

Moritz Küng – CULTIVATED DESERTS

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Pictures of cities are medially omnipresent nowadays: in the daily news, in political debates, and on game consoles. Cities are no longer clearly defined, their centers and peripheries are frayed, and the membership status of their residents is blurred by perpetual migration. Yet the idea we have of a city, (regardless of how large it is), is additionally often reduced in its iconography to postcard size. More or less concrete images are roused depending on how a city makes its claim. Current associations with cities are thus, for the most part, limited to individual structures, such as historical monuments, towers, bridges, high rises, churches, squares, and company headquarters. For example, one connects Rome with the coliseum; Washington with the capitol; Paris with the Eiffel Tower; and Shanghai with the Oriental Pearl Tower. San Francisco is linked to the Golden Gate Bridge, Lucerne, for its part, to Chapel Bridge. The Empire State Building is an inseparable part of New York and Oscar Niemeyer's Copan building of São Paulo. Cologne is associated with its cathedral, Neuer Dom; Barcelona with its Sagrada Familia; the other way around, San Marco square with Venice and Red Square with Moscow. And what would Sydney be without its opera, Bilbao without the Guggenheim, Brussels without Atomium, and Peking without Rem Koolhaas' CCTV-Tower? As emblematic and imposing these structures may be, the preferred method for photographing them is from a worm's eye view, at twilight, isolated from their immediate surroundings. In this way, not only the postcard images have borders, but also the cities themselves where these images are found, where the ostensible characteristics seem less articulated, more diffuse and heteronomous.

One of the first city photographs in the history of the medium characteristically shows this type of diffused urban situation: rather than a typically picturesque view, raw reality. Louis Jacques-Mandé Daguerre (1787–1851), inventor of the Daguerreotype - a photographic process in which silver-coated copper plates are first exposed, to then reproduce in a mirror image what was visible before the lens, marking the start of photography's history - aimed a camera obscura of sorts from the window of his apartment at 5, rue des Marais in Paris and shot the photo *Le Boulevard du Temple (8 heures du matin)*.¹ Although Paris was already a pulsating metropolis boasting ca. 800'000 inhabitants at the time, in the image it seems desolate and melancholic, which is certainly also due to the original's spotty and scratched surface. The large boulevard is seen in the direction of today's Place de la République, slightly offset from the central perspective, flanked by trees with light foliage appropriate for the season. In the foreground is an old house that is defining for the image. The house is in need of renovation and has a soiled fire wall. Most remarkable about this photograph, however, is a little scene hardly visible at first glance: in the left foreground of the otherwise deserted image, a man is having his shoes shined. Whether this can be traced back to the long exposure time necessary in those days, or whether - as is often speculated - Daguerre, a celebrated set builder at the time, consciously staged these two men in the scene, remains un-known. Yet it is precisely this situation that makes the photo still seem "modern" today.

Two likewise historically important photographs later thematized (from today's perspective, conceptually), the consolidation of center and periphery, or, if you will, detailed and distant view, as in the picture described. Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904) created several 360 degree panoramas of San Francisco in 1877/1878.² His thirteen-part *Panorama of San Francisco from California Street Hill* is not only the most perfect, but due to its length of 520 centimeters, also the most well-known

version. The artist took the photo on a single day between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. and did so from what was the highest point in the city at the time, the tower of the Mark Hopkins Residence on Mason Street. To avoid any back-lighting, he pre-calculated the precise height of the sun for each shot and accordingly set a synchronous viewing angle.

The counter thesis to Muybridge's holistic representation of the city had its first climax in the picture series by Eugène Atget (1857–1927), which nonetheless first received due attention posthumously, initially by the surrealists, Man Ray in particular. Atget was an urban chronicler who beginning in 1888 made thousands of photographs, or "documents" as he once called them, of alleyways, shops, window displays, portals, balustrades, and façades; of inner courtyards, living rooms, kitchens, and also of carriages and public buildings, such as churches. In 1909 he put together the first of seven so-called "albums" containing motifs, such as apartments or shops.³ The final albums, *Zoniers* and *Fortifications de Paris*, were created ca. 1913 and are devoted to the outer districts, areas now referred to as slums, and the green areas along the city walls and canals. While the one documents a precarious hut constructed from building rubble, soiled building entryways, rotted wheelbarrows, and mobile homes; the other presents atmospheric, light-flooded impressions of an idyllic no-man's-land at the border between sprawling city and lowlands.

