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Christian Mayer
L'heure entre chien et loup

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Lately I found an intriguing French expression in a book by Jacques Derrida: the hour between dog and wolf. It describes the time of the day that we also call twilight, or dusk. The time when the light is so dim you can't distinguish a dog from a wolf. It made me think of the past, when time was still closely connected to sunlight and each place had its own time. When Geneva's "Tour de l'Île" had three clocks showing three different times: that of Geneva, that of Paris and that of Berne. It was the necessity of train schedules that put an end to this diversity at the end of the 19th Century. Since then we live in time zones. And it was the invention of the light bulb around the same time that made human action become more independent from the sun.

I have long been fascinated by the history of light bulbs, and this summer I had the chance to visit the world's longest burning one. I travelled to the town of Livermore in California and asked for access to the city's fire station, as this is where the bulb is burning nonstop since 1901. I stood underneath the weakly glowing bulb next to the fire engine and chatted with one of the firefighters. He acted like a guardian, the guardian of the bulb. And suddenly I felt like standing underneath an energy vortex, a mysterious source of power. This bulb seemed to resist time and deterioration. Will it ever stop glowing? And how many people all over the world are watching it right now via live-stream photos of the "bulb-cam" that is installed right next to it?

When I took my leave the firefighter gave me a t-shirt with a picture of the bulb and the words "1.000.000 hours of service" printed on it. I wore that t-shirt a few days later when I went to see an exhibition of historic photography in Los Angeles. Next to the amazing photographs spanning the 19th and 20th Century they also showed historic cameras and other devices connected to the history of photography. Among these exhibits was the replica of an old light bulb hanging from the ceiling. It was made to resemble the look of the antique bulb, but with the material that is used for recent bulbs. Which basically means that this bulb will end service after only 30.000 hours. Is that true progress in times of capitalism?

One of the museum guards startled me out of my thoughts by saying that it was closing hour. And while I was slowly approaching the exit I watched the guards covering some of the photographs with a special fabric to protect them from light rays. The exhibition was called "See the Light", but now I understood that light truly was the aggressor here, attacking the images, endangering their existence, challenging history. It was light that once created these photos, now they had to be saved from it. And for me the exhibition seemed perfect in this very state, with some of the images hidden behind high-tech material, while others were not. Somewhere in between light and darkness, between visibility and invisibility.

All the photographs in the exhibition were developed onto paper. But basically any material that reacts to light can be used as photographic medium. Even a banana plant would carry images after you'd attach negatives to its leaves for several weeks. Photosynthesis then becomes photography and creates pictures in different shades of green. Once you remove the negatives to unveil the delicate images, they start to disappear by slowly fading into the same hue of green all over again. In a similar way, albeit quite unhealthy and all in red, works the process that let photographs appear on the skin of those Instagram users that started the "sunburn art" hype in the summer of 2015.

But what shall the images show that we'd materialize? With the billions of photographs being taken every single day, which ones do we like to add? Sometimes I wish I could forget everything that I know about photography and then take pictures without knowing what the meaning of that is, like the stray dogs from Mongolia that I equipped with a camera that automatically took one photograph per minute. These wild dogs were able to establish a form of photography that is devoid of any aesthetic pretension or intended composition. The resulting series of pictures represent a direct approach to a place we would otherwise be incapable of grasping. It is a form of subconscious photography that is directed by smell, and as such is completely alien to us.

Which makes me wonder if the expression "the hour between dog and wolf" speaks about more than just levels of light. It also seems to describe that limit between the familiar, the comfortable versus the unknown and the dangerous. An uncertain threshold between hope and fear—when the dogs return home and the wolves appear.

Christian Mayer