

TASSO



Seducing his extraordinary photo realism through the fractured mirrors of imagination, Tasso's work oscillates between flawless representation and deliciously elusive perception. His range is inspirational, reworking the concept of graffiti lettering through wood and psychedelic fly agaric mushrooms, while his faces sing raw poetry to the deceptively mundane. His iconic chrome spray cans take self reflection to a new level, his site specific works play with context in superbly inventive ways and his experiments with underwater faces are simply astonishing.

From suspended pop culture stage sets of the bizarre to poignant portraits of Chinese children: from lonely painted windows to little green men, his work is mischeviously laced with the unexpected. His celebration of the mature female alone is both joyous aesthetic and proud subversion of airbrushed constructs of beauty and his intriguing ability to spin convention - be it through subject, interpretation, medium or perspective play make him one of the most spellbinding aerosol artists out there today. We caught up with Tasso for this wonderfully up front and revealing interview





How did you initially begin as an artist

The question for me is this: At what point does something which is painted become a work of art? For many years I wore a self-made shirt with the printed message: I am not an artist! I really didn't care for a long time. I also thought to myself that just because I could paint a little bit doesn't all of a sudden turn me from being a butcher into being an artist. I always believed that it would be up to the people to decide. This question was not relevant for people for whom I painted a commissioned mural of a landscape, a steam engine, or their deceased dog. I believe that I became an artist when I began to identify myself with my paintings, when a message was included in the images, and when I

began to share my thoughts and my fears in my pictures. My paintings became art after I realized that it isn't art to merely copy a photograph perfectly (which might have even been made by someone else). In my workshops I realized how quickly I was able to teach this to willing students.

Art is a matter of perspective! One can have differing opinions about art! Indeed, two of my paintings allude to this and were therefore titled: "Über Kunst kann man geteilter Meinung sein!" ("One Can have Split Opinions about Art"). Most of all, art should be unique, original, beautiful, critical, informative, contemporary, provocative, funny, shocking, and not merely a pastiche of something that has already been done.

