

*scientific series*

# Win Labudas Wall Pictures

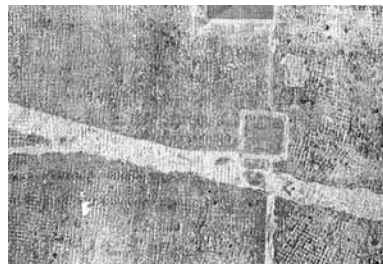
by *Nadja Labuda (2001)*

As a daughter of Win Labuda, from childhood on I was able to accompany him on his photographic explorations in cities around the world. My fascination with art on the one hand and my father's photographic work on the other can be dated back to those early years.

Over the years I was fortunate to be in continual interchange with him about art and artistic thinking; he shaped my way of seeing and awakened my passion for modern art. During my studies at university, I learned to restrain my passion in favour of looking at and judging art applying scientific criteria.

As an art historian, I have concentrated particularly on 20th century art and, as a consequence, the photography of this period as well.

This text comes from the pen of a viewer in whose heart the same blood flows as in the photographer's. Therefore, rational observation and judgment are coupled with the deep affection that I, a daughter, feel for my father's work.



## Introduction

In the present volume of my father's photographic work, the wall is the central subject. Infinitely many facets of its visual manifestation and possible ways of seeing are shown here. Sometimes it seems bare and almost banal; only at a closer look does the chosen image show artistic dimensions approaching the great art works of the past century. Sometimes it also appears as the bearer of unknown signs of rain, time, decay and restoration. Thus, the wall is mankind's drawing board and forbidden scratchpad of feelings large and small. The development of new materials has entailed that not every wall can be considered a wall in the old sense. Only „old walls,, are still made of the arduously hewn granite or the red bricks so familiar to us Europeans. In this sense, wall for Labuda also includes gates, doors or any spatial object that a message can be put on.

The wall surrounding us everyday, that we pass by every morning and evening, that is so familiar to us that we do not even notice it, is transformed by the eye of the artist into a living counter-image, into a mirror of our lives, thus becoming a sign of the lives and times.

The chosen photographic frames are closely tied to my father's personal and artistic history, with his travels and places of trust and well-being. They are his very own focus. The familiarity and commonplaceness of the chosen images may lead one to only glance at them, as with a well-known face that one believes to know already. Before discussing individu-

1 - *Wall Moon at the River*, F 019

2 - *Healed Wall*, F 075

3 - *Wall Wave*, F 021

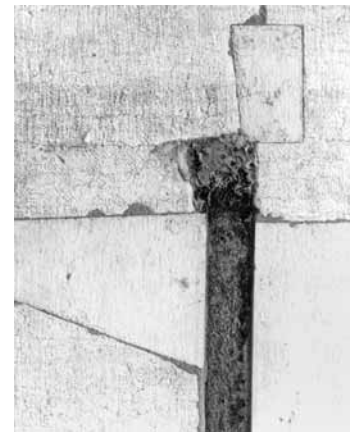
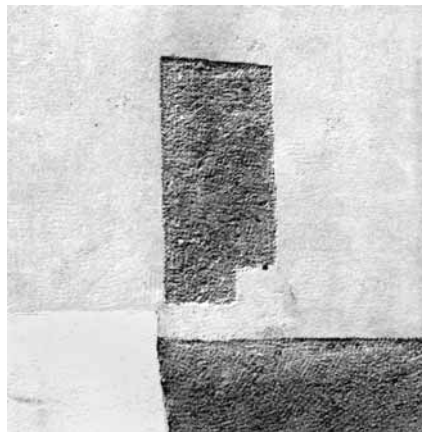
al works, let me make several remarks beforehand, in order to sharpen the viewer's sensibility and openness to perceive what is already known with a fresh spirit of discovery. Two definitive aspects of what is represented shall thereby be examined more closely, on the one hand the phenomenon wall and, on the other, the changes in its manifestation caused by people or by time.

### The Wall

Seen archaically, the wall can be traced back to the human desire to clearly demarcate one's living space, either individually or as a group. The free choice of favourable locations with seemingly good conditions to live and for survival may have influenced this process. Sometime or other, however, increasing skill in constructing houses freed mankind from the dependence on caves and trees. This situation of improved supply and defence made considerable progress possible. In the course of the development of civilisation, the wall assumed a protective and even symbolic character. For example, in the architecture of the Roman Empire, it became a sign of power and invincibility. Large-scale and insurmountable, its original significance, i.e. as a boundary and a protection against enemies



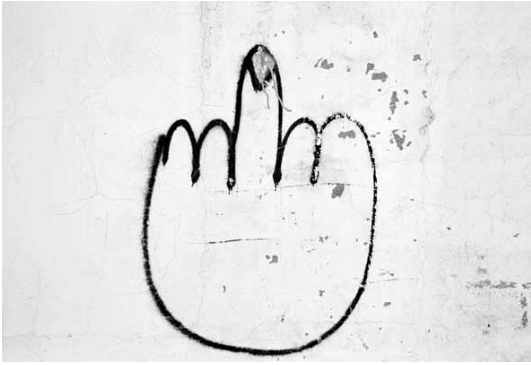
4 - Wall Surface Fragment, F 083  
 5 - Wall Surfaces, F 100  
 6 - Wall Healing, F 070



was thus redefined. This approach found its most imposing expression in the building of the Great Wall of China. Even today it is the largest fortress construction on earth, even visible from outer space. Measuring a length of 2450 km, it was built circa 210 B.C. to provide protection against invading nomads. Other symbolic meanings of a different nature were associated with the depiction of the wall in medieval portrayals of Mary. In pictorial representation, a wall often encloses the „hortus conclusus“, i.e. the garden in which Mary is portrayed in the Annunciation scenes. Here, in the Christian religion, the wall stands for the virginity and inviolability of the Madonna.

The spiteful, imposing manner with which the wall stands protecting people but, on the other hand, can be an insurmountable obstacle, made it a monument open to attack during political and social clashes.

