

# Unfamiliar Familiarities. Outside Views on Switzerland

## **An exhibition of the Fotostiftung Schweiz and the Musée de l'Elysée in connection with the anniversary '100 Years Tourism Promotion Switzerland 1917-2017'**

Switzerland's image has been shaped decisively by tourism. It has always been possible to market the country successfully with photographs of spectacular mountain panoramas and rural idylls. These photographs made a significant contribution to the national identity. However, the corresponding repertoire of images also resulted in numerous clichés.

On the occasion of its 100th anniversary in 2017, Switzerland Tourism has launched an unusual experiment: instead of allocating advertising commissions, it invited five eminent photographers to capture their own independent views of Switzerland and present them in an exhibition. The project was devised by the Fotostiftung Schweiz and implemented together with the Musée de l'Elysée (Lausanne). Switzerland Tourism provided financial and logistical support, but exerted no influence on either the theme proposed by the participants or on the resulting works.

When selecting the photographers the exhibition curators placed great store by different perspectives: the artists were to be clearly distinguishable in terms of their origins, working methods and previous knowledge of Switzerland. They were requested to develop personal essays rather than reportages. The aim was not to show a representative image of Switzerland, but to provide an opportunity to see the familiar anew and from a subjective vantage point.

The result? Five fundamentally different travelogues about an island at the heart of Europe – a plurality of views of Switzerland. Shane Lavalette (USA) visited the same twelve communities that the Swiss photographer Theo Frey had portrayed for the national exhibition or 'Landesausstellung' in 1939. Almost 80 years later, he confronted Frey's documentary work with a kind of travelogue-diary shaped by atmospheres and encounters. Simon Roberts (UK) focussed on the relationship between people and landscapes. He sought out various viewing platforms and in so doing himself acted as an observer of observers who seemed to prefer to observe themselves through their smartphone cameras despite the impressive backdrop. Alinka Echeverría (Mexico/UK) engaged with young people who are at a crossroads in their lives and at the mercy of the living conditions prevailing in their country – tomorrow's Switzerland. Zhang Xiao (China) travelled along the river Rhine and produced a collection of fascinating and humorous visual question marks – the first series he has done outside of China. Eva Leitolf (Germany) travelled Switzerland's borders in a caravan, sometimes looking in, sometimes out, while at the same time wondering where Switzerland begins and where it ends.

*Tatyana Franck, Peter Pfrunder, Lars Willumeit*

The project 'Unfamiliar Familiarities' has been supported by Switzerland Tourism.

Parallel to the exhibition the two institutions released a book, published by Lars Müller Publishers: five artists' books complemented by a textbook and combined in a slipcase. Available at the ticket office, CHF 38.

Special events:

Sunday, 12 February, 11.30 a.m., (Re)framing Switzerland. Talk with the artists Alinka Echeverría and Simon Roberts, chaired by Lars Willumeit (in English).

Sunday, 12 March, 11.30 a.m., Die Schweiz im Netz. Wie Bilder zirkulieren. Fabian Reichle (Manager Social Media, Switzerland Tourism) in conversation with Lars Willumeit.

Sunday, 9 April, 11.30 a.m., Die Schweiz im Plural. Curator tour of the exhibition with Lars Willumeit and Peter Pfrunder.

## Shane Lavalette

### Still (Noon)

*Although I wanted to be a good photographer, I am still at odds with myself today. What is the most valuable thing about my work? I have discovered that the simplest, most trivial things can suddenly assume a great value...*

– Theo Frey

‘Shortly after starting work as a photojournalist, Swiss-born Theo Frey (1908–1997) began to desire something more from his photography. For much of his career, he would seek out opportunities to utilize his camera to probe more deeply into the world than his reportage assignments allowed. One of Frey’s most resonant and personal projects was a large-scale presentation for the 1939 Swiss National Exhibition. For this, he visited and systematically photographed in twelve Swiss villages, aiming to tell a story of Switzerland at that moment in time.

Following the footsteps of Frey’s journey from nearly eighty years earlier, I traveled to the same twelve villages in order to find new images that explore the fabric of Switzerland today, guided by chance encounters and my own meditations on the past, present, and future. Frey was a devout documentarian who did not consider himself an artist, but he was certainly invested in the power of an image to transport a viewer. I found his considered studies of subjects most beautifully illustrated in his “contact sheets”—the numerous hand-made grids of numbered photographs carefully assembled by his wife, Alice. I was immediately drawn to these objects as profound representations of place and time, now finished with the patina of their own existence.

Within the archive at the Fotostiftung Schweiz,<sup>1</sup> I uncovered unexpected connections between my own images and Frey’s, and was at once confronted with the weight of history. I considered the ways in which Frey’s photographs have different implications now than the day that they were made, and how the meaning of my own images will undoubtedly transform with age as well. Photographs, I realized, are much like mountains. Though we think of images as fixed and still, what we see in them is always shifting, however slowly, with time.’

