The Work of Otto Beckmann
An Imaginary Exhibition – A Guided Tour

The creative work of Otto Beckmann represents a permanent search for new ways of expression spanning a great diversity of works between the poles of algorithm and mysticism.
Certain artistic leitmotifs are constantly recurring like the interwoven themes of a fugue. Each thesis also bears in itself the seed of its anti-thesis. Beckmann's work defies any art-historical classification. Nevertheless we will attempt an introduction to his art with an overview of his work throughout different periods illustrated with representative art works.

Beckmann starts his creative work in graphics [1] [2] around 1937. He further develops them in his own techniques, e.g. cement-cutting and string-printing. From 1941, when Beckmann is appointed to teach at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts, additional elaborate metal [4] [6] and enamel techniques appear in his works.

[1] *Apocalyptic Horseman*, 1939, ink drawing

[2] *Dream (Burning City)*, 1939, water color

[3] untitled, about 1940, string-printing

[4] *Sebastian*, about 1942, relief, embossed copper

Along with time-related motifs [1] [2], figurative works dominate in Beckmann's work at this time. They strongly remind of icons; their adjuratory spirituality state an intended contrast to the prevailing sinister political situation. With the exception of a student's work show at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts in 1941, Otto Beckmann does not participate in any exhibition or publication during the period of the national socialist regime. He documents his works, poems, and art-theoretical thoughts in handwritten volumes, which he later calls *Unreal Protocols*, produced for himself and probably a circle of close friends[1]. In these protocols he describes his first algorithms, the draft of a table cross (1936) and a calculation for the proportions of vases (1940) [6] which he entitles *thought machine*. His *light reliefs* serve as additional example for his early artistic experiments [5].
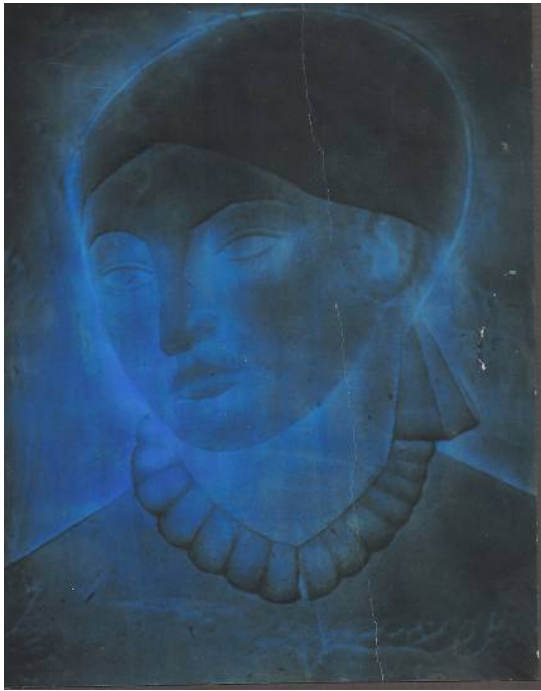
[5] Light relief, 1944, acrylic glass

[6] Vase, 1941, embossed copper

At the end of World War II in 1945 Otto Beckmann begins to work as an independent artist. The first exhibitions soon followed in Vienna[2]. He elaborates the enamel technique and produces accomplished works in his series of iconic images [7]. He makes his living with graphic prints which are sold by Vienna galleries [8]. In these years, a shift in the woman's motif being detached from its schematic astringency and gaining subtle sensuality [9] can be noticed. In 1948, Beckmann's period of figurative works ends.

Otto Beckmann, in general, approaches a subject first by graphic means in order to finalize it with elaborate techniques such as enamel [10].

[7] Icon, 1946, enamel on copper

[8] *Pandora*, 1947, colored woodcut


[9] untitled, about 1946, etching

[10] *Woman With Fish*, 1947, enamel on copper

In 1948, Otto Beckmann is invited to the Summer Seminar in Schloss Leopoldskron, Salzburg[3], which was organized by US occupation forces. He meets the psychologist Wilfried Daim, with whom he starts deep-psychological experiments[4] entitled *meditative practices*: surrealistic visions of the subconscious which Otto Beckmann illustrates in etchings [11] and metal sculptures [12]. Later he produces collages which in a way remind of surrealistic works by Max Ernst [13] and where Beckmann applies forms of experimental photography which he calls *plytypie*. Some of these works clearly document his dealing with the apostasy of the subconscious [14].

