Crisis and transformation

Sonja Heyer: *When did you feel that reportage photography was leading you into a crisis?*

Steffen Diemer: It started around 2005/06. I was overcome by a feeling that I couldn't name at first. An indefinable, queasy feeling slowly rose from my toes up through my body. The situations became increasingly brutal. More and more was demanded of us photographers, for less and less money. The time pressure became greater and greater. That meant we no longer had time to familiarize ourselves with a story. We were just running around, hunting for motifs that would be most universally applicable. I hardly ever got to talk to people. It was all about just pointing and shooting. That was no longer my world. But I had to take photographs to earn money. I had to push myself more and more to get on the plane to deliver the images.

In 2010/11, the Arab world was swept by a series of political protests that began in Tunisia and reached Egypt in January 2011. After a few weeks, Egypt's long-time president Hosni Mubarak resigned and the Muslim Brotherhood took power in the course of the year.

Steffen Diemer: During the Arab Spring, I did a series on the Copts in Egypt. It was about their relationship with the Mubarak regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. They were considered loyal to Mubarak, but then there were deaths among them. In February 2011, I photographed a large demonstration by Copts in front of the state television station in Cairo. I was the only photographer in the middle of it. The situation was very tense. Snipers were already positioned on the rooftops. As with later demonstrations in Cairo, I had the feeling that a large orchestral piece was being performed. Everything seemed completely choreographed. When the camels charged across Tahrir Square and their riders beat up the demonstrators, it may have been an operation by the Egyptian secret service. It was also unclear who was leading the groups of demonstrators. The television station is located directly on the Nile, not far from Tahrir Square, which is actually a roundabout with a few steps leading up to it from the sides. I then witnessed the square being cleared. Apart from me, there were countless other journalists on site. We stood crowded together. At that moment, I thought: Wow, we're all taking the same pictures. Just as I was thinking, two female journalists from the BBC ran past, pursued by a mob.

Weren't the demonstrators interested in international coverage?

If they were real demonstrators, that is. One of them pointed at me and said, "He has a camera too." So I ran too. Tahrir Square has several arterial roads. I then stood at a tank barrier in front of the Ministry of the Interior, with the army behind it. The mob reached the tank barrier. Then they stopped running, and you could sense a certain cooperation between the mob and the army to drive everyone in one direction. The army took everything from me, my camera, memory cards, and I was detained in an armoured personnel carrier along with other journalists. Later, each of us was interrogated individually.

The next day, I was expelled. On the plane, I saw an Egyptian newspaper reporting on the persecution of journalists. I flew back immediately, and since the situation had become completely unclear, there were no more checks. I was travelling with a journalist friend. We were in Marsa Matruh, in northern Egypt, near Benghazi, where the Libyan revolution began, which turned out to be a counter-revolution. We were travelling in a group of journalists when my friend next to me was shot. That was the end of the road for me. I flew back and was initially admitted to a hospital. The psychotherapist there recommended that I fly back and properly conclude my story in Egypt. I flew back to Cairo and took the bus to Benghazi. There I experienced what was called the Libyan revolution, a movement that took place only in a relatively narrow coastal strip between Benghazi and Tripoli. Then

I came back, but I still haven't touched the images from that time. When I lost my friend back then, we were standing close together. One step to the right and it would have hit me. The fact that I was still alive weighed heavily on me for a long time. Even when I had my first success as an art photographer, it still bothered me a lot.

Do the editorial offices, agencies or the Bundeswehr you worked for offer their journalists any kind of support, such as therapy, coaching or similar?

No, not to my knowledge; that's everyone's own business. Even the soldiers in the Bundeswehr didn't have anything like that for a long time.

But the armed forces do offer military pastoral care.

But pastoral care is not therapy.

That's right. But if a system of embedded journalism is established, one would assume that it also includes care.

No. As a freelancer, you're on your own.

You have also had near-death experiences in connection with your work as a photojournalist. How did that happen?

I had such an experience in Afghanistan. We were coming down from the mountains. The country is very high and has correspondingly deep valleys. We were crossing a valley when we suddenly heard a tank. What happened next still causes me to freeze completely whenever something falls or makes an unexpected noise. We suddenly found ourselves standing in front of a former Russian tank that was loading its cannon. I could see right into the barrel. But then nothing happened. I thought they must be about to fire, but nothing happened. A thousand thoughts raced through my mind as I froze: my mistakes, people I would have liked to say goodbye to. It took a long time before I could break out of my paralysis, and I still dream about it today. A fear of death that has not gone away.

