

Georg Aerni

Silent Transition

11/06 – 16/10/2022

Georg Aerni has, in parallel to his work as an architectural photographer, produced a comprehensive artistic oeuvre. Although this has been exhibited sporadically, it is yet to receive any major recognition in a museum context. The exhibition at Fotostiftung Schweiz now focuses on the works he has produced since 2011 and shows Aerni's oeuvre as a significant position within contemporary Swiss photography.

In a consistent continuation of his earlier work, Georg Aerni sheds light on the interfaces between culture and nature, examines urban spaces' language of signs, or devotes himself to the metamorphoses of landscapes and structures. His more recent works also revolve around issues regarding ecology and sustainability, for instance in impressive photographic essays on southern Spain's gigantic stretches of land completely covered by greenhouses, or on wildly sprawling residential developments in Cairo. Discreetly, without pointing a moralising finger, and sometimes with an ironic undertone, Georg Aerni addresses the use of natural resources, land and topography, or the transience of structures built to last for eternity.

Buildings and structures constitute a fundamental theme in the work of Georg Aerni, who was born in 1959 in Winterthur and turned entirely to photography just a few years after completing his architecture studies. He soon made a name for himself in the field of traditional architectural photography, but also stood out as a tireless flâneur and observer. On his forays through city and countryside, Aerni discovered dwellings, constructions and objects of all kinds, which he translated into carefully composed images. Many of his independent artworks still show close links to the theme of architecture, but go far beyond what is commonly understood to be 'architectural photography'. Aerni's extensive award-winning 2011 monograph *Sites & Signs* already contained, alongside pictures of urban constellations, a number of works that are difficult to classify: surreal-looking interventions in the landscape; informal or unwitting buildings that show no indication of any plan; or geological formations that could be described as nature's construction sites.

The exhibition *Silent Transition* brings together around 90 of these new photographs, produced since 2011 as single images or small series, but which can nevertheless be recombined in coherent groups. This results in densifications that are anything but momentary impressions. Associative juxtaposition reveals profound recurring reflection on the interplay (or division) between culture and nature, on landscapes' slow transformation processes, on the temporal dimension of construction, or on the role of chance in our perception. The strength of Aerni's pictures comes across in large-format panels that not only captivate with their creative precision, but also invite the observer to pause and immerse themselves, enticing them to engage in silent meditative contemplation.

Georg Aerni always photographs objectively and calmly, without any pathos or activist intent. At most, a discreet hint of irony is discernible here and there, for instance when he shows gigantic dam walls or flights of stone-carved steps bearing signs of decay; when rust, moss or all kinds of discolouration almost incidentally tell of the ravages of time. Aerni's approach is such that construction sites and ruins, the planned and the unplanned, are not far apart. He devotes himself to tangles of driftwood caught in bushes on a riverbank just as earnestly as to concrete

walls and supports used in an attempt to defy a mighty rock face. His consistent sober style effortlessly combines images of structures conceived for the long term with photographs that show the temporary: intermediate storage facilities and installations that give the landscape a new face or become landscape themselves; constructions built for short-term use but then left standing as bizarre remnants; sculptures that were never intended to be sculptures.

Again and again, this photographer directs his gaze towards processes beyond human control, most clearly in works for which nature itself becomes the artist – such as those showing waterfalls temporarily frozen to ice. Even his photographs of imposing alpine cliff faces do not by any means show them to be timeless: Despite all their monumentality, they appear as vulnerable changeable ‘folds and layers’ (*Falten und Schichten*, the title of the series) marked by erosion, vegetation and the seasons. This photographer lets us peer through the surface and into the past – at time turned to stone.

The exhibition was curated by Peter Pfrunder, director of Fotostiftung Schweiz.

“I seek images in which embedded time becomes visible.” – an interview with Georg Aerni

Georg, you studied architecture at ETH Zurich, but only worked as an architect for a few years. When and how did you come to choose photography and art?

Looking back, I remember the following influences and coincidences as pieces in the puzzle: Photography was already very important to me during my architecture studies (1980–1986). A photo lab was available at ETH, so I could use that medium for numerous tasks. Due to my enthusiasm for photographing industrial architecture, I already came across publications by Bernd and Hilla Becher back then. After my studies, I spent six years working in Arnold Amsler’s architectural office in Winterthur and became acquainted with photographer Balthasar Burkhard, as well as Bendicht Fivian and Markus Raetz, in connection with an art-in-architecture project. In 1990, I was able to present a series of pictures (of the Sulzer site in Winterthur) to the public for the first time. Amusingly enough, this was on the factory premises where Fotomuseum Winterthur would open three years later, a museum whose exhibitions I followed closely from day one. A stay in Paris (1992–1994) ultimately had a decisive impact on my professional career. After a position there as an architect (fortunately) didn’t happen, I took a lot of time out, extensively exploring the city and its cultural institutions at my leisure, and thoroughly engaging with photography. On Sundays, I often went bouldering in the forest of Fontainebleau. There, by chance, I met photographer Maurice Vouga from Geneva, who was living in Paris. It was through him that I first came into contact with a large-format view camera. Vouga put me in touch with Musée Carnavalet, the museum where *Panoramas parisiens*, my first solo exhibition, was held in 1996.

Your oeuvre revolves around the interfaces between culture and nature. How do you find motifs that are not only suitable as images, but also full of meaning beyond the specific context? Are they spontaneous discoveries, or is there also targeted research?