[11] *Noah's Ark*, 1949, etching
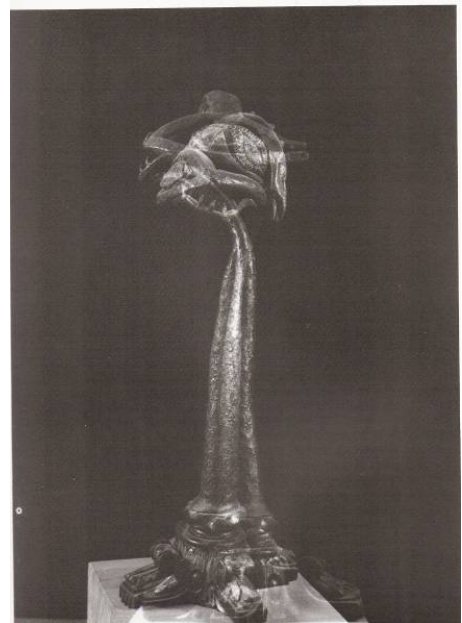
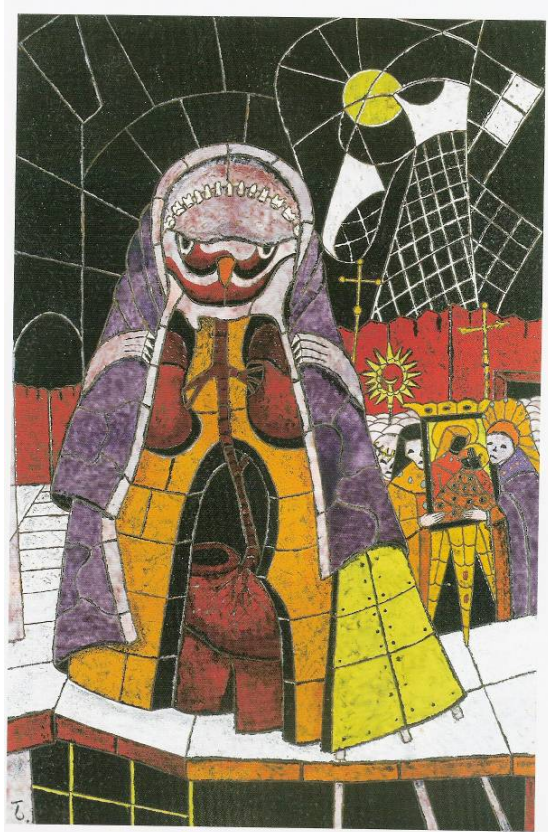[12] *Chimera (The Shaman's Magic Wand)*, 1953, copper with silver, simultaneous photo

[13] *Fin de Siecle*, 1950, etching

[14] untitled, 1953, plytypie

His distinctive enamel works [15] complete Beckmann's period of the *meditative practices*. He shall take up this subject [16] again in later years.

[15] *Appearance of the Anti-Christ*, 1954, enamel on copper


[16] about 1966, plytypie on aluminium

After a series of works showing strongly abstracted figures [17], a period of concrete works follows in the mid-1950s. Beckmann does not abstract from the visible world, but constructs direct forms [18]. He develops algorithms basing on aesthetic rules. The most used algorithm is the so-called *surface-cut algorithm* [20]. The technique preferred is enamel mosaic. Beckmann now uses enamel on ceramic instead on copper sheets as he did before. The vital use of bright primary colors – as the third dimension of pictorial composition – is dominating[5]. Otto Beckmann is commissioned to produce several enamel mosaics on residential buildings of the City of Vienna. A remarkable development in concrete algorithmic images [21] towards three-dimensionality is taking place, for example in his enamel mosaic surface-cut plastics [22].

