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OLAF UNVERZART – ALP

ON HEAVY BAGS, SLOW PICTURES, AND THE PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE OF THE
LANDSCAPE – A PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNEY IN THE ALPS

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*they are incorruptible and timeless. they challenge and reward. they throw you back into yourself
and into existential matters. i think it is these things that attract me to them so much.**

Perhaps these were also the sentiments and challenges faced by the pioneers of Alpine photography, as they ventured forth on bold and sometimes life-threatening expeditions in the largely unknown but not unstoried region of Europe's highest mountains. They were inspired by eighteenth-century poets and literary precursors such as Albrecht von Haller (1708–1777), a polymath from Bern, and his epic poem *The Alps* (1729); by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712–1778) critique of civilization; or by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749–1832) travel writings. Their visual inspiration came from the Swiss pioneer of mountain painting, Caspar Wolf (1735–1783); or British artist J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), who visited the Swiss Alps for the first time in 1802. And they were encouraged by scientists such as Horace-Bénédict de Saussure (1740–1799), a natural scientist from Geneva and the founder of Alpine geology who scaled the highest peak in the Alps himself in 1787, a year after the first ascent of Mont Blanc by Michel-Gabriel Paccard and Jacques Balmat.

But great as the fascination for the mountains may have been, alongside the desire for adventure and the longing for open spaces and altitude, they remained beyond most people's reach. When it first started, photography—and especially photography in the mountains—was an expensive undertaking and was therefore the privilege of those people who had sufficient funds or who could explore the topography of the Alps on scientific or military expeditions. One of the early pioneers of mountain photography was Daniel Dollfus-Ausset (1797–1870), an industrialist from Mulhouse who was passionate about glaciers. Not only can he be credited with the construction of a stone hut for mountaineers and scientists on the Aar glacier in the Bernese Alps, but he also took some of the first

photographs of the mountains. In 1849 and 1850 he was accompanied on his expeditions by daguerreotypists Jean-Gustave Dardel (1824–1899) and Camille Bernabé (1808–1860), who took a series of small-format photographs of Swiss glaciers and mountains for Dollfus-Ausset. All these photographs were both valuable and unique.

Among the photographic pioneers who took the first reproducible images of the Alps were the Bisson brothers, Louis-Auguste (1814–1876) and Auguste-Rosalie (1826–1900), who ran a successful photographic studio in Paris in the 1850s. They too were employed by Dollfus-Ausset, entering into an exclusive contract with him between 1855 and 1857. During this period, when most first ascents took place, Auguste-Rosalie Bisson succeeded in climbing Mont Blanc in 1861, after two failed attempts. He was among the first to take photographs above the snowline, although due to bad weather conditions he was only able to bring back three exposed plates from this expedition. Two subsequent ascents were more successful, although the bankruptcy of the Bissons' company in 1863 suggests that the enormous costs of these ventures were in no way offset by any commercial gain.

But perhaps it was simply a case of being a better businessman, like Alsatian textile designer Adolphe Braun (1812–1877), who also worked for Dollfus-Ausset and who knew exactly how to adapt to the growth of mountain tourism among the middle classes. With his expanding team of employees he photographed tourist destinations in Germany and Switzerland. His technically expert but comparatively affordable landscape photographs depicted the Romantic sublime in nature and were marketed in various formats, including stereo views and panoramas.

*one's perspective on things depends critically on one's approach.**

One's chosen route into the landscape—whether a meditative stroll or a bicycle ride, whether a filmic train journey or by car through accessible mountain passes—determines the images one sees and at the same time the experiences that the chosen route allows. In our age of photographic omnipresence, we can scarcely imagine the physical and financial exertions entailed in reaching a new vantage point during the early days of mountain photography. On elaborate expeditions photographers would set forth with up to thirty people, including local guides and bearers carrying equipment and supplies weighing around 250 kilos. In the case of the wet-plate collodion process, which was standard beginning in 1850–51, the glass plates had to be sensitized in situ, exposed while still wet, then developed, fixed, and washed in water. As a result, the luggage of the pioneers of Alpine photography contained not only heavy, bulky, wooden box cameras but also various lenses and

tripods, and even a portable darkroom, chemicals, and tanks—basically an entire photographic laboratory.

