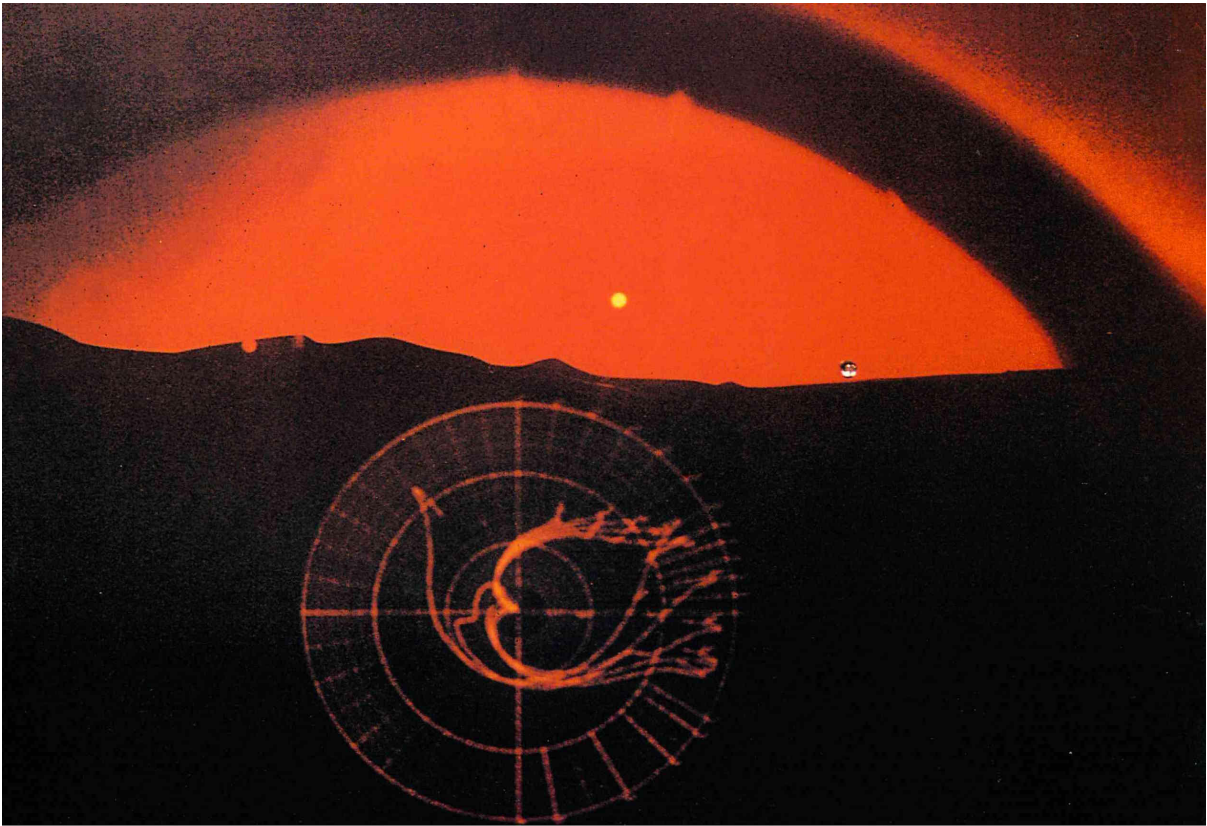


Sahara Project Redux:

Text for a Film



Lichtexperimente in the Wahiba Desert, Oman, 1997, © Archiv Heinz Mack

Prelude

The desert is not a void, a black hole, as many Europeans imagined or wished it were. The vermilion sands of the Sahara seem to have swallowed time, yet it protects those who know it: nomads, cold-blooded creatures, sandworms, succulents. They take shape if you remain for long enough. Maybe the vast distances, the lack of permanent structures, breeds fantasies, castles in the sand.

Memmi's Ghost

Apparent is the relationship between colonial, colonizer, and colonized as soon as we take off from Paris. A French flight attendant, high-cheek bones, with a silk, Hermes-like scarf tied to one side, raises her nose as the Tunisian Muslim woman whose overweight luggage was a metaphor for her appearance. She insists to the exasperated passenger she only speaks French, "seulement français madame". She watches aloofly.

We touch down on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, and the phthalo night becomes an ever darker blue. Albert Memmi's ghost reincarnates.

Tunis-Carthage airport is stark—marble floors and Corbusian pilotis, abandoned rotundas marked 'security', beveled mirrors. Customs is a living inferno, long lines with red tape, cut

for those coming from the metropole. I am standing in line with my Palestinian passport, observing a short-haired, fair-skinned, Tunisian man, white-passing, French-speaking, staring at his darker-skinned compatriot, who queues to exchange colored bills at La Poste Tunisienne. He is nervous, impatient, dressed in a sleazy way, a white shirt with tight black jeans, head shaved. He gives no space to his compatriot; boundaries exist to be broken.

