

Jakob Tuggener – Machine Age

Jakob Tuggener (1904–1988) is one of the exceptional figures in Swiss photography. His personal and highly expressive photographs of boisterous parties given by the upper social classes are legendary. His book *Fabrik* published in 1943 is regarded as a milestone in the history of the photobook. The exhibition “Machine Age” focuses mainly on his photographs and films of the world of labour and industry. These reflect not only the swift technical development from the textile industry in the Zurich highlands, or Oberland, up to and including the construction of power stations in the Alps. They also bear witness to Tuggener’s life-long fascination with all kinds of machines: from weaving looms to furnaces and turbines to locomotives, steamships and racing cars. He loved their noise, their dynamic movements and their bondless power, which he captured in images that oscillate between silent poetry and great expressiveness. At the same time he observed the men and women whose labours kept the engine of progress running – while also hinting that one day machines could dominate man.

The Machine Age

Jakob Tuggener was more familiar with the world of factories than scarcely any other photographer in his day. He had completed training in mechanical drawing at Maag Zahnräder, a gearwheel company in Zurich, and worked there afterwards in their construction department. The company’s photographer Gustav Maag introduced him to the technique of photography. Due to the economic crisis in the late 1920s, Tuggener lost his job, whereupon he then fulfilled a dream he had harboured since childhood of becoming an artist, by studying at the Reimann School in Berlin. For about one year he engaged intensively with poster design, typography and film and, through the eye of his camera, became enthralled by the dynamism of the big city.

On his return to Switzerland in 1932 he began to work as a free-lancer for the Oerlikon Machine Factory (MFO), mainly for their in-house newspaper tellingly entitled *Der Gleichrichter* (The Rectifier). Although the company already employed its own staff photographer, Tuggener was entrusted with the task of developing a kind of photographic inside view of the enterprise, one of the aims being to bridge the gap between workers and office employees on the one hand, and management on the other. The result was several multi-part reportages, published up to the late 1930s, about the production halls and portrait series of “members of the MFO family”, as well as one-page, album-like picture series of otherwise unheeded scenes of everyday life in the factory. As of 1937, Tuggener also made a series of 16mm short films – always in black-and-white, silent and hovering between fiction and documentation. These included, for example, a surrealistic-style drama about death and transience (*Die Seemühle*, 1944), which Tuggener made with lay actors in an empty factory on the upper banks of Lake Walensee, or his cinematic engagement with the theme of man and machine (*Die Maschinenzeit*, 1938–1970). The latter linked in with the earlier book maquette of the same name, transforming it into a moving, directly perceptible but also fleeting vision of the machine age as seen by Tuggener.

In 1943, in the middle of World War II, Tuggener published the book *Fabrik* (Factory). At first glance, that series of 72 photographs without texts seems like a kind of history of industrialisation – from the rural textile industry to machine engineering and high tension electro-technology to the modern power plant in the mountains. On closer inspection, however, one realises that through the filmic-associative sequencing of the photographs Tuggener is also pointing to the destructive potential of unchecked technical progress. He regarded the world war raging at the time as the result of that progress. The Swiss arms industry was producing weapons for that war unchallenged. With this book, conceived in keeping with the rules of the silent film, Tuggener was well ahead of his time. Yet neither his uncompromisingly subjective photographs nor his critical approach were appropriate to the threatening situation in Switzerland, where a call was being made for unity and strength under the heading “Geistige Landesverteidigung” (Intellectual National Defence).

Although *Fabrik* was not a commercial success, Tuggener considered the book a great artistic success, and pursued his engagement with the themes of labour and industry. He produced two more book maquettes: *Schwarzes Eisen* (Black Iron, 1950) and *Die Maschinenzeit* (The Machine Age, 1952), which can be seen as a kind of continuation of the published book. The journalist Arnold Burgauer described that latter as a “brilliant and sparkling factual report on the world of the machine, its development, its potential and its limits”. The classical “machine age” came to an end for Tuggener in the mid-1950s, on the threshold to the computer age. Not only did the mechanical processes which had so fascinated him become increasingly invisible, he also could not and did not want to accept the idea that someday even a human heart could be replaced by a machine.

