

I L S E

B I N G

The artistic career of Ilse Bing (Frankfurt, 1899-New York, 1998) can be located within a particularly complex temporal and socio-cultural context. This German photographer principally lived and worked in three places: in Frankfurt prior to the 1930s, in Paris in that decade and in post-war New York where she above all experienced the status of enforced emigré. Bing also visited other places, including Switzerland, Italy and Holland, but they never became decisive spaces that significantly influenced her way of working with regard to photography.

Analysed with the distance and perspective offered by the passing of time, Ilse Bing's artistic corpus cannot easily be located within the various photographic trends she encountered during her lifetime, particularly in her initial German phase and the decade in Paris. While her work is charged with elements associated with both *Das Neue Sehen* (The New Vision) and the Bauhaus, which emerged during the Weimar Republic, as well as with the Surrealism she assimilated during her years in France, Bing's position evades any strict norm or visual orthodoxy. In this sense it could be said that hers is a notably unique photographic gaze and approach in which modernity and formal innovation are indissolubly linked to a humanist approach involving a social conscience.

It is also important to emphasise that Ilse Bing's career within the context of relatively difficult times was marked by a resolute determination to make her way in a world which viewed the presence of women as active agents in the social and thus the cultural realm with disdain or even hostility. Bing belonged to a generation of female photographers that achieved a previously unattainable visibility. The camera became for an essential tool of self-determination for numerous women artists, including figures such as Germaine Krull, Florence Henri, Laure Albin-Guillot, Madame d'Ora, Berenice Abbott, Nora Dumas and Gisèle Freund.

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Unless otherwise stated, all the photographs are gelatin silver prints by Ilse Bing.

DISCOVERING THE WORLD THROUGH A CAMERA: THE BEGINNINGS

With the exception of a few photographs of an amateur type, nothing indicated that Ilse Bing, who was born into a prosperous Jewish family in Frankfurt, would dedicate much of her life to the practice of photography. After an initial focus on scientific subjects and a period studying art history, Bing decided to illustrate her doctoral thesis with images taken in different museums. From that moment onwards and following a study trip to Switzerland when she discovered the work of Vincent van Gogh, she took the decision to focus her attention on photography. While she initially made use of a Voigtländer plate camera, she soon acquired a Leica which she would continue to use for much of her career. This was the camera she employed for the commissions she received from newspapers such as the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, work that gave her a degree of financial independence during the turbulent years of the Weimar Republic.

At the outset Bing covered a range of subjects, doing so with ease and formal audacity. Everything seemed to attract her attention: men at work, the spatial simplicity of a gallery, the organic lines of a roof, the leg and arm movements of the ballerinas of the Rudolf von Laban company, the modern architecture which she had discovered through her friend the Dutch architect Mart Stam, and more. Bing's gaze sought out unusual angles, it looked upwards and downwards, at times encountering normally overlooked elements of no monetary value and ones brought together by chance, as in *Dead Leaf and Tramway Ticket on Sidewalk, Frankfurt (1929)*.

THE LIFE OF STILL LIFES

Objects from daily life are frequently present in modern art: a bottle, a newspaper, a letter, a collage-like fragment of a label, a jug, etc. Surrealism marked a revolution with regard to the representation of the object, which is never literal but rather filled with hidden aspects. The insertion of external objects into the visual space combined with other ones favours the emergence of the imaginary. By the time Ilse Bing arrived in Paris in 1930 she was already captivated by the chance encounter of often humble elements. Her French period served to accentuate her interest in a wide range of cast-off possessions and objects that seemed to allude to a universe in flux. Bing's gaze always came to rest on real elements. The chairs she photographed existed but the framing she employed, the closeness or distance of the shot, the fact that the chairs are unoccupied and that the floor on which they stand has the silvery darkness of rain are all the result of her choices, adding an air of melancholy to the image.

Over the course of her career Bing used a range of different techniques in parallel while remaining constantly fascinated by inanimate objects. During her Paris years and despite financial difficulties her work is generally characterised by a poetic gaze in which the imagination moves towards undefined, almost dream-like realms. In contrast, in the period of exile in the United States a degree of coolness emerges, with the appearance of formal and symbolic traits such as a closing-in or enclosing of the depicted scene.

THE DANCING BODY AND ITS CIRCUMSTANCES

During her initial phase, in 1929 Ilse Bing established contacts with the dance and gymnastics school founded by Rudolf von Laban. She was struck by the way in which he aimed to draw a parallel between geometry and human movements and gestures.