Another time, we entered via Pakistan and had to cross the

Salang Pass via Kabul. It is the most important north-south connection in Afghanistan. Whoever controls the pass, has power over one of the main economic routes. The Salang Pass is a bottleneck and very dangerous. It is lined with wrecked vehicles and trucks that have been shot. We crossed it twice in winter, and to this day I still can't believe we survived. After my first crossing, I never wanted to go back there, but an assignment took me back to the same place just nine months later.

You say that until you broke with reportage photography, you were travelling with a former self. What was this former self and what became of it?

The process of change took about a year and a half, from September 2011 to March 2013, and was like a great silence. I couldn't go forward or backward. I was completely broken inside from the previous twenty years. I lacked table manners because for a long time I had been eating everything quickly and devouring it. I had more or less stopped caring about my appearance. I was neglected, both inside and out. First, I had to make an effort to become compatible with society again. For me, that meant cultivating good relationships with the people around me and no longer being a so-called lone wolf. Then I had to take care of my emotions and learn to channel them well. In everyday life, terms such as narcissism or ego shooter have very negative connotations, and the corresponding behavior is indeed negative. In war, however, selfishness is essential for survival, because it is a matter of life and death. It is very difficult to get rid of these characteristics and behaviors that have become ingrained in me. I had not lived a normal everyday life for a long time.

You were controlled by others and had to fight to regain your self-determination.

That's right. In my old life, I spent ninety per cent of my time waiting, waiting for the situation to be right, waiting for the light to be right, waiting for a phone call, waiting for a driver, waiting for things to get started. I was on call all the time. Now I have to determine my own

time. On top of that, I have to get used to everyday routines. I found it very difficult to be honest with myself and not run away from myself. The struggle with the past continues. To this day, I find it difficult to function well within structures and to orient myself to generally accepted norms. I get distracted very quickly and then my thoughts jump from one thing to another.

Are there any experiences from your time as a photojournalist that you look back on positively? Did you learn anything that you wouldn't want to have missed?

Yes, alongside all the negative experiences, there were also many wonderful experiences, such as encounters with people, but also overwhelming landscapes and smells. Constantly discovering new things satisfied my curiosity and my wanderlust.

As a child, I was allowed to watch the *Auslandsjournal* on television on Fridays after my weekly bath. I loved it. It was my gateway to the world. Even then, I had this curiosity.

Looking back, I remember, for example, how we once marched through the Sahara, from Mali to Libya. I accompanied a camel caravan that was transporting goods. I learned a lot and travelled with interesting people. For a long time, the route was navigated with the help of the stars. That was fascinating. Nowadays, GPS (Global Positioning System) is certainly used as well. But the same routes have existed since ancient times, even if no paths are visible. They are rediscovered again and again. These tracks still exist today. Camels are unique animals that have adapted perfectly to the heat. The appearance of a tree in the desert is like a revelation, because there is an oasis where there is water, but also where news is exchanged.

Are there any landscapes you would like to see again without war and conflict?

Yes, first and foremost Afghanistan. The Pamir Valley is overwhelming. Or, if you set off from Nazar-e Sharif towards the Chinese border, you have an unobstructed view of the Himalayas from the narrow strip of Afghan territory. I have never seen anything more impressive in the world.

Then I think of the Omo Valley in Ethiopia with its round huts, which are becoming increasingly rare. When people cook with wood early in the morning, a veil lies over the villages. Looking at it from a slightly elevated position has a certain effect on you. It's as if the whole landscape is bathed in a fragrant scent.

How did you manage to overcome the crisis you found yourself in from 2011 onwards?

