Atelier Amden
Landscape
Roman Kurzmeyer, 2015

Berlin artist Eva-Christina Meier's photographs of Amden show apple trees in the snow, the dark waters of Lake Walensee below the village, the little wild cyclamen discovered on walks, the potted lemon trees on the dining terrace of Hotel Sonne — and an African refugee. The young African had been assigned temporary accommodation for asylum seekers — it was 2004 — in Amden's former Hotel Soldanella. That was all Meier had learned from him when, on meeting him walking up the road into the mountains, she asked if she could take his photo. When she next visited the village a few months later and went off in search of him to give him one of the pictures, she discovered that he had already left; nor was she able to find out what his name was, or where he was currently living. On her walks and hikes, Meier also took pictures of the landscape much like those on the postcards on sale in the village, except that she was primarily interested in the way the conjunction of farmland, natural environment and urban context demonstrates incontrovertibly that this beautifully situated village is no longer isolated from the world. She photographed the word "Amden," spray-painted on concrete in the cramped, dark and damp bus shelter in Lehni as she waited for the bus that would take her down to the valley. The small, relatively new open shelter for bus passengers, built into the slope at the edge of the car park, also contains a letterbox for the farmsteads in the area and a niche for a large metal rubbish bin. This Alpine region high above Lake Walensee, which is easily accessible by both private vehicles and public transport, has in reality become a more than well-equipped "parkscape." Little more than an hour by road from Zurich, it is a mountain village on the fringes of the city.

A Mountain Village Just Outside the City

Many of the artists who exhibited their work in Amden between 1999 and 2015, especially those from big cities, were struck by the urban features of this village, whose inhabitants once eked out a living from poor small-holdings and cottage industries, and who since the late nineteenth century have benefited from tourism on only a modest scale. Far from drawing visitors' attention to the landscape and nature, the works by Elizabeth Wright, Rita McBride and Pamela Rosenkranz focused on the monotonous drone of traffic on the motorway on the other side of Lake Walensee — a dull roar or barely audible hum, depending on the weather. That's it: cars. Although the exhibition sites in the meadows (the Faren and the Zand) can still be reached only on foot, improving the roads and paths to provide better access to even the smallest farms is an on-going issue in local politics. There is not a single house outside the centre of the village that does not have at least one car parked outside it. As long ago as 1990, the American writer and landscape expert John Brinckerhoff Jackson concluded that there were now landscapes that could rightly be described as "composed of structures and spaces designed to accommodate the automobile rather than people" even outside the United States.[1] He talked of the "spread of a new kind of landscape, based less on territoriality and specialized spaces

1 John Brinckerhoff Jackson, "The Future of the Vernacular" (1990), in Paul Groth / Todd W. Bressi (eds.), Understanding Ordinary Landscapes, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1997, pp. 152–153 and 150–151.

with restricted access and more on that vernacular liking for mobility and the temporary use of public or semi-public spaces." Landscape, in other words, has become an urban space, affected by modernization and swallowed up by the city. Roads and streets are now not so much external spaces as extensions of private, domestic realms, and these new public spaces are designed and organized accordingly. In the words of the French anthropologist and cultural historian Marc Augé, these areas are now "places of identity, of relations and of history."[2] By the same token, however, "a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place." Non-places are unlike anthropological places that integrate the history of the locale and so become "places of memory." They are rather places of transition, zones such as roads, multi-storey car parks, motorway services, shopping centres and airports that are used by large numbers of people at any given time, but that are not, by definition, part of the historically developed spatial situation and the ensuing social interaction. In such places, people encounter each other without ever meeting.

In 1981, when activists in the German-speaking world's new Green movement were starting to make themselves heard, a translated text by the British writer, artist and art historian John Berger was published in *Merkur*, a German journal of European thought. Berger was openly sceptical of the then popular rediscovery of nature and of the transfiguration of rural life by people who mainly came from an urban background.[3] In Berger's view, the British peasantry had barely existed since the late nineteenth century, and there had never been any peasants in the United States. Furthermore, the economic modernization of Europe would, as he saw it, lead to the "elimination" of the peasantry by the end of the twentieth century. His sobering conclusion was that "agriculture does not necessarily require peasants." Berger saw peasants neither as producers of agricultural products for the free market nor as landscape gardeners. The peasant family was rather "a productive and consuming unit" that had become a victim of economic modernization. Peasant culture, which had been dominant in Europe for hundreds of years, was thus steadily fading away: "Previously cities were dependent on the countryside for their food, peasants being forced, in one way or another, to part with their so-called surplus. Soon the world countryside may be dependent on the cities even for the food its own rural population requires. When and if this happens, peasants will have ceased to exist."