Both Muybridge and Atget reveal the city in its totality, yet there are immense differences in their photographic positions: Muybridge presented a thriving, prosperous metropolis in the extensive linear gestures of a panoramic image. Atget, on the other hand, constructed an unglossed mosaic-like picture of the big city from a multitude of seemingly melancholic impressions.

Daguerre's unspectacular air, Muybridge's expansiveness, and Atget's clip-like quality are all echoed equally in Georg Aerni's photo series. One can sense that he has appropriated the city with an equally analytical method. The long, horizontal black-and-white *Panoramas parisiens* (1995/1996) work in this way, with their frontally photographed flow of façades - of the Boulevard Brune or Boulevard Montparnasse for example—negating every linear perspective while remaining crystal clear, like an architect's frontal views (which comes as no surprise since Aerni first studied architecture before turning to photography). In the series *Xamfrans* (1994–1998), named after the seemingly isolated corner buildings in Barcelona's Eixample quarter, which was planned like a chess-board, Aerni then precisely duplicates this urban structure with a similarly organized ensemble of 124 individual photos.

Later series by Georg Aerni, in comparison, appear formally less compelling and constructed and more narrative in their approach. Nonetheless, his city images remain distanced, even alienating. With their unconsciously fictional quality of urban border zones or "cultivated deserts," they permit direct comparison with the work of British author J.G. Ballard (1930–2009). Ballard's stories, often associated with the concept of dystopia, a type of anti-utopia that paints a pessimistic picture of society's future, consistently deal with repressive forms of social control in which natural catastrophes or climate change have dramatic consequences. In this way, Ballard evokes extremely visually powerful scenes by means of radio telescopes, fallen space stations, laboratories, fossils, and sand dunes, dried up oceans, dead fish, and birds of prey. Like certain photographs by Georg Aerni, Ballard's texts also refer to deserted cities, desolate shell constructions, sky scraper gorges, concrete gardens, eroded hills, melting glaciers, labyrinthine urban neighborhoods, highway over- and underpasses, battered sheet metal fences, abandoned construction sites, obscure dead end streets,

artificial landscape fragments, and decayed neighborhoods, as well as sewage plants, rusty billboard frames, and piles of debris. For Aerni, too, the actual reasons for the city - that is, the inhabitants - are largely absent from the pictures. Thus, in the way that he shows urban space, it seems unreal, model-like, even utopian-more theory than fact, whereby an oppressive, practically claustrophobic sense arises: Despite, or precisely because of the sober distance of the photographer to his motif.

In J.G. Ballard's short story *The Concentration City* (1957), he describes a similar city with seemingly endless streets and buildings at multiple levels with rare green zones. And although this city is accessible by high speed transportation, the inhabitants don't seem to know what lies beyond their own neighborhood as they have no need to leave their familiar surroundings or desire to explore the unknown. The protagonist, physics student Franz M. - clearly a reference to Kafka - believes, however, in the existence of "free space," an infinite amount of open space, which is dismissed by the other inhabitants as nonsense. Franz wants to find this space and decides to travel on the high-speed train in one direction for as long as possible through the urban zones until he discovers "free space." Towards the end of the story he realizes that in fact he is not moving forward but backward, in the opposite direction. In the end, he arrives back where his journey began. The Scottish literary critic and sci-fi book editor David Pringle remarks in an essay devoted to Ballard that the globalized city has neither top nor bottom, and as final consequence, there is no longer a way out.⁴ In this sense, Georg Aerni's photographs add further clarity to the phenomenon of man's attempts to take possession of something that he ultimately cannot control.

- 1 Collection Münchner Stadtmuseum – Fotomuseum, Munich.
- 2 David Harris, Eric Sandweiss, *Eadweard Muybridge and the Photographic Panorama of San Francisco, 1850–1880*, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1993.
- 3 Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums*, Yale University Press, 1992.
- 4 David Pringle, *The Fourfold Symbolism of J.G. Ballard*, in: *Re/Search, J.G. Ballard*, V/Search Publications, San Francisco, 1984, p.132.