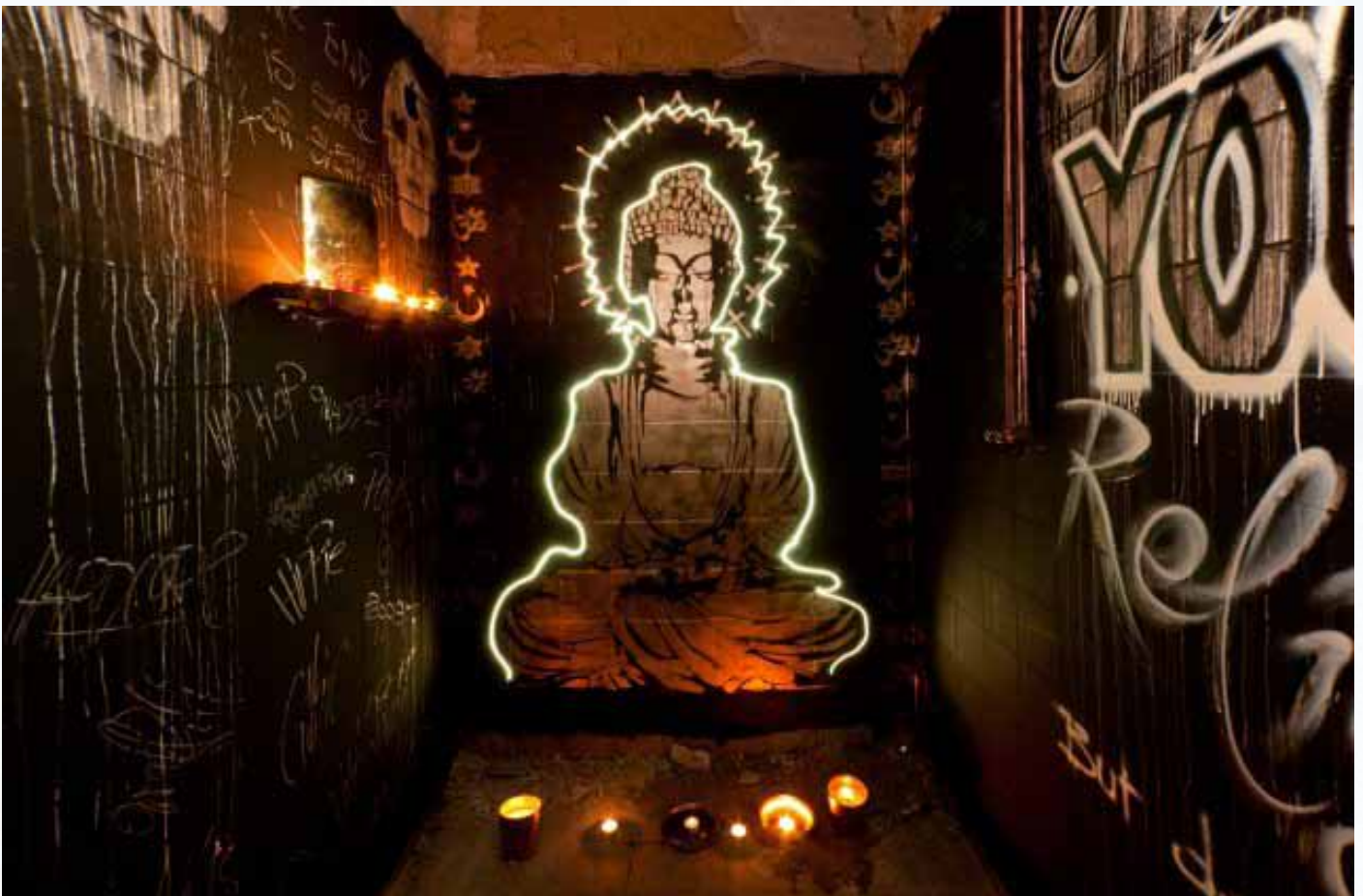


Tell us about your memories of life in the GDR. (German Democratic Republic)

In retrospect the GDR appeared muted, subdued, and grey. Colours were, for the most part, associated with the West. One could beautifully witness this in the western TV programs. Everything was prettier, more colourful, modern and elegant. We lacked sufficient consumer goods with quality, but ours was a world of lasting friendships and unity. When one can buy anything, children will not experience the same feeling of joy when they get their hands on a matchbox car, a Smurf figurine or a comic book. As kids we learned early on how to deal with the inadequate management of all consumer goods, by trading almost everything with one another. An ABBA button, T-shirts, BRAVO (German youth magazine), stickers, chewing gum, everything was tradable. Everything was a tradable commodity and trades were necessary to obtain things from others that we wanted to have. As a youth I just wanted to be different and show, through my appearance, that I wasn't part of them, the communists, the system, the complacent.

My rebellion started with the music of the "NEUE DEUTSCHE WELLE" (The New German Wave). When that slowed down I continued with punk music. I coloured and shaved my hair, wore safety pins and a toilet chain around my neck. Finally I did not have to worry about finding the latest hip clothes, which our stores wouldn't carry anyway. One could permit creativity to run loose. Even at this time I ended up making pants with a graffiti look, using textile markers. After that I switched to the New Romantics and remained, almost until unification, a convinced "Gruftie". Being so different, we had a lot of fun in the east.

We simply claimed so many liberties, which the generation of our parents would not have dared. Certainly, there were problems with the police and the Stasi (former GDR secret service) **were** watching us. Nonetheless, this was never a reason for me to leave, and escape to the West. I always believed that escape wouldn't make sense. If one wants to change something, it should be done where one lives. Fortunately many thousands agreed, which ultimately led to the peaceful revolution of 1989.





What did graffiti mean to you when you first discovered it?

I first noticed graffiti while watching a documentary with my dad on ZDF (a major public German TV station). I believe it was *Style Wars* or *Wild Style*. I didn't understand a thing, since the subtitles were moving way too fast. Besides, I was much more interested in the images than in what was said. It was simply awesome!!! The characters from my comic books came rolling into the city. Crazy lettering, which I would sometimes draw of my favourite band's logos, adorned walls and houses. I was all over it! I didn't know what that was, but I knew one thing for sure: THAT was me!

When did you first develop your photo realism?

