After Nature

Man's instinctive affinity with nature emerges in its most poignant form on Sundays, or on the year's highest festival, during the holidays, with a sketchbook resting on our knees or on a tree trunk, when our own internal, pulsating, or external - in this case inert - nature plays the role of a supporting prop for a re-energising absorption with nature as the measure of all things. Mimesis, on free days; for it seems that at other times our affinity with nature is less accessible.

For the next three years, the dictates of fashion postulate naturalness in clothing, and the pope is given to mention the laws of nature in his moral encyclicals - two observations introduced here with the aim of injecting a breath of topicality into this contemplation of eternal conditions. Nature has always been man's yardstick. The beauties of nature have always moved us, we have always regarded certain things as natural, we have always longed to be part of nature. It is still our yardstick when we buy organic detergents, organic muesli or organic bread in health food shops. The fact that the original word "natural" has been replaced by "organic" is, although effective from an advertising standpoint, ominous. Our eternal relationship with nature, our affinity with it, is broken. *Gernot Böhme* has some very definite things to say about this putative affinity. It is, he says, composed of pairs of opposites, like the natural order of things as opposed to the randomness of our laws, like man-made precepts as opposed to the eternal, self-creating life principle, like the natural as opposed to the artificial way of life, like the "natural condition" as opposed to the "civilised condition", or like the self as opposed to the non-self. But do these opposites still have a meaning, are they still more than a mere placebo for our emotional solace?

At the beginning of the long path of man's anthropogenic influence on nature was the command "subdue the earth." In the 14th century, when Petrarch emerged from the musty darkness of the Middle Ages into the light and climbed Mount Ventoux, he may have taken an aesthetic pleasure in the view of the land, but he also planted another milestone in man's domination over nature. Nowadays, now that nature is starting to hit

back (nature? What nature, I wonder), we are aware that something has changed. We should have realised it a long time ago, for truly, which of us really means nature when we formulate the word? Natura beef - yes, but preferably pre-sliced; natural beauty - yes, but preferably with a touch of cultivation; nature - yes, but preferably in the form of parks, natural English parks as opposed to artificial French parks, because they contain all that we like about nature but exclude everything else, everything rough, wild, prickly or evil-smelling.

When *Walter Mittelholzer, René Gouzy* and *Arnold Heim* set off from the lake of Zurich in a seaplane and flew over the dark continent to the Cape of Good Hope, great regional importance was ascribed to the success of technology in opening up new paths between "our little mountainous country and far-off lands". Had their seaplane been called "Europe" instead of "Switzerland", *Mittelholzer* would have been known as the *Petrarch* of 1926, a Petrarch who climbed higher than the highest mountain, who *flew, flew, flew*. Beneath him the world, at first southern Europe, then everything that constitutes the alien non-self: dark, incomprehensible, African nature, a nature that reminds us of our origins, or at least some of them, not of Arcadian light and bright, columned halls but of the dark, sub- and unconscious aspects of western existence. *Mittelholzer* probably landed in a landscape rather like the Ticino, like the southern slopes of the Alps, at the light, southernmost point of the dark continent. But Africa really is different, for whereas we Europeans ask: "what do you think about it?", the Senegalese ask: "comment tu sens ça? What do you feel about it?". And then they dance "it". But even they ask in French.

In his large landscape pictures, Rémy Markowitsch uses photographs from books about Africa, books by *Walter Mittelholzer* and others, with well-sounding names such as *Martin Johnson's* "Safari - a Saga of the African Blue", books written in the1920s and 30s when not only ethnologists but also surrealists and music-hall performers started taking an interest in Africa. Africa, a vitally important continent for Europeans, says Markowitsch, but also the subject of a huge misunderstanding, probably from the very beginning. His

investigations of African (and southern tropical) landscapes took him to areas which absorb our western projections like blotting paper: the heat, the darkness and the damp become manifest - from two sides: darkness encounters the exotic, in search of the red orchid. The pictures are as large as Markowitsch's studio window and afford a vista - of "After Nature".

Collecting and nurturing

At school, in the lower grades, not long after we learned to talk, we collected autumn leaves of all colours, the hard-working ones among us out of doors, in the woods, the lazier town children, like me, on the school playground; we put the leaves in a book or between sheets of paper, pressed, dried and later drew them. Domesticated exercises - or memories - in collecting, nurturing, preparing, preserving and understanding the nature of our fore-forefathers, of with-and-after nature, using highly domesticated nature as our model.