Soon after arriving in Paris, Bing was commissioned to photograph the Moulin Rouge waxworks museum. The old Parisian dance hall where La Goulue and Toulouse-Lautrec had been leading attractions had lost much of its splendour. Bing spent time there and was attracted by numerous aspects of the place: its daily life on and off stage, including the couples who enjoyed a drink there, the boxing matches taking place, a dancer cheering up a weary boxer, the interesting nature of the clients, and the boredom of the doorman at the entrance to the cabaret. Aside from these aspects, what really caught the attention of the Paris photography world were Bing's images of dancers in movement. Her restless eye was able to represent the vibration of the circular twists and turns, the complex, effortful open leg movements of a dancer captured in action, the troupe of dancers energetically waving their skirts, and more.

Another group of images of the troupe centres around the dancer Gerard Willem van Loon.

The third and last series of images focusing on dance was commissioned in relation to the *ballet L'Errante*, choreographed by the American George Balanchine and with set designs and libretto by the Russian painter Pavel Tchelitchew. Bing demonstrated her skill at capturing movement without making it seem frozen or trapped in time. Her eye translated the weightlessness of dreamlike fantasies to her images through the dynamic way in which she captured shadows.

LIGHTS AND SHADOWS OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE

The architecture of Paris is generally reflected in Bing's photography through images of middle- or working-class houses or walls and façades of dilapidated buildings. There was one notable exception, namely the Eiffel Tower. This emblematic work, constructed for the Universal Exhibition of 1889, was nothing less than a revelation for Bing. The Tower's imposing metal structure had been captured by various photographers, including László Moholy-Nagy in 1925, followed by Erwin Blumenfeld, André Kertész, François Kollar and Germaine Krull.

Bing chose to locate herself inside the structure and take shots at different heights, the majority looking downwards. Using this method, the reality of the space occupied by passers-by becomes perfectly visible. In other words, the intention is not to emphasise the abstract core, pure geometry and beauty of the forms, girders, mainstays, braces and other constructional elements but rather to show that this architectural marvel was also located in a specific place, in this case the gardens of the Champ de Mars.

At a later date, New York's modern architecture astonished Bing for its display of power expressed as imposing constructions. She translated her amazement into a group of images primarily characterised by a distanced and simultaneously critical gaze on the architectural spectacle before her eyes. Her position was not simply an uncritical and admiring one, as evident in various photographs of skyscrapers abutting on poor areas of the city. The thrust of the symbolic power of vertical architecture is called into question by being juxtaposed with humble spaces and buildings, as we see with *Chrysler Building* (1936).

THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE OF THE STREET: THE FRENCH YEARS

When Ilse Bing arrived in Paris in late November 1930 the city's cultural context was particularly favourable in terms of the number of illustrated publications that made use of images taken by a large group of male and female photographers. These publications included *Vu*, *Voilà*, *Marianne*, *Regards*, *L'Art Vivant*, *Arts et Métiers Graphiques* and *Urbanisme*.

One of the commissions that Bing received allowed her to delve into an evident reality: the existence of poverty in certain parts of a major capital such as Paris. She focused her work on portraying the soup kitchens where large numbers of destitute people gathered.

The artist revealed her abilities in *Paris, rue de Valois* (1932), an image that allows for a questioning of the supposedly objective truth habitually associated with photography. On an inner city street Bing's gaze focuses on a puddle in which the roofs of an adjacent building are reflected. She shows us the paradox of something that is located above and high up appearing below, on the ground.

While Bing's Parisian photography has a melancholy, even sombre tone to it, it also looked at areas of human activity characterised by lively bustle and social interaction, such as her images of a gingerbread fair.

These years in France provided the setting for a veritable laboratory of ideas in which the influence of Bing's Frankfurt years is still evident. It was also a time when the emergence of Surrealism was occupying the Parisian cultural scene, with its exploration of the unconscious and of hidden desires. It can be detected in the ghostly feel of the solarised photographs that Bing took on the Place de la Concorde.

In this context, and thanks to an invitation from the Dutch-born Hendrick Willem van Loon, Bing discovered the Netherlands, visiting places such as Veere and Amsterdam and capturing different moments of daily life. The country's nature as a terrain regained from the sea also led the artist to reflect this geographical reality in a number of snapshots.

THE SEDUCTION OF FASHION

During her Paris years Bing experienced financial difficulties, a recurrent problem for her over the years, for which reason in November 1933 she began to contribute to the fashion magazine *Harper's Bazaar*, an American publication noted for its modern style. She secured this work with a recommendation from the editor of the French edition, Daisy Fellowes, a fashion-world figure brought up in aristocratic circles. Some of Bing's photographs are in fact of accessories that belonged to Fellowes, including the grey felt hat and an elegant pair of gloves. In these and other images Bing applied a highly innovative approach in which she brought out the texture of the objects and the sheen of the surfaces by cropping the frame in such a way that the various garments acquired a sensual touch as well as suggesting the attractiveness of a coveted object.