The first act of liberation in the French Revolution was accompanied by the destruction of a wall. The Bastille had become the symbol for the suppression and absolutistic rule of the French Empire, and, as the mark of a new beginning, it had to fall. Since this day, the concept of the wall and its fall has invariably been associated with the belief in freedom. The



most significant event of recent German history also involved the fall of a wall. Here the wall had become the real and symbolic monument of the violent division of a people, and it was only after this wall had been scaled and overcome, that freedom became a reality.

7 - *Hand, Stretched Middle Finger*, F 098  
8 - *Les Justes*, F 042

### The Graffiti

The writing on the wall, the scream of protest, the declaration of love or the cry for help have a power originating from their immediacy. Hardly any other kind of message attains the intensity of paint strokes or carvings on a wall. Such graffiti draw part of their effect, however, from the destruction of someone else's property. Executed in all furtiveness and quickness, and for the writer or painter always associated with the risk of being caught, graffiti always demonstrate a resistance to law and order. Thus, even today the wall is a drawing board for those who have a message burning in their souls.

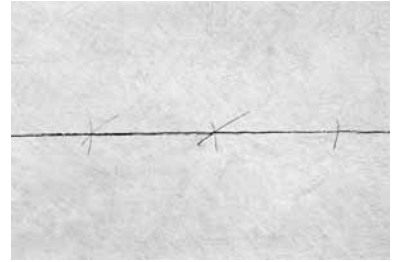
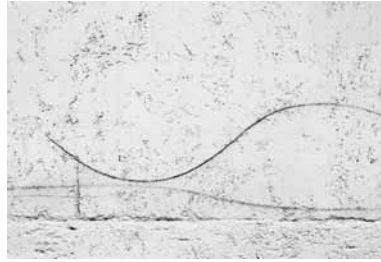
The history of graffiti is closely related to the history of communication, i.e. the transference of thoughts, feelings or news. Corresponding to the human desire to preserve personal expression, different media have developed. Already in antiquity there were scrolls, stone tablets with carvings, paintings on the walls of caves and many other means of expression in handing down old stories and events. And up into the Middle Ages, the oral tradition was a common form of exchanging information. The minnesinger or troubadour was an important member of a society who preserved old history and told new stories.

In this canon of kinds of communication, graffiti assumes an outsider's role. Indeed, it is a written, immediate expression of feeling, often going hand in hand with breaking the rules. In Old Testament accounts, we are told of a mene, mene, tekel, which was a warning or portentous sign on

9 - *White Overpainting I*, F 085  
10 - *Homage to Barnett Newman I*, F 012



- 11 - *Sine on the Wall*, F 009
- 12 - *Line with Crosses*, F 140



the wall that first had to be deciphered. An example for the trivial form of code signs that, once introduced, were disseminated worldwide is the heart with the arrow piercing through it, - automatically interpreted by all of us as sign for love.

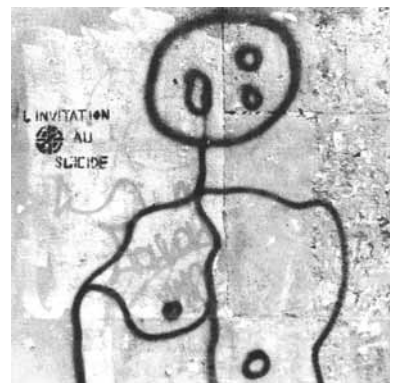
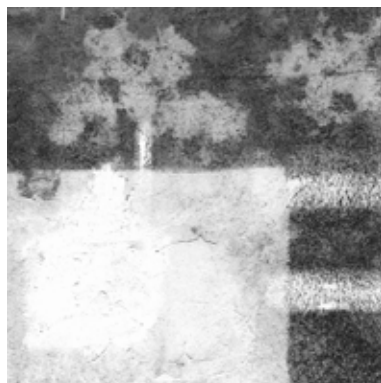
Archaeological findings give evidence of the existence of graffiti even at the beginning of civilisation. It is found in old gathering places, underground systems, castles, and in sanitary installations. It always seems to have been important for mankind to express himself immediately, often spontaneously, without reflecting profoundly over form and content.

Especially tragic evidence of the wall as a medium of spontaneous feelings and thoughts are the words of the inhabitants of Pompeii, which they wrote in the last moments of their lives on the walls of their houses. But numerous graffiti were also found on the walls there that were written by the former inhabitants in moments of a flood of emotions. They bring the buried city back to life for us and give the people who lived there names and histories. Graffiti have also been handed down from France. Restif de la Bretonne, for example, was a famous "scribbler", called „Griffon“ in French, who considered the walls on the banks of the Seine to be his personal diary, leaving dates, experiences and feelings for posterity.

The indisputable significance of the wall as a public communication forum and personal blackboard has led to a great variety of manifestations of graffiti art. It may be a line drawn by a child on the wall, the personal symbol of a person, a complex wall mural or a collective work created by sprayers, e.g. in railway stations and trains. The variety of signs and texts seems to have no limits.

Every one of us has painted graffiti at one time, unconsciously and spontaneously, with a game of hopscotch on the street or a heart carved into a school bench. Many situations can be recalled in which we unconsciously and playfully painted, carved or drew a sketch on the nearest surface. Graffiti is created following an inner call; a picture or word, alrea-

- 13 - *Wall Fields I*, F 084
- 14 - *L' Invitation Au Suicide*, F 014



dy living in us arises from our subconscious to the surface. But the unconsciousness of graffiti is only one of the possible aspects we can observe in this world of signs and words.

Over the centuries, the power of a sign on the wall was discovered in its relation to its effect on the public too. A beginning of the passing on of signs that were conceived for a certain group of people is the persecuted Christians' sign of the fish in the Roman Empire. The fish on the wall was a sign of tacit agreement and unspoken togetherness among the persecuted, who could often find their fellow Christians only by this means. If one looks at the history of graffiti, then it was always communities of this sort who expressed themselves by painting on walls in order to seek allies, to protest, to demonstrate an attitude - thereby remaining anonymous.

The meaning of graffiti that has been created within a political or religious context and then passed on can only be deciphered for the period of the 20th century. Even though there is evidence of the existence of graffiti throughout the centuries, the thematic context - for example within an archaeological site - can hardly be made out today.

