longer a place of solitude, as in the 70s and 80s. Luckily, however, it is still a space to create and think. Every day we get visitors to the Botanical Gardens, which have been in existence for ten years now, and we are also visited by walkers who are following the mountain paths. Previously nobody found that mountain particularly interesting. At night we can still lie down in the square in front of the little church and look up at the stars for hours. We have managed to defend ourselves from the arrival of electric lights, but we are already beginning to suffer the lights and disturbances of the summer discotheques in the valley. You see how important it is to keep moving, and understand that we cannot keep things fixed, we cannot freeze situations. How could we? The Buddha teaches us about impermanence. It sits in every cell of our bodies. As we change the world changes, and we must be wise enough not to fall into the illusion to be able to hold things. I am fully aware that one may find there a weighty contradiction with the fact that photography does freeze a precise moment...

Your photographic experiences were born from your empathy with your dear friend, the french writer and photographer Hervé Guibert. On the tips of your toes you captured the fleeting moment, the extraordinary flow of hours and days. What philosophy, what feelings did you go through, did you share as friends and artists?

I photographed Hervé Guibert from 1979 to 1991, the year he died: a photographic project that lasted twelve years. At the beginning and the end I didn't take many photos; I used photography „on tip-toe“. Hervé knew what it meant to let yourself be photographed, leaving a visual record through a portrait, through a series of portraits. He had decided, long before we met, that with his art (literature, photography, cinema) he would create an image of himself that only he could control. At a certain point I arrived, with my little Rollei 35, a gift from my mother. He had the same camera, a gift from his father. I insisted on photographing him, as if in a game. At first he refused. Then he gave in. The game made us think about portraiture and self-portraiture. The road we took seemed to us to be good, promising, novel. At the end of Hervé's life it was me who hesitated to take photos; for fear of losing what we had tried to create, to exclude the evident force of the spectacle present in photographing a dying man, particularly a man dying of Aids. I didn't want to do it. He would again and again ask me to take photographs of him. For an early publication of this work, Hervé gave our mutual photographic work a name: *folie a deux*. We had built up a story, a novel of true moments and absurd stories, of pretentious falsifications and complicity, of sincere affection and reciprocal attraction. Doctors of the nineteenth century thought that the madness of an individual empathetically involved with another person, could generate madness in that person by contagion. Perhaps this is the most cordial form of madness? We performed it up to a bitter end. This work done by the two of us has not yet been fully revealed and shown.

We never got bored photographing each other. With Hervé we often swapped cameras and film (always 400 ASA). Since we had the same cameras, we knew it would be impossible in the future to make a definite distinction between his photographs and mine. We shared the same spaces of intimacy, we shared the same light. But above all, mixing up „author“ and „subject“ was one of the points in our



project. It was an experiment. We joked about future analysts, interpreters and heirs getting a headache by trying to sort things out and separate whatever each of us would have produced. We questioned what views of authorship, views on art and commercialization of art command. Today, in Guibert's negatives archive in Paris there are as many negatives of mine as there are those of Hervé in my archive in Berlin.

We believed that art was friendship, complicity, a shared vision of the world, against a background of a common conviction that questioned the truth of the substance of what you transmit and what you understand when you first look at something. We realised that we should not trust in easy answers; that behind the façade there are always secret rooms to explore. We were highly interested in our own image, and in its transformations. When we conceived our project, we were adolescent creators. I still shiver to realize that, what started as a game around changes and physical transformations, by the force of fate came at the end to be a reflection on suffering, disease and death of my friend.

Your works transmit balance, they are alive, interior and present, they have an indefinable quality of time: what about the storm?

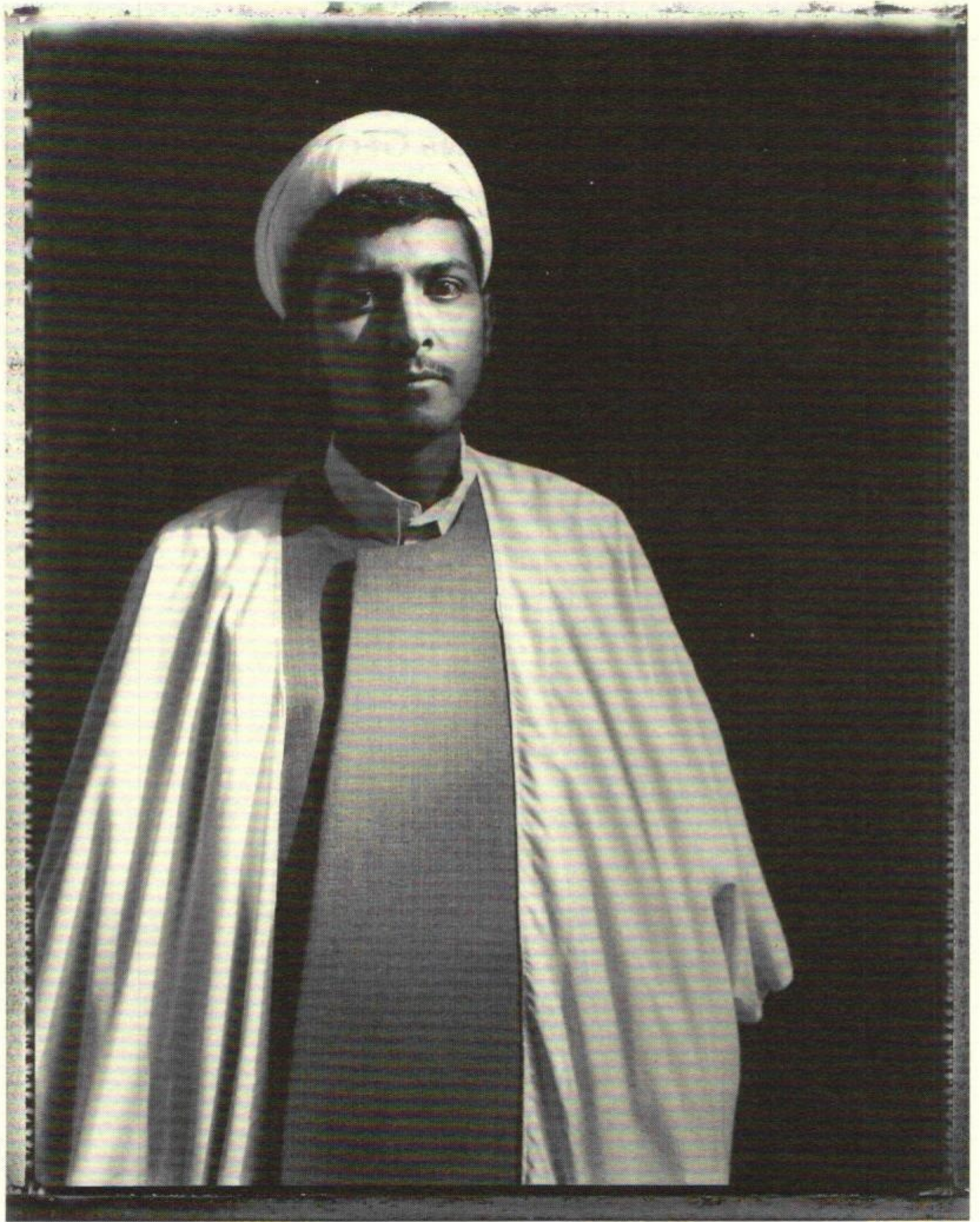
The storm is there alright! It torments us all the time. We know that we have to radically change our behaviour: will we do it? Even if we try to stay immobile, in the perfect and ineffable equilibrium of beauty, the cry is still there. We would be lightweights if we did not hear it.