Depicter of Opposites

In Berlin in 1930 Tuggener had already begun to take photographs at the then famous balls held by the Reimann School. The thrillingly erotic atmosphere on those occasions fascinated him and he found taking photographs in dimly lit rooms a great challenge. Back in Zurich, he sought out the local night life so as to give himself up fully to the splendour and luxury of masked, artists’ and New Year’s Eve balls. He allowed himself to be lured by elegant ladies with their silk dresses, low necklines, bare backs or shoulders into a glittering fairy-tale world whose mysterious facets he attempted to explore with his Leica. Although Tuggener’s photographs of these balls were for a long time only taken note of by a small insider-group, many saw him as a “skilful depicter of our world of major opposites”, a world between brightly lit ballrooms and dismal factory halls. Tuggener too positioned himself between these two extremes by saying, “silk *and* machines, that’s Tuggener.” For he loved both, lavish luxury and dirty work, the bejewelled ladies and the sweating men. He regarded them as equivalent and refused to be categorised as a social critic.

Whichever world Tuggener visited, he did so with the elegance of a grand seigneur. He was a visual person with a casual but affectionate eye for the insignificant, the apparently incidental. He was not just a sensitive image-poet, but the “Number One photographic poet”, as he liked to confidently designate himself. The critic Max Eichenberger wrote of his factory photographs: “Tuggener is capable of taking photographs that not only reveal a painter but also a poet, indeed a rare magician and strange alchemist who, albeit in modest quantities, turns lead into gold.”

In collaboration with the Jakob Tuggener Foundation, Uster.

With the support of Dr. Werner Greminger-Stiftung, Winterthur; Schindler Familienstiftung, Zürich; International Music and Art Foundation, Vaduz; Stanley Thomas Johnson Stiftung, Bern; Sandoz Familienstiftung, Vevey.

The Fotostiftung Schweiz is regularly supported by the Bundesamt für Kultur, Berne, the City of Winterthur and the cantons of Zurich and Thurgau.

Jakob Tuggener on factories and technology

Aviation meeting

Last Sunday there was the aviation meeting in Dübendorf. I was there with heart and soul, with my eye and even more so, my ear. All my photos were well received and appeared in magazines. As far as Messrs Flückiger and perhaps Mittelholzer go, I am confident of results, because the photos I took of the airfield would even pleasantly surprise the likes of Mittelholzer.

From a letter to Marili Gassler, 5 August 1934

Railway

The traffic controllers are going to try to obtain a free national rail ticket for me so that I can spend an entire month photographing the locomotives on the Gotthard line. Subject matter that's perfect for me. I tried to find a photo for Oerlikon; a locomotive on its journey, but it's not quite as I would have liked it. It needs to be just as it is: the monster should rumble and roar and slog through gorges and race over high bridges. Pray for me; I want to manage it.

From a letter to Marili Gassler, 5 August 1934

Motor racing

Now the racing. I've called one of my pictures 'Rider of the Apocalypse'. The idea suddenly came to me, and it's magnificent. I went to the priest. Unfortunately there isn't a text from the Bible that I could take as a basis for my photographic visions, but I'll find another title that could describe the magnitude of our century. I've made an unusual turnaround. I've suddenly come to see the sport as the medium of our age. The dynamism, the speed, is the thing of the moment. How delighted I am to be its herald. You should have experienced how the monster came racing past; like a bolt, squealing and thundering. Oh, it was spectacular – it rippled coldly through my heart. Technology as the most grandiose poetry. Such a sport is heroic, gripping, and death is potentially never far away. That was a day whose impression I'll never forget. I also saw the tragedy of the heart. I wanted to photograph a woman as she said goodbye to her husband, the racing driver. That was so touching, like a great film scene, but I had inhibitions about photographing the scene. Afterwards, I saw this woman again. Her face was buried in her hands. Her husband was dead. Five circuits before the end he lost a wheel; the car raced into a fir tree, which it cut smoothly away, then went head over heels, felled a second fir tree and ended up as a pile of wreckage. The fir struck a spectator dead and injured a second. All these impressions were deep; the technology magnificent and the sorrow shocking.