I am someone who puts problems aside for a long time and carries on, even when they are pressing. I was on the road with my friend, who was also a journalist, on many assignments, and it was clear to both of us that our turn would come at some point. We naturally assumed that either one of us would be hit first, then the other, or both of us at the same time, and that we would die doing this work. Nevertheless, I couldn't imagine ever giving up reportage photography. There is a simple reason for this. All the terrible things can only be suppressed if you keep going. The ship must continue sailing, because as long as it is sailing, you can handle anything. But as soon as the ship is in port and the water is just lapping gently, everything comes to the surface. When my friend was shot, my deepest desire was to die too. I always carried a capsule with me that contained something that would kill me very quickly. It was a means of escape in an emergency, because I never wanted to be taken hostage. When I returned to Libya after his death, I assumed that my time had come. And even at that point, I continued to work normally as if nothing had happened. I sensed that everything would come to the surface if I drew a line under it. And that's what happened between 2011 and 2013. I lay on the couch in my studio and stared out of the window. My dog was my salvation. And I always had my capsule with me. I thought about swallowing it to spare myself the torment in my head. Even today, when I'm driving on the motorway, I sometimes think that if I just drive into the next pillar, it will all be over and I'll have it behind me. The trauma remains, even after years of therapy. It puts a strain on my relationships and my self-esteem.

Talking to plants

Where does it come from, this fascination humans have with plants, with something so different that colonized the earth early on, made further life possible and, from a human perspective, now exists on what appears to be the most distant branch of all forms of life? Historically, the question of whether plants have souls arises when philosophy, that is, humans, are in crisis. It seems to be related to the fact that crises provoke the question of free will.

Humans quickly become aware of the fact that their will gives them greater scope for creativity than other species. This can be interpreted as a special ability, a gift, a merit or a curse. For the consequences of this creative power are extremely contradictory. They also include deliberate killing, mere destruction and annihilation without necessity. And so, self-doubt about the limits of reason sparks a search to see whether and how other species deal with their nature, what cultures they have developed and whether we humans can regain something through observation.

This begins with Aristotle[8] and the discovery of vegetative life (θρεπτική ψυχή – *threptikē psychē*), which is said to be inherent in all living beings. And to this day, Gustav Theodor Fechner's *Nanna oder Über das Seelenleben der Pflanzen*[9] (Nanna, or On the Soul Life of Plants) belongs to the canon of ecological, but also natural aesthetic debates. Incidentally, it was first published in 1848, reprinted at the turn of the century, then again in the 1920s and finally in 1991. Always punctually in times of social upheaval.

One outstanding phenomenon of plants is their ability to survive. They, of all creatures, who are completely unprotected and at the mercy of other species, are practically indestructible. They hibernate, survive wars, reseed themselves or wait in the soil until the field is ready again. This is probably why humans pin their hopes on them, believing they can teach them to endure their own kind, to survive and to return to the cycle of nature. And so they continue to explore their nature.

All the questions they ask of their own species are negotiated with them, the plants. What about free will? Do only those who possess a soul and individuality have it? Then plants possess it, because they individually seek light and water, and as Leibniz discovered, no two leaves on a tree are alike. Are they capable of feeling pain?

Anyone who has observed the dying forest in the Harz Mountains or elsewhere knows that dying of thirst is the most cruel death for any species. Can they communicate? Demonstrably more diversely than humans. Our speech is their scent. Do they act autonomously? This is a complex question that we can hardly answer ourselves, because it involves questions about thought, time and reason. And our thinking only allows for our reason, and vice versa. Plants are impressive precisely because of the diversity of responses they have found to challenges. While our form of life only knows historical linearity, the eternal succession, plants practice different forms of time. Unlike humans, they grow practically always and regularly, in cycles. But they also produce linear forms, such as trees, which reach a certain size and eventually stop sprouting. And they form underground networks, communicating via their root systems. We humans are only just beginning to discover this diversity as a model for alternative behavior.[10]

However, it remains strange how they manage to speak to us. Because we usually only consider something to be a counterpart if it has a face. It stands to reason that we recognise ourselves in animals. But in plants?

Looking through Steffen Diemer's catalogues, I notice that his artistic work began with tulips and that he is now preoccupied with algae. From an evolutionary perspective, these two plant species are as far apart as possible. If you cut tulips and put them in a vase, they continue to develop, sometimes forming bizarre or anthropomorphic shapes and seeming to speak to us in this way. Algae, on the other hand, are among the earliest forms of plant life. Their connection to us is more extensive.

Why did you start with tulips and now work with algae?