An immanent part of graffiti is its transience. Not created per se for eternity, few graffiti from history have been preserved for posterity. For example, in the trains that transported the soldiers to the front and back home again in the First World War, one can find numerous graffiti in the wagons that caricature the enemy. During the Nazi period in Germany, the initial systematic discrimination and the later legally decreed exclusion of the Jewish population was accompanied by graffiti written by the rabble and the SS. Having begun with racist slogans, the star of David on a store wall became the symbol for a call to boycott Jewish-run stores. Later the star not only called for a boycott, but also became a death sentence painted on the wall. But just as graffiti was of service to totalitarian governments, there were also great resistance movements in the 20th century accompanied by signs on the wall which intended to encourage and to convey that somewhere - often underground - people were fighting for their idea of justice.



15 - *Symbol of Venus, F 011*

In Spain during the Franco regime, it was the P for "Protestad" on the walls, and during the sixties there was a real flood of graffiti against certain regimes or doctrines, as for example in South Africa, in Portugal and, of course, in Germany too during the student movement of '68. Such politically motivated graffiti is always anonymous; it serves a conviction or an idea represented by a larger group.

The spreading use and ubiquity of such signs on the wall leads to the assumption that graffiti increased drastically in the course of the 20th century. But that also may be because colours, due to improved qualities of the materials, last longer today than they used to.

Certainly one can see an autonomous movement of graffiti art after the middle of the thirties. It had its origin in the U.S. and, since the beginning of the seventies, became established in other parts of the world with the most varied modes of expression. Within such movements, large wall murals were created and are being created still, some painted - some sprayed, within a grey zone of legality or today even increasingly as contract work

16 - *Button Eye*, F 120  
 17 - *I am sad*, F 059



### Description of individual works

Turning to the individual photographs in this volume, one discovers on first perusal both graffiti that appears on a wall in an artistic fashion and also seemingly abstract wall structures and wall paintings. There is the sprayed graffiti man-icon, the chalk inscription of a lover or the engraved writing in a tree or stone. But there is also the smooth, plastered wall with the traces of careful restoration, contrasting surfaces or the play of shadows of a wrought iron form. One notices, too, that the backgrounds are not only always walls in the strict sense of the word. We see trees and walls, but also gates and doors made of wood or iron. The enumeration makes obvious the diversity of motifs and backgrounds characterising this volume, in spite of its closed circle of themes. The concept wall stands for all of them. My father gave his photographs titles that are themselves part of the creative process. They correspond to his own world of feeling, which one can abandon oneself to or distance oneself from, in order to find one's own access to his work. If one seeks a more profound analysis of his photographs, the following recurring motif groups and themes can be compared alongside each other.

### Wall Structures

Access to this part of the oeuvre can be gained by looking at the photographs depicting bare, unchanged wall structures. However, here we will not encounter a completely monochromatic and smooth wall surface. The focus and the choice of images usually comprise parts of a surface of geometric or quasi-geometric abstraction, or they show us forms that we spontaneously associate with a free artistic gesture.

18 - *Paris*, F 063  
 19 - *House Symbols*, F 001

We can discover artistic aspects in the sense of pictorial forms in Mauermond am Fluß (Wall Moon at the River), F19. The unscathed surface of a



wall is broken up here. A channel is spreading irregularly from the upper left-hand to the lower right-hand corner of the picture. The wall surfaces bordering on it appear in darker tones in the upper part, and in the lower part in light grey and white. In the dark part in the upper left there is an almost perfectly circular small bright surface, which contrasts sharply with its surroundings. It is conceivable, that the channel was created over time by the eroding forces of rain and wind. In any case we see the unscathed, smooth wall of our imagination broken up, injured, and the well-fortified and protective aspect of the wall as a concept now seems to have been transformed into the exact opposite. This place is significant in two respects: on the one hand one can discern the change, full of nuances, from light and dark and, in the relief-like differences in structure between the smooth surface and the erosion, the pictorial forms of the wall surface. On the other hand, our attention is directed to the transience and aging of the material. The insidious decay of the wall, its foreseeable disintegration has quite obviously not been caused by human hand, but instead is a sign of time leaving its traces here. That man intervenes in such a process and wants to prevent total decay becomes clear in the pictures *Mauerheilung* (Wall healing), F70, and *Geheilte Wand* (Healed Wall), F75. *Geheilte Wand* appears to us to be a counterpart to *Mauermond*. Here we



see a grey, structured surface on which a light, well-defined stripe runs from the upper left to the lower right. One can discern that a crack that was once there has been filled with plaster, as if the injury of *Mauermond*, F19 had been remedied in order to restore the unity of the surface. The right-hand third of the picture is divided off by a vertical line that one can either interpret as a wall corner or otherwise even as plaster that was applied later. Another geometrical element is a small square that is positioned on the intersection between the vertical line and the diagonally running band. The snapshot effect of the picture is emphasised by an additional, truncated square at the upper periphery of the picture above the small square. In contrast to *Mauermond*, F19, we see in this picture a linear structure of the pictorial elements. The organic forms that are created when materials decay are restored by man into the technical-geometrical form.

A similar contrast appears with a comparison between *Mauer-Landschaft* (Wall Landscape), F7, or also *Mauerwelle* (Wall Wave), F21, and *Wandflächen* (Wall Surfaces), F100. With *Mauerlandschaft*, F7, and *Mauerwelle*, F21, irregularly formed surfaces of grey, white and black tone values are juxtaposed. They interact artistically with each other, and one is reminded of pictures that were created in the Informel period, or also of the works of Mark Rothko. Through the focus on this section of the surface, the crumbling away of the wall surface and the colour layer beco-

20 - *Bygone Paris*, F 067  
21 - *Plane Tree Bark I*, F 005

mes an expressive form with artistic gesture. By contrast, in Wandflächen, F100, the white, grey and black surfaces are clearly limited and defined geometrically.

The structural differences of the wall surfaces are emphasised through the shadings of the individual elements, and a clear interaction of surface, grey value and form takes place. As often in my father's work, this choice of image calls to mind certain developments in style in the history of 20th century art. Thus he may have had Suprematist works in his mind's eye such as *Schwarzes Quadrat* (Black Square) by Kasimir Malevich, or geometrically demarcated surfaces, which we can always find again in Colour-Field-Painting.