In the beginning of the 1960ies Beckmann is commissioned to design church doors and windows as well as interiors of sacred buildings by the architect Robert Kramreiter. Some of these sacral works express Beckmann's outstanding "form-cosmos" and distinctive symbolism [19].
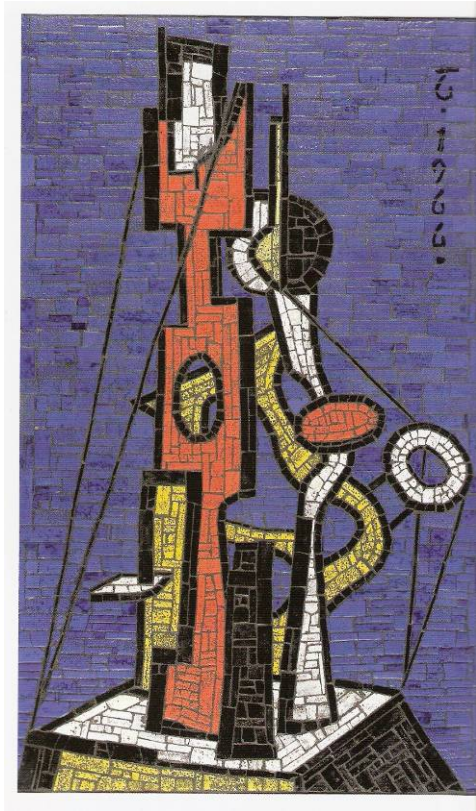
[17] *Group*, 1955, enamel on copper
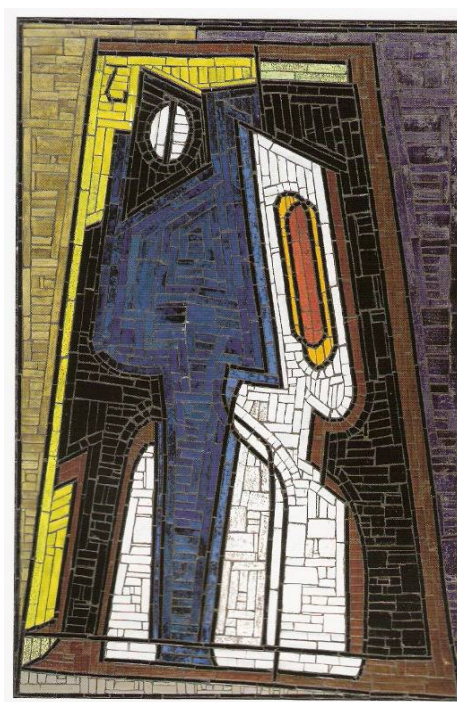
[18] *All Souls' Day*, 1960, enamel mosaic

[19] Church Door, 1961, St. Erentrudis Herrnau Salzburg mosaic, photo of the building site

[20] Motif from *Night Cycle,* 1955, enamel surface-cut algorithm

[21] untitled, 1966, enamel mosaic

[22] Enamel mosaic plastic, 1965, 193 cm high

In consideration of the number of contract works, the period from mid-1950s to the beginning of the 1960s can be regarded as Beckmann's most successful productive period. However, the secret love of Otto Beckmann belongs to research in experimental art. Thus he tackles a so-far untouched creative task: the creation of abstract films. Using transparent materials Beckmann constructs models (*optical matrixes*) which show a dynamic play of colors with polarized light [23] and shine from inside-outward under ultraviolet light [24]. The matrixes are successively shifted according to a given choreography. In this way Beckmann creates his outstanding *cinematric films* from single photographic images.

[23] 1963, Cinematrix in polarized light (film still)

[24] around 1960, Cinematrix in UV-light

Always searching for new ways and making use of newly emerging possibilities Beckmann is enthusiastic about using computers for art purposes. In 1957 he gets in contact with Herbert W. Franke and later cooperates with one of the pioneers of computer-generated graphics Frieder Nake and Gerhard Stickel (computer texts). He corresponds with nearly all of the most important representatives of emerging computer graphics. Among them are Georg Nees, Hiroshi Kawano, Leslie Mezei, and Waldemar Codeiro.

In 1966 he is given the opportunity to use the technical equipment of the Vienna Technical University and gets in contact with scientists who are fascinated by his experiences. He founded the experimental group *ars intermedia*, a rare example of a long-term and fruitful symbiosis of scientists and artists. „intermedia" refers to the idea of producing images, sound sequences, and *auto-poems* with the help of a single program. In fact, Beckmann first produces sounds and then sets his *cinematric films* to sound sequences. Only in 1968 he appears before the public[5] with computer graphics [25]. His laser graphics represent a special category in the cooperation with scientists of the TU Vienna [26].


[25] untitled, 1968, Computer graphic
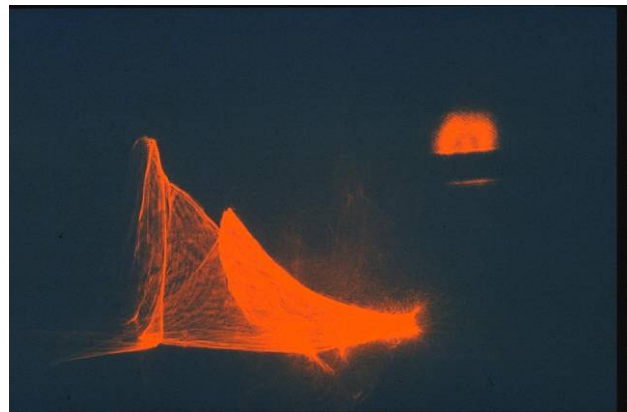
[26] untitled, 1971, Laser graphic

Beckmann finds a congenial partner in his son Oskar who is endowed with expert technical knowledge. Oskar constructs a special computer system (a.i.70/71 and further stages of development) which Beckmann uses from 1970 to 1980. The program can be influenced in real time by analog peripheral devices. This makes it possible to interact within human reaction time. No other computer of that time is able to mange this. The special feature of Otto Beckmann's computer experiments was in the attempt to produce single photographic images in order to automate the creation process[7] itself.