(2001)



**WHY DO YOU RISK RELATING YOUR ART WITH RELIGION?
INTERVIEW WITH HANS GEORG BERGER**

Majid Afshar



The Hauzas of Iran are the focal point of an exceptional art project of German photographer Hans Georg Berger. His work on teaching and learning in theological schools and universities of Iran has been shown in Germany in October 2005 and is scheduled soon to come to Iran, for an exhibition in Qom. Majid Afshar talked with photographer Hans Georg Berger, who is also a writer and docent on photography at the Academy of Fine Art in Bangkok (Thailand), about his work in Iran and his ideas on photography.

Professor Berger, thank you for giving us your time. You have been working for several years in the Hauzas of Iran – you took photographs, and met students and teachers of these institutions. You are probably the first western artist who has concentrated on this very special part of Iran, on young Shi'ite clergy, and on life in the Hauzas. What is your interest in the Hauzas?

When I visited the first Iranian Hauza in 1996, I was struck by two things: one was the extraordinary concentration, and the organization of learning, that is so very different from our system in the West; the other was the readiness of some young clergymen to talk to me. They asked interesting and surprising questions, and there was a feeling of a very natural and generous hospitality. My first Hauza was the Madrassa ya-Chahar Baq in Isfahan, so I also happened to start my work at a place where a breathtakingly beautiful, great idea of Islamic architecture comes together with a very efficient way of organizing space in order to make learning possible. This Hauza in Isfahan looked to me like a perfect place for study and concentration. I loved the quietness, the carefully planned presence of trees and water, the rhythm of space – I was impressed by the very intimate, bare rooms where the students were living, and the magnificently decorated, vast rooms reserved for prayer and teaching. I immediately had a feeling that it would be highly interesting, for me as a westerner and as a photographer, to learn more about the people who lived and worked in such a place. From my side it was more than curiosity – I imagined becoming, for some time, part of the teaching and learning in certain Hauzas, as I have done before in other projects dealing with cultures that are not mine. My work with a camera is a tool to achieve this.

Did you really plan this right from the start? Even to us it does not look easy to introduce photography, an art project, and a western artist into a religious school...

At the start, I had doubts that this would be possible, but my experience proved that we could communicate, start a process of discussion, and produce a very special work of art together. We did something that now stands firmly for itself, we made a statement that can be looked at, that can be discussed and considered by others.

What are your previous experiences in art, before you worked on the Hauzas in Iran?

I am an artist who is interested in religious and social questions, also in anthropology and ethnology. My art work deals with the question "How can we relate to the Other?" We live in a complicated world that has different concepts and beliefs. It is important that we know about each other. We must learn about each other. This is why my art work is directed towards the study of religions that are not mine. Before working in Iran, and Shi'ism, I worked on different aspects of Theravada Buddhism in South East Asia, and on Taoism in China and Vietnam.

There are many Quranic schools (Hauzas) all over the world. Why did you choose Iran? Were there special artistic attractions in Iran?