His critical analysis of 20th century art is recognisable in many of his photographs, and for every expert on modern art, the preoccupation with his wall pictures can turn into a recognition game. In the titles for his photographs, he sometimes refers directly to artists who influenced his choice of motifs, whereby we come to a closely related theme of the photographs, namely abstract surface pictures painted on the wall.

### Abstract Wall Pictures

In *Hommage to Barnett Newman I and II*, F12 and F72, my father pays tribute to one of the most important American artists of the modern age. Superficially, Barnett Newman (1905-1970) can be seen as an exponent of Colour Field Painting, which established itself at the beginning of the fifties as a countermovement to Abstract Expressionism in America and which had extensive influence on later style directions in painting and sculpture. Characteristic for Newman's style were the renowned „ZIPS“ - for the most part large-size, radiant colour fields, which were traversed by thin, contrasting colour bands. Both with his artistic formulation of the meditative and the sublime in the colour fields that were organised in themselves and in the surrounding space without a colour/space hierarchy, and also with his theoretical writing, Newman established himself as an outstanding artist personality in the U.S. *Hommage II* shows a grey wall surface that is traversed by a light, thin band, flowing horizontally and slightly under the imaginary centre of the picture. In *Hommage I*, the structure is less geometrical. Here a stronger black-white contrast was depicted, whereby the white colour fields are not clearly demarcated from the black ones, but rather show an irregular course in form and tone value. A vertical black band, set off as a continuous contour of the wall structure, creates the „ZIP“ of this picture. While *Hommage II* alludes especially to the clear, non-hierarchical picture structure of Barnett Newman, in *Hommage I* the metaphysical and meditative aspect of his

22 - *Levels of Time*, F 117

23 - *NON, the History of France*, F 097

24 - *Olivier, Te Quiero*, F 118







pictures can be traced. A large number of the photographs show abstract paintings on walls, unconsciously created by unknown people. Often they show overpainting, touch-up work or layers of paint that for various reasons were unconsciously applied one after the other and which come to be an abstract form first in the eye of the photographer. Based on their underlying intention, these wall pictures have a similar direction as the homages to Barnett Newman that were previously discussed. On the one hand, one finds strict geometric forms, demarcated by clear lines and light-dark contrasts as in *Mauerflächen-Fragment* (Wall Surface Fragment), F83, or *Mauerfelder* (Wall Fields I), F84. On the other hand, there is irregularly applied, seemingly expressive and gestural painting on walls in *Weißer Übermalung I* (White Overpainting I), F85 and *Abstraktes Mauerbild I* (Abstract Wall Picture I), F136. These pictures are snapshots taken by a passer-by who has his own special perceptive focus. His look is sensitised to the special aesthetic of the wall surface, which to some people appears to be the senseless work of scrawlers.

25 - *Homage to Barnett Newman II*, F 072  
26 - *Vive l' anarchie*, F 142

A different mental attitude, a different inner willingness leads to a change of our reality. An insignificant blob of colour to one person can be the pride and joy of another's personal art history. Over the decades, the wall became a living counterpart for this photographer. Through his lens, we may become witnesses of many sensitive revelations and therefore submerge into a reality that can then become our own.

### Wall Drawings

In contrast to the daubs of colour on the wall, which were perceived by my father to be abstract wall pictures, but which were not intended to be such by the people creating them, there are also wall pictures that already in their origin display an artistic dimension. *L'Invitation au suicide*, F14, *Les Justes*, F42 and *Kinderzeichnung*, F 120 portray vividly how a sprayer adventures on artistic interaction, with the wall as canvas. *L'Invitation au suicide* is the drawing of a „hanged,“ stick figure on an irregularly painted wall surface. In sprayed letters to the left of the figure, next to a round emblem, are the words *L'Invitation au suicide* (Invitation to suicide).

Moreover, if one looks at *Les Justes* next to it, then it becomes immediately clear that the same sprayer must have done both pictures. The head of the stick figure is separated from the trunk and levitates upside down on the wall. The trunk is distinguishable under it as a segment of a wavy line. To the right of the head, next to a sprayed picture showing the actor Cary Grant, are the words „Les justes“ (The Just). Here we see the work of a graffiti artist who has his own signature and thus his own recognition value. The anonymous artist made this combination of a variable figure



27 - *Shadows of Time*, F 023

with different handwriting flourishes his trademark, therewith presenting a message of his own to the 'outside world'.

In comparison, Knopfauge, F120 has quite a different effect on us. Here a face was painted on the wall the way a child does it, with just a few dots and sweeping strokes. The starting point of the drawing is a circular black element, which protrudes from the wall a little bit. Perhaps it is a screw or an old bell button. This element, placed humorously into the picture as a whole, forms the right eye of the portrait. The artist obviously used an existing element of the wall as the starting point of his picture, integrated it and therewith gave both the wall and the drawing a character completely of their own.

These three examples, like many other elements in drawings and pictures that are captured in photographs, reveal to us the power a wall can have on an artistically creative person and the interaction that can take place between functional surface and graphically oriented creativity.

### Signs and Symbols

In the following section we will turn from the artistic and structural dimensions of the wall to the painted or drawn messages, which are represented by signs and symbols. We find pictures like *Symbol der Venus* (Symbol of Venus) F11, *Hand, gestreckter Mittelfinger*, (Hand, Stretched Middle Finger) F98, or *Häuserzeichen*, (House Symbols) F1 that show us well-known, familiar symbols.

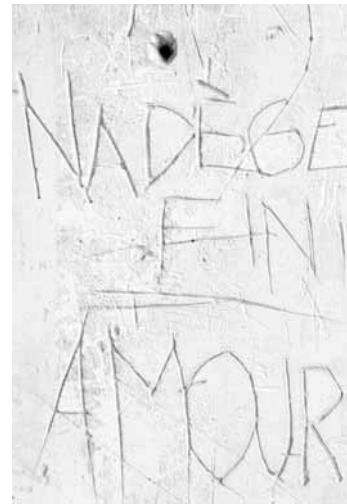
In *Symbol der Venus*, F11 we see a white, cracked wall surface on which the Venus symbol has been irregularly and inexactly applied with a brush with dark flowing paint. One can associate this symbol with many ideas, all of which belong to the same general theme. Besides being the symbol for Venus in the astrological sense, it is also the sign for „female“, and in the sixties it became the symbol for the women's movement and emancipation. The appearance of this symbol makes us aware again of another aspect of graffiti that we had already discussed: each wall inscription was carried out as an unlawful action. Therefore, everything that was painted on the wall had to happen fast. The artist could not pay attention to correct execution and exactness.

