

Sabine von Fischer: *Cartographer of the temporary landscape*
from: Georg Aerni. *Silent Transition*. Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2022

These images are also mappings. They are records not only of a single moment but of a certain period. This period begins with the research into the places the photographer saves on his maps, and rolls on with the waiting for the right season, time of day and weather.

Besides a high-resolution camera and a tripod, these digitally retrievable maps are Georg Aerni's most important tools. With them, he's simultaneously a photographer, an architect and a surveyor. After all, he had studied architecture at university and learned to compose things out of individual pieces in such a way that for all the inner dynamic, the whole remained in balance. Observing and surveying are skills he taught himself on walks through unfamiliar landscapes and cities and on hikes in the mountains.

Photography as cartography, cartography as a variety of photography: not all photographic works lend themselves to this intellectual play. But Georg Aerni's certainly do, displaying no fear of the banal or shame in disrupting habits of seeing. They simply show certain places. His works usually take their name from field and street names - not the municipal area or mountain peak, but the name of the section of this specific landscape as recorded on the map by cartographers.

Darli, *Geissberg*, *Gämsiband*, *Firnband*, *Alpe d'Ogliè*, *Montanji*, and *Bänder* are examples of such field names and thus titles of works. Even people who are well acquainted with the Swiss regions stumble over them. Were you once there, or not? Does this image show a rock massif of a more distant landscape? Egypt, Apulia, woods in Aargau or the Geissberg. But ultimately it's not the geographic coordinates that arrange the images into groups but the topographies of the visual motifs.

One of the series is called *Falten und Schichten* (Folds and Layers). The photographer turned his camera to the opposite wall of rock and waited for a cloud or ray of sunshine: straight ahead, unflinching and without deviating. Now the rock, with all its cracks and crevices, its smooth and mossy areas, lies before us on the paper. The chosen frame never contains an iconic mountain peak, a famous building or striking landmark. When the photographer then maps the sections, he has chosen with the camera, it sometimes seems as if there's an unknown country here that he's the first to explore.

He prepares his shots down to the last minute detail. The wait for the right moment overlaps with the search for the best way to frame the image. How close does he want to get to the subject? When will there be a föhn mood without the sun, when the contours of the landscape emerge in all their subtleties?

Some of the pictures in this book, however, were taken quickly, almost hurriedly compared with the years Georg Aerni waited for some of his photographs. They capture a moment that will never return: dismantled roof timbering waiting to be transported away, or a carpet of pollen on Lake Lucerne. But for most of the pictures, the photographer, metaphorically speaking, takes the long view, looking far ahead to a point in the future and marking the date he intends to return to the site.

For eleven years, ever since a family hike in the Aargau Jura, Georg Aerni knew about the traces of barbed wire in the bark of trees. Then at some point, much later, when the memory of these tree scars refused to let him go, he returned to capture these images on the Chli Wolf and the Gross Wolf with his camera. The lines in the tree trunks were still there; there were more of them and they were deeper. From the photographs he then

also composed a room installation in Aargauer Kunsthaus: four walls with twelve pictures in which barbed wire and tree trunks closed together to form a kind of forest clearing or *Waldlichtung* - the title of the series - and at the same time a kind of prison. On his next visit to the site, much of the wire had disappeared and only the scars remained visible. Whether the photographs or the exhibition had had any influence on the course of events remains unknown.

Hearing the trees grow. Apart from the sap, which enables even crooked and scarred trunks to continue growing, the water in the caverns will also have produced sounds. But what sounds? And what sounds did the drystone walls, sewage pipes and bare façades make when Georg Aerni pointed the camera at them, searched for the right frame and set the aperture and shutter speed?

The scars on the trees are artifacts, as are the plastic sheets of the greenhouses at Campo de Dalías in Andalusia, the *Lodrino* quarries on the valley floor of the Leventina, the building excavation on *Badenerstrasse* in Zurich and the corrugated iron in *Essertes* near Lake Geneva - here, too, place names become picture titles. The boundaries between culture and nature can't be drawn sharply, neither for the tangled branches above the *Maggia* nor for the gnarled and overgrown olive trees in Apulia. And certainly not for the bizarre *Strubel*, the ivy hairstyles sprouting from the rocks of the Goldau landslide. Like little anarchists, the *Strubel* appear where a small piece of earth escapes human control. In this series, they develop a sense of comedy that at first is hard to believe in a work by Georg Aerni.

For all its seriousness, again and again such surreal moments occur. It's as if this formal control over the composition of the image gives the content free rein. The camera is usually positioned so that the vertical lines are parallel with the edge of the picture. In the frontal shots, the horizontals are also meticulously aligned. Rhythms fix the image. With the seconds during which the camera captures the image, it now becomes fixed in memory.

The sign-like quality of the chosen frames that Nadine Olonetzky described so aptly in Georg Aerni's earlier monograph continues in the work of the last ten years (*Sites & Signs*, pp. 254–257). The order in the granite slabs of the collapsed roof on the *Alpe Soglio*, created as if by magic, seems to be from another world. Another mysterious object is the rusted and overgrown crane track in *Balma* near *Lodrino*, which looks like a stranded flying object held to the ground by ivy.

The basic geometric shapes of the small, stone farm buildings in Salento known as "pajares" (el pajar is Spanish for barn) remain equally enigmatic. Like miniatures of Mayan temples, they mark positions in the landscape – the photographer found them on satellite images –, but are simple shelters for the farmers and barns for the harvest. The dovecotes in the same region look just as mysterious; from the outside they hardly give any indication of what they were used for and what happened there. Georg Aerni captures the unexpected, unrecognised, unknown aspects of these "secret ordering patterns" (Stephan Berg in *Sites & Signs*, p. 259), but does not neglect the everyday quality of these situations: they look as if things have always been this way.

Almost, at least. Changes are gradual, barely perceptible even on repeated visits to the site, and yet these scenes give clues that something is going on. The scenes oscillate between stable and unstable states, and at the same time between attributions of artificial or natural. The dividing lines shift, sometimes blurring or reversing in such a way that a tree trunk suddenly appears as the most artificial thing.

In the so-called Anthropocene epoch, this is not a surprising or novel observation. It's just that in Georg Aerni's works, the names of the categories themselves have already changed again and passed quite silently into the next state: *Silent Transition* - the series shot in Cairo and Giza gives this monograph its title. *Silent Transition* are all the moments captured on these pages, which always carry the before and after within them as a question, as a possibility, as an unknown past and an anticipated future.

The images from Cairo and Giza document a change in the landscape on the edges of the metropolis that is eating into the fertile areas of the Nile Delta. Aerial photographs from the internet, printed out repeatedly at intervals of several years, can be found in the photographer's studio as part of his working documents. Next to them are the pictures taken on location, in remote fields, backyards and the spaces in between.

The environmental catastrophe of this seemingly unstoppable change in the landscape, which is being built over kilometre by kilometre, also manifests in a placelessness whose coordinates Georg Aerni notes precisely. The growing expanse of sealed soil may be resulting in an increase in average global temperatures, droughts and floods, but what appears first are the consequences on the ground. On the Nile Delta, sheep graze on construction sites; in Apulia, olive trees on the compacted, industrially farmed land are stricken with a bacterium; in Andalusia the groundwater is starting to mix with seawater. Even so, the withered meadows and abandoned building sites are more than just ruins; they speak the rhythms of an everyday life that continues nonetheless.

The eye of this photographer captures the world in a loving, albeit merciless way. What would we be doing for the sake of our planet if we sugar-coated it and photographed it beautifully? What's there is there. The photographer, who is also a cartographer of contemporary landscape, has known this for a long time.