There are several reasons why I started my work on Islam in your country. First of all, Shi'ism is very little known in the West today. Iran is the world centre for Shi'ism, though Shi'ism exists also in many other countries. I thought it would be more interesting to Western people to learn about Shi'ite schools than to learn about Sunni schools. The general public in the West unfortunately does not know much about Islam, but it does hear more about the Sunnis than the Shi'ites. There is also the fact that, from outside, it seems more difficult to work in a Hauza in Iran than in, let's say Egypt, or Indonesia. I like to try where it seems more difficult; I also wanted to see if the common western idea about religious schools in Iran being completely closed to the outside world was a prejudice – and I found out that indeed

it was! Another important reason is that there is an uninterrupted tradition to study the thinkers of the Christian West in the Hauzas of Shi'ism. Shi'ite clergy study Western thought, up to our contemporary thinkers. Shi'ite studies of western thought have been going on for centuries, and that makes dialogue maybe more meaningful with the Shi'ite world. I had this idea right from the beginning and I think my work, the way it functioned, the way we managed to understand each other, is another proof of this. In the course of the project I learned about Shi'ite theology and tradition, but it has been also fascinating for me to listen to the ideas of Shi'ite theologians on Thomas Aquinas, or great Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart or Thomas a Kempis – not to speak of their dealing with Western philosophy, from Kant and Hegel to Wittgenstein and Habermas. The architectural beauty of some of the schools I have been working in has been helpful too, but I also worked in very simple or modern schools. And then there was the very special ways of hospitality that you have in your culture, the unique Persian way of receiving and taking care of a guest which made me come back again and again, with the greatest pleasure.

Tell us about the first shot!

Well – I must tell you that I do not like this idea of “shooting” a photograph, and my work as a photographer is in fact completely opposed to this idea! I tell my students that “shooting” a photograph should be avoided! This idea implies that you surprise somebody, like a hunter surprises a deer, and above all it implies that you take something that is not freely given! Of course I know that this is the usual way to take photographs, especially by tourists; but I think this does not lead very far, and in my opinion it is a very un-reflected, often sad use of photography... It excludes the Other, you could say it only pretends to be interested in him. In fact, it means a true limitation of the possibilities that lie in the photographic process. Photography in my concept is part of a process of communication and learning. This is what fascinates me in photography. I use photography as a tool to discuss certain situations more deeply, to get acquainted with people, or to be understood by a precise social group that accepts me as newcomer/outsider. The camera forces me to concentrate on what

can be seen in its frame, and photographic images I produce give me and the people I am working with a rather solid base from which to start a discussion of contents, meaning, judgments and, finally, truth. It makes us discuss the different ideas on truth we may have.

But you must have done one very first image?

Yes, of course I did - I apologize for not having been to the point of your question. Of course there was one first photograph. And I can tell a story about it. I took the first photograph in Isfahan, after a discussion with a group of young clergymen in the courtyard of their school. Out of one of the Iwans of the Madrassa, a very old mullah and a very young mullah sitting next to each other had followed our discussion from a distance. They were perfectly calm and sat there like quiet statues. I thought, in their quietness and serenity, they gave a wonderful image representing teaching, representing age and youth. I asked them if I could do the photograph, they accepted. You see in the photograph their serenity - but you also feel a certain tension that had been introduced by me, by my presence, and which they accepted. You can imagine the sound of the fountain and the voices of the birds in the garden that lies in front of the two. It is not in the picture. But it is there in the viewer's imagination! It is there as there is also the path of teaching and learning that they took together. There are also aesthetic and artistic aspects of the photograph, like the way they hold their hands, so different between the two figures, and the play of black and white between their beards and their turbans - but what I said first is more important to me: the photograph shows a process of communication. It transcends time, it is a message. This is an image about ideas - not only a visual document of a precise situation that is limited in time. Isn't that fascinating? This is the strength of art, and it is an example of the strength of photography.

When you started your work in Iran, did you know what to expect? Have there been surprises? Did you have prejudices towards the religious schools?

My work has been full of surprises, and doing this interview with you, a young Iranian whom I met in an institution of religious studies at

Qom, is yet another surprise. My knowledge of Iran, of the Hauzas, of Shi'ism and of Islam is very limited. I am not an expert. I am a person who wants to learn, who wants to be part of a process of intellectual and spiritual exchange. I have no difficulty to say that I am in the position of an apprentice – to whom the most obvious things must be explained in detail, step by step. The photographic process is a process of visual learning and discovery; any good photographer must be always ready to be taught new things through his eyes and through the lens of his camera. I try to make these two attitudes meet in my projects.

What kind of surprise did you experience?

Of course I had been hoping to be surprised from the beginning! The biggest surprise was how deep and serious my discussions with most of the students were – sometimes right from the start. I discovered a world of high concentration, learnedness, serious study, of great humbleness, and a serious desire to exchange ideas. I discovered a world that had many different facets, where different opinions reigned. There is such diversity in the religious schools in your country! I realized that I knew nothing of this, as most people in the West know nothing of this. But I also realized that most of the teachers and students in the Hauzas never had met people like me before. They rarely have a chance to meet a person from the West other than an occasional tourist. I certainly was the very first Western artist who came to learn from them, who wanted to build a project with them.

And what about prejudices?

If you don't know a situation or people by your own experience, it is likely that you have prejudices. I certainly had my prejudices when I started my work in the Hauzas. When your experience is limited, you take prejudices as answers to your questions. My experience on the Hauzas was nil. I did not know, for example, how seriously some of the students were studying modern western thinkers. I did not know that there were Hauzas with a very international crowd of students, coming from very different countries, all of them Shi'ites. I met Shi'ite students and clergy from Nigeria, from Pakistan, from Tajikistan,

from India, from the Gulf States. I did not know before that there are highly qualified Hauzas reserved for women, like Jamiat al-Zahra in Qom, where I had the privilege and pleasure to work at one point. I certainly had misconceptions, fears as well. And certainly, some students and some teachers had prejudices towards me, at the start of our work. We managed to deal with them, to put them aside, and eventually we got over them. We managed to meet with respect and intellectual interest. This is maybe one of the great achievements of my project.

You are a prominent photographer, your work has been shown internationally in many shows, your photographs are published in Europe, in America and in Asia. Has it been difficult for you to work in Laos? Were there obstacles? Did you encounter similar obstacles in Iran?