It is quite similar with *Hand, gestreckter Mittelfinger*, F98, a genteel paraphrase for what we immediately identify as a „stink finger“. This sign was sprayed on the wall with black paint in one single continuous movement; on the left side of the hand we can exactly distinguish the starting and finishing points. Here we see the use of sprayed paint on the wall and at the same time the spraycan as the medium, with which much modern graffiti is applied to surfaces. Whether the obscenity and aggression accompanying this sign on the wall is due to the fact that spraycan-use is probably more common among younger graffiti painters remains conjecture. But one can assume that this sign was put on the wall because the sprayer passionately rejected a certain person or even a system of society, issues that inflame youthful minds more than the minds of older, more established generations.

The mood changes, though, with *Häuserzeichen*, F1, a photograph showing the well-known „house of Nicholas“ as a white chalk symbol on a deep grey ground. Many stick figures of houses are painted here like semi-detached houses topsy-turvy alongside each other. It cannot be

made out whether they originate from one hand or whether perhaps a first house sign standing by itself tempted other passers-by to add more. Involuntarily, childhood memories come to our minds of playfully learning this painting technique. We are even reminded of our own unconscious doodling, e.g. while telephoning, either in deep concentration or absent-mindedly, on an innocent sheet of paper.

Much more subtle in expression and less easy to interpret are the pictures *Linie, Kreuze*, (Lines, Crosses) F140, or also *Sinus an der Wand* (Sine on the Wall), F9. The latter shows a black, sweepingly drawn wavy line on a white wall under which another already faded line runs in the other direction, more or less as a counterpoint. Did a child holding a piece of chalk in its hand make this mark in passing, just by moving along, or did someone consciously want to express endlessness with this wavy line? The snapshot-like quality of photography seems to stress this last aspect in particular; the line that has been cut off continues before our inner eye and goes on to infinity. In *Linie, Kreuze*, F140, a straight, horizontal flowing pencil stroke appears on a light wall surface. In regular intervals this pencil stroke is marked with crosses that seem to "hang" on the line exactly at their point of intersection. Here no particular interpretation seems compelling. The strokes of the drawer may follow a definite code or a personal cipher that can only be deciphered by the artist himself or by a certain group. This mysteriousness is what makes the depiction of the string of symbols so interesting.



28 - *Nadege, Fin d'Amour*, F 121

### **The Writing on the Wall**

From a sign or symbol to the written word is no big step; writing is merely a series of characters, intended for a certain knowledgeable circle. In the past century a far livelier exchange between cultures occurred than ever before. One can get an inkling of how limited this process really is, however, by looking at the diversity existing in the world of writing characters still today. My father photographed his walls in many countries of the world. Cultural differences did not stand in the foreground with the wall structures and the abstractly painted walls, because this kind of pictures belong to the few that are cosmopolitan in nature and effortlessly transcend cultural boundaries. The photographs described in the following section refer to the various facets of the use of writing and language and show us the closeness and distance that exist on our earth.

The word on the wall has different levels of meaning and different backgrounds. It can have an official character, as a prohibition or warning or as name of an official institution or company. Whereas in former times painted letters were common for this kind of writing on the wall, today we find letters on signs that are less ephemeral than paint. Quite different are the personal inscriptions of a single individual, someone communicative, who immortalises his heartfelt messages on the wall. They are either directed toward the entire world or toward a particular loved or hated person. If we begin by looking at the messages that are addressed to a broad public audience, we come to the titles *NON, Geschichte Frankreichs* (*NON, the History of France*), F97, *Schatten der Zeit* (*Shadows of Time*), F23 and *Vergangenes Paris* (*Bygone Paris*), F 67.

With *NON, Geschichte Frankreichs* (*NON, the History of France*), F 97, the word *NON* appears on a surface of three stone blocks that border on each other, whereby the word itself is on the uppermost, transversely-



29 - *Safely Escaped*, F 080  
30 - *Merde*, F 050

laid, rectangular stone. It is not exactly distinguishable whether the word was first written on the stone or whether the dim lettering was on a sign that no longer exists. The word itself is hard to make out. In spite of that, it retains its meaningfulness in this picture. Here we have a wall surface made up of hewn stone, a sign that it could have been an official building. The word NON gleams on it like a reminder of the history of France, on the resistance of the Algerian-French, who fought against the separation of their homeland from the French motherland and who lost this struggle.

In *Vergangenes Paris* (Bygone Paris), F 67, the word Paris can be made out on a wall where time has almost completed its destructive work. Here, too, the word Paris seems to have been written on the wall with mounted letters. The obvious neglect and dilapidation of the wall match the barely recognisable traces of writing. Nostalgia may have moved the photographer to take this picture of the past splendour of Parisian nights, memories of a long-gone golden time.

In *LOI*, F 99 (The Law), and *Ebenen der Zeit* (Layers of Time), F 117, one sees painted letters on the wall that are superposed by other writing or that cover fading letters. The lower half of the picture is a blank, grey wall structure, and above it is a lighter and smoother wall surface where the most varied conditions of the written word appear, all of them seeming to reflect the past. The official script and the standard letter unfold their fascination for the photographer only in a condition of decay. The flaking off of the paint, the plaster and the accompanying slow disappearance of the writing capture his attention. In these works the moment of time, of transience is discernible once more, confronting us with the limits of our existence.