Parkscapes

Painters came from abroad to paint *en plein air* on the shores of Lake Walensee right up to the late nineteenth century. By that time, the natural scenery they were painting had already been tamed and cultivated. It was a landscape, not a wilderness, and the painters knew they were not painting nature. The landscape above the lake was agrarian, laboriously worked by small-holders living in precarious conditions. In a history of the region published in 1961, Paul Hugger described Amden as having been a self-contained society up to the turn of the twentieth century, as a village whose traditions and customs had barely changed for centuries.[4] This naturally begs the question of whether this area can still be described as an agrarian landscape today. And Atelier

2 Marc Augé, Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, trans. John Howe, London/New York: Verso, 1995, pp. 52 and 77–78.

3 John Berger, Pig Earth, London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative/New York: Pantheon, 1979. The following quotes are taken from the Introduction.

4 Paul Hugger, Amden: Eine volkskundliche Monographie, Basel 1961 (Schriften der Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Volkskunde, 41), esp. pp. 83–117; see also my essay on this subject in Viereck und Kosmos, esp. pp. 109–114.

Amden? Are we not rather looking here at a situation of which the project that started in 1999 can be regarded as symptomatic and as evidence of the insidious creep from agricultural land to recreational space? Although I shall discuss elsewhere in this book just how important the landscape, its flora and fauna and its atmospheric forces are, especially for visitors' perception of the works exhibited here (less so for their conception), it goes without saying that this is yet another form of cultivated nature, and not what farmers today would describe as nature.[5]

Amden is linked to greater Zurich by the S-Bahn, a fast, local train connection which terminates at the village of Ziegelbrücke, where passengers can catch a bus to Amden. Ziegelbrücke also has express train connections to the Alps, to Chur, and via Zurich to the Central Plateau, Basel and Bern. Lake Walensee marks the boundary between greater Zurich and the "quiet zone" (Appenzell–Toggenburg) in the east, which is one of three, large, interconnected regions in Switzerland (aside from the Alps) that have become destinations for rest and recuperation. The ETH Studio Basel defines these "quiet zones" as Gros de Vaud and the Fribourg Lower Alps, the area around Napf Mountain, and Appenzell by way of Toggenburg to the Zurich Oberland.[6] All are "figures of inversion within urban transformation—that is, they are the areas that have temporarily been left alone by the city, and not areas that have been formed by it. Their status at the moment is passive. It is easy to predict that with time they will be subjected to the same appropriation as the rest of the countryside."[7] The authors of this study also describe what this might mean in the near future for these regions: "Gradually, urban ambitions in the quiet zones are starting to overlap: the urban need for nature, the desire for a historical sense of belonging, the longing for peace and quiet, the search for new rituals of recreation and special forms of consumption, and finally concrete demands on the real estate market. In the quiet zones it is, in essence, urban desires that are exercising a concentrated form of almost palpable, physical pressure on the landscape and its history. This pressure is making the rural features of the quiet zones the most fragile urban form within Switzerland's urban topography. These areas are available on two fronts—in terms of the autonomy of the individual communes and in terms of the rights of individual newcomers to access the parklands. In consequence, it is almost impossible for the quiet zones to resist the desires and projections of the centers."[8]

A Period of Transformation

When the first exhibition (*Viereck und Kosmos*) was presented simultaneously in Amden and at Kunsthaus Glarus in 1999, the planning process and the mode of presentation were wholly unaffected by considerations and analyses such as those published by the ETH Studio Basel. As I explained earlier on in this book, since that first show coincided with the publication, that same year, of my history of the Grappenhof *Lebensreform* colony, I was keen to "exhibit" the terrain that had once been part of the settlement. It seemed to me that only first-hand experience of that rural, Alpine landscape would allow people to understand what had made the members of the colony (mainly German) pioneered by Josua Klein want to settle on the lower slopes of the Amdenerberg in the early twentieth century. My intention then had not been to follow that

5 In the late 1980s, I had wanted to explore the question of whether there might be a "rural" aesthetic that is identifiable in works of art. Today, I see the exhibition series in Amden in the light of this theoretical backdrop.

6 I am in agreement with the findings of the ETH Studio Basel (Institut Stadt der Gegenwart), as presented in Roger Diener et al., Die Schweiz – Ein städtebauliches Portrait, Basel 2005, p. 210.