One side of Markowitsch's work, a hidden side which is not immediately evident, is this aspect of collecting. First of all books, perhaps, containing written-down, categorised knowledge, with condensed views of the world, from different times and "pressed" - printed - in different techniques. Not collections of leaves or berries, but of cultural assets, of illustrations of the world. Prefabricated, maybe, yet Markowitsch handles them like raw materials, spotlights and investigates them, as if he wanted to find out what they really are, transforming opaque material into an illuminated screen. The Enlightenment threw light on things like this, and Modernism did it in increasingly elaborate ways, progressing from views to insights, probing beneath appearances, discovering structures behind the surface, and pushing the boundaries of the visible further forward, further in. At school, even in the lowest grades, we went regularly (probably too regularly) to be X-rayed. Ever-greater, ever-deeper, ever-clearer truth was the objective, recognition of structures and their deviations which meant illness. Markowitsch's X-rays, his visual palimpsests, do the opposite: they make things unclear by making them visible, they blur focal sharpness, they

put information and its carriers on an equal scale. The rustle of paper, the first material carrier, or the chuntering of screen dots, the actual carriers of information, interfere with the portrayal. In Markowitsch's plant pictures, his arrangements portray truths about the printing quality of the 1960s rather than about the world of plants. P1, for example, with the original rubber plant *(Ficus elastica Tricolor)* on the left, its easier-to-cultivate relation *(Ficus elastica Decora,* grown in 1945) on the right, and the transilluminated variety of the rubber plant called *Ficus deltoida/Ficus diversifolia,* the fig tree, are a celebration of saturated colours, the taste of our youth, the spirit of the "everything-is-possible, everything-is-tameable" of the 1950s and 60s. When light is lacking, it must recompensed by fertiliser - or so it says in the book "Mehr Freude mit Blumen und Pflanzen" ("More Fun with Flowers and Plants") which Markowitsch illustrated. When the spirit is lacking, the printing must be more colourful. The rubber plant, once a tropical plant, then an indoor plant for indoor tastes, is almost as easy to look after as a nylon shirt. Just as plants grow to a size compatible with their own - or man-aided - strength, the size of Markowitsch's pictures is variable. He takes mimesis to the point of absurdity. His mechanical copy of a mechanically printed copy of a mechanically photographed copy of some reality or other acquires its own monstrous pictorial reality, finally assuming the appearance of a digitally produced plant arrangement, like a just-produced, somewhat alienated original, a "Natura naturans", self-generating nature gone slightly wrong. Markowitsch's commentary on the 145-year-old craze for photographing the world.

Cadavres exquis

In his picture of the Simmental cow "Flamme" from Erlenbach and the brown cow "Liebi" from Illgau, both of them fine animals and both portrayed in proud profile photographs, Markowitsch has crossed and blended the two breeds - although it is not possible for the eye to comprehend them both simultaneously and completely. The ancient breed of Swiss brown cattle is characterised by its great adaptability, and the animals' pedigree dates

back to the turf cattle of the pile dwellers. The Swiss spotted cattle which "originated" in Switzerland, or were introduced in antiquity, are divided up into the red spotted (Simmental) and the black spotted (Fribourg) breeds. Protected and unprotected pedigrees, the pride of the first farming society. A few years ago, television showed a farmer and cattle dealer negotiating by handy telephone in the midst of the still idyllic alpine landscape about the sale of Simmental cows direct from the green meadows of Switzerland to the USA. This was at a time when the Americans were buying large numbers of this breed because they seemed ideal for the meat-producing and meat-consuming world. For their part, the Swiss farmers were interested in crossing Simmental cows and American bulls in order to produce a cross-breed with a higher milk yield. However, since the Simmental cow is as much part of the tourist image of the Swiss Alps as the white peaks of the snow-covered mountains, and as indigenous to the Swiss mentality as Toni milk, certain aesthetic problems arose. It was impossible to use the sperm of the original American super-bulls because this dark-coloured, and sometimes even black, breed would have conspicuously changed the brown spots of the Simmentals. So it was decided to use the sperm of an albino, and thus much lighter-coloured, bull. In consequence, an inexplicably large number of cows died of an inexplicable disease. And thus the aesthetic problems gave rise to physical, i.e. veterinary and financial, questions; not, however, to ethical issues since we still ascribe animals to external nature, beyond the range of ethics.