### Confessions and Messages

The confessions and messages of individual scribblers on the wall create a completely different mood, as we can see in the photographs *I am sad*, F 59, *Olivier, Te Quiero*, F 118, and *Paris*, F 63. In *I am sad*, F 59, an unhappy person wrote the sentence, "I am sad, don't you know" on a dark wall that has white painting on its left-hand side. Is this directed toward a certain person or the whole world? He wants to share his melancholy in order to free himself from its burden and makes the wall the message board of his feelings. In *Olivier, Te Quiero* (Olivier, I love you), F 118 we see this declaration of love, neatly written in small black letters, on a white shutter above a black wall surface. Does Olivier know he is loved? As in the previous picture, the writer remains anonymous. Is not the written word always a self-confession as well? Did the act of writing make it true, for

the writer and for the world?

„Paris“ appears as a tiny little written word in the middle of a wall surface, which gradually changes in shading from left to right, i.e. from white over light grey to black and which shows the form of the map of Western Europe. The word Paris is placed exactly where Madrid should be. Obviously, it was a writer who, in geographical confusion, could not find the right cartographic location to immortalise his inscription. The personal messages affect us in a special way; they leave so many questions about individual fates unanswered: one would really like to know if Olivier returns this love, whether with I am sad sadness could be transformed into happiness or whether Paris somewhere could still retain its splendour. Or does our fascination lie just in the knowledge that an answer will forever be denied us?

### Engravings

Engraving in stone touches us more deeply than the painted wall. It is not a sign of fleeting existence but rather a message with the claim to eternal life. Engraving is the most archaic of all art forms. The engraver penetrates deep into the surface of the stone; he destroys the matter, creating a picture or a word with the force of his hands, apparently with a deeper passion, working with greater arduousness. The resistance of the stone, the wood intensifies the will to overcome all material barriers and leave something lasting. Only the engraver knows his reward to be certain: no rain can extinguish his message. In the present volume we find many photographs whose subjects are carvings on the bark of a tree or in stone; here, too, they range from abstract drawings to declarations of love.

If one begins with Merde, F 50 (Shit) then the difference between the written and the engraved word becomes clear. How much more intensive is the carving in the wall, the sharp edge, the deep engraving and the pointed form of the letters than in painted writing. But even „long live the anarchy,“ in Vive l'anarchie, F 142, arduously carved in stone, seems to be a more insistent appeal than the A in a circle, which we know as a sign sprayed on many walls of our nearest neighbourhoods. The end of love in Nadège, Fin d'Amour, F 121, (Nadège, the End of Love) clearly needed the medium of engraving to portray the helpless feeling of disappointment in all of its intensity. Chiselled in stone, the end of love for Nadège is sealed with a finality that preserves the emotionality of the engraver with every single letter.

But we encounter not only the written word, but also even drawings as wall carving while going through this oeuvre. In Hommage an Paul Klee I

31 - *Gate to the Arena,*

F 132

32 - *Eternally Closed Gate I,*

F 020



and II (Homage to Paul Klee I and II), F 94 and F 105, and also in *Mauerkerbung Männchen* (Wall-Carving Manikin), F 30 we find the stick figure faces of our childhood days. They resemble our first attempts to portray human faces. The child always chooses the most direct method. With a circle, a few dots and lines, the child achieves its aim and creates an image that in its meaningfulness and archaism cannot be surpassed. Here too, Labuda commemorates one of the great artists of the 20th century - Paul Klee -, who always wanted to depict the material world in his works. Klee did so by skilfully introducing geometric elements, in spite of the fact that his associates tended toward abstraction. *Hommage an Paul Klee II*, F 105 and *Platanenrinde I* (Plane Tree Bark I), F 5 are engravings, carved not in a wall, but in wood in the bark of a tree. One can see how much this surface structure differs from that of a wall. In *Hommage*, one sees the cracks in the bark, conveying the organic liveliness of the whole. In *Platanenrinde*, F 5, on the other hand, one can make out that it is about a tree, but if one takes one step back, the grey evenness of the surface is hardly distinguishable from a wall.

### Doors and gates

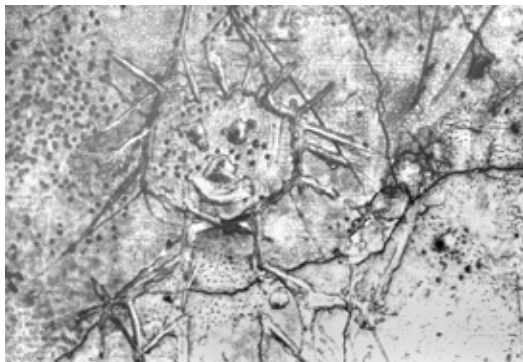
The integral part of every wall is the gate; symbolically it stands for the crossover into another world. The passage through a wall, be it door, gate, window-shutter or hatch is always understood in this photographic work as part of the wall, and it is viewed and captured for its surface structure and metaphorical content. Whether the wall opening is seen as a weak point in the seemingly impregnable strength of the wall or as a possibility of overcoming a barrier; its varying manifestation includes both aspects. And sometimes it only seems to be - without any mystery - simply a passageway, a picture that still fascinates nonetheless. In *Glücklich entkommen* (Safely escaped), F 80, it is the combination of a closed trapdoor in the wall and a small black man who is raising his arms joyfully and making off, which inspired the artist to give the picture this title. The lock goes with the white surface of the wall to almost make a unity of structure and colour on which the black-sprayed man serves as a contrast, both in content and in tone value. *Tor zur Arena* (Gate to the Arena), F 132, photographed in Pamplona, Spain, captures all of the mysterious and promising elements in one picture that for us accompanies a closed door. In former times it was the closed door of the living room on Christmas Eve that filled us with such intensive anticipation and which we could not take our eyes off. In this sense, the gate to the bullfight arena becomes the symbol for the world of excitement, of suffering, of delight and even of death, waiting concealed for some behind it. As long as we do not know where this door may lead, it is simply any passageway, but as soon as we know where it is, we are presented with many kinds of associations.

33 - *Wall-carving Manikin*,

F 030

34 - *Homage to Paul Klee II*,

F 105



Unendlich verschlossenens Tor I (Eternally Closed Gate I), F 20 conveys a different mood. Here anticipation becomes anxiety when we look at the door, barred with a stock-lock and sprayed with white numbers. One may think of the transports of the holocaust or of the soviet gulag. With his photographs of gates and doors, Win Labuda stimulates our imagination, our inner world of pictures. The photographs gain their meaningfulness through the world that we surmise behind them. It is our own history that bestows on them colourfulness or darkness, that makes the hidden world promising or filled with anxiety.