La Medina is sealed off with police barricades, blocking the main entrance to the white-washed labyrinth. An ochre hue washes over the adjacent boulevard, which I would realize the next day is lined on both sides with fragrant, orange trees. The sound of birds is startling—wild, even. They are hungry, or mating, or feasting, or attacking, or all of the above in one, neurotic frenzy. Tell me, are the birds of Tunisia in heat? What if they live a more exciting life than we do?

An eloquent man with a craggy nose, with a soft but guarded look, greets me at Dar El Medina. His jet-black hair is like an oil slick: it curls at the ends, like miniature waves crashing. The ribbed lines on his burgundy turtleneck reach his chin; he hides it discreetly underneath a black duster. He seems queer: it's reciprocal. He scrutinizes me as if to ask what my purpose is in Tunis. What are my means?

The floors of the hotel are checkered black-and-white, an Art Deco remnant, some paintings adorn the wall, mostly cubist rip-offs, touristic ephemera of the Kebili oasis, other wooden and ornate decorative objects. There I am in the dining room, red velvet curtains, he offers a soup with burghul, the remains of a baguette, a sweet and sticky dessert, harissa, and some tea with mint.

The next morning, blue flashes in my eyes. White surroundings. A painted clock in Arabic numerals. The Ministry of Finance.

I awake to a cat with yellow eyes, Halawa, the name of a flaky block of tahini with pistachios. All I remember are curious, electric eyes with black, almond-shaped pupils. The cats of North Africa have their own genetics.

An idyllic day.

Bright skies.

Whiffs of jasmine.

Gusts of wind separating palm trees.

The shouts of schoolchildren in uniform.

A young man guiding his mother.

Slow and bright, blue of my thoughts and dreams, transports me to somewhere else. Paradise.

I'm walking past a monumental statue with seven red flags which circle each other. The image of a man on fire, the man who self-immolated.

El Kechachine is a 600-year-old hammam, inside, employed is a middle-aged man called Idris. He shampoos my hair, with gentle, aged, leathery hands. Next to him is a heart-shaped bucket of water, square pools. My locker is number 27.

The worst of the medina is when you are its stranger: you cannot exit the maze. Alleys repeat, intersect, loop back, disappear, become tetris-like until you are in the center with no way out.

In a bookstore on Rue Habib Borgeiba, I ask for Albert Memmi, and meet Ziad, a Tunisian Jew, with Hebrew tattoos, a ponytail, metal piercings. He suggests many books, aggressively. I enter conversation reluctantly. Of all the prophetic ramblings, one sticks with me: “history cannot be escaped,” he says.

Mack’s Voyage

The year is 1968. Heinz Mack, the German artist and ZERO Group member, sets out on an indefinite journey with an undisclosed crew to the Sahara Desert. The fabled, burnt-yellow Grand Erg Oriental, split between Tunisia and Algeria. With a Volkswagen, some cameramen, he boards a ship from Marseille to Tunis. He imagines a reservation of art, surrounded by nothing but sand.

For Mack, the most precious substance in the world is light. *Pure light. But what is pure light? Or pure anything for that matter?*

Desires for purity in humanity once led to massive erosion and unknowable deaths. Desire for purity in art once led to abstract, gestural procedures, splashes, and stains, like Albert Burri’s *Sacking and Red*, or Art Informel and Tachisme.



Albert Burri, *Sacking and Red*, acrylic paint and hessian on canvas, 1954

© Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini Collezione Burri, Città di Castello (Perugia) / DACS 2019.

Protests erupt in Paris, Mexico City, Düsseldorf. How to express both concepts and ideals? Art should have a concept but also mirror society's ideals. Too much distance can be construed as inhabiting one's own universe. Navel-gazing. A vacuum.

Outside of the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, demonstrations break out against a show of American, Minimalist art. What's Donald Judd got to do with it?

He used to complain it was hard to find a good lamp. Was that his biggest concern?

Youth lead the movements, asking why the older generation of artists have forgotten WWII. Joseph Beuys is thrown out of the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf for rejecting the "entrance examination". Art is not truly for all.

Interlude

Against this backdrop, Mack departs for the Sahara. Our noble adventurer is about to enter a world with many dangers. Earth that shifts. Skies which estrange. He who brings back the spoils of a foreign land controls the empire.

1914

Paul Klee, the German painter, vacations in Hammamet, Tunisia, sixty-six kilometers southeast of Tunis. There, in watercolors and graphite, he paints the Mosque of Hammamet and two towers, gardens, in cool fragments—fuschia, strawberry, violet. "Color and I are one. I am a painter," he declares, after his sojourn in Tunisia. Is the light of Tunisia any different than elsewhere? Better than Germany's.

Post-Independence

Mack conceives the Sahara Project.

*Sie fragen: Kann das Projekt auch werkllichkeit warden? Ich antworte, ja!*¹

Can the Sahara Project really happen? He responds to his own question enthusiastically, "yeah!"

*Finden wir noch immer die Reservatur der Natur, deren außerordentliche Räume von großer Dimension sein müssen, scheint es doch so, daß sich in ihnen selbst Atomexplosionen rerlieren.*²

In Mack's journals, he writes that there are still reserves of nature, of such enormous size, that even atomic explosions get lost in them.