I find it fascinating that plants lead two lives, one underground and one in the air. When I cut a plant, it is missing a part and is doomed to die. When I lived in Mannheim, the nearby Penny supermarket was supplied with flowers three times a week, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays. When I went to the supermarket on Saturday evening, there was no water left in the flower bucket. Sometimes the tulips only cost 99 pence, sometimes I got them for free. At home, I put them in water and the next day they were alive again. At that time, I had a cave-like backyard studio with only a little light coming in from two sides. And the tulips looked out for that light. A plant needs three ingredients to produce life: soil, water and light. The tulip was missing two of them: water and the cut bulbs. And yet it was determined to live on, and that fascinated me. If you water it regularly and let it drink, over time individual petals fall off and it develops a parchment-like surface. In this transition from life to death, the tulip develops its greatest beauty for me.

When I look at your tulip pictures, I am subtly drawn to anthropomorphic creatures. When I see a photo of a tulip standing with its "head" in a glass of water, I think sympathetically about whether it has drowned itself, because I associate the flower with its head. I don't get that idea with algae. They contain fractals, forms that replicate themselves infinitely, a kind of infinity.

At first, I found algae creepy because, to me, they were dead. My partner had discovered an old herbarium in the Neidhardt antique bookshop in Böblingen, which I initially ignored because it "only" contained plants glued to large pages with wheat glue. After a year, I took a closer look at it. The person who had created it had worked with great care and even compiled a register with all the names of the algae. So we bought it. I never work with found objects straight away, so the herbarium lay around for a few months because I still couldn't find a way to approach it. At some point, I started researching. I discovered that some of the algae species no longer exist in the sea. And then I really got to the bottom of the matter, discovering what an important food source algae is and what it does in the sea. To this day, algae is the most important plant on earth for binding carbon monoxide. Algae does 52 per cent of this work – for us. And that sparked my interest. We then decided against collecting algae ourselves, because the herbarium already provided a perfect collection. I saw it as my task to preserve this herbarium forever through my photographs. I work with the ambrotype process. The word goes back to *ἀνβροτός* (*ambrotos*), which means "immortal" in Greek.

What distinguishes tulips from algae as a subject? Does it make a difference to you that, as far as we can tell, the tulips are still alive when you take the photographs, while the algae are already preserved?

Even in death, algae have retained an ability that they also had in water: they adapt to every current in the herbarium just as they did in water. The herbarium was created between 1866 and 1869 and is in very good condition. The algae did not move themselves out of the sea, but they ensured that life could emerge where there was none before. Seen in this light, algae have a lot to do not only with tulips, but with all living things in the world. Plant life has managed to reproduce endlessly without having to move from its place. Either the wind carries the seeds away, or a bird or insect does. Nature has shaped our earth, not humans. We live in our little cosmos and often think we are the centre because we have stepped outside it, but it is exactly the opposite: nature is the centre.

On the one hand, we humans often claim that nature no longer exists because we have tamed, subjugated and transformed it. On the other hand, the principles of nature continue to exist and we ourselves cannot escape them.

When traveling to the so-called countryside, people like to say that they are now in nature. But it is precisely there that nature no longer exists, only cultivated landscapes.

However, when someone intelligently designs a garden, they have transformed the principles of nature into culture. In recent years, there have been increasing attempts to develop a language for communicating with "nature".[11] *The question remains whether we humans can communicate directly with other species or whether we need a meta-language for this. How can we even receive the signals of other forms of life? How do you manage to talk to plants?*

First of all, I have to step outside the circle I am in and understand that what is in front of me is a living being. I can only connect if something speaks to me and can give me something. That is the basic prerequisite for any connection and understanding. As a human being, I have to ask myself: is there a spirit in the plant or not? I can only talk to a living being that I believe has a spirit. These are beings that want to tell me a story. When I discover them, they awaken memories from my distant or recent past. When I am able to establish a connection in this way, I want to tell the story in my images. We live on a small planet in a large universe. All around us is sky. This cosmos would not exist without the plants that appeared when everything was still sulphurous. We and the plants can only live in this cosmos. However, we cannot explain the existence of the spiritual; we can only acknowledge it, just as we acknowledge the existence of time and the soul without being able to explain them. So I can only lay the foundation for communicating with a plant.

Perhaps it would be helpful to distinguish between spirit, soul and consciousness in plants. Then I can say: I can encounter this other being on a spiritual or soul level, even if it has no consciousness according to my standards.