For numerous series of works about cities, the first step in my work after arriving was to study maps and publications, and mostly to walk around for days. Using small-format photographs, I’d then try to determine a visual concept, so as to then take the definitive photographs with the large-format camera in a second phase of my stay – at a certain time of day, taking into account the desired light incidence and weather. For some time now, I’ve been in the habit of

researching potential shooting locations beforehand in the studio, by means of maps and aerial photographs, in order to then have more time to pursue the hoped-for images on site, which was the case with series such as *El jardín de los ciclopes* (Campo de Dalías, 2012), *Plastiche* (Apulia, 2015–2016) and *Silent Transition* (Cairo/Giza, 2018). My stand-alone works are mostly about motifs that I encounter spontaneously. Sometimes they're in a state that only lasts for a short time, so I only have a limited time window for a shot. Sometimes they're motifs that I discover on a hike, on a stroll around town or from a train, and which then might spend years on my 'waiting list' as a marker on a map app.

Why is it that quite banal objects suddenly appear so surreal in your pictures? Is it something to do with the photographer's perspective, i.e. a kind of staging, or is it more due to the objective givens and situations?

Perhaps I wouldn't have enough inspiration to create artworks if I were to use other media in a closed-off studio space. As a photographer, I'm happy when I come across situations, out in the world, that stimulate my imagination. I'm attracted to objects that (due to their function not being clearly evident, for example) possess a certain mysteriousness and trigger various associations for me. A surreal appearance often comes about through isolation of an object, through omission of context and the associated obscuring of scale. It's also influenced by the choice of perspective or the 'eye level' of the camera. And frequently, certain light and weather conditions make something ordinary appear unexpectedly 'magical'.

Nature seems to play a stronger role in your more recent work, for instance in the series on driftwood on the banks of the Maggia or in the pictures of frozen waterfalls.

I only partly agree with that assessment, as nature has repeatedly been very present in my work over the past 20 years. I do usually show it in connection with traces of civilisation though. I've long been interested in the juxtaposition of natural and built environments – and in how natural and artificial elements interlock and interpenetrate. In the case of the floating debris formations along the Maggia/Bavona (*Ordine temporaneo*, 2021), which were caused by flooding, the question arises as to how natural or how human-caused they are – and what consequences of global warming we are responsible for. This theme connects the series of Ticino pictures with my earlier series *Holozän* (Holocene, 2006–2008), which deals with the shrinkage of Alpine glaciers.

In many pictures, chance plays an important role – the unplanned, the 'unwitting architecture', so to speak. What is it about these phenomena that interests you?

Yes, chance plays into my hands again and again – and the more time I spend out and about, or lingering, the more often it happens. Although there are basically no uninteresting areas for me and I could find fascinating constellations almost anywhere, I do also need my inner willingness and openness to recognise them.

Can the term 'composition' be applied to your pictures? On one hand, they're highly documentary images, but on the other hand, the precision of the framing and the visual organisation of the subject via photography have decisive impact on the strength of your works. Can the degree of shaping done by the photographer be described?

For me, photography means selecting sections of the world and interrelating the presented visual elements in a weighted and condensed way. When defining the framing, I pay just as much attention to the edges of the image as to the centre. There are hardly any areas of the image that differ in importance. I always work extremely slowly, with a technical camera (which allows horizontal and vertical adjustment of the lens) on a tripod, so when I'm taking the shot, it's possible for me to precisely check the visual composition and see the results of any small

shift in the camera's position. In any case, a coherent composition can cause an ostensibly unspectacular situation to suddenly take on a high degree of complexity within the rectangle of a photograph.

In your pictures, you bring space and time together. Time has been described as the fourth dimension of architecture. What does this aspect mean to you? Do you draw inspiration from it when choosing your themes? Do you specifically look for signs and traces that point beyond the presented space?

Unless taken in a studio, photographs always freeze a unique moment in time, which will never be repeated in terms of light and weather. Thus, excluding any manipulations, they always document time as well, referring to a 'before'. In my work, the history of a place or the transformation of a city sometimes forms the starting point. Equally often though, I just react intuitively, 'ignorantly', to forms, colours and surfaces. I then try to find out the history and meaning of the picture's content afterwards. If I don't manage to do that, I'm left with my imagination. Buildings under construction, quarries, and gravel pits where building material is being extracted keep appearing in my photographic works. These places have something in common, in that they speak of the future and, if there is prolonged inactivity there, of the past: as ruins of abandoned building sites, or nature's wounds. I hardly ever take pictures of new perfect surfaces, but rather of those that show a great richness of patina, with colour gradients, cracks and scars caused by processes of ageing and weathering. I seek images in which embedded time becomes visible.

The questions were asked by Jürg Trösch, founder of linkgroup, and Peter Pfrunder.

Works in the exhibition

The exhibited works are produced by Georg Aerni in editions of no more than 3 or 5 copies (formats and framing as in the exhibition). Works can also be purchased until the respective edition is sold out. More detailed information and a price list are available from the front desk at Fotostiftung Schweiz.

Publication accompanying the exhibition

The monograph *Georg Aerni – Silent Transition*, edited by Peter Pfrunder and Nadine Olonetzky, has been released by publisher Scheidegger & Spiess. With texts by Sabine von Fischer, Nadine Olonetzky and Peter Pfrunder. Design: Hanna Williamson-Koller.

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