During these years Bing also met Elsa Schiaparelli, the celebrated Italian fashion designer with links to Surrealism. Bing took photographs as advertisements for perfumes such as *Salut* and *Soucis*, both of 1934. The aim of these images was to encourage the viewer to desire the product with all its sensual resonances without renouncing a modern aesthetic.

THE UNITED STATES IN TWO STAGES

Bing's experiences in New York can be divided into two quite distinct phases. The first was a visit in 1936 while the second came in 1941 with her forced departure from France following the Nazi occupation. She continued to live there until her death in 1998, although she brought her photographic activity to an end forty years earlier.

The first American trip lasted from April to June 1936. Bing was impressed by the colossal dimensions of the city's architecture while her restless gaze also focused on other aspects of the metropolis: the harsh life of down-and-outs (*Variation on Dead End*), the dirtiness of the streets, a circus show with acrobats and animals, and more.

In these difficult circumstances and experiencing isolation, Bing transferred her sense of solitude to the reality that surrounded her, observing it attentively. The result is a number of desolate images in which her own feelings are transmuted into melancholy landscapes and objects: scrawny, leafless tree branches, picket fences enclosing plots, and a fire hydrant in a snowy landscape next to a fallen tree.

From 1941 onwards, still suffering from the effects of exile and in need of earning a living in a hostile environment, Bing turned her activities to various different jobs, taking passport photographs for immigrants, portrait photographs on commission and even working as a dog groomer, among other things. The illustrated magazine world clearly turned its back on her at this period.

SELF-IMAGE REVELATIONS

In 1913 the teenage Bing took what she considered to be her first self-portrait. She poses in her bedroom in the family home in Frankfurt, sitting sideways at a desk and resting her feet on a chair. What we see in reality is her reflection in a cupboard mirror, which shows the young Ilse with her long hair. In front of a background of paintings, she looks out attentively and places her hand on the camera – a Kodak box model. She was unaware at the time that this device (albeit not this make) would become her principal working tool.

Throughout her life as an artist Bing repeated the exercise of portraying herself (usually indoors) with the aim of leaving a record of a specific moment of her existence. Through these self-portraits she forged her own identity as an emancipated and independent woman in times of enormous patriarchal pressure.

During her first visit to New York Bing conceived an image that is a clear indication of the sense of estrangement and alienation she felt at seeing herself so small before the immensity of the mecca of skyscrapers, as in *New York, the Elevated, and Me* (1936).

Bing would later make the representation of shadow a stark extension of her life and personality, frequently using it throughout her American years.

During the course of her lifetime Ilse Bing explored the transitory states of her own identity, sometimes presenting herself as firm and decided, at times as vulnerable and anxious and on other occasions as a fleeting shadow cast on a wall.

PORTRAIT OF TIME

In addition to seeking out the intricacies of her subjectivity in her own image, from almost the outset Bing engaged in an intensive photographic activity in which she combined commissions for portraits, especially of children, with the desire to explore the human psyche.

With regard to childhood, Bing saw children as complete beings on the same level as adults, with their own internal struggles and issues. During her own childhood the prevailing view was that they were not fully formed but Bing was uncomfortable with this perception and over time she learned to see adulthood and childhood as two phases of life that had much more in common than was generally thought.

Similarly, she did not share the view that women should be conceived on the male model as if they were a mere accompaniment to their tune. She considered that "the human being can be represented and symbolised by women", albeit without aiming to idealise them. These concepts, which clearly reflect an underlying feminist attitude, seem to allude to a holistic vision of existence devoid of hierarchies or fixed categories.

Bing went beyond merely capturing the moment, the temporal space in which her models pose. Rather, with both her child sitters and adults she aimed to show them engaged in an activity, extracting aspects of their character and personality from them.

LIVE NATURE

Any assessment of Ilse Bing's work must necessarily emphasise the impact on her career of her urban experiences in Frankfurt, Paris and New York. While this assertion seems indisputable, an analysis of her corpus would be diminished without a consideration of the close relationship she maintained with nature, both the untamed natural world and nature designed and organised by human hand, as in the case of the gardens of Versailles.

The natural world was also the locus in which Bing's emotions and feelings took hold. The photographs taken on the banks of the Loire, for example, generally exude an air of calm and balance comparable to that which she felt in her own life at the time, contrasting strongly with the landscapes of wild and rugged places such as those she captured in the mountains of Colorado at a period of greater personal tension.

In 1959 Ilse Bing gave up photography for good. After three decades as a photographer and long before her work started to be recognised in museums in the United States, France and Germany, with exhibitions and publications of her work in Paris, New Orleans, Aachen and New York, the artist, who had proved herself able to represent the vibration of life, considered that she no longer had anything new to say or contribute in this medium.