"Das Licht macht den Raum leicht." Light unburdens space.³

¹ See Schmied, Wieland, and Marion Agthe. *Utopie Und Wirklichkeit Im Werk Von Heinz Mack*. DuMont, 1998.

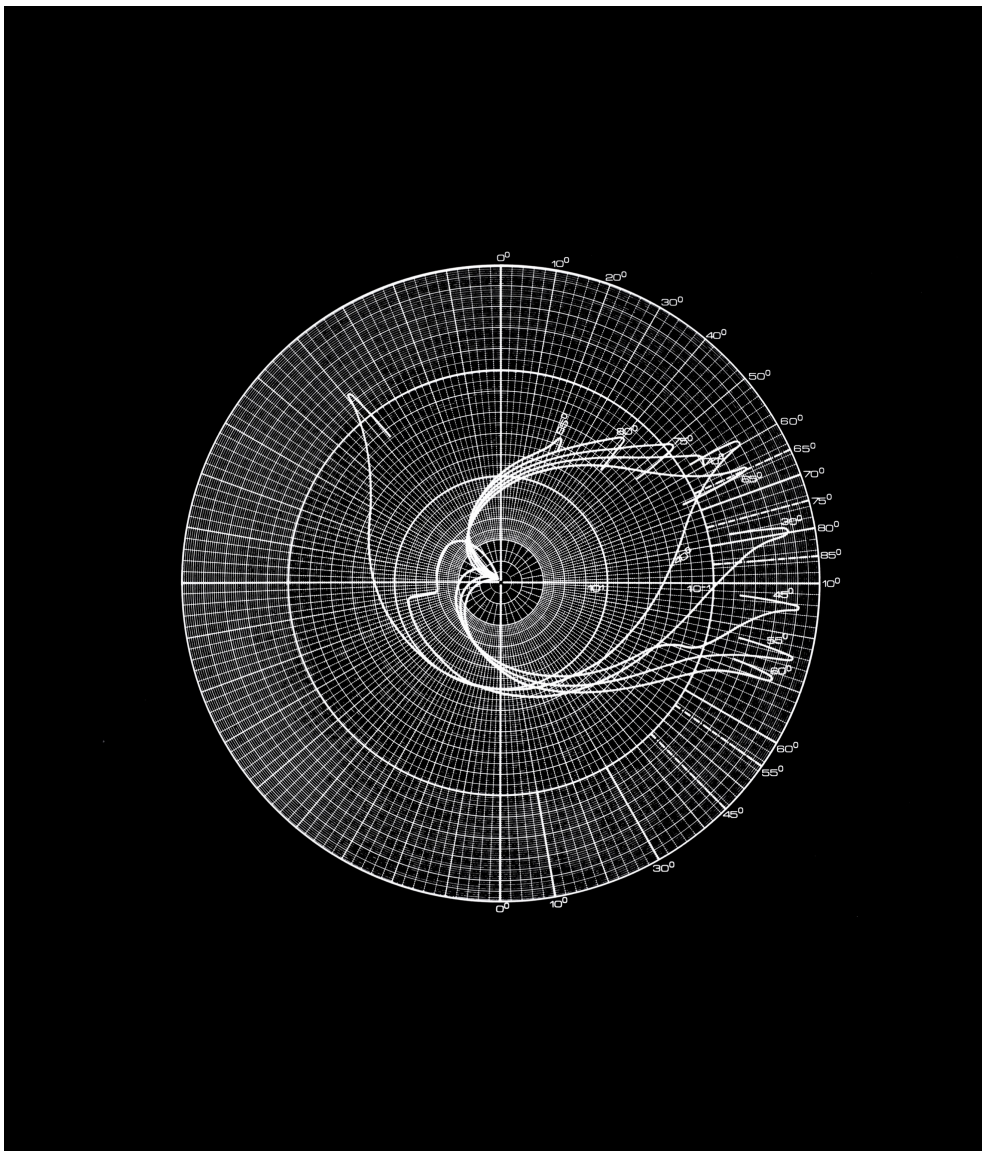
² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

*Morgen aber werden wir auf der Suche nach einer neuen Dimension der Kunst auch neue Räume aufsuchen müssen, in denen unsere Werke eine unvergleichliche Erscheinung gewinnen werden.*⁴

A voyage, a search for a new dimension of art in which the psyche will transform its appearance. The desert as its perfect expression. The Sahara as its most extreme.

At the ZERO vault in Düsseldorf, I uncover diagrams depicting *albedo*, incident light reflected by a surface, typically a planet, a moon, the sun. Mack's utopia was ice and sand, deserts and glaciers: he traveled to Oman, Algeria, the Arctic, to stage his metallic light structures.