### **The face of the wall in the focus of the photographer**

In the canon of photographic genres such as landscape, nude or portrait photography, wall photography takes a small, but artistically significant place. What attracts a photographer to the wall as a theme so much that he journeys to Japan, India or Egypt for it? Ideas that were briefly discussed in the section about the wall and graffiti are to be expanded here, using as documentation selected examples that wall photographers known to us have furnished in their books.

The wall is a surface object created by man, made of stone, concrete, plaster and paint. At the moment of its completion, it is faultless, smooth and immaculate. That is the beginning of its metamorphosis. From then on it is exposed to the influences of time and human beings; it gains its own patina, structure and own face. Every photographer is in quest of truth, and with this as background, is seeking a testimony about the world around him. One may find it in representing the broad landscape; others for the same reasons devote themselves to the human body, to plants and flowers or to the boundlessness of the firmament. The photographer of walls finds his testimony through the documentation of often unintentionally created colour surfaces, pictures and signs in an artistic context that he has determined. His creative act is elevating unnoticed surfaces to a lasting work.

At the beginning of the artistic process of wall photography in black and white is the eye of the photographer, equally the lens of his camera, which usually only takes a small image, removing it from his surroundings. Solely through the choice of a certain image or frame, the chosen surface experiences its transformation into a new structural and formal existence. The second part of this abstraction process is the reduction of the genuine colour to shades between black and white. When it is finally brought to paper, the surface that is portrayed is freed from the reality it is based on and thus reduced to its own structures and forms.

### **Brassai (Gyula Halasz)**

The father of all wall photography is the Hungarian photographer Gyula Halasz, called Brassai. It was he who discovered the beauty of the walls of Paris in the thirties of the past century, describing them in poetic texts and capturing them on black and white film. His focus was special in a double sense, because he devoted himself especially to wall engraving as a medium. On the walls of the civilised world he discovered primitive art, which, like a recollection of a distant primeval world, he awakened to new life through his lens. The carvings of children and the lonely speak through him their own archaic language, directly touching the uncon-

scious, the instinctive in us. On a journey through the graffiti of his time, he discovers „Masks and Faces“, „ Animals„, and „Signs of Death“, but also „Love and Magic“. In his art he attempts, through the focus he chooses, to be close to his images.

But he shows hardly anything of the free wall surface surrounding it; he concentrates solely on the lines of the engraving. Of course, it is a never-wanting-to-end interplay of wall and engraving that he photographs, but still with his pictures one is affected by the intensity that is created, especially by the closeness of his focus. Thus, his pictures unfold their unique mythology, their primordial language.

Brassai's interest in the archaic-seeming wall engraving is founded on two important influences of that period: the work of Pablo Picasso and the relatively new-discovered beauty in the art of primitive peoples. Both influences are closely intertwined; Picasso was one of the great representatives of the primitivist movement in art, the basis of which was the artistic appropriation of archaic forms and natural materials. Many conversations between Picasso and Brassai have been preserved and bear witness to the rich exchange of ideas of the two artist friends. Picasso's enthusiasm for the primitive engravings Brassai found on the walls of Paris was great. Even greater was Picasso's influence on Brassai. The forms and structures that captured Brassai's eye are closely connected to the canon of forms that Picasso was developing especially during this period. Thus, Brassai's photographs are both echo and innovation; both aspects enter into a symbiosis in his work, which had an indisputable and deep influence on many photographers of succeeding generations.

### **Aaron Siskind**

Proceeding chronologically, at the beginning of the fifties we come to a wall photographer who lives and works in America. A native New Yorker, Aaron Siskind remained committed to the most varied facets of the world's cities during the whole creative period of his artistic work. Already at the beginning of the forties he established a purely abstract photographic style, for which he is recognised and famous still today. He took the step into abstraction not uninfluenced by other artists around him who were working in New York in the middle of the last century. Aaron Siskind was an active member of the Abstract Expressionists, who essentially founded the predominance of American art in the post-war period. Among the artist colleagues close to him were famous personalities like Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. As a photographer, Siskind took on an outsider position in this circle. His pictures originate in the ordinary places of commerce and urban society. This may be the industrial quarter of a metropolis or the market of a fishing village. Siskind makes us acquainted with the transformation of reality, which can happen through the conscious use of a camera. Everything that surrounds us and that we perceive as reality is always only our very personal focus of things. Yet photography makes us aware of how many nuances our perception of reality can have. Not through filters or later processing, but through a different perception of reality are we confronted with misleading appearances and the contradictions of the material world. The world Siskind photographs for us and thereby puts into a new context consists of textiles, corners of houses, stacked boxes, the asphalt of the street and, in particular, the wall and its various manifestations. These and countless other objects that awaken his interest are transformed by him into the flatness of



photography and thus subjected to a double abstraction.

Siskind's photographs make us acquainted with this process, allowing us to discover the abstract-painting-like dimensions of our everyday surroundings. His pictures speak the language of his time and often seem to us to be the photographic transposition of the artistic objectives established at the time by the Abstract Expressionists. Thus, put into a completely new context, we can rediscover Jackson Pollock's flowing drips of paint and the black, gestural brush strokes, which remind us of the pictures of Franz Kline.



35 - *Homage to Paul Klee I*, F 094

### **Lee Friedlander**

Lee Friedlander is an American artist-colleague of Siskind who likewise devoted himself to the manifestation of the wall with a significant photographic contribution. Although his main emphasis also is on the urban environment, his perception of this environment leads to quite different outcomes. For him, when looking at walls, the alphabet is in the foreground, which is already implied in the title of his volume of photography „Letters from the people“.

The themes he devotes himself to are divided into three categories: Letters, numbers and sentences that he finds on the walls of large American cities. He does not show them in isolation or in close relation with the manifestation of the wall, but integrates them into the American city-dweller's feeling of being alive. Frequently, even fragments of urban surroundings like shadows, vistas of architecture or even people can be seen in his photographs.