His "personal" studio computer came online in June 1970. Within a short time, Otto Beckmann manages to solve some of his major artistic projects, such as *optically-acoustically identical film* [29], serial image [27], and computer-generated surface-cut plastics [28].
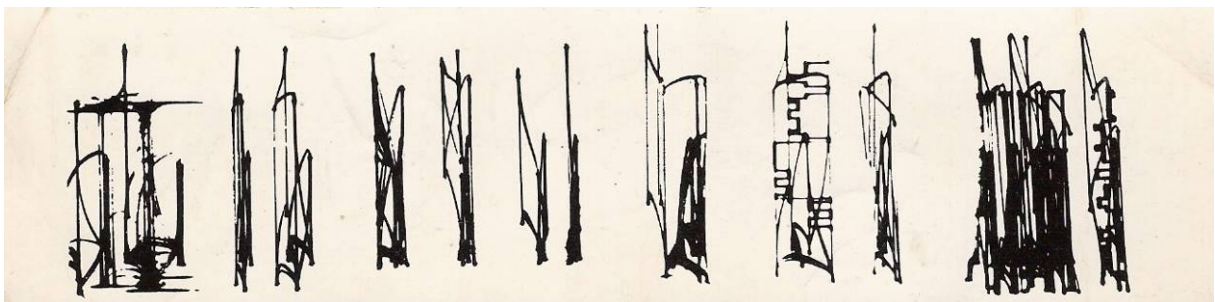
[27] Interactive variation of a program from 1970, process photos. The left and right groups were used for the works: "The Inventor and the Machine" and "The Mass Practices Insurrection".
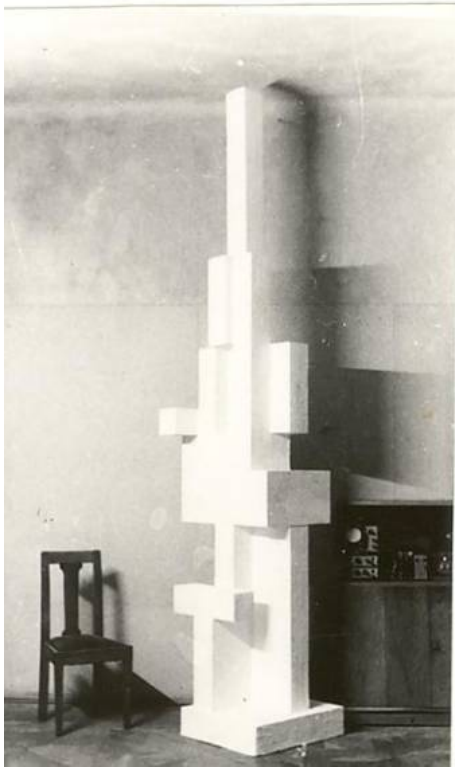
[28] Computer-generated architectural object, 1971, styrofoam 365 cm high, Neue Galerie Graz


[29] Optically and acoustically identical film, 1970, film still

As one of the few computer artists, Otto Beckmann created large-scale objects based on computer graphics [30].

[30] Computer-generated mobile object, 1972, Elementary school Vienna, 200x260x23 cm, MUSA Vienna

The special impact of Otto Beckmann on international „Early Computer Art" – as the period from the early 1960s until 1979 is called in art history – is based on his unmatched richness of forms and ideas.
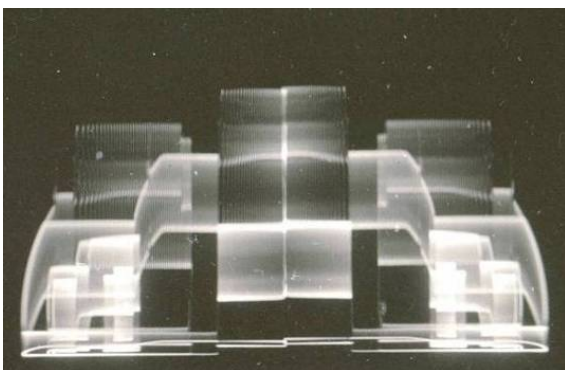