The diagram for calculating the reflection on corrugated surfaces, © Archiv Heinz Mack

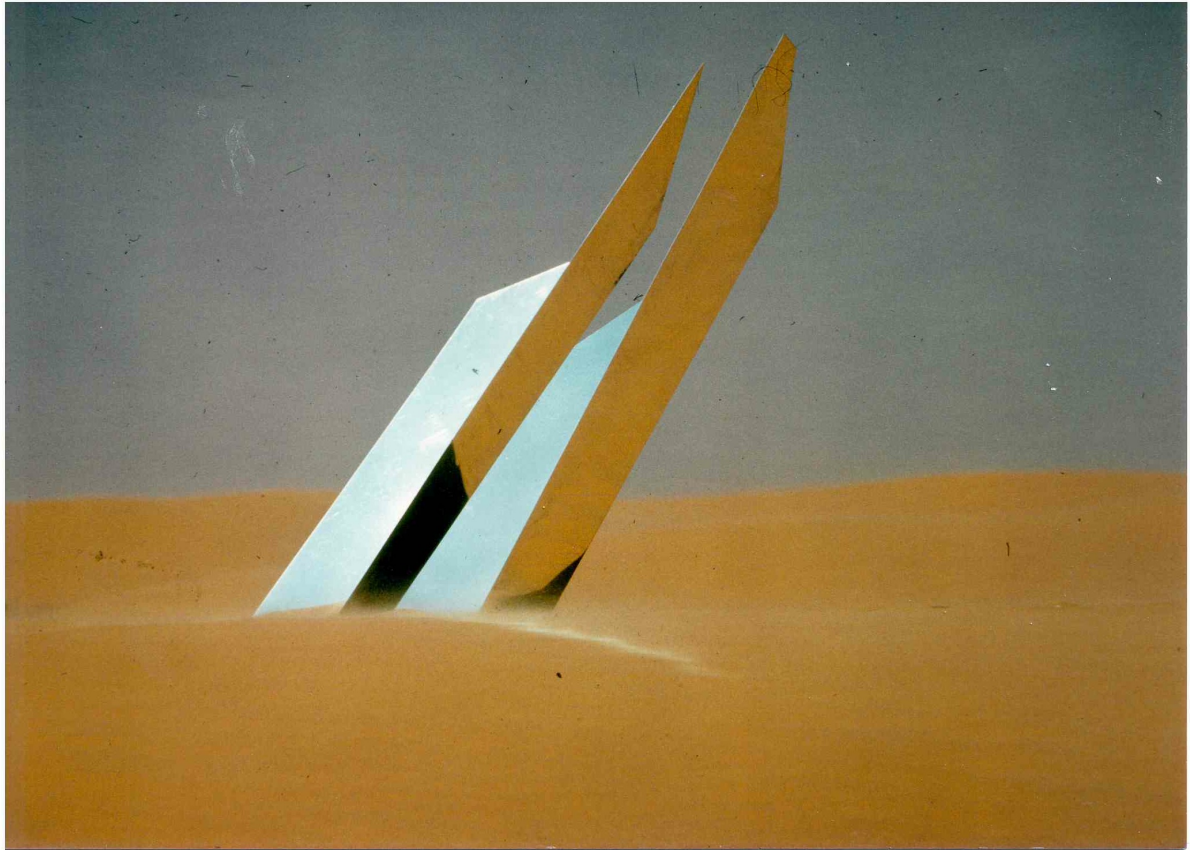
He conceives *Sahara Project* as twelve stations: the daydream, or *tagträume*, of a sun-worshipper. It is biblical, or occult, some hybrid of the two. Guiding him is the *azimuth*, or

⁴ Ibid.

as-samt in Arabic, an historical instrument which reveals celestial objects, expressed as an angle in relation to a disappearing horizon.

The first vision is a single, extremely high pillar in the desert, not far from the shores of the Mediterranean.

*Pillars in the middle of the sea, like light-carrying ships hulling rudderless on the ocean.*⁵