My work in Laos has been going on for almost 10 years now. Laos, and particularly the former royal city of Luang Prabang, has become part of my life. When I started working there, the government had just decided to permit foreigners to enter this town which had been practically closed to the outside world since the end of the Vietnam war. I was interested in the religious life of the city, in the life of the monks in several dozens of monasteries. I turned to them to explain my desire to understand and learn, and I have been received in these Buddhist monasteries with generosity, friendliness and intelligence. I explained that my art projects take time and that it is necessary to develop trust, respect and understanding in order to make them work. We did a huge, beautiful work on Sacred Ceremonies of Laos, and, more recently, a rather different, much more intimate work on Meditation traditions of Laos. The situation was pretty much the same in Iran – I started something quite new which seemed impossible at the beginning – most of the “experts” were skeptical that it could be done - but in both cases the participant’s desire for exchange and communication, and my readiness to listen and learn, came together in a positive way. Of course there were obstacles and difficulties – in Laos and in Iran. We managed to get around these obstacles. Language is one problem in such a project, though not as big as one might think. I had to learn about certain cultural mechanisms, in order not to offend my partners– that was more difficult

than language. Sometimes there was the problem that someone did not want to communicate, or wasn't interested at all in listening to my questions. This may happen anywhere – we all can be afraid of the outsider, and stick to our fears rather than open up. Sometimes you cannot go against this, sometimes you do not manage to build trust. If this happens, it is a sad moment. I withdraw in such situations. I do not insist, I do not impose my presence.

Religion is a fragile and complicated subject to work on. Why do you risk relating your art to religion? Isn't that a very unusual thing to do for a Western artist?

You are putting forward a very important question! I can give you a personal answer first, followed by a quite political answer. The personal answer is that I have always been interested in religion (my university studies were on History of Religions), and that I follow a personal quest to know more about religion. I personally find it necessary to learn by experience, not only by books. My art projects are steps on this long path. In a way, they are religious practice – I very well know that not everybody will follow this idea, but I think it is true for me and for my life. So far, I have done some of these steps, but I cannot see the end of the path yet. From a more general point of view, I cannot see how we can live next to each other and how we can understand the world if we do not see that our religious beliefs are important, that they are indeed different. We must develop a capacity to relate to these religious differences. We must find a way to peacefully accept our differences – also the differences of religion. We all sense the danger that comes from the actual state of world politics. Nobody can ignore that there is a dangerous situation today. As an artist, I believe in the strength of dialogue, communication, and images, as long as they are used in a good way – so I try to do my best, the little part I can contribute, as far as I can, to make communication more serious, more profound and helpful in the attempt to avoid misunderstanding and conflict. This is why I try to work with people who have a culture and religion which is different from mine. This is why my art projects deal with religion.

While working in Iran, you encountered a large number of clergymen. How did you deal with them? We have seen you work here in Iran, your approach was very subtle, quiet and respectful. We could see that very often you enjoyed being with them.

Of course I was happy to be with them! I have been treated with great kindness, by people whom I found highly interesting! I managed to build an art project with them. A friendly and respectful way of being with each other set in at a very early point of my work. I see that you can imagine a westerner coming inside a Hauza and acting with arrogance and superiority. I can imagine that too, and I would not only feel ashamed for him, but I would also think that such an attitude is stupid and unacceptable – since it does not lead to understanding. In the Hauzas of Qom, Mashhad and Isfahan, I have been treated with great friendliness and intelligent curiosity by most of the students and teachers. While it was impossible for me to give back their hospitality, I enjoyed sharing their friendliness and understanding – too often not good enough, I am afraid. They have really been very, very good to me.

Did you ever stay with the clergy or the students in a Hauza?

Yes I did, after some time I was invited to stay in several places. You see, it is for several years that I have been coming to Iran, so with some teachers and students we became real friends. I spent long days in the Hauzas. It is in the evening and in the very early morning that you understand the importance of silence there. Silence in the West is something that is missing as a value; it certainly does not exist in most Western places of learning. I have unforgettable memories of the simplicity of life, the humbleness of the young clergy in the Hauzas.

We know you have recently exhibited your work on the Hauzas in the city of Trier, Germany. How did people in Germany react to the photographs?

It is hard to imagine anything that is more unknown, surprising and unexpected to a Western art public than a series of photographs of

Shi'ite scholars and clergy, taken today, as part of a contemporary art project. Most people in the West would think that I risked my life working in the Hauzas (obviously, I did not), and that it would be completely impossible to work together peacefully, on a high level of understanding, not to speak from really enjoying it! This all comes from a huge bulk of misconceptions that unfortunately stand between our cultures, and which I am afraid are constantly growing. Showing my photographs in Trier (at the Catholic Academy) and hopefully in other places in the West in the near future, gives a different vision of Iran, of the life of Shi'ite clergy, from what people would expect. To most people in the West, the exhibition comes as a surprise. It goes against these misconceptions and is an occasion to reflect. One always hopes that thinking and reflecting may change people's ideas to the better...It is obvious that it is not enough to hang my photographs on a museum wall in the West, and leave visitors alone with their questions. In Trier, there were two conferences that accompanied the exhibition, and a small catalogue with several learned texts was produced, one of them by Saeid Edalatnejad, an Iranian clergy and theologian. The book and the conferences were an occasion to learn about Islam, Shi'ism, and to understand the system of teaching in the Hauzas of Iran. I am also giving public lectures, where I project my photographs, in Germany, Italy and Switzerland. One of my conferences has been organized by the Embassy of Iran in Berlin. This embassy has been very helpful in the preparation of my work, as the Embassy of Germany in Tehran has helped me to work in Iran. I am grateful for this support by our two governments.

Will your work ever be shown in Iran?

