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exhibits

Steffen Kluge Shines a Little *Licht* On Photography

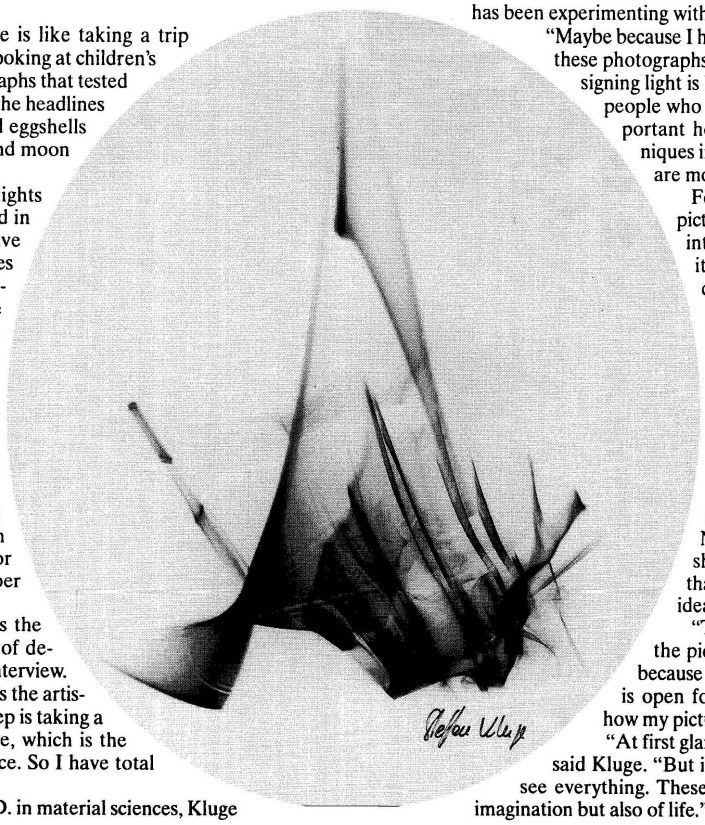
By Gayatri Singh

Looking at the art of Steffen Kluge is like taking a trip through time — back to the days of looking at children's magazines and their abstract photographs that tested the imagination. "What is it?" asked the headlines over close-up photos of sponges and eggshells that looked like desert landscapes and moon craters.

Kluge's photographs of blurred lights and ribbons of color stretch the mind in similar ways, though they do not have origins in mundane objects like textiles and household products. Kluge's subject is light and light alone — and the morphing creatures he creates with it can be seen through May 9 at Smolny Cathedral's main exhibition hall.

According to Kluge, he is the only person in the world right now who is making pictures with the unique technique he calls *Lichtgrafik*, or "light graphic." Kluge refracts and reflects electric white light through prisms and mirrors to shape and color it. He then flashes the light on a paper surface and photographs it.

"For me there is no such thing as the perfect photograph; it is a question of designing light," said Kluge in a recent interview. "I finish designing the picture, which is the artistic aspect of my work, and the final step is taking a photograph of the completed picture, which is the light that I have designed on a surface. So I have total control over the outcome."



A mechanical engineer with a Ph.D. in material sciences, Kluge has been experimenting with Lichtgrafik for the last 15 years.

"Maybe because I have studied very technical things I feel these photographs are not technical at all — for me designing light is like having fun," said Kluge. "For the people who view my pictures it should not be important how the picture is made or the techniques involved in it ... because these pictures are more for the heart than for the brain."

For this very reason, Kluge leaves his pictures without titles or captions, leaving interpretation to the viewer. And while it is not difficult to see a whole host of characters springing from his oblique forms, it is difficult to characterize Kluge's work simply as photography. Not only does his craft cross into the realm of lighting design; his abstract shapes and freakish colors challenge the belief that photography reproduces a concrete object.

Kluge, 35, thinks that this exhibit is his 75th, though he says he has "lost track" of the exact number by now. Nonetheless, this is Kluge's second show in St. Petersburg, and he feels that the Smolny Cathedral provides the ideal space for his pictures.

"The juxtaposition [of the venue and the pictures] provides a good atmosphere, because when you go into a cathedral ... heart is open for everything," said Kluge. "That is how my pictures should be viewed.

"At first glance you do not see nature or people," said Kluge. "But if your mind is open enough you can see everything. These photographs are not just a part of imagination but also of life."