From a letter to Marili Gassler, 29 August 1934

Machines in the factory

It's the fantastic attraction of the forces in the machines; they want to be shaped and released. I need to find a word or a picture for it; that overall idea that equates to the experience.

When that great roaring begins and the speed increases, for people of our times it's like Bach playing the organ. The engineer stands between forces greater even than those once faced by Sigurd as he fought the dragon. At 4000 revolutions our heart ruptures, at 5000 our ear. Here lies the expression of our times, only we don't yet know it.

From 'Conversation about art', undated manuscript, around 1937

To the Lake Zurich Steamboat Company

I made the artistic industrial photos in our machine works, but even after many hundreds of pictures, I'm still searching for the machine. Only the locomotive and steam engines or piston engines meet our concept; only they are 'machines'.

Then let me descend to the wheels and piston rods, so that one may come who can visualise their life. History is sorely lacking illustrations of our technological age. I for my part wish to continue the line of ancestors of those few artists whose pictures have served the history of technology.

Letter to the Lake Zurich Steamboat Company, 29 August 1943

Poetry in Pictures

When I hear about old machines, I spare no journey and no time to rescue another picture of it for future generations. They are its expression, and bear the face of the mechanics. Today, everything is hidden behind casing. Our ear is no longer able to hear the singing of the wheels, and our eye is no longer able to see the attraction of its movements. They are like tinned food, no longer machines, or at least not like any that could exist in our imaginations.

'Poetry in Pictures' from Der Gleichrichter, issue no 1, 1 February 1950, page 15

Films in the seminar room

In the seminar room, a selection of Jakob Tuggener's 16mm short films from the years 1937 to 1970 can be seen. In various ways, they circle the topic 'Man and machine'. These films have been newly digitised especially for this exhibition, and this is the first time that a greater selection of them will be presented (in cooperation with the Lichtspiel/Kinemathek Berne).

Publication

On the occasion of the exhibition, Steidl Verlag, Göttingen, is publishing for the first time 12 book maquettes as facsimile editions, as well as 14 short films on DVD, in a box together with an accompanying book containing essays by Martin Gasser and Severin Rüegg and an afterword by Maria E. Tuggener. This accompanying volume and the maquettes entitled *Maschinenzeit* (1952) and *Uf em Land* (1953) are available during the exhibition as individual publications.

Special guided tours

Sunday, 22 October, 11.30 a.m.: guided tour with curator Martin Gasser. *Sunday, 19 November*, 11.30 a.m.: Urs Stahel, curator MAST – Manifattura di Arti, Sperimentazione e Tecnologia in Bologna, and curator Martin Gasser take visitors on a guided tour of the exhibition.

Film showings

Sunday, 29 October, 11 a.m., Kino Cameo, Winterthur. *Wednesday, 1 November*, 8 p.m. Lichtspiel/Kinemathek Bern. *Thursday, 11 January*, 8.15 p.m., Kino Cameo, Winterthur. With live music played by the trio /// arsis, Winterthur, and an introduction by Severin Rüegg. Further information and ticket reservation: www.kinocameo.ch or www.lichtspiel.ch.

Jakob Tuggener

Schools in Zurich 1910–1919. Apprenticeship as technical draughtsman at Maag Zahnräder AG in Zurich 1919–1923, then employed until the economic crisis of 1930. Studies at the Reimann School of Art and Design in Berlin 1930–1931. From 1932 freelance photographer and contract work in industry, including for the Oerlikon machine works, among others. From 1935 thematic photo book maquettes with original photographs, including topics such as factories, rural life and the formal dances of 'better society', among others (more than 60 maquettes in total). At the same time, 16mm silent films until 1970. Publication of the book *Fabrik* (Factory) in 1943, which brought him international recognition. Co-founder, along with Werner Bischof, Gotthard Schuh, Walter Lüubli und Paul Senn, of the Kollegium Schweizerischer Photographen (Academy of Swiss Photographers) in 1951. Exhibitions at home and abroad. Received the City of Zurich Culture Award 1981.