The first time I had the idea to precisely paint a photograph with spray paint, occurred when my buddy BART copied an image of the comic



figure DRUNA, at a meeting with other writers. Druna was very sexy with strong curves, and was very realistically drawn. He painted her in black and white, with very few precise details. Nonetheless, I was completely fascinated. Every time he painted cartoon characters he messed up the proportions slightly, so that the results would look a bit shaky and toy-like. The realism and the tight butt of the lady seemed to somehow hide these mistakes. I immediately thought to myself: I could do this even a touch better.

For my next piece I therefore chose a decorative plate, which depicted a painting of a native American chief, as a reference. This was no accident, since I wanted to top him, and do it all in color. Besides ochre and orange, I had no clue which colors to use as skin tones. So painting a "redskin" made perfect sense. I impressed myself so much with the final result that I knew from that point on: THAT is it. This is what I want to pursue in the future. THIS can be done even better. I wanted to learn how to paint white





skin, water, hair and so on. During the coming years a fascinating world of experimentation and discovery unfolded for me. The whole thing had the positive side effect that regular people liked it and were willing to pay for it. Within no time at all I was able to finance my paint. This was important, because one thing quickly became obvious to me: At least ten colors, or more, were needed for one photoREAList eye.

Where is the balance between real and surreal for you?

Surrealism, to me, is an art movement that is clearly associated with names like Dali and Magritte. When I paint a photoREAL apple on a table it simply is just real. If I paint the same apple, making it appear to have the size of a football stadium as it hovers over a city, dripping seeds from within, then it becomes surreal. In this sense, I believe the difference is mostly a matter of composition. If you are a little whacky, it is easy to paint surrealistically. Nevertheless, except for some, not so satisfying exceptions, it was never really my thing. I am too grounded in reality.



Besides that, I feel that surrealism isn't timely anymore, especially since the aforementioned artists practiced it to such perfection, that it seems very unlikely that anyone can contribute in an original manner to it.





How much do you work from photos, and how much from imagination?

Well, my process is like this: First comes fantasy. I will make up something or see something, and then create an image in my mind, a story. Then I'll make notes about it to myself. There must be hundreds of them by now. At this point most artists will start the sketching phase, whereas I will start arranging everything for a suitable photograph. The right person in the right clothes and the right accessories, in precisely the lighting I envisioned. With my colleges the work on the computer follows at this stage. Since I was lacking those skills, I had to laboriously collage the segments the old school way, or arrange them directly on the wall or canvas. In FotoREALism the objective isn't to freely create, as the name indicates. The more imagination one accepts, the further one veers from this art form. One simply has to know what one's goal is: To copy a photograph perfectly, or to create new worlds.

start painting after the spot has told me what would be perfect for it. Something that is tailor made for it. This comes with some downsides: It makes it nearly impossible to work with other painters, since you need the entire spot alone for it to carry the message. A good example is my painting: "Es ist nicht leicht jeden Tag ein Künstler zu sein" ("It isn't Easy to be an Artist Every Day"), which I painted in Quangzhou/China, on the wall of a gallery. This picture would have lost it's entire meaning and appeal had there been styles painted next to it. Aside from that I need a little "warm up time" to think things through, which is why such pieces happen mostly in my homeland. The painting "HelpHand" was painted over one year in advance, in order to create the perfect photo, by taking advantage of the annual floodwaters. Would I have painted the same image in Rome, this piece could have never come to completion the way it did here.

How important is it to use the wall or the location to help tell the story

I love to be inspired by the location. I only

How has your style changed over the years?

After a long journey of perfecting my style, I ended up at a point where I didn't want to be a copy machine anymore. Additionally, many new and good PhotoRealists had entered the





game internationally. One paints a rooster, the next one, a guy with an elongated neck and a clown's face, the third, the obligatory baby or female portrait. It simply started to bore me, and to copy photographs had lost its draw, at least on canvas. I could also see that my colleagues AKUT with his partner HERA and, by then CASE as well, had a firm grip on the market. I didn't feel that I had too much to contribute. In order to develop, I should have painted more. I had to focus on painting commissioned walls for almost 10 month per year. Since I earn my living predominantly with these wall designs, it is difficult to find sufficient time to paint canvases. As an example, I have to add that I was working on the two under water pictures, for almost two months each. Thus I didn't really develop significantly during the last few years.