[31] *Aida*, 1971, photo, stage design

[32] *Take Away the Fool*, 1977, print, stage design

Already in 1966, Otto Beckmann was working on what he calls *imaginary architectures*. By this, he meant works that deal with visions of architectural forms with artistic aspects, in other words, architectural design as sculpture. His first art works in the realm of imaginary architecture are acrylic glass objects [33] which were later processed by computers. Beckmann creates facade-like designs [34] and virtual 3-D objects shown either as plan and frontal view [35] [36] or in perspective view [37].
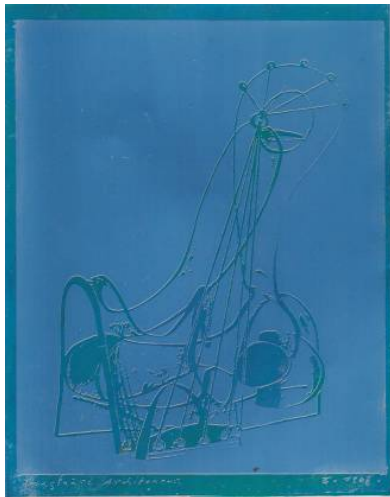
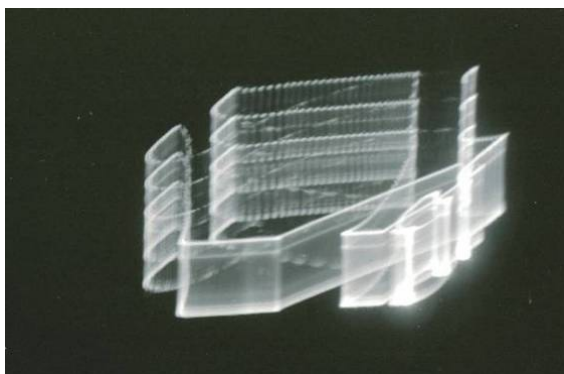[33] *Imaginary Architecture*, 1967, aluminium foil
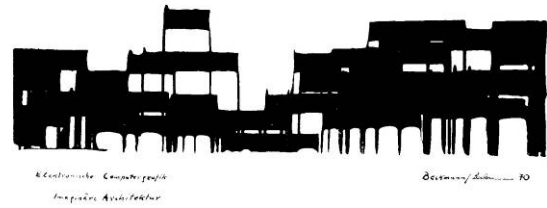
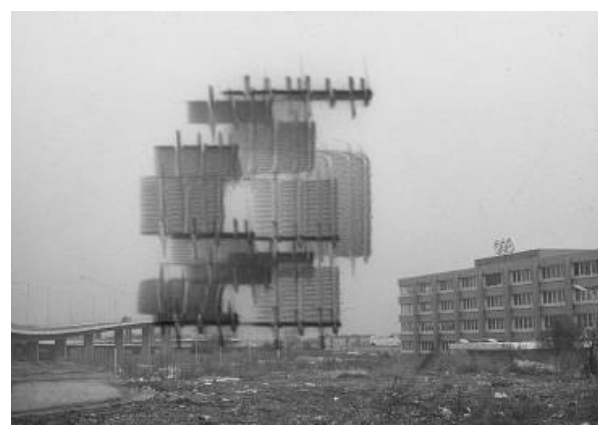[34] *Imaginary Architecture*, 1970, computer graphic, Kunsthalle Bremen
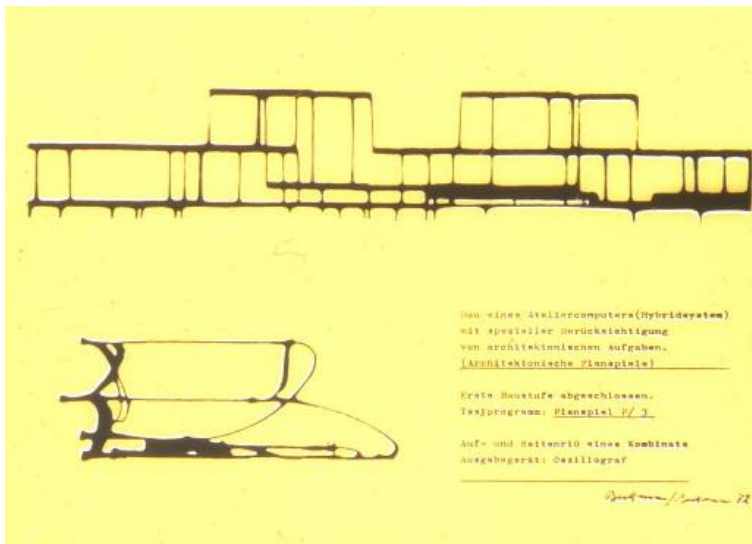
[35] Architectural object, 1972, front and side view Collection of ZKM Karlsruhe