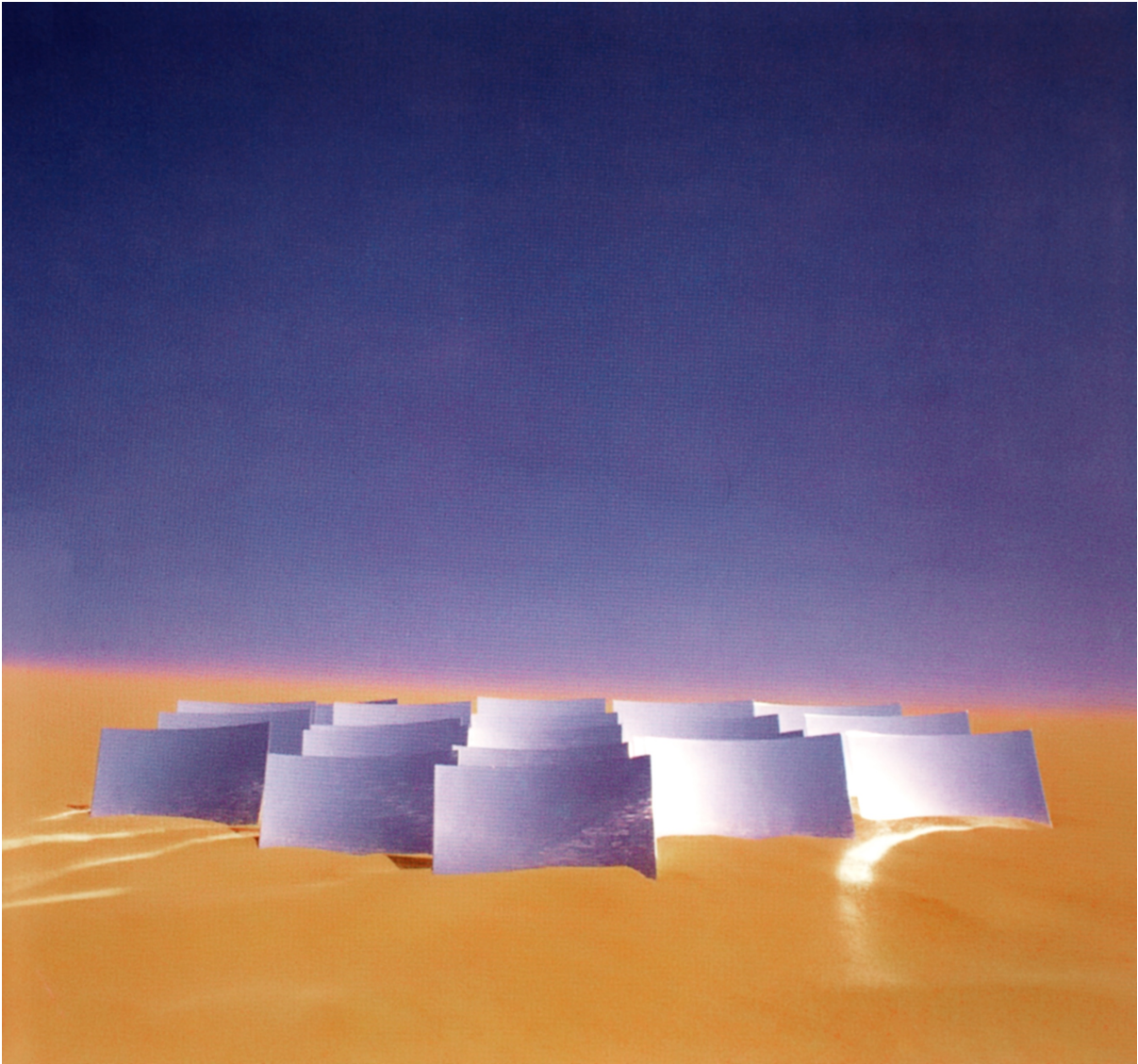
Der Absturz des Saint-Exupery, 1976 (Modell eines Monuments in der Algerischen Wüste), © Archiv Heinz Mack

The second vision is a mirror wall. An unescapable confrontation with oneself, or to transport twenty plasma televisions from Europe to the inner dunes of a distant planet with indigo skies and orange soil. His photos seem retouched: how were they staged, and with what crew?

A diary entry: *An unbroken mirror of surfaces more than 100 meters long, 5 meters high.*⁶

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.



Spiegelplantage, 1968, collage, © Archiv Heinz Mack

*Several upright, drum-tight, sails, snow white.*⁷

Snow White.

Magical fans.