In the summer of 2011 I realized that I had lost all my desire and motivation to paint (photoREAList) canvases. So I decided to simply stop painting canvases all together, and stop pursuing gallery shows. Instead I decided to focus on painting buildings and commissioned walls. The newly gained free time did wonders for my health, which had been affected by stress. It was a great feeling to have a day off now and then and to enjoy it without the self-imposed pressure to spend it in the studio wearing a respirator and being



suffocated by spray fumes. The change, or more accurately the new beginning, happened when the organizer of "HALLENKUNST" asked me to participate in the show for the second time that year, during the December exhibition of 2011. In the previous show I had exhibited my Graffotos, but this time I wasn't interested in purposefully pressuring myself just to measure up with my MaClaim colleagues. I had an idea in mind, which did not require paint, nor spray paint, nor photoREALism.

On the day of the opening I was in India, but spent most of the day wondering how my colleagues would react to the new paintings. In the evening I received an SMS from my crew member RUSK, who congratulated me to my change of style in the new work, and so it continued...ANDY K, SONNE, TSHUNC...and finally AKUT as well, who's opinion I value very much. Everything was good! The decision to travel new paths was right and has been rewarded. Let's see where this new path will lead from here.



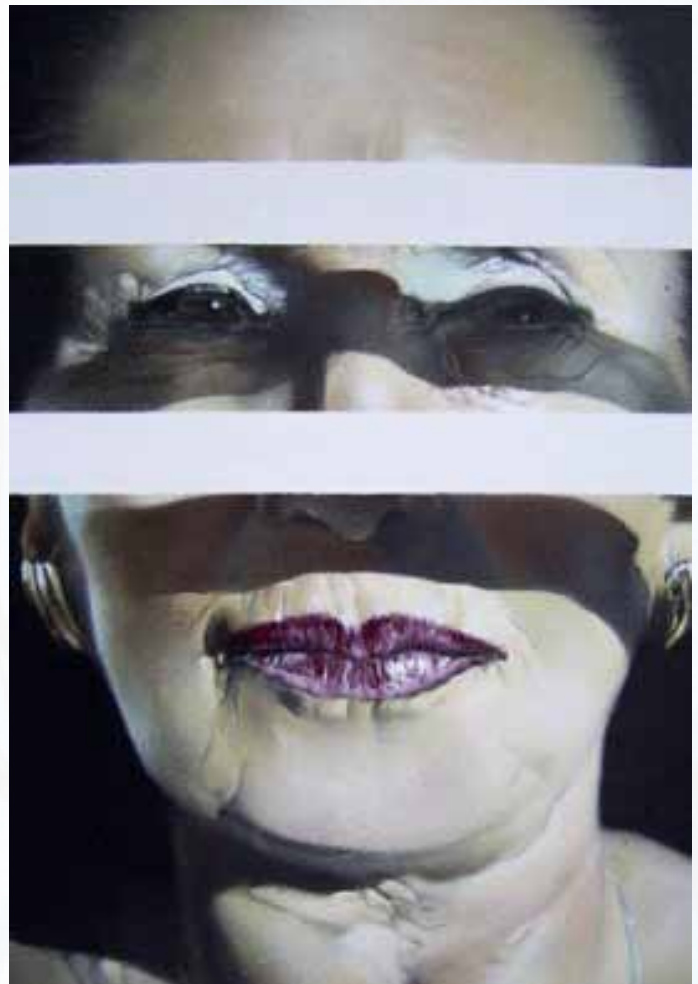


How do you get that amazing mirrored chrome effect?

The easiest way is to take a good photograph of a chrome effect and simply copy what you see. There are no tricks or secrets to it. Simply paint what you see. In general this rule applies to photoREALism. Paint what you see, not what you know. Less accomplished photoREALists use colors to paint skin, but skin also reflects the light and the color of it's surroundings. Therefore skin can look greenish, red, white...

Do you still do much lettering?

I own several photo albums of styles I did. Of course I started with tagging and letters. A couple of years ago I began once more to do some styles. It served me as a balance to the very concentrated, focused discipline of copying photographs. The letters were pretty standard, but sought to convince through their arrangement, varying sizes, and displacements. For that reason they were only painted in white with a thick black outline. At this point it isn't too interesting for me to paint my name on walls. Except.....,-



Tell us about the older women in your paintings – the celebration of their beauty. Is this a conscious comment on society's false ideals of beauty?