A literal lifting of such a burden and increased mobility resulted from the invention of new dry-plate technology, by which the technical operations were simplified through the use of preprepared glass plates, the weight of the equipment reduced to fifteen kilos, and the photographers themselves became visibly more flexible. Haberdasher, mountaineer, and amateur photographer Jules Beck (1825–1904) was one of the first proponents of this new process, and he revolutionized the way the mountains were seen. As Switzerland’s leading mountain photographer he documented the landscape of the Alps above 4,000 meters for over twenty years.

By contrast, the work of Italian alpinist and mountain photographer Vittorio Sella (1859–1943) demonstrates how the choice of a particular approach is not only dependent on external conditions but can also derive from a substantive decision. In an age when technical advances were already creating more straightforward photographic methods, his deliberate initial choice was the old-fashioned, elaborate, wet-plate collodion process. What mattered to Sella was not achieving his aim quickly but the perfect quality of his mountain views, taken from the ideal standpoint.

Olaf Unverzart too adopts the more difficult way, setting off on his photographic expeditions into the Alps with a plate camera and around twenty kilos of luggage. The photos in this book were taken over a period of twelve years over countless trips and tours. Working with conventional film, he usually takes no more than two shots of the same subject, making his most important decisions before pressing the shutter release. By slowing things down in this way, Unverzart’s gaze can wander and shift; he is allowed to have doubts, perhaps even to fail. Allied with time, Unverzart is freed to examine things in detail, and to circumnavigate unresolved questions for a long period, thereby strengthening his own artistic position.

*the whys and wherefores of how any trip has gone hold no interest for me at 4.30 a.m. in a hut at an altitude of 3,000 meters.**

Going one’s own way, giving in to one’s feelings, experience, and instincts means not least liberating oneself as well from narratives and stories, from the preconceptions in one’s head, and the touristic stereotypes of today’s already numerous viewing platforms and photo opportunities. The popularization of mountain photography, which resulted in pictures of the Alps becoming visual

common property, was not long in coming. Around 1900 mountain tourism became affordable for a broader sector of the population, summer resorts in the Alps were promoted as a place of relaxation for city dwellers, and more manageable cameras and the gelatin silver process gradually made their way into amateur photography. The Wehrli brothers from Kilchberg near Zurich were among the first to contribute to the mass marketing of images of the Alps. Skilled photographers Bruno (1867–1927) and Artur (1876–1915), together with salesman Heinrich (1869–1906) founded a photographic business in the mid-1890s, and in 1904 set themselves up as photographic publishers, Wehrli A.G. As such they published picture postcards showing photographs of Alpine villages, Swiss attractions, and their numerous Alpine tours that found a broad customer base among those travellers who could not afford their own camera. The prevalence of the postcard also brought with it an increase in stereotypical Alpine views that reinforced the cliché of an ideal, romanticized mountain habitat. Last but not least the 1930s Alpine films of pioneer Arnold Fanck (1889–1974) and Luis Trenker (1892–1990) contributed to a fascination with the mountain landscape and mountain and ski sports. The German economic miracle of the fifties and sixties ultimately turned the camera into a fully fledged member of the family—ever present on trips to the mountains with everything but the kitchen sink packed into a Volkswagen Beetle. Afterwards one shared one's experiences with friends at slideshow evenings, or glued prints into the photo album as souvenirs. The Alps were turned into an experience, and the landscape into a backdrop. Meanwhile mass tourism and mass photography conquered the heights, reaching absurd proportions. The construction of new highways, huge parking lots and cableways, more and more new ski areas, the opening up of glaciers, and the growth in the amusements industry meant enormous encroachments on a once pristine natural landscape.

So it is not surprising that contemporary photographers are looking for a new way of seeing the mountains, free from the impact of tourism. They deal critically with the destruction of the cultural landscape and the consequences of climate change; they struggle with the myth of the Alps and its ideological connotations, or go off in search of the few remaining places where the original landscape can still be experienced.