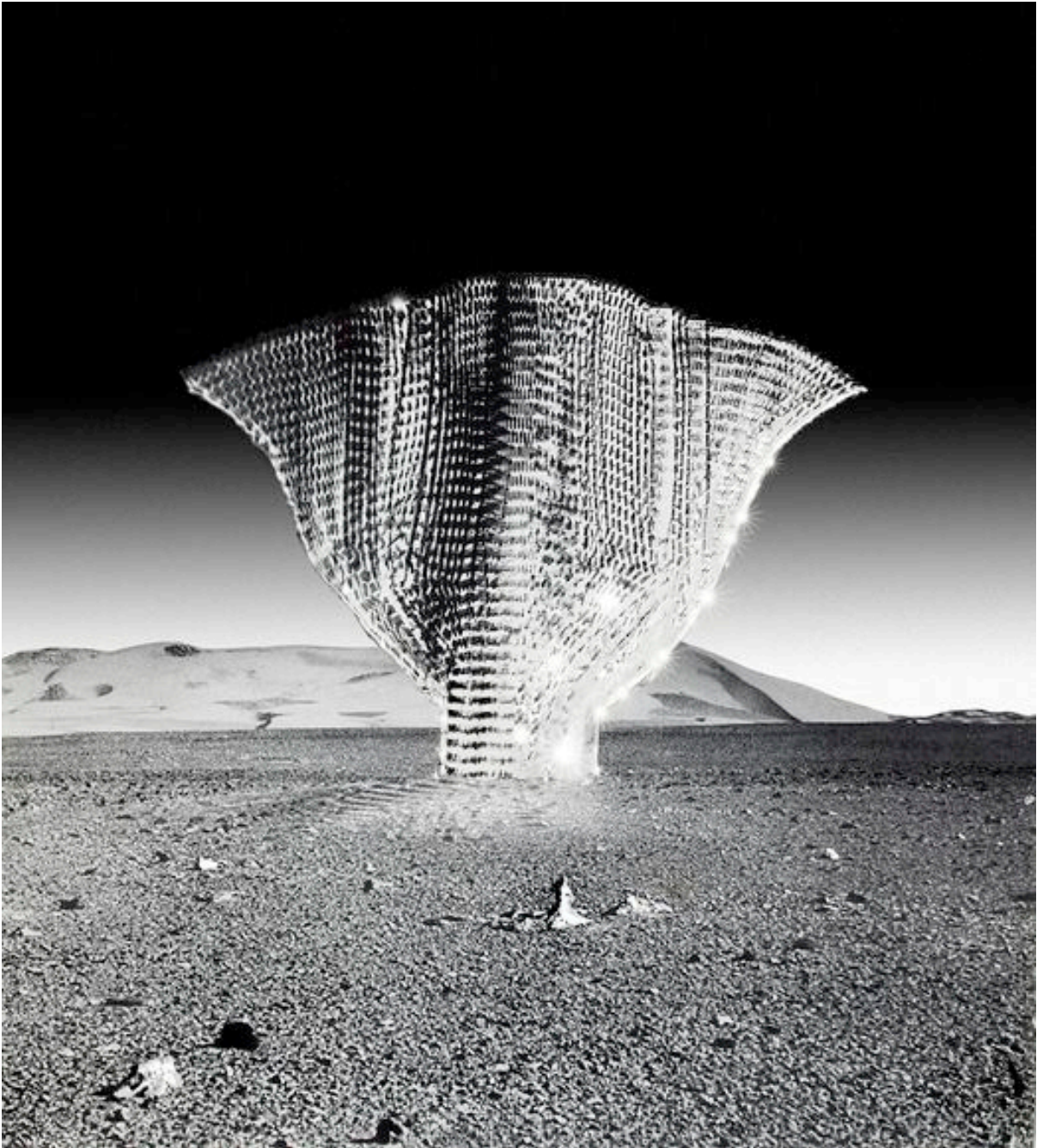
The crystal glass of an upper-class aristocrat.

Blinding facets.

Awareness of the light is heightened, but something else is lost. A sense of the desert, its discreet power.

We make a quick stop at the Hotel La Tente, and a large, bearded man named Ben Naji in a white *jalabiyya* greets us: *Welcome to Douz*. “How deep can one go?” I ask. *One hundred kilometers. Two hundred kilometers. To the border of Algeria*. He gives me his card and tells me to call him if I change my mind.

⁷ Ibid.



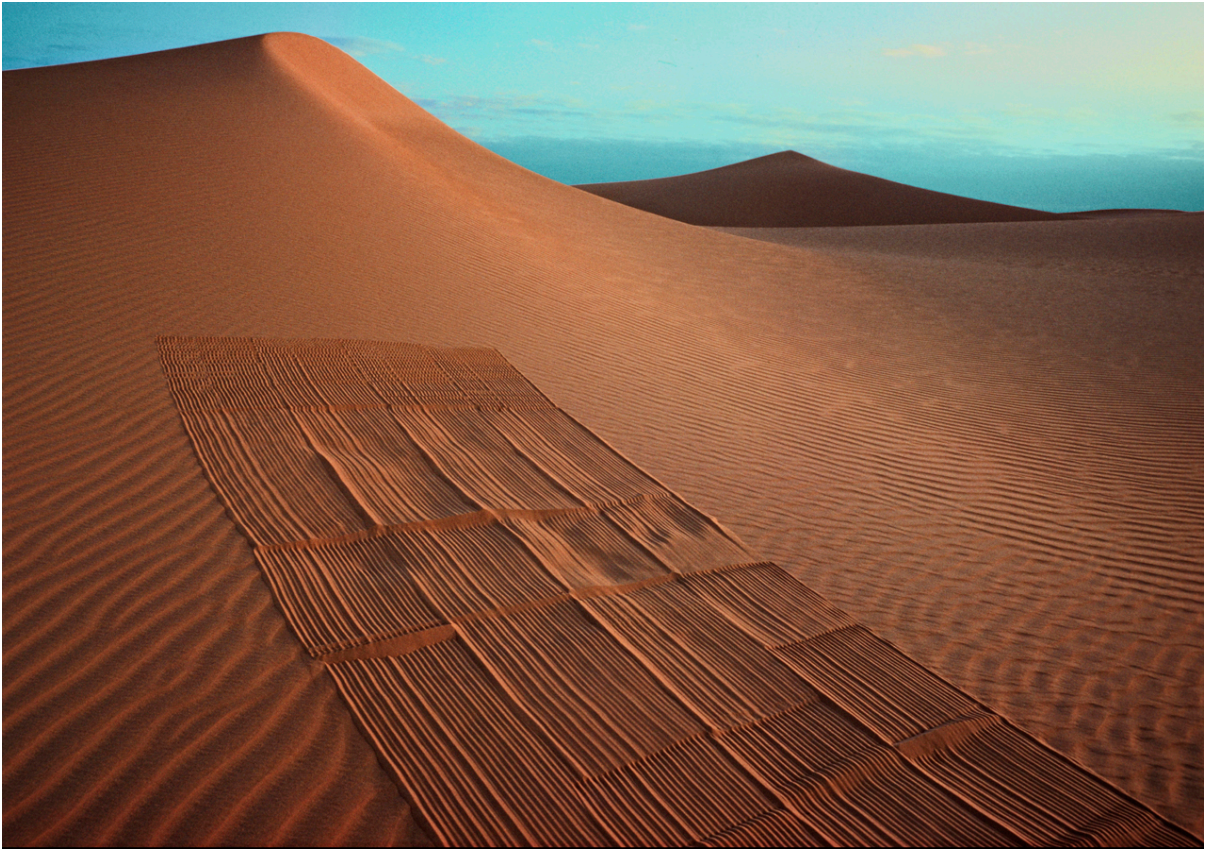
Feuerfontäne in der Wüste, 1968, © Archiv Heinz Mack

