

First of all, the city: Georg Aerni photographs places and non places. Well structured angles and nooks, but also gaps and wastelands, less-defined areas. And building sites. He examines how the urban fabric is organized and how the individual buildings form those conglomerate volumes called Tokyo, Paris, Barcelona, Hong Kong, and Mumbai. He observes the form of the city as structure, its cubage: for example, how space adjoins interstitial space, wall abuts wall, how the horizontal of the street surfaces meet the vertical of building façades, how trees and squares are jammed between, how emptiness gapes. In his photographs he directs attention to how all of these volumes form the playing fields in which the inhabitants move. Tokyo, Paris, Barcelona, Hong Kong, and Mumbai have been and will be built by people; they therefore have characteristic structures, volumes, and colors. As hubs, activities flow through them. Rather than static ensembles, they are in constant flux. A new building rises there, something is being pulled down there, opening up a temporary gap where a building will later be hoisted; over there, canals snake under bridges, and the traffic runs as though through arteries: the city is a living body, a constant construction site, and a sign system that can be read.

Although a typical main geometric structure is recognizable in every city, equally present in Georg Aerni's photographs are the signs of disorder and uncontrollability although at times only subtly. In Tokyo (*Insights*, 2003), for example, the box-shape building gaps and urban wastelands wait for the just as box-shaped building volumes that will be set into them. Everything is washed, clean pots with posts stand ready for flowers that have yet to grow; it appears as though all has been thoroughly considered. Yet here, too, are spots with moss and rust, leaking pipes that run along the building walls, and a maze of telephone cables above the streets. In Hong Kong (*Slopes & Houses*, 1999–2000) the residential high rises then aspire to dizzying heights, form a pattern that seems to want to go on forever. The residential silos cluster on the hills, their slide into the sea halted by poured concrete shells. From circular holes, trees grow into the urban space, yet rifts point to movement underground, and dry leaves falling without regard, paying no heed to the thoroughly planned surroundings, point to the passing of time. And in Mumbai (*Promising Bay*, 2007/2010) the building façades have a mossy-sooty patina from the heavy downpours, and flaking plaster, dirty beards along the sewage pipes. Corrugated metal rusts and frays, the roots of trees embrace walls, water gathers to shallow ponds between residential buildings. In this series, the inability to calculate life as it is lived is expressed most intensely, even with the rampant slum buildings. It contrasts the geometry of the built structure, which can, by the way, turn to ruins even during its creation. Every city is a zone with awakening and decline, with an in part, long history and open future, a zone in which a pulsating will to shape and change drives on the transformation of its sign system.

Then the countryside: once again, these are places, sometimes non-places. In any case, various terrains on which something - an object, an installation - draws one's gaze. Places close to the city or Alpine areas, also breaking points, sometimes construction sites. Georg Aerni examines the structure and the process of dissecting the landscape, the materialized memories of human activity. He observes the anatomy of the landscape: the series *Artefakte* (beginning in 2006) shows quite plainly how raised earth forms a hill, how blocks form a barricade, stones a wall; how wood defines places for particular activities. And how footbridges, piles, stairs, or traces of digging tell of plans and

goals that are more or less clear. In the photos of glaciers and rocky Alpine landscapes in the series *Holozän* (2006–2008), Georg Aerni then directs attention to a landscape that is transformed by wind and water, the seasons, and - sometimes dramatically - climate change. Nature, too, the landscape, is in a state of constant change, no longer shaped by the grinding work of weather, but by people who for centuries have made it a cultural landscape, even high up in the mountains. Making it possible to live from it, be protected from it. And recently: so that urban dwellers can relax and refresh themselves in what is called free nature. The landscape is a zone with awakening and decline - growth, development, and dying off, decay - with a history and an open future. A zone in which people's will to shape and transform has left behind irretrievable traces, and continues to do so. The landscape, too, is a sign system that can be read.

When the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* was shown at the International Museum of Photography/George Eastman House in Rochester, USA, in 1975, the photographic examinations of the topography of cities, agglomerations, and human-designed landscapes became a concept. Curator William Jenkins elevated to awareness something that, at the time, was virulent in various places simultaneously: the focus of attention was not untouched, exalted nature - for example, the US national parks as photographed by Ansel Adams - but rather, landscapes shaped (so as not to say blighted) by man, the interplay of what is naturally available and what is built. Also Ed Ruscha's early book editions *Twentysix Gasoline Stations, Los Angeles* (1963), and *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967) and Dan Graham's influential slide show *Homes for America* (1966) examined the aesthetics of contemporary environments. These conceptually sophisticated works, often in series rather than individual images, laid the cornerstone for an occupation with the aesthetics of constructed everyday life. Conceptual art and photography turned to the antimonumental and, indeed, did so in anti-monumental forms of expression against the backdrop of growing environmental awareness: carried also by a programmatic rejection of the established art of museum-compatible paintings and sculptures. The artistic act is shaped, for example, by selfmade editions, seemingly provisional photo-text works, and Polaroid camera experiments. Ironically, this movement helped photography achieve a place in contemporary art, which was first made possible by the artistic and economic boom of the large-format, visually powerful photography of the 1980s and 1990s. Discerned in retrospect as a paradigm change, *New Topographics* made available a language in which new stories could be told from the sign system city and landscape. Photo series, such as Thomas Struth's *Unbewusste Orte* (beginning 1980), Peter Fischli and David Weiss' *Siedlungen, Agglomerationen* (1992), Naoya Hatakeyama's *River Series* (1993/1994) photo-graphed in Tokyo, and Peter Bialobrzeski's *Lost in Transition* (2007) arose against this background.

Georg Aerni is aware of this history of photography in his work. When walking through the cities and landscapes, he finds those signs that characterize the mood of the contemporary, evolved urban structure, the mood of the contemporary, likewise evolved natural landscape. It is that mood created by humans. Although only in the photographs from Mumbai are people visible, all tell of life forms, values, and aesthetic preferences, of developments and realizations, of the incessant transformation of the city and landscape. Discovered and constructed elements combine to a dense sign system; one the locals are capable of interpreting precisely, but which can mystify strangers. Georg Aerni approaches his precisely selected situations in photo series - photo essays - and attempts to carry out an urban-social or rural-sociological analysis through the photographic description; in doing so, he shows not only the complexity and power, but also the fragility, even vulnerability and beauty of these new topographies.

The *Territorien* (2004/2005) series most clearly typifies the amalgamation of natural and artificial within this process. The artificial landscapes of the zoos are oddly alive through an absence: the lack of animals that should inhabit the cages, and the people who sustain their functions. They are sites full of traces. The architecture and the set pieces from nature (such as real trees), imitation rocks, and artificial water falls, form a stage-like terrain. It is differentiated only gradually, not structurally, from the cultural landscapes of cities or wooded areas close to cities, construction sites, and agricultural areas. They are serious, composed landscapes filled with loving details and shaped by hopes - of simulating natural surroundings to guarantee the animals' survival, provide protection, and charm visitors. But then suddenly one discovers gnawed-on carrots: Carelessly lying around, if not to say loafing about, as though they had nothing more sensible to do. They subtly point to the uncontrollability of living beings and embody a type of absurdity that can also be found in human habits, in Tokyo, Paris, Barcelona, Hong Kong, or Mumbai, in the Alps or somewhere in no-man's-land between city and countryside. This absurdity hides everywhere and when someone - like Georg Aerni - takes a closer look, they discover it. At some point, the traces have their own stories to tell.