He feels committed to the particularly American characteristics of urban life. He is less cosmopolitan-urban in his references and more keeper of the archives of the spontaneous expressions of American city-dwellers on the surfaces of his everyday surroundings. To a great extent, even the alphabet letters bear witness to a typical American typesetting, and this tendency continues with the numbers. Finally, in the depiction of writing and sentences, he leaves no doubt about their cultural origin, focussing on American advertising slogans, store signs or wall inscriptions that allude to certain social or political phenomena. Friedlander is not interested in abstraction, but quite the contrary in a story, in his partly serious, partly romantic epos of urban America.

He tells this American story by photographing the writing and characters on walls and surfaces which he experiences as the immediate and direct communication area of urban denizens.

### **Hans Silvester**

The author and photographer Hans Silvester is the exception in the canon of wall photographers presented here, because he is the only one to use colour as a creative element in his pictures. His fascination for the world of the Greek Islands inspired him to portray certain facets of this picturesque part of the world. Documenting the beginning of his photographic ramblings was an illustrated book about the cats inhabiting the islands. This was followed by a kaleidoscope of colours, forms and structures that he found on walls and surfaces in the framework of his excursions. The pictures that were thereby created reflect the interplay of colour, sun, wind and sea. The radiant colours on the doors and walls enter into a struggle with the powers of nature to which they must sooner or later

succumb. Cracks in the wall structure, flowing traces of water and contrasts of colour and the weathered wall surface are rendered through his photographs in an expressive and artistic-seeming fashion. To intensify certain colour effects, he uses photographic filters to emphasise certain picture moods. Hans Silvester provides us with an impressive view of the manifestation of the wall in a region of Greece and grants us the opportunity to perceive the wall also as a manifestation of the influences of wind and weather and of country life.

### Summary

If one turns to my father's work in comparison, an artistic position is shown that differs in its richly faceted direction from the photographers discussed previously.

Brassai, as the forefather of wall photography, concentrated on the archaic-seeming engravings on the wall.

Siskind acquainted us with the abstract dimensions of the manifestations of walls and other surfaces.



35 - *Dancing Venus*, F 129  
36 - *Tito's Handprint*, F 016



Friedlander was interested in the interaction of people and their urban environment.

Silvester photographed the manifestation of the wall in colourful interplay with the influences of nature and time.

And finally my father - he is the poet of the photographers of his genre, the chronicler of large and small feelings that were immortalised by the unnamed on walls, doors, gates and the bark of trees. In his work, we find both the engraving and the artistic yet abstract wall surfaces, but also the numbers, the letters and the written sentences of the urban person. He presents us a multi-faceted manifestation of various walls, whereby each of these different views matches the artist's own constant aesthetic and human view, without using the word concept for it. His artistic form language is oriented toward the great painters and drawers of the past century and less on his photographer colleagues. Until the end of the eighties, he was not even acquainted with the volume „Graffiti,“ by Brassai and was, as he said, deeply affected and at the same time pleasantly surprised to find in Brassai an unknown intellectual father.

The abstract wall structures and wall paintings comprise the most expressive element in his photographic work. Here his deeply contemporary feeling of art and aesthetics comes to light.

An admirer and connoisseur of 20th century art finds here a medium to contribute his own abstractions to the series of impulse-giving artists of our time. In the titles of his works that are created in this context, a feeling is discernible that will even be intensified in the other works. Although we discover in the abstract art of the post-war years and even up to the present the wish for a 'pure' art form having no direct reference, and this referencelessness can occasionally be found in my father's photographs, his titles enrich the abstract wall photographs and structures in particular with a lyrical component that allow associations with the material world.

Mauermond am Fluß (Wall Moon at the River), for example, can be a pure abstract wall structure to the viewer, in a figurative sense it can also become a moonlit river landscape, a stretch of land anywhere, bathed in light and shadow, lighting up fleetingly only to then become a furrowed wall surface again. His titles show us how the artist perceives the faces of the wall, how the wall for him becomes a volume of poetry of the unnamed and thus also his own volume of poetry.

Letters, words and numbers have varying manifestations in his work. Sometimes they seem to be juxtaposed incoherently, sometimes a number is there, isolated, carved or painted on the wall or on wood; then it is a placard with a demand or finally the written confession. Through these photographs we are confronted with an important component in the entire artistic work of the artist - with that great continuum, with the fact of time. The flaking off of the paint, the decay of the wall, the fading of the letters and numbers, but also the repair of injuries to the wall surface; all that is placed before our eyes, and we see ourselves confronted with present and past, with the eternal cycle of decay and renewal.

We come into contact with the phenomenon of endlessness and limitedness in two ways; the wall stands opposite us as an everyday monument of urban limitation and becomes thus the quiet challenge to overcome the limits and to create the idea of an endless world behind the boundaries before our inner eye. The photographer's look onto the aging face of the walls is also the questioning look behind the limits of our own existence and the unspoken wish that behind these boundaries a new, perhaps endless dimension may unfold.

The work of my father is of highest relevance because at a time when photography as an independent art form is finally being recognised, his work, like no other, bridges the gap between 20th century painting and the photography of our time.

With his oeuvre, he transports us into a world of walls, allowing the changes in the walls to become signs of our own poetry. After looking at and reflecting on his work, walking through the streets becomes an exploration of this new world of signs, pictures and symbols, and the face of our cities is transformed with every step we take. Our changed perception will find the artistic beauty, the humour and the passion that is revealed on walls in manifold ways, and our everyday visible world will become more abundant.

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Translation: Carol Obeschmidt

Win Labuda (born Winfried Gerhard Labudda: 26 June 1938, in Danzig) is a German researcher, science photographer and entrepreneur. Labuda founded the company Clear & Clean GmbH in L beck in 1979. From then on his research activities focused on surface cleanliness in relation to the mechanics of wiper-based cleaning procedures. For this purpose, he developed a number of test methods and devices. Labuda is the author and co-author of a number of patents and extensive technical literature, published by On this page you can download the most beautiful desktop wallpapers of Pexels. Browse through the desktop background images and download every background picture to your Windows and Mac OS computer for free. 4.34K Photos 27 Videos 0 Users. Stephan Seeber.