The first impression has a monumental impact. Before us unfolds a panorama of Rue de Rivoli in Paris as we have never seen it before: A serial unrolling of façades bringing together the entire length of Rue de Rivoli from number 234 to 252 in a horizontal overall view broken only by the dramatically flush cross streets. The sixteen-part, black-and-white, twenty-three-centimeter-high and nearly four-meter-long photo frieze creates a context translating the successive nature of retinal perception - which is necessary, given the length of the street - into the simultaneity of a photographic construction. This transformation of reality (in terms of form) in a serial photographic visual mode is quite clearly reminiscent of Ed Ruscha’s renowned photo series Every Building on the Sunset Strip (1966). Both series have their origins in the succinct objectivity with which Eugène Atget captured Paris in his photographs from ca. 1900, thereby making the city available as pictorial archive.

The Panoramas parisiens (1995/1996), with which the former architect Georg Aerni first presented himself as an artist, bear no trace of uncertainty or tentative searching. The precision that Aerni brings to his work is impressive, as is the complexity of meaning that he generates through his process. As with all of the artist’s work groups, here, too, early on in the image-finding process is a precise study of the map of the city, a cartographic encircling of appropriate motifs and situations. Extensive forays on foot follow this abstract approach; a flaneur principle borrowed from the nineteenth century, with which the artist, on the one hand, deepens his awareness of the city, while on the other hand, remains open and permeable for new and unanticipated impressions. The concrete photographic project ultimately arises from analysis of the maps, designation of the working area, and atmospheric enhancement of it through the walks in the city. Aerni photographs the major Parisian boulevards - as he does all subsequent series - with a professional large-format camera that prevents a vertical vanishing line, whereby in Paris he performs his work with the accuracy of a surveyor taking photographs based on 95-centimeter increments chalk-marked on the ground.

What emerges, on the one hand, is an amazing and equally convincing documentation of Paris’ transformation as a result of the sweeping boulevards that Baron Haussmann, Parisian prefect and urban planner, sliced through the old urban structure between 1853 and 1870. While on the other hand, these panoramas are sovereign transgressions of the documentary approach with their emphasis on the rhetoric of the façades and serial nature of an architecture that was originally planned and built for reasons of hygiene, security, and traffic. In a pure demonstration of the architecture, the photographer uncovers what unfolds behind it in terms of claims to power, presentation, and representation. And the photographic principle of a panorama compiled from individual images additionally provides a highly effective picture-jolt that gently assails the realism of what is shown. Visual regularity makes parking cars “disappear” half sliced into the narrow gaps in the picture, and the photographically unavoidable lateral vanishing lines assure that the chimneys on the roofs tower unusually high upward. The exact - stretched across time - recording of reality thus produces its Irrealisierung (transformation to fantasy): An alienation that lets the stage-like pseudo-monumental reality of the boulevard step forth that much more clearly.

In Aerni’s next project, Xamfrans (1996-1998), he applies a typological principle that was already dominant in Panoramas parisiens. Set at the center of the image sketch, the corner buildings typical of Barcelona, with their strict black-and-white optics under the diffused whitish homogenous sky, seem
like a direct continuation of Bernd and Hilla Becher’s aesthetic guidelines. Here, too, the photographer is not simply attempting to precisely capture an urbanist normative structure. Instead, isolation of the corner buildings from their context provides a latent, surreal moment in the photos. This is one of the main themes in Aerni’s work: A precise observation and surveying of reality until the point at which something foreign, artificial, staged, and unreal becomes apparent behind it. An important aspect in this remains the examination of city, of urban structures, their secret ordering patterns and the breaks in their order. Transition zones between city and countryside, the artificiality of the apparently natural and the naturalness of the constructed have, additionally, shifted more clearly into focus since the late 1990s. Aerni always operates from a position that allows him structural proximity to his themes, while at the same time insisting on a certain distance.

