

# REVIEW: ICH SEHE WAS, WAS DU NICHT SIEHST!

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Bodo von Dewitz and Werner Nekes (eds)  
*Ich sehe was, was Du nicht siehst!*  
*Sehmaschinen und Bilderwelten.*  
*Die Sammlung Werner Nekes*  
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'I see what you do not see! Viewing machines and image worlds.'

A literal translation from the German does not seem to do justice to the intriguing title of this fantastic catalogue. It's hard to say exactly how, but the German language has a way of interconnecting the philosophical, the magical and the scientific, all in one sentence, creating an enigmatic aura that stays with you throughout the book. For me the title immediately sets the right tone for discovering this collection on the same basis as that which drove the collector: a continuous quest of exploration and reflection, fed by fascination, intrigue and experience.

The first thing I did when I received this catalogue was a sort of browsing: leafing through the pages, backwards and forwards, stopping on the way. It is a heavy book, of 'coffee table' dimensions and standard, but it rested comfortably on my knees, seducing me to look and look again. I was overcome by a strong sense of regret. Why had I let everyday reality take over and missed a marvellous opportunity to visit what must have been an extraordinary exhibition? Now I was confined to a two-dimensional visit, wandering through pages instead of rooms, discovering objects on paper instead of being amongst them. The transformations on offer from so many fascinating optical manifestations had to happen virtually, in my head.

In Werner Nekes's own description of his motivation to collect, he brings together knowledge and passion, the head and the heart. *Ich sehe was* follows this approach. The wonderful display of optical objects and visual imagery is both enveloped and queried by a wide range of interpretations, in the shape of seventeen essays exploring the subjects touched by the collection. This presentation of a collection is more than an individual's obsession and possession: instead it offers an attempt at understanding the world through the wonderment and excitement inherent in the 'seeing machines' produced by history. It is therefore maybe not surprising that objects are always linked to their use and/or meaning and placed within a context of humanistic philosophy, reflecting on issues raised in areas such as Visual Culture and Media Studies.

The essays that link and surround the images are written by authors from a variety of disciplines, each approaching from a slightly different angle. The first essay looks at the sources for projection, easily jumping through time, placing the emphasis not so much on invention and apparatus as on ideas. It explores the cultural and historical implications of ways of seeing, reflecting on the basic human drives to imitate and to represent, to understand and to express, through observation and experience. One of the two essays specifically dealing with the magic lantern is by Deac Rossell, who, as he so often does, presents us with new names and unknown developments. The usual approach of treating the magic lantern as 'pre-cinema' could not be farther away.

And suddenly I started looking at the images afresh, making new connections and placing gadgets of entertainment within a cultural philosophy. In this way Apparatus becomes connected with Art, Phenomenon with Vision. The camera obscura becomes another Eye, creating new 'virtual' worlds. The viewer becomes a dynamic force, changing the way we see, but always based on the familiarity and conventions of how we know how to see. The essays are about correlations and exchange between areas, and not so much about 'what came first' and what developed later. Painting, photography, film and the magic lantern all take their place within the popularisation of a visual knowledge. At times the text of the essays is quite dense, even for an experienced reader of German, and I must admit I found them difficult to follow on occasions. But for some reason that is not a problem. It is easy to pick up ideas that generate thoughts, and that is what counts.

This book, then, is less about artefacts and more about interpretation, and how collecting becomes a manifestation of this. One way of reading the catalogue is as a consideration of the principle of collecting through identification, classification, interpretation and organisation. It stimulates the reader again and again to make (unexpected) connections between optical manifestations or instruments, on the one hand, and scientific developments or cultural and artistic movements on the other. *Ich sehe was* certainly deserves a prominent place in my library, to be taken out for many years to come. It is not simply the illustration of an exhibition with some texts and notes delivering facts and figures. It presents a fascination, a lifelong obsession and a way of thought and reflection. Objects, images and machines take centre stage, but provoking thoughts and queries are always waiting in the wings.

