

# Heinz Emigholz talks to Siegfried Zielinski

**Siegfried Zielinski:** In the mid-16th Century, a strange collection of stories entitled 'Peregrinaggio di tre giovani, figliuoli del re di Serendippo' (Three princes of Sarendip) was published in Venice. The collection was based on Persian and Arab tales about three princes whose father gives them an excellent education, tests their acumen in a number of ways and eventually sends them out into the world so that they can learn from other cultures. The undoubtedly clever princes constantly uncover wonderful things no one thought to look for in the deserts between Egypt and Sinai and other areas. They are masters at deciphering clues and symbols, thereby discovering the answers to questions no one has thought to ask. It was for this phenomenon that the poet Horace Walpole invented the word "serendipity." I couldn't find a better way to describe the sensation I felt while watching the first parts of PHOTOGRAPHY AND BEYOND. Serendipity is the opposite of arbitrariness. What is the nature of the motives that produce such undoubtedly successful finds as we see and marvel at in Sullivan's Banks, Maillart's Bridges and now GOFF IN THE DESERT?

**Heinz Emigholz:** I'm just trying to remember what led me to decide to make these films. It was coming across the picture of a Louis Sullivan bank at an antiquarian bookshop in Santa Monica in early 1993. I can still recall what I felt at the time. I thought, "That's incredible. I have to go there. I have to experience that space." Why the sudden excitement? Because I had already reached this point in my mind: the intersection between ornament and modern construction. Although I hadn't experienced it in reality and couldn't imagine it, I had postulated it. My mind was therefore receptive, and a bad photo triggered a long journey. I knew nothing whatsoever about Sullivan's small banks beforehand, nor was I especially knowledgeable about architecture. One wonders whether this building would have proved so meaningful to me if it had been featured in some way in an encyclopaedia. The interesting thing about the story of the princes is that their comprehensive education – and I presume that because they passed the acumen tests they were excellent logicians – led them to open their minds to the world and all its manifestations rather than closing them as semi-educated people in particular do. They "recognised" the world on their journeys, but not in the sense of quotation or rediscovery. No, the world's riches unveiled themselves because their eyes were receptive to them, just as the hearts of great logicians beat faster at the sight of the outward appearances representing the lively network of entanglement within. That alone is recompense for the effort of appreciation, not the silly outline of ill-considered logic that ignores bodies and their exteriors. At any rate, I approached Sullivan's buildings without prejudice and with fascination. It was only when we had completed our travels and had the photographic results on film in front of us that I

realised that no one had ever done this before. And that surprised me again. It was different with Goff. I didn't even know his name before the late 1980s, when I discovered the L.A. County Museum Japanese art pavilion, which he had designed together with Bart Prince, a former pupil. The building impressed me so much that I wrote down the architect's name. But the story wasn't ready in my mind at the time. This didn't begin properly until I revisited the building 10 years later. My admiration for his skill at thinking, constructing and shaping space increased from one building to the next. In between – in retrospect it was the perfect link – I was involved with Maillart's bridges. And these films in turn were preceded by my work on Gaudi's 'La sagrada familia,' the subject of my feature film The Holy Bunch. This included an entire sequence without actors, focussing entirely on the cathedral, with the building carrying the story and the biography.

**S.Z.:** Your attitude to the built constructs of architects forgotten, suppressed or thrust to the edges of the established perception is one of radical affection. Your viewers and listeners are drawn in as accomplices in a very intimate process of approaching, considering and penetrating your subjects. Perception becomes grasping in a very direct sense of the word, seeing a haptic yet cognitive procedure. The photographic film camera doesn't dissect. The intensity isn't created by deconstruction, but loving construction.

**H.E.:** Within my construct – i.e. that of a technical medium – the eye reverts back to what it always was: an extension and interface to the brain, and one that needs no codes. It thinks and feels at the same time. As such, the film once again bears a genuine relation to the external realities of the world and does not get bogged down in speculation. As "imaginary architectures of time," films can consciously uphold and analyse the intersections between time and place, in other words, enable what we see and perceive at a given time to reappear. In PHOTOGRAPHY AND BEYOND, I only shot things and constellations I loved, and only cinematographical settings I loved. I present the uniqueness of space, and thereby of course the impossibility of representing them medially. Precisely the effort of working with 35mm film and Dolby Digital Stereo highlights the losses that the media constantly and tacitly sweep under the carpet.

**S.Z.:** You began the entire project at a time in which the euphoria about the digitisation of images and all forms of exchange had reached dizzying heights. The electronic generation and distribution of images was inflating vehemently. Nearly everything that was produced in the 1990s will probably be forgotten within a decade. As the first two parts opened in the cinemas, the so-called "new economy" was beginning to fall apart. The panacean qualities promised by the missionaries of all things electronic turned out in most cases to be bold quackery.