[36] Object, front and side view 1971, Screen shot


[37] Object, axonometric view, 1973

[38] *Headquarter*, 1976, Virtual object in real environment

Beckmann's virtual architectural objects embedded in real landscapes can be seen as the highlights of his computer art period [38] [39]. In 1980, he accomplishes this period with a series of works called *Metropolis 2080*[8] – the vision of a future form-cosmos which even today appears current.
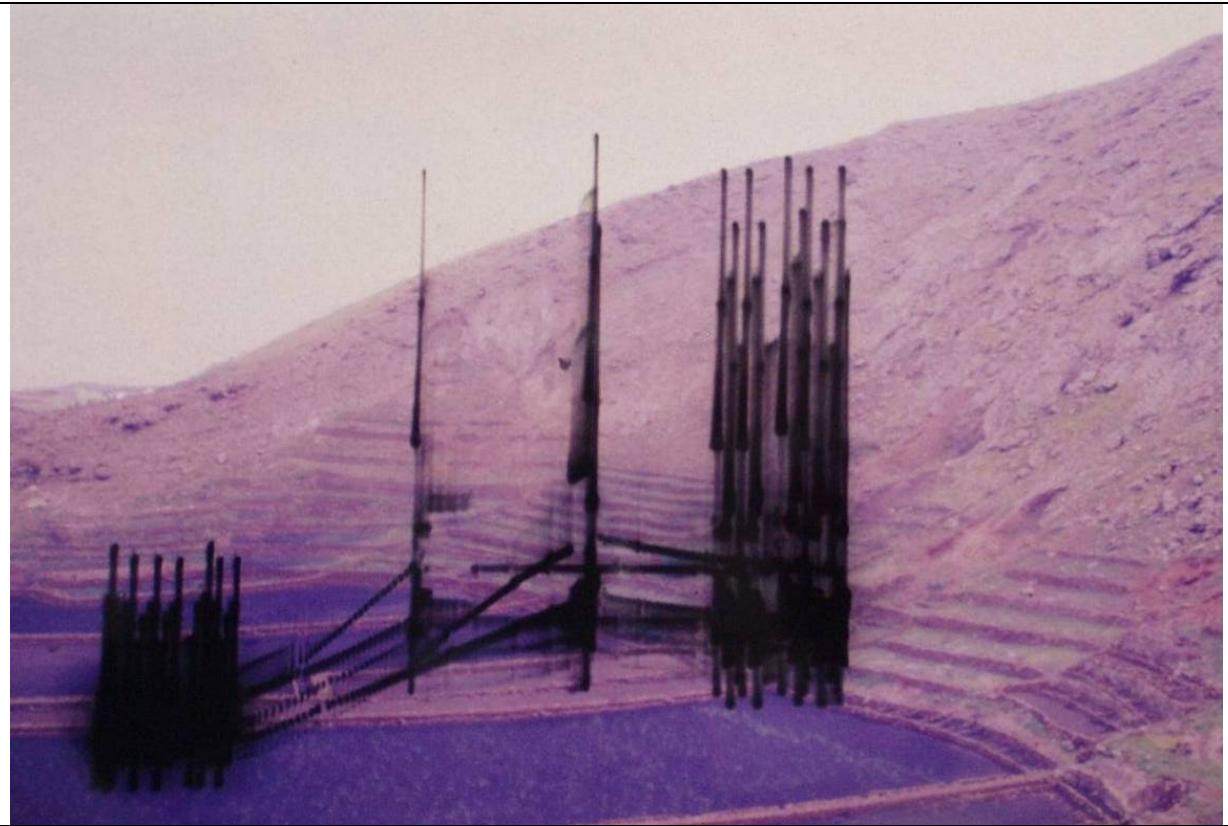
[39] *Desert City at the Sea*, 1979, imaginary architecture

Randomness is a conditio sine qua non for Beckmann's creative computer work. But already in his early computer art period he tries to implicate "natural accident" in his work beyond synthetic accident generated by the machine.

