

A Nation In Change (Eine Willensnation im Umbruch)

Interview with Erich Busslinger about Inland Archive – by Sybille Roter

(Extract)

When Erich Busslinger returned to Switzerland from a long stay in Russia, he was disconcerted by the until then familiar homeland. Equipped with a video camera, he roamed about his home country for several years, provoking a close examination of his memories and origin. *Inland Archive* comprises his unconventional shots of the supposedly inconspicuous everyday life and is an irritating description of Switzerland's state today. In long, meditative shots Busslinger observes the social changes of a nation searching for its future and the forgotten roots of its own tradition.

Led by the throw of the dice you have examined the various realities of Switzerland with a video camera on countless journeys since 1999. To what extent was the accidental postcode a help for your observations?

I wanted to make the experience of getting to a place I didn't know yet and to examine what I perceived in these new surroundings without any conscious research. The principle of chance was a possibility to get me off the roads I'm already familiar with and which I know from memory. The feeling of being on the road was always very exciting for me because you leave everyday life behind and enter a new space, in which your look is not yet focussed. I wanted to find out if it is possible to find significant images with this open attitude and my phenomenological working method.

How successful was your search for these shots of "moments in time" within the Swiss reality?

In the beginning, the examination of the realities was a real effort of will for me, because as an observer I was forced to position myself. As an artist I have always been searching for experimental or symbolic formulations. My aesthetic and artistic ambitions often prevented me from getting directly involved in reality, as I preferred to work with the ambivalence of the pictorial. On my expeditions through Switzerland I wanted to find images that spoke for themselves. In this process I realised that the accidental coming across places and situations confronted me deeply, activating my own memories. The journey around my own country became a journey to my origin.

On your journeys you wanted to look at the familiar with the unprejudiced eye of a foreigner. Which situations were particularly fascinating for you?

At the beginning of this work I wanted to investigate the urban space of Switzerland, an accumulation of conurbations and national parks. I was interested in images of indefinable origin. Sometimes it's obvious that they come from Switzerland, but sometimes it's not. I did not want to find the typical, but irritating images of Switzerland.

Which question do the ten chapters have in common?

In all of the ten fifteen-minute chapters, a fundamental conflict of civilization is perceptible. The changes in social development manifest themselves in everyday life as well as in the general landscape. The friction between the rural and the urban way of life often marked my experiences on these journeys. Today, Switzerland is a loose knotting of almost uncontrollably rampant structures of conurbations and suburbs. It is amazing how many different realities are lived out here or what kinds of microstructures exist next to each other. As soon as someone, quite like an ethnologist, gets into the minute and inconspicuous moments of everyday life, Switzerland has an exotic aura.

What description of the state Switzerland is in today resulted from these different shots?

It is obvious that Switzerland is a nation born out of will, which consists of extremely different cultural roots. It is always surprising that a consensus is found despite the different mentalities. The willingness to constantly negotiate the shared identity is visible. That these debates function on this level, still has an impact on the future perspectives of political practice. The Swiss have an enormous capacity for persistence in how they live their traditions. This coincidence of the high infrastructure of civilization and lived tradition is impressive. Next to all critical aspects in my work there is also a lot of respect.

The archaic dimension of the folklore, which puts its mark on everyday life even today seemed particularly striking to me. There is still a need for these rituals even though the roots of some are no longer present.

In which situations are these conflicts of civilization and changes in Swiss everyday life still perceptible?

The social changes, like the increasing migration to the centres of economy are perceptible everywhere. It's true, the whole countryside is developed and industrial zones have been established in remote regions, e.g. like Glarus or in Val de Travers, but compared to a centre of economy like Zürich their appearance reminds us more of the state of developing countries. The gap between the booming economical centres and the economically weaker areas is huge and

this has consequences for the social development in Switzerland. For example, I visited a Swiss bank's shareholder's meeting that symbolises another aspect of Switzerland. Here, money is part of the commodity working and operating worldwide. I show aspects of this economical and social contrast in the chapter "Umbau". It also contains a shot that shows a man lying on the floor apathetically. People just passed by without noticing him. It is an image for the unrelated anonymity in our society – or the price we pay for the dominance of our achievement-oriented way of life.

Which final conclusion do you draw from your subjectively pointed up observations in your other chapters?

The formerly highly esteemed solidarity is crumbling as in all modern industrial societies. There is a great contrast between the lived historical and urban identities and it is correspondingly the central topic in the chapters like "Vorort", "Stau", "Bergfahrt" or "Agricult". "Naturpark" tells about the incredible will of the Swiss to control the natural landscape and to optimize its cultivation. "Nachtleben" on the other hand shows the dark side of the controlled citizen. The militia system in formation is the topic of "Parade", while the Swiss drunkenness on tradition, is in the centre of "Heimatwerk". "Totolotto" tells about the search for happiness or the hope to be rich one day. It is the world of the ordinary people and their unfulfilled wishes. I personally have a particular liking for them. Already as a child I was fascinated by this search for a better life. In this work I have looked at my memories and stored images of Switzerland in a new way and have questioned my own origin. Through all these journeys I have once more learned from what mould we are cast.

Sybille Roter, Journalist, Basel, 2003

Translation by Judith Lichtneckert