THE NEVER-ENDING CLOUD TYPES

They move across the blue sky like a soft veil, lie above the landscape like a heavy grey curtain or tower up in the atmosphere like gigantic fortresses that can discharge into apocalyptic thunderstorms. Clouds determine our lives, our moods, our activities, and not least a great deal of our everyday communication. With their fleetingness, their permanent transformation, development, apparent tangibility and – at the same time – total unapproachability, clouds have beguiled generations of artists. Particularly romantics of the 19th century like William Turner or Caspar David Friedrich were fascinated, trying to capture the ever-changing skies on their canvases and create scenic cloud studies.

But the impact of clouds was not just limited to art. Also in science the 19th century marks the beginning of a systematic research of the weather. In 1803, the Englishman Luke Howard published his study "On the Modification of Clouds", in which he divided clouds into three basic forms with different shapes between them: cirrus (feather cloud), cumulus (heap cloud) and stratus (layered cloud). This classification can – in an extended and refined form – still be found in meteorology today in the observation and description of clouds.

It is this scientific approach of cloud classification that inspired Berlin artist Katrin von Lehmann to work with the subject of clouds: "It was not that I wanted to do something with or about clouds, but that I came to this topic because of a visit in a meteorological observatory." In the Meteorological Observatory Lindenberg in Brandenburg, she watched how every 30 minutes the clouds seen in the sky are entered into a cloud diary with their Latin name of classification. Although this activity could in principle be automated with the use of a cloud scanner, the human observer and his naked-eye observation are much more reliable. "Today human activities are more and more replaced by technical devices. This is why I found it very surprising that cloud classification is being done with naked-eye observations and that scientific data is created in this way".

In fact, the human ability to rank complex matters into types and categories can hardly be beaten by technology. It is one of the most fundamental processes of the human understanding of the world to explain the irregular, special, unique in using universal terms. The huge success of the natural sciences also has to do with the fact that here universally valid and effective classification systems were developed, which can bring the seemingly chaotic complexity of our world into an order. "I am especially interested in the question how natural phenomena are translated by scientists", von Lehmann sums up this issue. In her work "Augenbeobachtung" ('naked-eye observation'), she follows this process, reverses it and breaks it open.

Von Lehmann started her observation just like the cloud watchers, but in her case the object of study was not the sky, but the cloud recordings that were created in the Lindenberg observatory over the course of one month. She then intuitively translated the Latin terms into drawings without a necessary relation to the classified clouds. The resulting drawings, which represented one month of weather, were then folded and layered chronologically. This process of material concentration aims to create also a concentration in content of the final artistic work. The cloud classification in the process of naked-eye observation is momentarily overcome into the almost unconfined space of intuitive associations during the creative process. However, in the end the individual variety of the resulting drawings disappears into the abstract black and white of the cross sections during the process of layering.

The aspect of repetition plays a great role for Lehmann's works just like in the regular application of scientific classifications. "Often repetition creates something new: There is always a small change, a variation, and this variation brings about new questions, new ideas. What about so-called errors? I think they are very important. Maybe they question my self-chosen system." Rigid algorithms and clearly defined systems always carry the seed of a creative conquest in them.

However opinions have always been divided over how to assess the human urge to classify. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who had been very engaged in natural sciences, was so excited about Howard's cloud classification that he dedicated one of his poems to him. One can almost feel a certain relief that finally some order had been found in the chaos of clouds:

"But Howard gives us with his clearer mind / The gain of lessons new to all mankind; / That which no hand can reach, no hand can clasp, / He first has gain'd, first held with mental grasp."

Caspar David Friedrich, on the other hand, who had been asked by Goethe to create cloud studies after Howard's classification, refused to force nature into such a scheme. One step further this controversy leads to a philosophical question that in turn refers back to the difficult automation of cloud watching: Do our classifications illustrate an order that exists also independently from us in this world? Or are these theoretic classifications merely an explanation of our human way of looking at the world.

Von Lehmann considers the inspiration of discussions like these to be an essential function of art. After her high school graduation, she had indeed thought about studying meteorology before she decided to study visual art. She considers her work today also as a kind of research, but without a focus on finding answers: "I see a great contrast to scientific work. Scientists try to give permanent answers to life phenomena. I see artistic work more like an opening in the sense that questions are being asked".