*Shane Lavalette (USA, b. 1987) is an American photographer, an independent publisher and editor, and the director of Light Work, a nonprofit photography organization based in Syracuse, New York. He holds a BFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University. In 2016, he published his monograph ‘One Sun, One Shadow’, exploring the American South, inspired by its rich musical tradition.*

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<sup>1</sup> Theo Frey’s photographic estate comprises about 100,000 negatives, 3,500 contact sheets, 21 scrapbooks, and thousands of prints. In 1989, the Swiss Confederation acquired Frey’s archive, and in 2006 it was given as a permanent loan to the Fotostiftung Schweiz, where it has since been maintained.

## Simon Roberts

### Sight Sacralization. (Re)framing Switzerland

'When the wealthy English set off on their European Grand Tours in the 1800s, they expected that Switzerland would inspire them with vistas of sublime grandeur. The landscape's untamed romanticism was a crucial component of Switzerland's national identity and cultural prestige.

Today, the Swiss landscape often resembles a theater set, where tourists are transported to officially designated areas of natural beauty to gaze upon epic views from the safety of stage-managed viewpoints, a process referred to as "sight sacralization."<sup>2</sup> A place is named, then framed and elevated, before being enshrined, mechanically reproduced and finally socially reproduced across a variety of media. Tourists are both performers and spectators, part of the circle of representation in which "all we see is seen through the kaleidoscope of all that we have seen before."<sup>3</sup>

My large-format tableaux photographs are taken of viewing platforms at some of the most photographed places in Switzerland. The locations were sourced using the online mapping software Sightsmap,<sup>4</sup> which creates popularity heatmaps based on crowdsourcing geo-tagged photographs uploaded to the Internet. There is also an added element of augmented data within several of my photographs: embedded information ranging from videos of tourists taking selfies to a stream of images taken from the same locations within the last twenty-four hours.

Together, these photographs explore how we use, manipulate, remember, and experience tourist sites. The series considers tourists' creation and interpretation of their own photographs, both at the time of taking them and afterwards. The work raises questions relating to aesthetics, performance, and individual and collective identities within our "culture of instantaneity."<sup>5</sup>

*Simon Roberts' (UK, b. 1974) work deals with our relationship with landscape and notions of identity and belonging. He has published 'Motherland' (2007), 'We English' (2009), and 'Pierdom' (2013). Roberts holds a position as a visiting lecturer on the European Master of Fine Art Photography course at IED Madrid. He is an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society and a member of the international photography collective POC (Piece of Cake).*

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<sup>2</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 43-45.

<sup>3</sup> Andy Grundberg, *The Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography 1974-1989* (New York: Aperture, 1999), p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> [www.sightsmap.com](http://www.sightsmap.com).

<sup>5</sup> John Tomlinson, *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy* (London: Sage, 2007), p. 74.

Alinka Echeverría

## **Snow in Summer / La neige en été / Schnee im Sommer**

*The fellow members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of the communion... Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity or genuineness, but in the style in which they are imagined.*

*– Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*

‘As I started my journey, I was curious to learn what it meant to “come of age” in Switzerland’s unique historical, geo-political and imaginary terrain. Much in the way that territorial borders may be redefined, and mark contested thresholds of nationhood, so adolescence marks a complex frontier in which bodies stretch, hormones surge, desires are charged and emotions are raw. Invited into this precious place of becoming, of intoxication and experimentation, I witnessed young lovers holding each other in bed as dawn broke, and cooked breakfast with new friends after a night of storytelling. I discovered the streets of a forgotten border town with Ariane, and went swimming with Neige in a mountain river that she says “knows” her. Always kind and welcoming, the (one hundred and twenty-two) teenagers and young adults with whom I collaborated helped me envisage the intangible ties that bind them in Swiss-ness.

Together, we melted away limiting dichotomies of representation. Day/night, past/present, masculine/feminine, child/adult, gay/straight, insecure/confident, beautiful/ugly, right/wrong, native/secondo, apprentice/student, manual/intellectual: dissolved. Together we unfolded the layered contradictions of a time in which the joy of first love can turn to indescribable pain, where permanent tattoos are temporary trends, where personal identity is modeled on internet celebrity. A time in which looking in can mean coming out, and coming home means leaving. Together, we navigated a place where neutrality obliges conscription, where privilege is a burden, and opportunity a pressure, where immigrants align, secondos achieve, and terzos rebel from expectations. A place where the golden hour is blue and four tongues are mother; a place where snow can exist in summer.’