Since the mid-nineties Tyrolean photographer Lois Hechenblaikner (b. 1958) has focused on exposing the dramatic flipside of the tourist and leisure industry. Through his work on human interventions and incursions such as erosion and landfill, the use of plastic tarpaulins on summer ski slopes, or the employment of artificial snow machines, as well as his sardonic look at the après-ski scene, major public events in the Alps, and the marketing of today's kitsch Alpine culture, he reveals an industry that is a million miles away from any kind of sustainability or naturalness.

A more subtle approach is offered by Walter Niedermayr (b. 1952), who has been photographing Alpine landscapes since 1987 to show how man-made infrastructures appropriate and control the region. The people moving around in his flat white winter landscapes look like toys. Almost unreal and somewhat out of place, they force us to revise our view of nature as something that has apparently been turned into a theatre set.

In the work of Austrian architect and photographer Margherita Spiluttini (b. 1947) human beings have almost completely disappeared from the picture. What remains are the traces they have left behind in the landscape. In her strictly composed images, focusing always on technical structures and architecture, on streets and bridges, dams and installations, Spiluttini depicts nature imprinted with human activity.

In his own particular way Olaf Unverzart liberates the process of seeing in his photographic work. By affording the journey toward the image the same attention as he gives to the image itself, and by engaging with the physical experience of the landscape, his perception in and with the mountains develops. The process of seeing relaxes, becomes more precise, and detaches itself through this subjective outlook from the obligation to demonstrate or explain something objectively. Unverzart encounters the mountains with humility, time, and curiosity, waiting patiently until their protean strata and stratifications emerge.

*10 sheets of film, 5 hours trudging, but too sunny, dormitory.**

Adapting to nature and her moods, waiting and stepping back also means learning from the mountains. Experiencing oneself in the encounter with the peaks that are simply there, silent. Sensing how tiny and powerless you are, but also realizing what might be important and essential, and what drives your own actions.

Even early explorers such as Horace-Bénédict de Saussure were aware that the physical perception of the landscape was accompanied by a spiritual process, and that the stillness of nature brings the traveller face-to-face with him- or herself: “Anyone who has surrendered to such meditations on the summit of the Alps knows how much deeper, broader, and more illuminating they are than when one is confined within the walls of one’s study,” he wrote in his *Voyages dans les Alpes* (1779), showing that the decision to travel to the mountains can also be a choice in favour of a subjective, perhaps almost autobiographical view of nature.

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Unverzart's meditations on the Alps are characterized by his own personal position, by a kind of restrained observation that refuses one-sidedness. Indeed the contemporary Alpine landscape may well contain breathtaking scenery but there are also avalanche barriers and slope protections, melting glaciers and rockfall, mountain passes and futuristic hotel developments. But despite unavoidable human traces in the landscape, respect for the forces of nature remains just as tangible in Unverzart's pictures as the fascination conveyed by the first ascents and the early days of mountain photography. This can be seen most clearly in Unverzart's series *North Faces*, the final six challenges in Alpine mountaineering that were conquered with the ascent of the north face of the Eiger by Anderl Heckmair, Heinrich Harrer, Fritz Kasperek, and Ludwig Vörg in 1938. Bathed in the evening twilight, they confront us elegantly and sublimely—but also with indifference. For whatever it is we are looking for in the mountains—and perhaps even find—the mountains themselves have no need of us.

But just as we must not stop climbing mountains—although the roads have all been travelled and all the records set—equally we should not stop making images of them. Unverzart's photos show us this and make it clear that it is not above all a question of finding a new, untrodden path, but of recognizing one's own. It seems that through his work in the mountains he has experienced not merely an encounter with himself. The pictures he gives us testify to an artistic signature and attitude characterized by this inner need to make images, to look closely, and to tell stories that ultimately go far beyond the personal. In Unverzart's *Alps* the manifold tales of this world are concentrated—in all their beauty and tragedy.

*thank god they still seem unearthly to me. the rock is cold, the night so dark. power and madness
dance on the peaks.**

** All quotations by Olaf Unverzart*