

‘I Want Provocation,’ Says Tom Jeckel

Kites as Carriers of Unspoken Words

By Ben Ruhe

Being placed on Thomas Jeckel’s Websites is sort of like praying for rain and receiving a downpour that washes out the valley. Delightful at first, his postings start to overload your screen, or at least your nervous system. Yet the thought of erasure never occurs. Amid the oddities and incoherencies, there are wonderful postings----- weekly, daily, hourly.

As his many Websites and frequent postings from around the globe imply, the tall, robust 44-year-old Jeckel (who signs himself Tom, Tomm, or Tomas as the spirit moves him) is energetic, even manic. He is usually in an elated state, and is distinctly work-ridden and self-promoting but in a charming way. Because of his racing thoughts and grand schemes, he is alien to the systematic approach. He leaves that to others.

In an interview in Bangkok, where he fetched up on the way home from an underwater kite photography project in the south of Thailand, the Aachen resident explained what makes him tick.



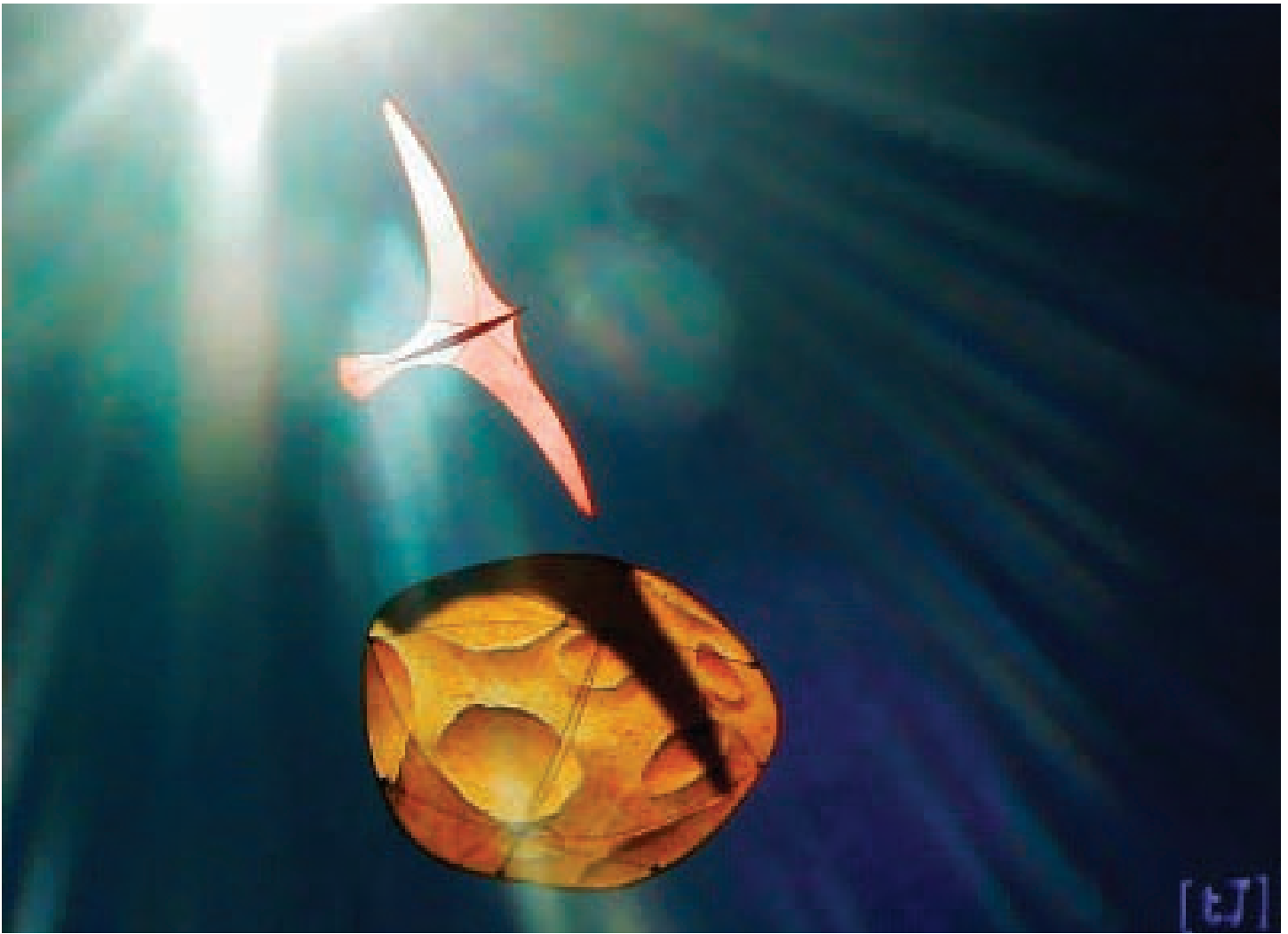
Tom Jeckel

Grandson of a World War 1 pilot and son of a World War 11 Luftwaffe flier (later, an engineer), he was early on tagged for the military. Instead, he went the polar opposite and has pursued a steady anti-war, overtly pacific stance for three decades now.

In this connection he has a wonderful story about buying a kite during an anti-nuclear demonstration and flying it to try and thwart hovering police helicopters. One of them stopped to examine the kite, then flew up and over it and used its rotor wash to force the kite down to the ground. With that Tom ran, with the ‘copter in pursuit. He says the huge antiwar crowd and the pilot undoubtedly killed themselves laughing at the spectacle. For himself, he says he was terrified as he thought of a prison sentence and only stopped running from exhaustion. “I knew if I was caught it wouldn’t be symbolic, I’d get two years in jail.”