I hope so! I would be very happy to show it in Iran. There has been a plan to bring it to the three cities where I have been working – Qom, Isfahan and Mashhad. Circumstances did not permit it. Showing my work is part of the work process. Most of the people I photographed have already seen their portrait, and have had an occasion to constantly comment on the body of work. I very much need this feedback which sometimes makes me change ideas about what to do, and about single photographs. Sometimes I redo photographs when I realize their meaning is not clear, or not correct. But showing the

photographs in a work-in-progress is of course different from showing them in an exhibition. I would be very happy if we could do that. It would also be great to find an Iranian publisher interested in a small book of these photographs.

What is your best memory from the Hauzas in Iran?

The discussions with certain students, when we managed to speak openly, with great seriousness, about essential theological questions, and about different visions of the world.

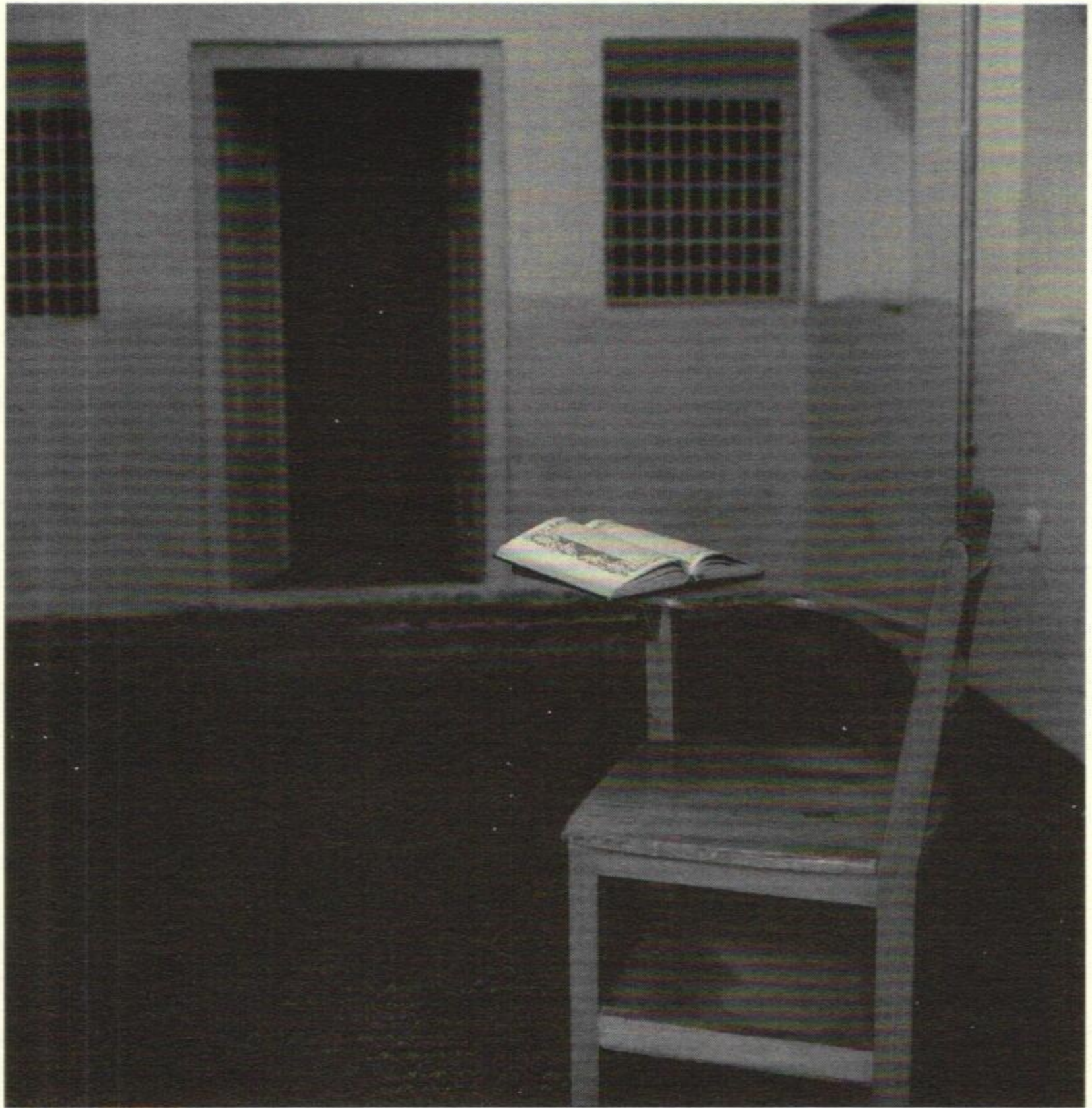
You have been working in Iran from the year 2000 to 2005. Do you consider your project finished? If so, will you nevertheless come back to Iran?

My projects never really come to an end... They are so strongly linked to people I meet and to friends I find. This has been the case in Iran in a very particular way. I know I have good friends now in Qom, Isfahan and Mashhad, also in Tehran. We are in touch and I miss them. I am longing to go back to the Hauzas, continue working there. I think we have something to say that is interesting to other people. And I have an idea about a project dealing with Islamic architecture in Persia – this I would like to continue. I do hope it will be possible.

What would you say as the last word?

I would like to thank you for your questions! Thank you kindly for your idea to do this interview. Persia and its culture are like a wonderful, ripe pomegranate: if you have tasted it once, you can never forget its mixture of sweetness and bitterness, a taste truly unique in the world!

(2006)



Annotations:

Images of the non-self

Catherine Choron-Baix

Page 31: ¹ Quotation from the website <http://www.hansgeorgberger.de/home.html>. – ² Cf. Raymonde Moulin 2003, page 183.