From this fundamental half-distance, Aerni discovers the texture of the city Hong Kong as the permanent transition from real architecture to built, artificially constructed nature. *Slopes and Houses* (1999/2000) draws conclusions from the rampant structure of this metropolis, from this principle of permanent architectural growth that continues in the likewise architecturally developed nature-replicas of cement “slopes” marked by individual trees. The cement nestles like a skin against the steep incline and transforms the hills, on which the city continues to expand ever further, into artificial structures, which look like continuations of the buildings constructed on them. Aerni photographs Hong Kong in exactly this way: The faceless beam of an L-shaped residential silo grows from a rocky-like concrete slope, and at the rocks, which hide behind a thickly woven grid of concrete struts at *North Point* (1806-1), one automatically has the impression of encountering either a caging of nature or its skilful fabrication.

This compelling photographic presentation of the bracing of slope and house, of terrain and architecture, is, however, at a fundamental level also a commentary on the unimpeded growth of a megacity that in light of increasingly rare building lots, detours more and more into the hilly and unwieldy surroundings. The accompanying loss of natural vegetation leads to massive ground erosion. The city, for its part, counters this by the excavation of “slopes,” which evoke the picture of the very nature that it has destroyed through its building activity. The photographer shows also this finding quite plainly, without wagging a finger or making gestures of moral superiority. Although these photographs continually strike at the core of Hong Kong’s urbanist rampant growth, they in no way pose as didactic visualizations of urban-planning analysis. Aerni’s gaze at architecture and city emanates from the structure, in order to see through it to the in between spaces, the transition zones. There, it finds what can best be identified, using a concept by Thomas Struth, as *Unbewusste Orte*: zones that are never entirely identical with themselves, that reveal themselves in the mode of a stage-like construction, a chameleon-like cloak, and precisely in their structural non-authenticity, express something authentic about the desires of the people and societies that have built them.

In the work group *Insights* (2003), in particular, the photographer tracks down the theme of in between space. And in doing so he once again finds a precise balance between the analytical exploration of an urban planning environment and the generation of images that distill from this reality a seemingly unreal, model-like, construction. The architecturally generated density of the megacity Tokyo, a result of the scarcity of building land, appears in the photographs as a complex, intermeshed ensemble of extremely diverse structures: Whereby their claustrophobic constriction is homogenized in each of Aerni’s photographs to a new, precarious, and temporary unity. In *Yushima* (2386-2), a new, gabled house towers over an adjacent, old, crouched wooden house: the gabled house itself is so tightly wedged in by a residential tower in the background and a brutal concrete construction with stairway
that a feeling of physical anxiety sets in. Ironically, the free space in the foreground that allowed the photographer to take the picture, is, itself, already occupied by a building foundation. The photograph thus comments not only on the speed with which Tokyo is condensing, but also the ambivalence of the photographic view between visibility and invisibility. Just a short time later, this photograph would then no longer be possible due to the newly constructed building.

This example, in particular, makes evident that Aerni’s photographs thematize not only spatial in-between and transition zones, but also temporal spaces of transition, fragile moments in a process of continuous change. As immobilization of situations that thematize change and permanent transition, an aura of simultaneous paradox and melancholy encircles them. This applies last but not least to the images in the work group Holozän (2006–2008), in which glacial tongues and the surrounding rock landscape meld to a view of the big picture that is as richly detailed as it is homogenous. The relative static and finality of the mountain formations meet the relative speed of glacial transformation and combine with that to an image of precarious balance. By selecting pertinent image excerpts and an extremely detailed depth of field, Aerni is hereby able to uncover an inkling of a particular artificiality found in nature itself.

The two series Territorien (2004/2005) and Artefakte (from 2006), in particular, revolve around this moment of an artificiality of the natural and a naturalness of the constructed. In the Artefakte series, the photographer treads the border between natural and architectural space. For example, a long, rounded stone wall extends through a clear, mixed-growth forest (3299-4, Cevio). A mountain crevice is bridged by a carefully layered stairway construction of stone (3095-1, Fontana). Grass and moss covered avalanche and rock-fall ramps look like comfy gabled houses buried in the underground (3033-4, Erstfeld). A strange mimicry is shown here. The built-in stone stairway suddenly makes the surrounding rock seem suspicious of also being a fake. And the avalanche ramps not only meld so perfectly into the surroundings, as though they were there first, but also doubly camouflage their actual function, as if they were, as their shape recalls a house form, thereby signalizing a homeliness that they cannot functionally offer. Since one must likewise assume that the form of the ramps is oriented on optimal protection from plummeting masses of rock and snow, in terms of visual logics, a metaphorical link unfolds between the protective function of the artifact and the protection that a house is meant to provide. Schlieren (2679-2) radiates a downright surreal and simultaneously melancholic atmosphere. Tree stumps of different heights are distributed in a loose circular form and held together by metal bands on a free space in front of a dense mixed-growth forest. After a moment one realizes that this is not a mysterious cult site, but a training station on a fitness path. Even then, the esoteric atmosphere of the scene remains preserved. The contrast of lush forest and tree stumps robbed of all organic verticality provokes more than just the quest for the cycle of growth and decay. The constructed tree stump arrangement in the foreground also transforms the real forest spreading out behind it into an artificial situation. Like a photo carpet, the forest frames the stage setting that has been constructed before it.