Partly. But, in addition, it represents my personal ideal of beauty. My friends and colleges know that I always had older partners. Women with style that act ladylike.

For me it's not a topic worth discussing. Beauty is not the consequence of a model figure, or the age of an individual. I have criticized this belief in many paintings, and made fun of Botox lips, anorexia and beauty oriented plastic surgery.

There seems to be a powerful theme of feminism in your work – the raised dildo for example. Can you give us a little insight into that?

There is a funny story behind the picture "Inte gjort för män!". I was invited to visit Ronneby in Sweden to paint a wall, which is



painted by a different artist each year. Right from the start I knew that I wanted to paint something that wasn't just nice and pretty, something that people wouldn't walk by and say: awesome!...and 100 meters down the road would have forgotten it. It was supposed to be an image that had a connection to graffiti and a sexual content. None the less the picture was to remain unobjectionable if viewed by children. On top of all that I was really into sidewalk paintings at the time, where you get the impression that a giant hole is opening up in front of you, a deep cliff or a shark or whatever. These paintings play off optical illusions, which are most pronounced when the painting is viewed from one specific point of view. All this I wanted to be present in my piece. The concept behind the work was to induce a misperception, and learn to what extent one can control and direct that with a painting. The success exceeded all of my expectations. Swedish feminists crossed out the piece with feminist symbols and slogans, just days after I left. There were passionate debates in the press about if and what art is allowed to do in the public domain. In the heads of those women spray cans turned into penises and milk into sperm! I had achieved my objective and began to realize the power we could have with our art. Still, the most important thing remains to write one's name on walls, over and over again in colorful letters.

Back home again, I wanted to say a special thank you, in my way, to the ladies from the feminist club, and painted the canvas "Inte gjort foer maen!" For that, I used their symbol for female, connected to a hand making a fist. I polished the fingernails and gave her a sparkly little bracelet around the wrist, and placed a dildo in her hand. Those are (usually) used by women and are made specifically for them. In my opinion, these people lack confidence, and they project their hate for men onto anything that resembles a phallic shape. All forms of fanaticism are unacceptable to me and I will defend myself with the weapons at my disposal: Sarcasm and art!



Tell us a little about the elongated, horizontal faces and their composition

I assume you are talking about the faces from "We all are Chinese"- Trilogie Man - Frau- Kind. (We are all Chinese-Trilogie Man – Woman – Child.)

2010 I was invited by Akim Walta to participate in the Germany –China – Project at the EXPO in Shanghai. One of the highlights was

the possibility for participating artists to exhibit canvases of their work at the evening reception of former German president Horst Köhler in Red Town. I definitely wanted to paint something which was related to China, and which would be both, very timely and humorous, something which could connect the people with one another. I remembered, as kids we would pull our eyelids to the side to look Chinese. No bad intentions, it was just a fun thing kids do. This gesture was supposed to show, we are like you, we all are people on this earth, no matter what we look like. That



alone seemed a bit simple to me. I wanted to include the reason for our being there as well and therefore chose the German Pavilion at the EXPO, an impressive building with a very unique, futuristic Facade as the uniting element for this work.

This form was then used to deconstruct the faces of the depicted people into separate geometric plains, in a Bauhaus-like style of Feininger, which I then proceeded to paint out individually.

What do you look for in a face?

I don't look for anything. A face either fascinates me or it doesn't. Young smooth faces are less interesting to me. Youth is no accomplishment. No skills and no knowledge are needed to attain it. Everyone receives it and therefore I believe that it is only rarely worthy of depiction.

Are cultural references to communism relevant in your work?

I regard communism in the GDR to have failed. Today, based on human nature, I see it as a delusion. One doesn't have to pay a lot of attention to it. I think that only one of my paintings refers to it: "Die Kapital".

Do you like to play with perspective and perception?

I love to shamelessly alter them in the urban space, or cause the viewer to be confused by making things look odd or out of place. Size relationships play a big role in this. In any case, one can really attract the interest of pedestrians by presenting them with unusual perspectives and ways in which they see things.

Do you change your color feeling according to what you are painting?

I believe that this has never played a significant role in my work, being a photoREAList. When I used colors, that were different from those of reality, it was



if my paintings create an emotion when you look at them, rather than being boring. I believe there is more than enough of that type of art around...