Page 32: ³ Second edition printed in 1992, after the death of Hervé Guibert.

Page 33: ⁴ *Het Bun Dai Bun. Laos. Sacred rituals of Luang Prabang*, London, Westzone Publishing Ltd, 2000. – ⁵ This programme, entitled *The Quiet in the Land: Art, Spirituality and Everyday Life*, was implemented in Luang Prabang between October 2003 and October 2008, with the aim of reviving the city's arts, knowledge and heritage and opening up local society to the outside world by organising collaboration with internationally renowned contemporary artists. Cf. <http://www.thequietintheland.org/>. – ⁶ The first retreat took place in December 2004, attended by 400 monks, and the second in 2005, with 553 monks.

Page 34: ⁷ According to Georges Condominas a *vat pa* or „forest temple“ started out as a sort of embryonic village monastery. Comprising the first *kuti*, the living quarters of the monks, it was later extended to include buildings used as temples (1968 : 89). It is today more of a place of retreat, used to provide a setting for activities that have become impossible in an urban environment. – ⁸ The community of monks. – ⁹ In addition to a permanent exhibition at the National Museum in Luang Prabang, the retreat was commemorated in a book published in Italy in 2006.

Page 35: ¹⁰ Ernest Pignon Ernest takes a similar view, arguing that black and white photography has a distancing effect. – ¹¹ This was also financed by *The Quiet in the Land*. – ¹² The Exhibition „*The Floating Buddha*“ was financed with a grant from the German Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs in celebration of the Lao-German cooperation in the field of culture.

Page 36: ¹³ This text prescribes four fundamental exercises that lead to concentration and awareness: sitting, standing, lying down, and walking, and it describes the movements accompanying these exercises and those leading from one exercise to another.

Page 38: ¹⁴ Various authors point to this capacity of art to capture forces. Hans Belting in particular explains this by reference to the fact that „it renounces the illusion of being able to capture and communicate reality in its supposed unity and simplicity“ (2004 : 497). André Rouillé notes that the artist „uses the photo like a mimetic medium to capture forces“ (2005 : 496).

Page 39: ¹⁵ In her work on this subject, Diana L. Eck illustrates this extended meaning of the concept by reference to the example of Gandhi who, in his travels round India, attracted tens of thousands of people who came to „take his darsan“ (1998 : 5). – ¹⁶ As the art historian Stella Kramrisch puts it, „while the eye touches the object, the vitality that pulsates in it is communicated“ (1976 : 136). – ¹⁷ Cf. Diana L. Eck *op.cit* : page 9.

Page 40: ¹⁸ „I cannot immediately recall any other such case of assiduity in the history of photography“, he wrote in the introduction to the book which he published with Hans Georg Berger in 1988 (*op. cit.*: 1).

Page 41: ¹⁹ The phrase was used by Jean Vigo commenting on *A propos de Nice*.

The ecology of dwelling, photography and intercultural dialogue

Giorgio Conti

Page 47: ¹ C. Taillard. *Le Laos. Stratégie d'un Etat-tampon*, Reclus, Montpellier 1989 –

² J. Cumming, *Laos*. EDT. Torino 1999 – ³ I. Polidori. *Laos*. Calderini. Bologna 1997.

Page 48: ⁴ H. G. Berger, *La felicità buddista. Sacre cerimonie di Luang Prabang*, Il Tucano ed., Torino 2001 – ⁵ T. Terzani, *Un indovino mi disse*, RL Libri, Milano 1997, p. 28.

Page 50: ⁶ J. Cumming, *op. cit.*, p. 15 – ⁷ F. Branfman, *Laos: voci dalla piana delle giare*, Marsilio, Padova 1973.

Page 51: ⁸ T. Terzani. *op. cit.* p. 31.

Page 52: ⁹ H. G. Berger & H. Guibert. *Dialogue d'Images*. William Blake & Co., Bordeaux 1988 – ¹⁰ H. G. Berger. *Lettere dall'Egitto. Dal Cairo a Assuan 19...*, EDT, Torino 1999 –

¹¹ A. Bonito Oliva, *Partitura di Joseph Beuys, la rivoluzione siamo noi*. in "Domus". 505, 1971, pp. 48-50.

Page 53: ¹² A. Caillé. *Il terzo paradigma. Antropologia filosofica del dono*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1998 – ¹³ M. Mauss, *Saggio sul dono*, 1926 – ¹⁴ R. Kapuscinski. *Il cinico non è adatto a questo mestiere*, Edizioni e/o, Roma 2000.

Page 54: ¹⁵ C. Geertz. *Antropologia interpretativa*, il Mulino. Bologna 1988 – ¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 22 – ¹⁷ F. Fukuyama, *La fine della storia e l'ultimo uomo*, Rizzoli, Milano 1992 –

¹⁸ S. Huntington. *Lo scontro delle civiltà e il nuovo ordine mondiale*. Garzanti, Milano 1997 – ¹⁹ M. Batchelor & K. Brown, *Ecologia buddista*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2000.