In the Territorien (2004/2005) work group, devoted exclusively to the architecture of cages in various European zoos, Aerni is also interested in this stage-like moment. It is entirely clear that this series does not aim at a photographic analysis of appropriate conditions for housing animals in zoos. The photographs, which, as usual, are void of humans, and in this case, also animals, instead track down an architecture that in its replication of nature takes on the rhetoric of a theater staging, and at the same time, causes genuine nature to somehow pale next to it. With its barely visible stairs, the green-
tarnished “rocky out-crop” at the Parisian zoo (2573-4, Paris) is a monument to this natural-seeming artificiality, which in a certain way nearly surpasses our expectations of genuine nature. The concrete stairs at the Stuttgart Zoo (2503-2, Stuttgart) are different: a crowning boulder and two tree trunks attempt a rough-and-ready natural camouflaging of the built structure.

In Promising Bay (2007/2010), the large series dedicated to Mumbai, Aerni ultimately condenses several of his themes in a precise and haunting way. Again we encounter contrasts of bitmapped architectural order alongside sprawling disorder. In Sakinaka (3289-3), for example, the strictly arranged architecture of the large apartment buildings in the distance is lost in the unregulated proliferation of slums. We again experience this peculiar, stage-like juxtaposition of nature and architecture: Most beautifully and impressively so perhaps in Hiranandani Garden (3287-3). A rocky hill with a crown of young, green trees—surrounded by a wall with corrugated metal huts behind it—rises in the midst of a residential neighborhood of dismal tenements: A walled, residual bit of nature within the slum reservation, the bordering of which has broken the ground before it and left behind a deep hole in the earth. Observing this image longer, the impression arises that the rocky hill will soon sink into the hole in the street. And here, too, we encounter this desire to mix construct and nature. Bandra (3282-2) shows a strip of rubble in the foreground with brown-tinged bushes. Rising behind on a concrete foundation are latticed bundles of armoring iron like a forest of brown bamboo trunks. Clearly visible, on the other hand, is Aerni’s interest in the painting-like presence of his photos. Mankhurd (3275-4), developed classically in three picture zones, shows a growing area furrowed in grid form, slum shacks in the middle ground, and pink and blue painted high rises in the background. Here is a picture containing all of the mentioned themes, in which a color composition of great subtlety simultaneously unfolds.

In the Promising Bay photographs, what has changed in comparison to the other series is the attitude of the photographer. Not dramatically, but recognizably. His view still operates from a distance in the search for structure, for a vividness in which the world becomes a scene, a stage. But for the first time, there are also people in the images. For the first time, the stages are populated. For the first time, not only are the conditions of the play that it deals with made visible, but also to a certain degree, the actors, the play itself. Until now, in Aerni’s photographs we were able to recognize the conditions and conditionality behind the realities of life through the structure of architecture. Now we also see life, how it plays out. For example, in a street canyon between whitish, prison-like jutting concrete walls: in Mankhurd (2868-3), for instance, are colorfully dressed children and in the foreground several colorful blankets hung over sheet metal fences contrasting the seemingly desperate and drab misery of a bunkerlike residential complex. This makes visible how the children’s vitality and urge to move are able to counter the normalizing concrete grid. Not only is the camera at eye level with them, it also zooms in so closely that it seems as though it wants to play: or at any rate, almost. The distanced observer has become the involved observer.