How many of your paintings have a story behind them?

If I am not painting animals, plants, landscapes or commissioned works, you can generally assume that there is a story behind every painting, which will often deal with very private things, or which were painted while I attempted to digest impressions or experiences I had.

Has the Fly Agaric mushroom had an impact on your creativity?

Well, if I would have continued to paint styles, after I completed the painting of the Fly Agaric mushrooms, I probably would have continued in a similar direction with them. Drawings and many such notes to myself still exist in my sketch books. I have also been collecting photos of the arm rests from different airline companies over the years. Every time I'm in an airplane and glance over to my neighbor's seat I discover perfect building blocks in them to construct a T, an A, two S's and an O...

for symbolic reasons. Today I paint almost exclusively in black and white. If I use colors at all, it is as glazes. I think I'm just done with it, after years of color saturated graffiti walls.

How important is the unexpected and the bizarre to what you do?

I know that many of my paintings are shocking to the viewer, or even threatening. Most of the time I don't intend to do this, and I am surprised when I hear this from viewers. Obviously it is much more preferable for me,



Tell us about the Ma'Claim Crew.

Ma'Claim is an important period in my life, but a predominantly completed one as well. If it would have been up to me, I would have disbanded Ma'Claim around 2006.

I always look at the situation similar to how it is with a band. What John Lennon did with Yoko Ono also had nothing to do with the Beatles. Nonetheless, I stood alone with my opinion back then. We now witness an embarrassing lack of productivity of the crew, which has nonetheless created four individual's identities as artists, and as a businessman. Figuratively speaking, I just would have preferred to have us officially die as a group, in order to live eternally as a legend. The most famous stars are those who die early. That is the only way to become a legend. Legends are not born if everyone at one point says "those guys did better stuff in their day..." In this sense it is probably best, if the four of us, as a group, never paint another wall together. I think AKUT and his partner are doing very impressive things, and CASE has found his way as well. Nevertheless, everything that I saw, which was painted in a two or three person combo in recent years, caused me to feel that I should quickly turn the page.



How close are you with your artistic visions, and as friends?

That's in the past. Each of us has gone their own way, and we all have our own visions. Furthermore, we all live in different cities which are very far apart. You just don't get to hang out in the evening over a beer, and that didn't really happen, on a personal level, back then either. Due to my age, and my completely different group of friends, I was never fully integrated. One should not forget, the other guys all knew each other longer, and were part of the same social group. I founded the crew and as a result, I slowly got to know their social surroundings. I got invited to parties or birthday get-togethers, but friendship is something else. We probably have some differing views, as far as that is concerned. As an artist I avoid looking at my college's work. For instance, I have yet to see the images in a HERAKUT book, nor do I know what's happening on CASE's website. Nonetheless I value AKUT's opinion about my work, as being one of the highest standards. A compliment from him is always honest, and if he says nothing I know what's up.

Every now and then we experienced the problem amongst each other, that it was





suggested, that one had copied another's ideas or techniques. That's how I protect myself from the risk of such accusations. I have to say this though: It was an awesome time that I wouldn't want to have missed. Thank you, AKUT, CASE and RUSK for that!

How much creative independence do you have on your commissions? Is it sometimes more interesting to be given a theme to work with than to invent your own?

You must clearly separate my personal artwork from my commercial activities. When I do commissioned art, I function primarily as a contractor of sorts. I have to keep the client's wishes in the forefront of my mind. So when a mobile phone producer contacts me, I most likely won't be able to offer them a piece of my personal art work, since their commercial needs will differ from the artistic concepts I deal with privately in my work. Nevertheless, I can do something original for

them (as long as they have an open mind, and don't think that they already have it all figured out perfectly.) I obviously have to watch the financial aspects closely. I live in a relatively rural area, even though Leipzig and Dresden are not far away. Here it would be even more difficult to support myself adequately with my canvases alone. This is especially true since I don't have a management that deals with exhibitions and sales. As a consequence, I now take the liberty not to paint FotoREALism in my spare time, since this has lost its enjoyment for me. As a result all my personal works are completely free, and far away from financial interests.

What does the future hold?

I am very curious about that myself.

www.ta55o.de

With huge thanks to Tim Clorius