Captions

Page 12: Cremation, 1994-99,
from Het Bun Dai Bun, Archive nr 178-2

Page 14: Novice Waiting for Ordination, 1994-99,
from Het Bun Dai Bun, Archive nr 327-1

Page 21: Novice after Ordination, 1994-99,
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Page 22: Before Ordination, 1994-99,
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Page 24: Novice, 2005,
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Page 28: Sleeping Meditation 3, 2005
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Page 30: A Buddhist Nun, 2004,
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Page 42: Walking Meditation 1, 2005
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Page 44: Thank you for Looking!, 1994-99
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Page 46: Sangha, 1994-99
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Page 55: Golden Manuscripts of Vat Nong, 1996
from The Manuscripts of Laos, Archive nr 189-5

Page 56: Arles, 1980

Page 58: Lettres d'Egypte, 1983

Page 67: Hotel „Old Cataract“, 1983

Page 70: Mashhad, Iran, 2004
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Page 72: Shia Polaroid nr 481, Iran, 2005

Page 83: Madrassa (Concentration), Iran 2003
Archive nr IR 0422-1

Authors and Sources

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is Director of the Museo delle Culture at Lugano, Switzerland, and professor for anthropology of art at the University of Insubria, Italy. He founded and directed the International Center for Studies in Anthropology of Art (ICSAA) in Cagliari, Italy, where he curated an exhibition of Hans Georg Berger's work on the ceremonies of Luang Prabang, under the title: *Città d'acque. L'opera fotografica di Hans Georg Berger*, in 2001.

His essay was first published in F.P.Campione, *A.Montaldo, Town of Waters*. The photographic work of Hans Georg Berger, *Aisthesis*, Milan 2001

CHRISTIAN CAUJOLLE

is a writer and critic of photography. Founder of the Photographer's Agency VU and the VU gallery in Paris, he has been director of the *Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie* in Arles, France, and currently directs the *Photography Festival of Phnom Penh*, Cambodia. Christian Caujolle in 1992 curated an exhibition of Hans Georg Berger's portraits of the French writer, photographer and filmmaker Herve Guibert that was shown in more than 20 solo exhibitions around the world.

His essay was first published in H.G.Berger, *Het Bun Dai Bun. Laos – Sacred Rituals of Luang Prabang*, Westzone, London 2000.

Translation by Ann Robertson

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is ethnologist at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and one of the leading French experts on the civilization of Laos. Director of the *Laboratoire d'anthropologie urbaine (LAU)* in Paris, she is currently working on historic and contemporary portraits of Theravada monks of Luang Prabang. Translation by Duncan Taylor.

GIORGIO CONTI

is professor for urbanism and sociology at the Ca' Foscari of Venice, Italy. A close collaborator of Joseph Beuys, he created the *Archivi della Modernità* in Venice. Giorgio Conti curated an exhibition of Hans Georg Berger's work from Laos for the *Galleria d'Arte Contemporanea* of Santa Sofia, Italy in 2002.

His essay was first published in F.P.Campione, *A.Montaldo, Town of Waters*. The photographic work of Hans Georg Berger, *Aisthesis*, Milan 2001

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Her interview was first published in F.P.Campione, A.Montaldo, Town of Waters. The photographic work of Hans Georg Berger, Aisthesis, Milan 2001

MAJID AFSHAR

is a writer on art and politics living in Tehran, Iran. He has been researcher at the Research Institute of Hauza and University in the sacred city of Qom, Iran and currently works as a free lance journalist in Tehran, Iran.

His interview has been published online by Iran News Channel, an English-language news agency based in Tehran, in 2007.

Biography

Hans Georg Berger is a photographer and writer. He was born in 1951 in Trier, Germany, and presently divides his time between Italy, Berlin and Luang Prabang/Laos. Berger studied comparative religion and drama in Germany and the United States. In 1975 he collaborated for the first time with the German artist Joseph Beuys whose art and political ideas would greatly influence his conception of photography. Another important artistic influence was the French writer, photographer and filmmaker Herve Guibert whom he photographed for 12 years.

Since 1988 Hans Georg Berger has produced a series of long-term photography projects involving world religions, including Theravada Buddhism in Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos as well as Shi'ite Islam in Iran. These projects embody his concept of "community involvement": the photographer, who is an outsider, seeks to blend in with the community he desires to represent. Towards this end, the artist brackets his autonomy by inviting the community to teach him where to look, what to portray and how to portray it.

In addition to his ongoing work on Buddhism and Islam, there is work on Taoism in China and Vietnam, on Zoroastrian communities and on ancient Christian Churches of the Orient.

Hans Georg Berger was director of the Munich Theatre Festival from 1977 to 1983 and the co-founder of the Muenchner Biennale music theatre festival. With Ariane Mnouchkine and Patrice Chéreau, he is co-founder of A.I.D.A., an international human rights watch group for artists based in Paris.

Since 1977 he has been rebuilding the Eremo di Santa Caterina, a former Franciscan monastery on the Island of Elba, Italy, which he has developed into a place that links contemporary art and music, writing, botany and archaeology. He photographed his friends and fellow artists with a small Rollei 35 camera while they worked on Elba; these photographs from the 1980s were presented for the first time in a large exhibition organized by the Institut Français de Munich in 2005.

In 1997 on the Island of Elba, he founded a Botanical Garden dedicated to the conservation and study of the spontaneous flora of the islands of the Tuscan Archipelago, and created a garden of ancient roses near the Hermitage of Santa Caterina.

Hans Georg Berger lectures on photography and his concept of “community involvement” in Europe, Iran, South Korea and Japan. From 1998 to 2004, he taught photography at Silpakorn University, the Academy of Fine Arts in Bangkok, Thailand, as a docent of DAAD, the German Academic Exchange Service. In 2009, he was named visiting professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, France.

Hans Georg Berger’s involvement with Lao Buddhism and the city of Luang Prabang is expressed by a number of art projects and activities in the fields of heritage and education. With his photographs, he produced two school-books for Lao students: one on Sacred Ceremonies and Ritual (in 1997, now in its fourth edition), another on Vipassana meditation (in 2006). From 2004 to 2006, he participated in *The Quiet in the Land*, an art and education project held in Luang Prabang by 12 artists coming from all over the world. Two permanent exhibitions of his photographs can be seen in town: *The Floating Buddha*, on the revival of meditation, at the National Museum and *Sacred Luang Prabang*, on ceremonies and ritual, at Amantaka. In connection with his work in Laos he is currently directing a Major Research Project of the British Library, London, on the collections of historic photographs of the monasteries of Luang Prabang.