*Alinka Echeverría (Mexico/UK, b. 1981) has made a name for herself working in the field of expanded photography. She holds a master’s degree in Social Anthropology from the University of Edinburgh (2004), as well as a postgraduate degree in Photography from the International Center of Photography in New York (2008). Echeverría was awarded the HSBC Prize for Photography in 2011; voted International Photographer of the Year for 2012 by the Lucie Awards committee; selected as BMW Photographer-in-Residence at the Musée Nicéphore Niépce (Chalon-sur-Saône, F) in 2015.*

## Zhang Xiao

### The River

'Having never been to Switzerland before, everything I encountered during this project felt new and strange. My only impression of the country came from the Internet: an almost perfect image with beautiful natural scenery, and excellent social welfare systems. As a foreigner, I could only observe this country through the eyes of a tourist.

Movement was essential in my discovery of Switzerland, and for this trip I chose to travel in three ways: by bicycle, by train, and on foot. These different modes of transportation proved to be complementary. They enabled me, in a short period of time, to encounter all manner of local customs and practices, and to explore all kinds of photographic genres.

Because of the role played by water in human life, not only its origins but also in the existence and development of human civilizations and societies, its connection to culture and place has occupied a central place in my work. Switzerland's longest and most important river, the Rhine, was a natural choice as the connective thread in this project. It enabled me to cover a representative range of regions and geographies, city and countryside, mountains and plains, but also tradition and modernity.

Between 2009 and 2013, I worked on another project following water, one covering the Chinese coastline. In the resulting series, it became apparent that in the context of rapid economic development in China, the material life of individuals evolved, but their mental attitudes often seemed to remain at a standstill. A theoretical sense of conflict and contrast became visible throughout these works, but a sense of "real life" was maintained by the photographs' capacity for recording a specific time and place.

Because, in my view, Switzerland is a highly developed and stable country, the situation there is not the same as in today's China. This made it sometimes challenging for me to fully explore the same themes as I had previously. As a result of cultural difference and language barriers, my work reflects my personal experience, and my own perspective in this country today, as opposed to exploring the deep tissues and issues of Swiss society. The resulting series describes the collisions and curiosity that confronted me, a "strange tourist from the East."

*Zhang Xiao (China, b. 1981) was born in Yantai, a city in the Shandong province. He graduated from the Department of Architecture and Design at Yantai University in 2005. Before becoming an art photographer, he worked as a photojournalist for the Chongqing Morning Post. In 2011, he was awarded the HSBC Prize for Photography for 'Coastline'. 'Coastline' has been published in book form in France by Actes Sud; in Ningbo by Jiazazhi Press; and in Tokyo by Zen Foto Gallery. Zhang Xiao currently lives and works in the city of Chengdu, in China's Sichuan province.*

Eva Leitolf

## Matters of Negotiation. Annäherungen an die Schweiz

‘Alongside natural disasters and pandemics, the Swiss government regards migration as a risk demanding preparedness.’<sup>6</sup> Official emergency planning documents lay out a scenario where an influx of refugees seriously endangers public safety. While this may not be a threat in the conventional sense, they say, there is no room for complacency.

In summer 2015, one Swiss newspaper describes a country looking to close itself off.<sup>7</sup> A supposedly eternal nation is held aloft, while there seems to be no place for Switzerland in the interconnected global village. The author calls for a shift in the narrative, a systematic, coherent national history for a nation whose success rests on learning and change.

Max Frisch discusses the meaning of Heimat, or homeland, in his acceptance speech for the 1974 Schiller Prize for literature. What does Heimat consist of, he asks: bricks and mortar, landscape as “the stage of life,” dialect as marker of (not) belonging, ideology, literature, territory?<sup>8</sup>

Matters of Negotiation approaches Switzerland from the margins, circling along the country’s territorial limits. Where does Switzerland begin, and where does it end? Who lives within, and who remains without? What conflicts arise through the drawing of borders? And how are frontiers defined, modified, defended, and overcome?

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*Eva Leitolf (Germany, b. 1966) studied communications design with a focus on photography at University GH Essen. She earned her MFA at the California Institute of the Arts and now teaches regularly at international art schools and universities. Her publications include ‘Postcards from Europe 03/13’ (2013), ‘Deutsche Bilder – eine Spurensuche’ (2008), and ‘Rostock Ritz’ (2004). In 2016, she was awarded the City of Munich’s Art Prize.*

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<sup>6</sup> The 2015 Swiss emergency preparedness report sets out to improve the country’s disaster response and security policy, in order to “enhance Switzerland’s resilience.” Bundesamt für Bevölkerungsschutz in Zusammenarbeit mit Ernst Basler + Partner AG, *Katastrophen und Notlagen Schweiz – Technischer Risikobericht 2015* (Bern: Bundesamt für Bevölkerungsschutz, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> *Tages-Anzeiger*, July 5, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Max Frisch, “Die Schweiz als Heimat? Rede zur Verleihung des Großen Schillerpreises 1974,” in: *Gesammelte Werke in zeitlicher Folge*, vol. VI, ed. Hans Mayer, assisted by Walter Schmitz (Frankfurt am Main, 1976).