

Presence in absence: the “ Landscape Works” of Nikolas Theilgaard

„Needless to say, you need to find a way through the landscape to be able to draw the map, but at the same time you need to draw the map to be able to find a way through the landscape.“

Inger Christensen

In a way that is at the same time both tangibly sensual and considered, the work of Nikolas Theilgaard investigates the aphorisms that come to stand in for perception as the world itself becomes more abstract. He aims at a kind of assimilation of the world, and begins with a cautious appraisal of visible surfaces, fixing and cropping them as a way to plumb the depths of the, so to speak, co-captives of space and time. In this the artist makes use of two divergent media that might seem at first glance to have little in common: photography and drawing. He isn't however interested in an opposition between the “representation of facts, objects and landscapes” and the conceptual appropriation of reality, not in different ways of perceiving the world, but in two different methods of making the world into an image: on the one side the image as a framed window to which we turn our gaze and on the other side the image that steps into the place of the eye and in doing so leaves the frame and our standpoint indeterminate.

The photographic images are almost exclusively produced while travelling, but the focus isn't on spectacular motifs of distant lands. The gaze is concentrated on perceptions and things at the edge of awareness. The perception at the edge, out of the corner of our eye, is both vague and vulnerable, inexact and irritating. The camera isn't used as a tool to elevate us over the place and make it accessible. Instead its secrets are protected. Light and

shadow, water and air build almost impermeable layers and enclose the place in an atmosphere of foreignness.

The view to the horizon is blocked. Depth of space can only be guessed. The landscape compositions only become two-dimensional images in the photographic medium, however, when the film is developed after the journey. A different kind of viewing occurs when photography explicitly rejects the illusion of the absolute creative power of the artist over his work. There is always something in a photograph which cannot be planned to the last detail. This plays a not inconsiderable role in the enigma of this apparently objective medium. This added value is something that Nikolas Theilgaard knows how to productively exploit. In a two-dimensional surface, that which is absent – that which existed previously in four-dimensional space-time – undergoes a poetic compression. The image becomes a map to be measured by the eye.

At this point in the artist's work there is an encounter between the two previously mentioned artistic media, which enter into stimulating dialogue with each other, although the drawings and collages seem to be primarily map-making ventures, which aspire to track down the underlying structures of the places and landscapes. But even if the production of a map always involves the fixing of a surface, a landscape, through various summarizing and reductive codes for the purpose of an apparent comprehensibility, Theilgaard takes the process of minimalisation more than a few steps further. A world atlas shows all the places where the artist has been, without however showing the routes in between. The pages of the copied index are whited over with Tippex and only the names of the places visited are left free. The Terra Incognita of the white surface determines the image. The biography of the places intersects with the geography of the self. In a counter-move a map of Denmark shows the complete

road network, but without indicating the place names, and covers the surface with a web of disoriented lines.

The material of the maps are transformed into a mysterious visual structure. The artist's map-making projects are above all inscriptions into the interior, for which he feels his way with his chosen detectors over the surfaces of the world and creates them for himself anew, rather than representing them. With his distanced photography and drawings Nikolas Theilgaard rubs shoulders with the impenetrable surface called the world. According to Botho Strauss "the forms of the world (are) in incessant distant contact, react, answer, refer to each other, they create, they play out a law through their presumptive variety, and they finally follow rules that we don't know. We can only observe them, classify them, laboriously establish similarities and changes while they dynamically relate to each other over space and time and create that which we call seeing and being seen, what we call thing and organ. Forms themselves are that spirit, which is talking about us."

We should learn to value the work of the artist as an attempt to productively use the gap between thinking and acting, between word and deed, between idea and perception.

Harald Uhr

Translation by Lucy Harvey