I envisage them through my oculars. Perforated, iridescent fans, on the outskirts of Douz, the gateway to the kingdom of the ethereal. At its outer perimeter, quiet as a tomb. Ridges and ripples never sit still, they are always reshaped and reformed by the wind.

Sand reliefs appear in front of me, raked, a zen garden with no gardener. An invisible net trawls down the dune, as if the ocean floor, but when touched disintegrates into the briny water, catches no shrimp, no living creatures.

He calls them “the labyrinthine products of the sand carrying the wind.”⁸ Is it a monochrome stained glass, the color and texture of sand, or a Louis Vuitton ad from 2004?

⁸ Ibid.



Großes Sandrelief, 1976, Algeria, © Archiv Heinz Mack

The desert needs no reimagining. It is upfront with what it offers. There are no gardeners, as it cannot be gardened. No animal tamers, as its animals are wild. He inverts its name to make it active again: “an oasis of petrified and motionless vitality.”⁹

There are *maschinenlöwen*, or machine-lions, instead. Figments of them. They live in Mack’s Machine Park. He trains them to perform, as if in a zoo, but leaves them savage, a dangerous act. Or they are giant *zyklone*, cyclones in space, able to uproot and destroy with the spherical movement of the wind.

Fantasies of marble undulations, plateaus made of lamellate screens, extending into the horizon. Several strata and epistrata. Sharp reflections of piercing light, remember the angles he is looking for, the searing blast of ultraviolet rays. Shadows envelop them, eventually.

I hallucinate a parade, a modern spectacle, much like Jean Cocteau and Picasso once performed at the Théâtre du Châtelet to a bourgeois audience with disastrous results.¹⁰ There is one wall which is silver, the other blue, like Yves Klein’s. He wears a costume of spun mirrors, not unlike Memmi’s colonizer, or the astronaut, who is tall and bronzed by the sun, wearing boots and a shovel, determining the distance between two horizons or one horizon and another planet’s.¹¹

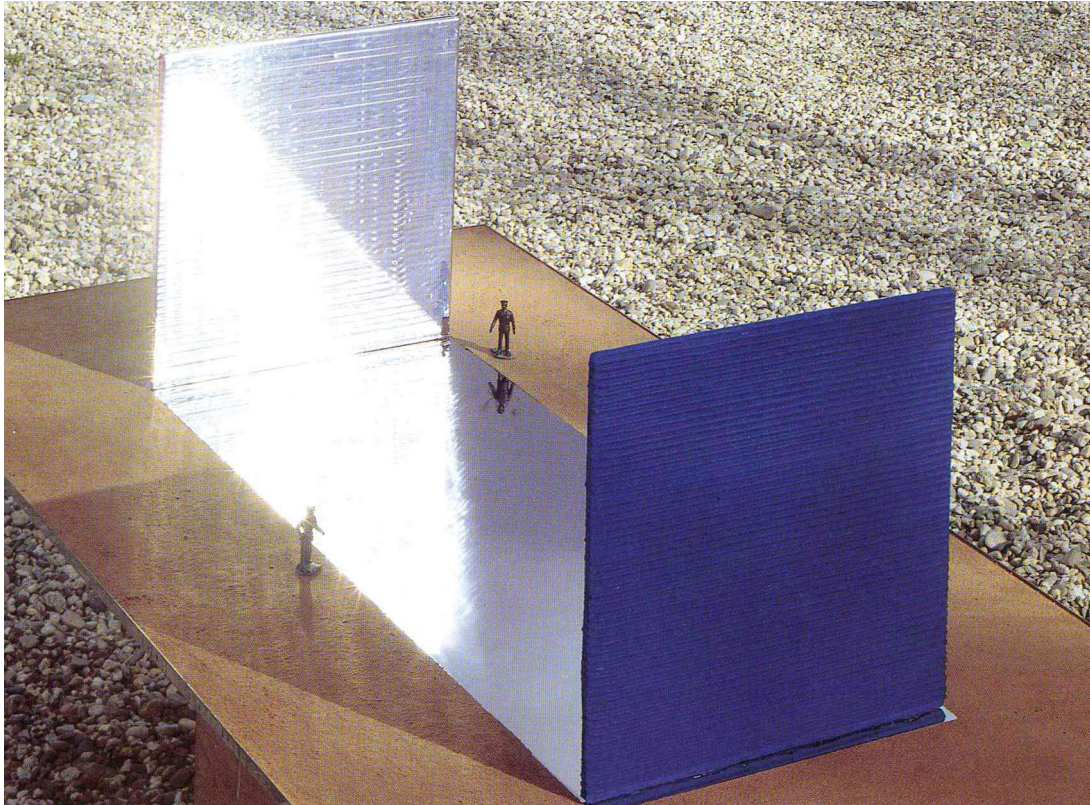
⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Berger, John, and Tom Overton. *Landscapes: John Berger on Art*. Verso, 2018.