Tales like this spill out of him.

With high energy level and low boredom factor, Tom calculates he spent 12 years as a university student, both matriculated and just hanging around, auditing courses. The audits were the best, of course, since he was studying what really interested him, under professors who could actually teach. His range of knowledge became extensive. Tom calculates he has had 12-----twelve!-----professions thus far. He has been professional photographer, journalist, carpenter, cabinetmaker, kite maker, demonstration kite flier, welder, surveyor, computer professional, taxi driver, and landscaper. He had a stint as a musician too. Finally, his interviewer said he’d nominate him as a professional creative thinker and philosopher; Jeckel agreed this was fair. Thirteen!



Looking upward toward the sun, Tom Jeckel records this remarkable aerial view of a bird kite by Ramlal Tien casting its shadow on a moon kite by Kisa Sauer.



A setting sun in Colombia, South America, combines with a Kisa Sauer moon kite to create striking halo effects.



Photographer Tom Jeckel loves to be surprised. “Doing a portrait of a policeman and kite in the rain in Taiwan,” he says, “suddenly girls from a dance group jumped into place, positioned themselves perfectly, and I pressed the camera button.”



Jeckel and others mounted an exhibition of kites in a hotel in Beirut and this lovely photograph documented the transitory event.



One of the photographer's pet photographic themes has him adding a kite to a quite traditional landscape. Here he photographs a red kite floating over a field of yellow oilseed rape blossoms.



Flying kites, music, artificial light, fireworks-----these are potions Jeckel uses in the nighttime magic show he calls "illuminations."



A flying kite provides a surprise counterpoint to a partial eclipse of the sun.



At a night time promenade at a kite festival, the photographer lights up a flying kite. It's a strange, compelling sight.

At this point in his life, Jeckel was seriously pursuing adventure-----big-time competitive fencing, survival training, difficult trekking, motorcycles. Exciting but financially draining.

Regarding kites as something for kids, he was quickly disabused when a friend handed him a kite line with five Peter Powell stunters at the end of it. "Wow, I said to myself, this is not a toy." He soon became thoroughly hooked on kiting, read his Hart and Pelham, and has since earned a living making and flying kites. Half a living, that is. He devotes part of his time to business, an equal portion to his myriad pursuits. He makes it a point to keep kites and his other activities quite separate. At one point the owner of a fairly large kite operation, he nearly went bankrupt with it. Now scaled way down, his operation supports him and permits him freedom of travel. He recently received an order from United Nations peacekeepers for 10,000 Sled kites to be delivered to Kabul for distribution to Afghan children. He not only met the order on schedule but discovered an exciting Central Asian culture-----duly documented of course on one of his Websites.

About his computer activities. After some thought, he outlines the main threads of his various sites; they are either projects he conceived or ones he allied himself with (and often took over).

Themes include underwater photography using scuba gear to document kiteflying in the depths; adding an image of a kite to a traditional landscape format (viz., flying a red kite over a brilliant yellow rapeseed field); screening 360 degree kite site images on the computer that the viewer can move around at will-----up and down, in and out.

Attending kite festivals around the world, he gives night-time “illumination” programs using artificial light, fire, and music, while projecting photographic images onto a screen flapping in the wind. It can be mysterious and mesmerizing.

His most ambitious project to date, one that can never be completed, he calls “kite planet matrix.” In this work, he is documenting, country by country, starting with all the members of the United Nations, everything that is known about each country’s kites-----history, names, types, uses, construction, materials, shapes, people involved, and so forth. “This is a work in progress,” he says dryly.

The list goes on and on.

Why kites? The question could be asked another way. What if it had not been kites? What if it had been evangelical religion? Or politics? With Tom’s energy and global sweep, he’d have made a substantial impact by now.

Since 1995, Tom has been associated with Kirsten (Kisa) Sauer, a maker of theatrical props and an imaginative kitemaker. He met her when he was at a festival and saw some interesting kites flying. “I wanted to see who had made them and walked over to introduce myself.” Together, they make a formidable team, aided by Kisa’s younger sister Anke, herself an innovative kitemaker.

Anke comments: “Tom’s very intelligent but not egotistical. He has a tremendous memory, almost total recall. His clownishness conceals his wide knowledge. Instead of showing off his knowledge, he asks questions.”

Kisa chimes in: “I like his viewpoint. He doesn’t look at the surface, the documentation, he looks at the relationships. He likes when people come together to do something, even something stupid. He makes it into a personal view. Sometimes it’s just color and lighting, like a wild painting. He likes to play around with pictures, other languages.

“He’s never done a regular exhibition, a video, a book; his Websites are his exhibitions. Websites are cheap, open, good exhibitions spaces.

“He particularly likes scuba diving. He’s interested in doing the unusual. He’s been underwater 200 times. He makes photographs and films. Underwater, you can’t hear, you can’t speak, it’s slow. Water is thicker than air, so it slows a kite down like a slow motion film. The kite behaves oddly. The wings may open and close, like a butterfly. There is a timeless feeling. Tom is interested in the relationship of the kite to the water.”

Jeckel himself sums up: “Kites are the carriers of unspoken communications. They are more dense, more compressed than voice communication. I want countries to talk to each other, and kites are a good medium for this. I think of my projects as work done for future generations.

“I’ve had many ideas some people didn’t like. I’ve given kites to the sea-----fed them out into the ocean on a long line until they vanished. I’ve burned kites; some people treat kites as pets, I don’t. I want kites to be a provocation---a way to realize ideas. We have only one life. Why waste time with things already known? I seek new realities every day.”