And anyone can do that.

What do you need for this? When are you able to make contact with a plant?

In order for me to communicate with a plant, it does not need to have an anthropomorphic form. Currently, I am intensively engaged with grasses. I only remove them from their natural habitat once they have completed their life cycle. When I stand in front of a field with thousands upon thousands of grasses, I must decide on a certain number to take with me. This is an arbitrary act of intuition. Beforehand, I observe the field for a while, perhaps making a video of it. Then I take ten to fifteen grasses and bring them to my studio. There I place them in a vase, where they remain for a while. I put them on the shelf, take them out again, until I examine each blade of grass individually. I fix each individual blade of grass in a small vase one after the other and ask what the grass wants to tell me. There is a type of reed that grows at the edges of fields lined with a small ditch. I find it extremely interesting to see what the wind has done to a blade of grass, how it has ground and bent it in the process of friction. What has been taken away is what preoccupies me, because the grass must have entered into a symbiosis with the wind, otherwise it would no longer be standing there. And weathers for many winters. The wind helps the plant, and the plant, for its part, must have a feeling and knowledge of when to release its seeds so that the wind can carry them away. This cannot be explained by genetics alone. And the seed does not fall somewhere by chance either. A meadow is a highly complex cosmos. What grows does not grow in this place by chance. A meadow orchid needs a certain underlying support to survive. In winter, a very specific decomposition process must take place, humus must be formed to store water. The orchid, in turn, provides other grasses with nutrients so that they have a chance to grow. Fungal mycelia in the soil are necessary and communicate with each other. A small chanterelle mushroom can have mycelia that extend over several kilometres. It is a self-contained, highly complex cycle from which only humans have broken away.

Plants simply move in different ways and have developed other techniques to be mobile. You described your encounter with a grass whose communication with the wind has left its mark on it. When you photograph it, it seems to me like biographical work. As if you were portraying a person whose skin has also been tanned by the wind.

That's close. Depending on where a person has spent most of their life, the elements have also worked on them.

I see a relationship between the pictures you took as a reportage photographer and the photographs of plants. Both approaches focus on biographies, dedicating themselves to the subject opposite them. Are plants subjects for your photographs?

Yes, of course! But why doesn't everyone see it that way?

Because many people who buy cheap flowers at the supermarket in the evening use them as decoration and not to communicate with them.

I have no choice but to engage in exchange. My studio is my retreat. Everything I work with is on my table. I sit there, the plants are in a vase, books and pictures surround me, and through my thoughts I enter into an exchange with everything. On the other hand, I no longer want to take pictures of people.

Perhaps that is no longer necessary because you manage to build relationships with all forms of life, allowing you to distance yourself from people.

Plants in war zones are a way of recognizing this. I just became aware again when looking at pictures from Gaza. Plants create the image of the apocalypse. No matter where I was as a photojournalist, there were palm trees. Palm trees haunted me. Our ideas about the Orient were also shaped by 19th-century Orientalism. I am thinking of Francis Frith's photographs from the 1850s. When I was a child, cigarette packets contained small orange-ochre collectible pictures with the inscription "A Journey Around the World", including pictures from Egypt that had become engraved in my mind before I had ever travelled to these countries. When I was a reporter in Iraq, in Baghdad and Mosul, once beautiful cities surrounded by fertile soil, I saw palm trees everywhere. Palm trees need nutrient-rich soil. They stood amid rubble and ashes. These palm trees gave the scene something unreal. These surreal images haunt me to this day.

It reminds me of the survival trees in Hiroshima, trees that survived the atomic bomb, defied the heat and radioactivity, and whose seeds are now being given away worldwide by the NGO ANT-Hiroshima.[12] *These trees gave hope to survivors in the post-war period.*

It is remarkable that the palm tree defies all attacks and, even when attacked, survives as long as even a single palm frond remains alive. There are areas where plants need fire to reproduce, forests in Australia that burn down, and after a few weeks you can feel the power rising. For nature, life goes on. Only for humans it does not. For me, this reveals the divine itself in nature. It is an eternal process of birth that connects all things. For me, nature has its origin in God. Divine creation is not a self-contained act, and in this I agree with the philosopher and mystic Jakob Böhme. Rather, it is a dynamic, everlasting process on many levels. It is the endless cycle of becoming and passing away.