¹¹ Memmi, Albert. *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Souvenir Press Ltd, 2016.

“It is no longer than any road in the world and stretches from a monochrome wall, which is blue, to a wall covered with one pure silver light.”¹²

A dust storm begins and swallows the entire parade. No survivors or evidence remain.



Der Corso (Modell), ca. 1966, © Archiv Heinz Mack

They were all artists, making their journey to an Yves Klein light show much like pilgrims to Mecca. At the center of their gathering was “a cube, hermetically sealed on the outside, whose walls are again made of milk white marble, resting in a sea of quicksilver.” Inside was a zinc white room, flooded with blankness; it was a sought-after experience, a religious one.

It was as if the pockets of air around the cube were electronically-charged. But they were not; it was an optical distortion, a mirage, *fata morgana*. Engraved slabs of metal and glass impress light onto their surface, they give off a fractured light which appears as undulating waves. The air remains as always, only light itself is now visible in its elemental form.

Some wander off to a trio of pyramid-like structures, only they are uninhabited cubes. Remote, with quartz particles washing over them, they belong to an ancient civilization based on seriality and repetition. Reflectors which conceal their real color or shape. Monuments to Apollo.

They capture the blue tint of the sky. Blue voids.

¹² Ibid.

Celebrations take place in the sky. Fire erupts out of thin air. Silver fountains, suspended, like light membranes. They are the miracle of the sun and light-worshipping cults. The last record is an image of a woman experiencing a sublime apparition in the sky. We do not know if she lived to see more, or how she arrived to the Arab World in the first place.



Feuerfontäne in der Wüste, 1968, © Archiv Heinz Mack

Epilogue

An artificial reality, driven by one man's fantasy of the sun, the light that powers it. Or of the Orient, whatever that means.

Redux, meaning brought back, or revived.

Goethe once wrote, in *Reflexionen und Maximen*:

*Who himself and other knows
must reach this decision:
The Orient and the Occident
know no more division
sensibly between both worlds
to roam, I would suggest,
Thus between the east and west*

*to move is for the best.*¹³

We do not see the land or people of Tunisia, in this abstracted reality. But where are they, or where were they when Mack constructed his desert stations? Was it only the German film crew, a team from Saarländischen Rundfunk, in collaboration with Westdeutschen Fernsehen?

A European embarks on a journey, far away from the archaic culture of Europe, the stifling rules and bureaucracy of Germany, to arrive somewhere blank, orange, bright. Were Tunisia and Algeria canvases, wouldn't they have painted themselves long ago, and haven't they? I enter the desert and do not feel surreal estrangement, nor do I see any objets d'art.

He does not regenerate a lifeless Asia, the motivating force of the Romantic Orientalist. The desert was never empty and suffered the same conquest and domination from British and French rule, from which our German protagonist sought escape.¹⁴

Can I walk away with this representation as sufficient?

I fill this new one with the independence of Tunisia from the French. The Bardo Museum bombings, Roman antiquity, its gods and goddesses, and the reaction against idols. Accelerated time, art and its after-effects. The boundaries of the desert and the ancient ruins of Carthage, dead TV and film sets strewn in quartz sand, the catalyst for glass. The search for the Greek "eidos", essence, form, type. I call it my idea for a film. Each scene, the antithesis of a metallic sculpture. Robust life.

Can one's encounter with "The Orient" debunk a fantasy?

And what is my own?

The tropics of Hammamet

In turquoise seas

Rocky coves

Northern Africa

A Pagan past

To which I belong

The heat

My sweat

Which I relieve myself

Admiring men

Mustaches

Hadrian and Antinous

Buraq

Water-drinking vessels

Spilling

Deep time

¹³ Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, and Max F. Hecker. *Goethe: Maximen Und Reflexionen*. Goethe-Gesellschaft, 1907.

¹⁴ See Edward Said's analysis of Goethe's *Westöstlicher Diwan*. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Penguins Books, 2003.

*The natural sun
I lay down
White jeans
A marine fortress
Hiding
Coconut lip balm
His musk
Black hair
Sweet glances
Enfatuation
Triggers sleep
Aquatic vapor
Sprayed on my lips
Refreshes my eyes
Not the desert
But the blue sea
Our subjectivities blurred
No traces or physical objects
Only memories
Aquamarine
Life which is real
No more fantasies*

Yusef Audeh