Exhibitions

- 2009 **Luang Prabang**, Laos: AMANTAKA (permanent exhibition)
Sacred Luang Prabang (curated by Pascal Trahan)
(Catalogue)
- 2006 **Luang Prabang**, Laos: National Museum (permanent exhibition)
The Floating Buddha (curated by France Morin)
(Catalogue)
- 2005 **München**, Germany: Institut Français de Munich (Oct-Dec 2005)
Les années 80/ Die Achtziger Jahre
- Trier**, Germany: Katholische Akademie (Nov-Dec 2005)
Gott ist das Haus des Wissens (curated by Jürgen Doetsch)
(Catalogue)
- 2001 **Cagliari**, Italy: Museo d'Arte Siamese (Dec 2001-Feb 2002)
Città d'acque (curated by Francesco Paolo Campione)
(Catalogue)
- Torino**, Italy: La Fornace Spazio Permanente, Oct / Dec 2001
La felicità buddhista (curated by Cesario Carena)
(Catalogue)
- 2000 **Vientiane**, Laos: Laos National Center for Culture, Nov 2000
The Manuscripts of Laos (curated by Dara Viravong Kanlaya)
- Santa Sofia**, Italy: Galleria d'Arte Contemporanea, June-July 2000
Luang Prabang, città sacra, città d'acqua (curated by Giorgio Conti)
(Catalogue)
- Hannover**, Germany:
Expo 2000, Laotischer Pavillion, June-October 2000
The Manuscripts of Laos (curated by Dara Viravong Kanlaya)

- 2000 **Köln**, Germany: Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, February-June 2000
Rituale einer glücklichen Stadt (curated by Gisela Völger)
(Catalogue)
- 1999 **Berlin**, Germany: Ethnologisches Museum,
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Aug 1999- Jan 2000
Het Bun Dai Bun. Rituale einer glücklichen Stadt
(curated by Wibke Lobo)
- 1998 **Luang Prabang**, Laos: Nine sacred sites of the city, Dec 1998,
Het Bun Dai Bun (catalogue)
- 1997 **Bangkok**, Thailand: The National Gallery, Dec 1997
(in collaboration with Goethe Institut)
Het Bun Dai Bun (catalogue)
- Vientiane**, Laos: Vat Si Saket, November 1997, Het Bun Dai Bun
- 1996 **Zagreb**, Croatia: Institut Français, May-June 1996,
Dialogue d'Images (curated by Christian Caujolle)
- 1995 **Créteil**, France: Fnac Galeries Créteil, June-July 1995,
Parly II, France: Fnac Galeries Parly II, März/April 1995
- Portoferraio**, Italy: Centro Culturale De Laugier, June 1995
- 1994 **Amsterdam**, The Netherlands: The Vintage Gallery, May-June 1994
The Mudra Series (curated by Joseph Geraci)
- Colmar**, France: Fnac Galeries Colmar, November 1994-January 1995
- Gent**, Belgium: Fnac Galeries Gent, September-Oktober 1994

- 1994 **Tokyo**, Japan: Penrose Institute for Contemporary Art, March 1994
Dialogue d'Images (curated by Christian Caujolle
and Kazumiko Murakami)
(catalogue)
- 1993 **Portoferraio**, Italy: Centro Culturale Laugier, November 1993
- Firenze**, Italy: Institut Français, October 1993
- Mainz**, Germany: Institut Français, September 1993
- Bordeaux**, France: Fnac Galeries Bordeaux, August-October 1993
- Erlangen**, Germany: Städtische Galerie, July 1993
- Stockholm**, Sweden: Institut Français, June 1993
- Amsterdam**, Netherlands: Maison Descartes, April-May 1993
- Berlin**, Germany: Fnac Galeries Berlin, March-April 1993
- Bremen**, Germany: Institut Français, March 1993
- Paris**, France: Fnac Montparnasse, January-February 1993
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- 1992 **Rennes**, France: Théâtre National de Bretagne, November 1992
- Wien**, Austria: Schauspielhaus, Nov-Dec 1992
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- 1991 **Paris**, France: Istituto Italiano di Cultura, Palais de Gallifet,
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- 1989 **Isola d'Elba**, Italy: Eremo di S.Caterina, April 1989, Ritratti Riesi
- 1988 **Livorno**, Italy: Museo Contemporaneo di Villa Maria, Oct 1988,
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The photographic work of Hans Georg Berger.

Edited by Francesco Paolo Campione and Anna Maria Montaldo.

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Twelve portraits of roses from the Hortus Conclusus of the Hermitage
of Santa Caterina. Limited edition

(Edizioni S.Caterina, Rio nell'Elba, 2004)

**Gott ist das Haus des Wissens. Fotografien eines Kunstprojekts
in theologischen Hochschulen von Qom, Mashhad und Isfahan.**

Herausgegeben von Jürgen Doetsch. Mit Texten von Jürgen Doetsch,

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www.hansgeorgberger.de

With his innovative method of photography, Hans Georg Berger posits the artist as an outsider who strives to blend in with the community he desires to represent. The traditional roles of the photographer as the active, and of those photographed as the passive part of the artistic process are being questioned, and in part inverted.

The essays and interviews assembled in this book explore Hans Georg Berger's artistic experiences in Laos and Iran. An anthropologist; a critic of photography; an ethnologist; an urbanist; and two fellow writers, explain and investigate the radicality of his reconsideration of the relationship between artist and subject.