Sometimes, however, we also make spontaneous discoveries. For example, we discovered tree fungi on a walk. The symbiosis between tree and fungus is a miracle. The rings in the tree fungus have something universal about them. Seasonal elements, such as chestnuts in autumn, are added to this.

I also found the prepared fish unexpectedly. All further steps, such as the visit to the fishmonger to have particular fish shown to me, have already been planned.

Light and darkness

In addition to their extremely precise and well-considered visual language, Steffen Diemer's works are characterized by a special space created by the black glass plates. This space creates a limbo in which the strongly illuminated subject of the image is located.

Steffen Diemer: I work exclusively with black glass as an image carrier. Black, like white, is not actually a color; it is the color of "non-properties". That's what makes it so interesting to me. For me, black expresses the connection to the cosmic, from which everything comes. I often incorporate black backgrounds to further enhance the effect of an image.

> *The Japanese writer Tanizaki Junichirō (1886–1965) said that beauty only comes into being through shadow.*[19] *Beauty needs light just as much as it needs darkness. What aesthetic influences are decisive for your use of light and shadow?*

My engagement with the mystic and philosopher Jakob Böhme has been decisive for my approach to light and shadow. Böhme dealt intensively with light and shadow in a spiritual way. I have noted down many things from his two writings, *Die Morgenröte im Aufgang* (The Dawn at Rise) and *Vierzig Fragen von der Seele*[20] (Forty Questions from the Soul), in a notebook. Böhme says, for example, that darkness is the greatest enemy of light and at the same time the reason why light is revealed.[21] One could spend a whole lifetime thinking about that. Böhme writes about creation: The visible world is a revelation of

the inner spiritual world from eternal light and eternal darkness. That strikes at the heart of my work.

You mentioned that the space behind the image, created by the blackness of the glass plate, symbolizes the cosmos for you. Is there a connection to Jakob Böhme?

Yes, Jakob Böhme also sees darkness as representing the cosmos. Böhme's terminology is sometimes difficult to understand and is still being researched and interpreted today. I have internalized his thinking.

If we understand darkness, including the darkness in your pictures, as a necessary space for something to come into the light, is this space itself alive, or does it enable life? Is only light alive, or is darkness alive too?

No, the space itself is also alive.

People are still racking their brains over the nature of empty space.

It does not end.

It does not end, and its materiality is still being pondered today.

Jakob Böhme says that the eternal is born of the eternal, and I agree with him: it is an eternal rebirth. My work does not stop with the visible surface.
It is glass in which light refracts, and light is infinite. It refracts, for example, on the object "pear" because the matter asserts itself more strongly here.

To this day, it remains unresolved what this black space is filled with. What is there?

One could jokingly say: that is a typically human question. We try to explain the inexplicable ourselves. The black in my pictures causes fear in some people.

Like silence.

Yes, like silence, because the eye can no longer hold on to anything. Looking up at the black sky at night and comprehending infinity can trigger fear.

But this seemingly empty space does not frighten you.

No, it doesn't frighten me. My thoughts are then no longer held back by anything and can lose themselves in everything. I can give free rein to my dreams.

Why does working with this traditional ambrotype process suit you and your personality?

In my life as a reportage photographer, I always had to react to something in a very short moment, in a small window of time. I viewed the world through the small viewfinder of the camera rather than walking through it with my eyes open. Back then, I composed and delivered images almost instantly. That made me tired. And that's why I knew that for me, the only process that would work was one that took a long time.

Due to my experiences and my inner characteristics, I find it difficult to relax. My conscience often plagues me. I find myself working on several thoughts and ideas at the same time, constantly keeping myself busy so that my mind doesn't start racing. When I'm working on a new project, I manage to concentrate intensely on the task at hand for a certain amount of time and quickly identify the essential elements. When it comes to the actual creative process in my studio, I can forget everything around me. This is the only moment when I feel true peace and great tranquillity. For me, it is always a magical moment, which I can then transfer to the picture. The entire process of creating and editing the picture, right through to framing, takes such a long time that the work literally falls out of time. This is also because something always happens during this process that forces me to pause. I am a very impatient person, but this process forces me to be patient. Through this method of the wet plate procedure, I have discovered my master.