Beckmann enters the period of found objects, *objects trouvé.* According to the materials used, this period can be divided into different segments: In 1973, pieces of tree bark showing traces of bark beetles are used for prints, later they form small plastics cast in bronze. Finally these figures are assembled in scenes [40].
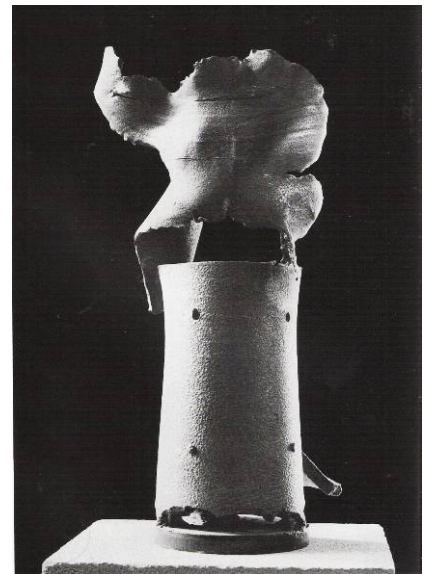
[40] Triptychon: *Theatrum Mundi* with *Bestiary, Sanctuary and Purgatory*, 1976

Another figure series is made of brick fragments abraded by the sea [41]. A further period consists of large concrete sculptures of found iron objects which are welded together. The basic materials are war relics or waste from the iron industry [42].

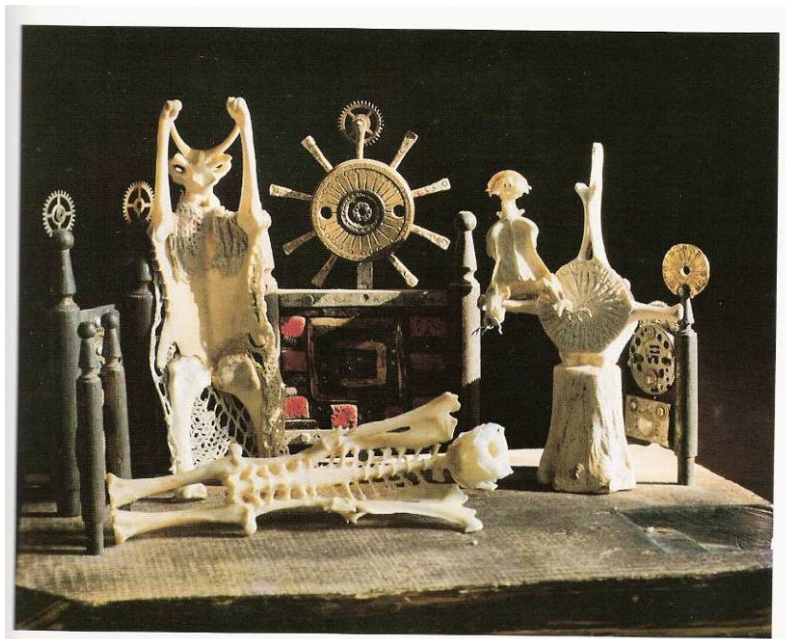[41] Terra cotta group, 1976, artist's photo

[42] *Iron Mask*, 1970, shrapnel

From 1978 on Otto Beckmann uses bones to produce his found objects. Remarkably, bone material has been used for ritual objects by shamans instead of art works. Otto Beckmann documents his new return to magic in 1979 in the fictive character *Duralei D. Dopotopoff* [9]. He calls his new works *neo-*

magical objects of cultism. They are idols and fictive magic ritual objects [43] which are often arranged in mysterious and artistically condensed scenes [44].
Along with bone, technical components are also used.

[43] *Shaman Ritual Object,* 1978   [44] *The Youth of Sphinx of Thebes*, 1986, bones and metal

The highlight of this period are Beckmann's *text-generated machines* [45] representing a synthesis of algorithm, mystics, mobility, and intermediality: machines in action as dynamic metaphor of the algorithmic, their demoniac impact on man, and the indication of this though literary quotes.
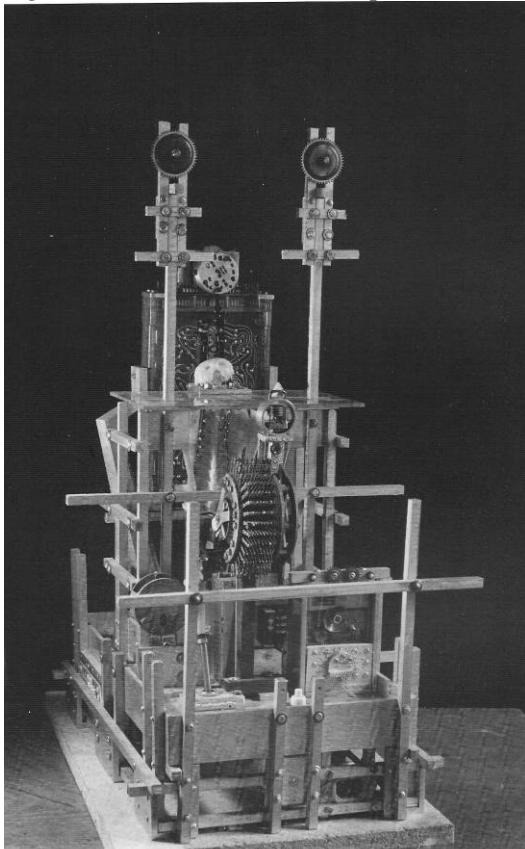
[45] *Wedding Machine*, 1986, metal, electronic   [46] *Rose of Vienna*, 1983, after a poem by Walter
parts and bones   Buchebner

Beckmann is always concerned with the relationship between presentation and literature. In 1983 he creates the cycle *text and photo*, inspired by Walter Buchebner [46].