**H.E.:** People will complain that it's not about clinging to constellations or composed phenomena and that only the exchange process itself is interesting, even though I share your belief that this is utter nonsense. Ecstasy is a trap. I'm interested in endurance. The bean-counters present no more than nominally democratic acts on their multimedia exteriors, and most of it is nothing but associative rubbish. At this bandwidth they are in any case utterly ruthless and hopelessly out of reach of mortal individuals. So why bother? Now and again we plunge our hands into the stream and pull something nourishing out. And coincidence is just as refreshing as research. PHOTOGRAPHY AND BEYOND, by contrast, is a plea for decisive, finite formation, and does not represent the "sea of opportunity" in which we can take an abstract swim. Beauty only ever exists at a particular time and in a particular place, not as abstract relational logic. As a logician, I should at least be permitted to say that. Incidentally, in making our production we used the "new" media more intelligently than many companies who pride themselves in doing so. Day after day, Filmgalerie 451 posted an online "making of" of each of the 50 days of shooting. Far in excess of a hundred thousand users a month watched these cinematic ads. That's never happened before. "Making of" documents are usually only faked up afterwards. As a result, we're no longer dependent on the film journalistic blanchange that is currently oozing through the "old" media. After GOFF IN THE DESERT has premiered on February 14th, 2003, the film will be flanked by the Web site [www.bruce-goff-film.com](http://www.bruce-goff-film.com).

**S.Z.:** Are we to understand your renewed exploit into so-lemn photographic filmmaking as an act of protest, of resistance by aesthetic means against a culture in which mediated moments are deemed obscene, and dancing on plateaus has become a social requirement?

**H.E.:** Everything you do also distinguishes itself by what you don't do. You set priorities because you only have a limited amount of time at your disposal. I wouldn't necessarily call that resistance, but a conscious choice. The "dancing on plateaus" does look rather silly from the outside. If the players on the new media stage have voluntarily taken over from very different forces the role of relieving the so-called "little" people from their loose change, they are only following a long tradition. But they have now been cut down to size in a classic way. How can you accuse someone who has never "felt with his eyes" of "neglecting a core business?" The fact that the soul is connected to the body has been completely overlooked out of sheer elation at the new association machines and their almost religious aura of boundlessness. For my work, I was pleased that the sphere of the panacean promises had moved away from film and settled somewhere else. This background noise – namely the act of trans-

posing multimedia efforts onto a new, universal medium – has created new conditions for filmmaking. We can now concentrate again on what is important: representation and linear paths, that is, spatial representation and agents of the dramatic form. Film can free itself from the imposed demands for socio-politically educational, Big Brother-like, associative, essayistic proof in montage form; info-kitsch that shrouds the world in a blanket of understanding as far as the antennas and networks reach. In view of everything the media is now capable of, this is something of a second change of paradigm. Reality is no longer to be covered and interpreted by language, but "only" as perfectly as possible via an intact photographic surface like a "performance," a motif as old as film itself, but long buried down a collateral line.

**S.Z.:** PHOTOGRAPHY AND BEYOND has an impact on two levels; as an individual film that you insert into the project and as an item in a cinematographic and audiovisual archive. Bit by bit, you are creating an encyclopaedia of the means by which strong-willed architects have accentuated, altered and transformed spaces and locations.

**H.E.:** Yes, freed from the chains of meaning, things can speak for themselves again. Films can now simply show things again without being judged for what they portray or how they does so. A word about my choice: the Architektur als Autobiographie (Architecture as Autobiography) group looks at architectural spaces that I believe have been sorely neglected by so-called "architectural history." In GOFF IN THE DESERT, I show something that has been suppressed by almost criminal means by the International Style and Bauhaus movements. Just like Rudolph Schindler, Bruce Goff was deliberately marginalised and sidelined simply because he wasn't an ideologist with global aspirations, but felt duty-bound to the sites and particular shapes of his constructions. The film now has the strength to put something centre-stage in such a way that it can't be talked away again. Here's a little joke by way of an aside: In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a project – I believe it was initiated by UNESCO – to immortalise the World Cultural Heritage List. A variety of production companies fell over themselves to shoot cheap footage of famous buildings. This rubbish was subsequently shelved in the archives never to be seen again. Someone should turn it into a research project to assess these products. Then the work can start all over again. However, I can only compare the "archive" concept (which is after all an encyclopaedic one) to my own production. In the 'Basis of make-up' subgroup, I show all my notebooks, sketchpads and drawings in as sensible a manner as possible. That is both complete and a parody of encyclopaedias. Their objectives are more than any individual can achieve. Personal matters only get in their way, and it is this disruption that I take a close look at.

**S.Z.:** Is this a task you assign to photographic films after they have been run through the electronic acceleratory and cleansing machines in order to permanently preserve (constructive) aesthetic sensations and the respectful view artists have of them? Is the cinema perhaps a museum in the best sense of the word, a place where (in this case) constructed fantasies are refined?

**H.E.:** I can't formulate any tasks. All I can do is offer what I do best: representing space on a flat surface. I consider myself a cameraman held out in the service of Mankind and who makes the fruits of his sight available to others. This is no more and no less than utopia without a dramatic structure. I believe that everyone perceives space differently and that art and structure arise out of the perception of these nuances. The world reveals itself to us, and we show each other the world – not just different facets, but our different views. During peacetime this is an endless process that deserves to be loved.

*Media expert Siegfried Zielinski's 'Archäologie der Medien – Zur Tiefenzeit des technischen Hören und Sehens' [The archaeology of the media: On the nadir of technical seeing and hearing] was recently published by Rowohlt.*