7 Ibid., p. 860.

8 Ibid., p. 743.

first show with still more exhibitions. And although it would be utterly wrong to view the Grappenhof settlement (founded in 1903) as a precursor, in some senses, of today's leisure and tourism industry, the fact is that the (now almost complete) transformation of an agrarian region into the "parkscapes" of our own time had not even begun. Klein and his friends found in Amden a traditional community of small farmers and a parish council that was open to the modernization projects that the settlers promised to instigate. With hindsight, those projects (which many regarded as controversial, both in the village and in the international press) seem to anticipate future ideas for a different use of the landscape, which would not come into their own until the first decade of the twenty-first century. Needless to say, few of today's farmers in Amden would agree with this account of the present situation. And yet the truth is that in recent years, many farms have ceased to function or have become a secondary source of income only; as a result, a number of farms have been amalgamated and younger farmers (one can only speculate as to the reason) have given up the traditional practice of crop rotation. While economic factors have clearly played a part in this, the main aim is to farm more efficiently in keeping with present-day notions of family life and regulated working hours that also allow for leisure. The new regulations with which the authorities are trying to force through changes in land cultivation and animal husbandry must also be a factor. In the last ten years, however, it is not only the cultivation of meadows and pastures that has changed; there has also been an influx of new users. New infrastructure for leisure activities and sports has been created down at the lake and there is no doubt that the new users will want more parking spaces, public toilets, detailed signage, better roads and ecological, extensive, but less dominant farming practices. Although the land still belongs to the farmers, and in many places is still cultivated more or less as it always has been, the city dwellers have long since taken mental possession of it.[9] As we have seen, all these things were conceptually imminent as long ago as 1903, when Josua Klein planned to construct a railway on Mt. Speer and build a temple in which to exhibit reproductions of the best art in the world on Lake Walensee. His plans did not meet the needs of the area's existing inhabitants, however. Today the centre of the village is undergoing major reconstruction and the results, unfortunately, are neither pleasing to the eye nor aesthetically challenging. With more and more commuters now working in the lowlands and returning in the evenings to the sunny terraces of their country residences, it is not hard to predict that converting buildings previously used for farming, both within the village and in the surrounding area, to accommodate the organization and running of diverse leisure activities will soon be the norm. Many farm buildings and outhouses will be demolished, a few will be restored in exemplary fashion as historical monuments, and others still will be repurposed.

It has become clear to me that the exhibitions presented by Atelier Amden and documented here coincided with a period of transformation in this landscape, for only recently have farmers ceased to use the barns in which the exhibitions were held. During this transitional period, the art itself has always appeared alien and surprising. Those with a particular interest in this open-ended situation found their way to Amden. Under these non-institutionalized conditions (far off the beaten track of the art world) and against the backdrop of a still agrarian region with largely traditional land use, these experimental exhibitions were meaningful. This claim requires explanation, however, which as I conclude will bring me back to matters relating to the work of the exhibition curator.

9 Cf. Christa and Emil Zopfi, Sehnsucht nach den grünen Höhen: Literarische Wanderungen zwischen Pfannenstiel, Churfirsten und Tödi, Zürich: Rotpunktverlag, 2014, esp. pp. 164–185.

Presence: On Presenting Art

Not only in our own time has artistic activity been seen as a highly specialized occupation, intended for an exclusive public. As a rule, contemporary art today is created in the knowledge that it will be seen in a museum situation. Would artists either want, or be able, to produce work without this kind of institutional framework? What would be the nature of the presence of such works? What are the consequences for the production and reception of art when the rules according to which it is made and viewed are as yet unfixed, let alone generally applicable? When the exhibitions in Amden are discussed in this light, it soon becomes clear that the question of how they are curated also raises theoretical issues. And these issues concern not so much the form of the works themselves or of exhibitions as the wider conditions affecting our understanding of art.