We live in "Nature in the Age of its Reproducibility"("Die Natur im Zeitalter ihrer technischen Reproduzierbarkeit"), to quote *Gernot Böhme's* adaptation of *Walter Benjamin's* famous title; we live with nature, and we are nature itself. Up till now, we have thought of nature as always having existed, and of technology as our creation. Were the two really so strictly separate as we imagined them to be, we would have had to be content to drink sour wine and eat sour apples. Nowadays, however, the fusion between nature and technology is quite as significant as nuclear fusion. And although we have by no means exhausted nature, and although for centuries we had to be content with research and imitation - with

mimesis -, intrepid, inquisitive mankind has discovered some secret keys which promise to bring about a fundamental change in the nature of our interventions. We human beings have mutated, crucially, from imitators to creators. And, oh megalomaniacs that we are, we have lost no time in proclaiming that we are fully in control. Markowitsch's crosses between typologically ideal cows, pigs, rabbits and dogs are reminiscent of the surrealistic practice of cropping, doubling, multiplication. The surrealists wanted to conjure up the phantasmagoria, *Bataille's* "informes", to help the suppressed counter-world to come into its own. Markowitsch's "cadavres exquis" permit *Dr. Doliitle,* having at last reached his objective, to find the push-me-pull-you. His almost motionless, enlarged double animal portraits on the scale of 1:1 generate a tension through the ambiguity between the dignified portrait and the mechanical transillumination, a tension which forebodes the techno-nature-orgies of the future. "So that we can sleep well again...", as a campaign for gene technology would have us believe.

As a precaution

The political scientist and traffic specialist *Walter Seitter* is interested in the book as printed language, and it is on the example of a book that he presents his investigations on the exact nature and management of the carriers of "air vessel modulation" precipitation: "The state of the book when it is being used consists of a series of single states, which we call 'the state of being open', whereby each 'opening' opens up a double page: two connected, juxtaposed leaves each showing one of its sides. (...) If we begin by opening the book at the place which we in the west call 'the beginning', the first double page consists of the reverse side, the front side of which was the title page, as well as the front side of the next, second page. (...) The structure is based on the fact that the book (in use) is a series of double pages, of which each one covers all the rest (and everything else as well). If this covering up were not to function, then, with one double page, we would be able - obliged - to read all the others, i.e. we would read all or nothing. (...) Perhaps the urgency of the second principle of optics only really

becomes clear on this example: it is because we see only the outermost, extremely thin surface, only because the surface is opaque, that we can see it, that we can see anything (anything specific). The imminent palimpsest effect is reinforced by the fact that the next layer of writing directly 'behind' the words being read (...) consists of 'back-to-front' letters. Thus the opacity of the page must be adequate to cover not only all the other pages, but also its own reverse side. The page must cover itself - so that it is visible." (**Seitter,** Physik des Sichtbaren, in : "Tumult", Zeitschrift für Verkehrswissenschaft, No. 14). The over-insistence of the descriptions in these textual extracts has an element of absurdity, and I think, although I do not know him, that the author would gladly admit it, albeit not without a "yes, but...", since here he is involved exclusively with the physics of the visible, which means that whereas other people may *read* books, he is primarily concerned with what we see when we open a book, how we hold it, and what a book containing printed language looks like, materially and structurally. Rémy Markowitsch does something similar, with similar meticulousness, in order finally to arrive at the opposite. "The cycle 'After Nature' examines the use of photography in books", he wrote in telex-style notes intended for his own use. "It registers what has been registered and X-rays forms of portrayal in printed photography. (...) The new image emerges at the same time as the printing of the second photograph. I reproduce reproductions." He is not interested in language and its book form, but in our common picture archives, books, which contain the pictorial worlds of the 20th century and with them ways of handling pictures, the arrangement of the page, the sequence, the printing techniques.

Subsequently, rather than describing these visual archives he - himself a visual artist - exposes them, X-rays them, enhances their very opacity in order to wrest a picture from the two-fold deposit. This has something in common with visual surgery: "cut-out" books. What we see is real, it is really there, it is revealed as it is through transillumination. The visual worlds ,which are as it were dissected through combination, themselves deal with injuries and deformations. One kind - which were modelled on the "Lehrbuch für häusliche

Krankenpflegekurse", third edition 1944, published by the Swiss Red Cross - imitates the state of being injured and simulates the specific measures required for healing; the other - which refers to "education in deportment and behaviour", published in 1967 by the Volkseigener Verlag Berlin 'Volk und Wissen', warns against the beginnings of "changes in the physical and spiritual demands on the workers brought about by the technical revolution...", by means of the simulation of preventative, precautionary gymnastic posture exercises. Rémy Markowitsch simulates a classically artistic approach by allowing us to gain an inkling of the presence of creative figures which provide a counterpoint to the theme and its mechanical appropriation, and by giving the transilluminated subjects a rigid frame, as if protecting their fragility and artistic ingenuity and preventing any possibility of their leaking out into space, into the poorly-trained banality of contemporary everyday life.

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