His concept of *virtual exhibition* refers to the idea of creating art works on different places and power nodes and leaving them at their point of origin in order to create a locally dispersed permanent exhibition which is interconnected by lines of power. Out of these works, besides photographs, only some wood figures (*Art and Nature, Haunted Woods of the Shaman*) in the Vienna Prater forests have been preserved [49] [50]. In addition to real places [47] imaginary places appear, e.g. *Urgusia*, which probably refers to Beckmann's childhood in Siberia [48].
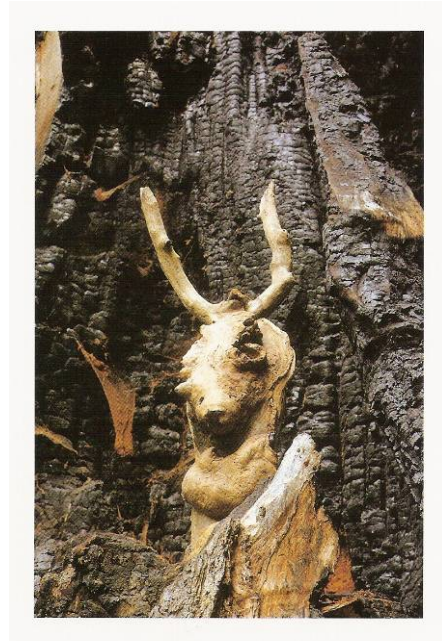

[47] *Dragon Rock*, about 1990, on Lanzarote island

[48] *Urgusian Village*, about 1990, wood and synthetics

[49] *Shaman From the Haunted Woods*, about 1990

[50] *Stag Ghost*, about 1990, Vienna Prater Forests

In 1990, Otto Beckmann produces a cycle entitled *A Shaman's Manual*. In his last creative period which he calls *recentologic excavations*, he uses objects found in the waste grounds of cemeteries [51]. It represents his creative dealing with the subject of death [52].

[51] *Psychopompos*, about 1990

[52] *The Time of the Dead Spills from the Cup*, about 1995

Source: AOB Archiv-Otto-Beckmann, February 2010

Remarks:

[1] The Polish painter Tadeusz Cybulski belonged to Beckmann's Krakow circle of friends.

[2] The first exhibition in which Otto Beckmann participated was "Religious Art since 1938", December 1946, Museum of the Diocese Vienna.

[3] The report of the long-time director Timothy Ryback is found in the internet: *SalzburgSeminarHistoryRyback2005.pdf.* Ryback mentions only Marcel Marceau as a participating artist.

[4] See also: Wilfried Daim, "Meine Kunstabenteuer" (My Art Adventures). In his book Daim mentions also the painter Ernst Fuchs as participant in Leopoldskron. However, it can be assumed that the circle of participants included many more Austrian artists.

[5] It is probably no accident that the emergence of vital colors in Beckmann's work coincides with the signing of the Austrian State Treaty in 1955. The retreat of the Russian occupation forces relieved Otto Beckmann of his fear of complications resulting from the fact that he lived in the Russian occupation zone and had been a Russian citizen from 1908 to 1925.

[6] Gallery Wil Fenken, Breitenbrunn, 1968

[7] See also: Oskar Beckmann "Der Kunstcomputer a.i./70 - ein Schaffensmodell" (The Art computer a.i./70 – A Creative Model) in the catalogue "ars intermedia, Werkbeiträge zur Computerkunst" (ars intermedia, Contributions to Computer Arts) published by Zentralsparkasse Vienna, November 1971

[8] The project *Metropolis 2080* was presented at "ars electronica1980 " in Linz.

[9] Duralei Dopotopoff – freely translated "the simple-minded antediluvian" – has several autobiographic characteristics.

The so far most comprehensive description of Otto Beckmann's work including more than 500 illustrations is found in the book "Otto Beckmann - Zwischen Mystik und Kalkül" (Otto Beckmann – Between Mystics and Calculus", Peter Peer, Peter Weibel (editors), 2008, Verlag Buchhandlung König, Köln, ISBN 978-3-86560-550-4