If I want to see Hans Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521–22) with my own eyes, I go to Kunstmuseum Basel. I can be sure that the painting is still there, in the same excellent state of preservation, and perhaps even in the same place as on my previous visit.[10] Brian O'Doherty first saw this painting—in the original—on 17 April 2012. At the time we were preparing his exhibition, which opened a few weeks later in Amden. We were discussing his idea for a *Rope Drawing*, which I then executed according to his instructions in May 2012. The last time he had been in Basel was in 1949, he told me, when he had travelled there from Dublin on his motorbike. He had wanted to see the Holbein even then, but had not had enough time to go to the Kunstmuseum.[11] O'Doherty has changed since then; the young Irish medical student has since become a world-renowned art critic and artist. And the painting? Museums are repositories. Even in private exhibition spaces and galleries, works of contemporary art are shown in conditions that suggest that their significance and status are already assured and that the work itself could last for all eternity. The barns around Amden are also repositories; only the hay—cut locally and stored in them—is intended for prompt consumption by the cattle round about. Thus the barns are repositories that have been filled and emptied for centuries following the same seasonal pattern. The concept of time here is different from the way time works in a museum—entirely different. In this region and in this landscape, which is constantly in flux, it is only the present moment, and how it is perceived, that counts. There are no protected spaces dedicated to art and detached from the normal passage of time. When Robert Büsser, a mountain farmer, saw the first exhibition in this series, which was presented on his land in the summer of 1999, his response to the old apple tree that some weeks earlier the artist Anya Gallaccio had laden with apples (now rotting) was to deplore the waste. Since then, however, he has felled and burnt the rotting wood of that old tree, which no longer bore any fruit, but whose age and shape had nevertheless touched the artist back then. Some years later, in a short conversation with the artist Erik Steinbrecher (then in the process of hanging a long garland of burgers across one of the haylofts—a strange act even by the standards of the art world) Büsser asked what *we* would think if *he* hung a dead goat in the attic of his house? The season, the time of day, the changing light conditions, the weather—all of which visitors take in as they make their way to the exhibition—are palpable inside the barns, too. Mai-Thu Perret's textile works flutter in the wind in a way that

10 For a history of the reception and interpretation of this work, see Hans Holbein d.J.: Die Jahre in Basel 1515–1532, exh. cat. Kunstmuseum Basel, München: Prestel, 2006, pp. 257–259.

11 John Berger also wanted to see Holbein's painting of the dead Christ and, like O'Doherty, travelled to Switzerland on his motorbike to do so. He describes crossing the Alps and arriving in Bern, only to discover that same evening that the painting is in Basel. Cf. Berger (see note 21), pp. 536–540.

the viewer would never see or experience in a museum. As Martin Seel has suggested in his *Aesthetics of Appearing*, works of art speak "only to those who perceive them as an individual constellation of appearances (individual in the sense of not being replaceable by any other combination of elements). This perception is directed at the simultaneity of a composition or co-occurrence of appearances. Whoever wants to experience the content of artworks has to attend to this simultaneity, this interaction, this *process* (as Adorno constantly emphasizes) of artworks."[12] In a museum this applies not only to the appearance of a work as an aesthetic object, but also to its dialogue with all the other exhibits and, in a wider sense, with the history of art as such. In the mountain landscape above Lake Walensee there is no dialogue with other art. The self-presentation of the work also comprises its individual appearance as an aesthetic object; at the same time, its perception is affected by the alien context and ever changing conditions, not least due to the weather. Although most of the works on display here were conceived for internal spaces, the presence of the landscape and natural forces also play into the viewer's experience of them. It is remarkable that almost all the artists who have exhibited at Atelier Amden have immediately understood that the works they show there will be of a different order from works seen in a museum.

As Michel Serres has put it: "The name geographer is given to those who write about the earth: for peasants are the only ones who really write on it. It would be better to call geography the writing of the earth about itself. For things — resistant, hard, sharp, elastic, loose — mark, hollow each other out and wear each other away […] Carried away by torrents and their own weight, halted by obstacles or their own shape, stones descend and break, carve into the talweg the long path of their fall or movement. Masses of sand, driven by the wind, file away at the mountain. Ice cracks and breaks stones and trees, cliffs and the earth on the plain, as does drought. Who is writing? Water, snow, the return to gentler weather, ophite, granite, equilibrium, density, energy, sun, flora and fauna. This covers, that stains. On what do they write? On snow and water, on fauna or flora, on marble or ice. What the earth displays results from the wrinkles it gives itself."[13]

The mountain landscape above Lake Walensee and the exhibition venue — an abandoned barn bearing the marks left by the weather and many generations of concentrated agricultural use (until just a few years ago) — could be described as a stage, of sorts, where the actors are the visitors who act the part of exhibition-goers (or hikers). The constant processes of change that affect everything in this landscape, and that the region's traditional agrarian practices (which will soon be history) had to take into account also have an impact on the exhibitions, on the works themselves, and — by heightening the viewer's appreciation of the present moment — on their perception, too. Artists made these works in full knowledge of this other order of things, an order entirely out of their control. What the artists did in these surroundings with their powerful visual stimuli — currently being transformed into a "parkscape" — was to perform a simple action, to produce a work, or to present an existing work. Only occasionally was the setting itself the theme, although all the artists extended the compass of their works, thus responding to the context that they became part of for the duration, and that was seen with new eyes thanks to the presence of art in its midst.

12 Martin Seel, Aesthetics of Appearing, trans. John Farrell, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 113.

13 Michel Serres, The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley, London/New York: Continuum, 2009, p. 275.

Eva-Christina Meier –o. T. (Bushaltestelle Lehni), 2004 – Foto: Eva-Christina Meier

Eva-Christina Meier – eingeschneit, aufgeblüht, abgereist, 2004 – Foto: Eva-Christina Meier

Eva-Christina Meier – eingeschneit, aufgeblüht, abgereist, 2004 – Foto: Eva-Christina Meier

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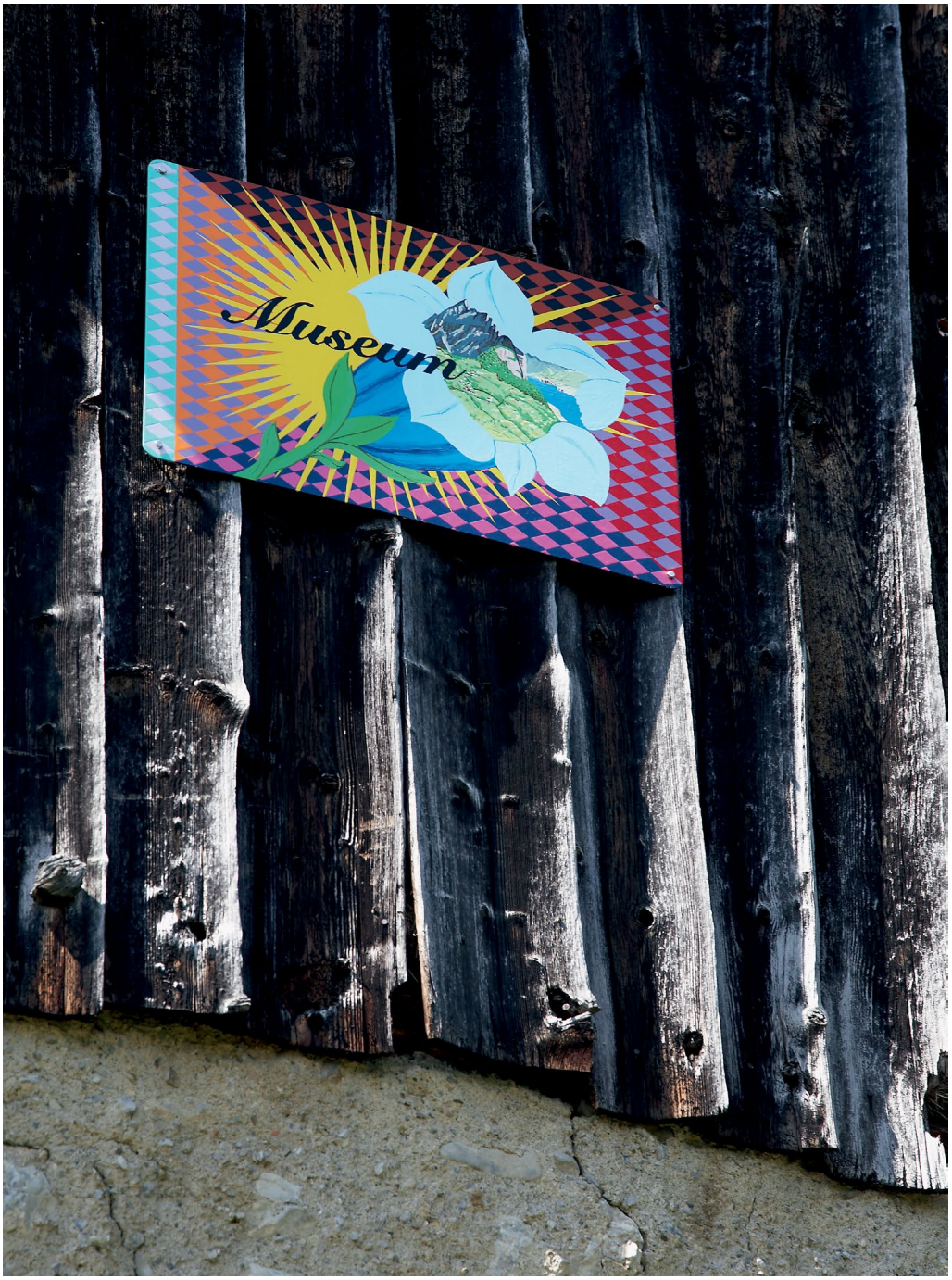

Christine Streuli – Amden schaut dich an, 2007 – Foto: David Aebi