

An Atlas

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*No one, wise Kublai, knows better than you that the city must never be confused with the words that describe it. And yet between the one and the other there is a connection. (Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*)¹*

The city represents a space that evades perception. It offers itself up to sight only one section at a time. To discuss a city, therefore, means to talk about an idea that escapes visibility. In its incomprehensibility, it turns to the imaginary. Anyone walking through a city cannot help but revert to the imagination to guide one's sight and hence, one's footsteps. In this sense, "invented" sight precedes that of the eye. What is perceived is merely the aftermath of an idea—regardless of how well this idea and the eye's sight harmonize.

The knowledge of this incomprehensibility and of the fragmented gaze makes use of a kind of order that connects both: a language of images and signs that draws from the visible, to show where it will lead the imagination—labels, road signs, maps, or guidance systems mark the precise spot where sight and the mind's eye overlap. Embedded within these moments is the hope for a sense of orientation.

The desire for a sense of orientation stands for the attempt to connect the visible site that one imagines with the concept of a space that cannot be seen, but can nevertheless be imagined. Orientation, then, makes use of the visible and the imaginable together.

When images and signs address the unseen to guide our vision, they successively inscribe its traces into our sight. What then seems to be the visible is the paradoxical form of a visible version of the imaginable. This visible version of the imaginable becomes a true paradox when so many images and signs populate the space of our sight that the sheer number of ideas evoked literally drowns in the visible. When too many signs occupy the space of our sight, these references are themselves transformed into pure visibility. In this sense, the boundaries of the unseen, of the imaginary, are not located on the edge of the inconceivable, but on the edge of visibility.

This boundary is radicalized due to the fact that the eye frequently falls back upon the visible, using only what can be seen to orient itself. In every city there are buildings, landmarks, or streets that are considered orientation points, but are not

necessarily interesting alone. Even though they represent visible space, they are dedicated to their function as signs, supporting the "imagined" more than the eye's sight. From this perspective, the city itself transforms into a map. Space and image—the city and its map—blend into one another. The idea of walking through the city also stands for the idea of walking on and through images. Images of space and spatial images. Spatial images and images of space.

This is where Olaf Holzapfel's work begins. The motif of urban space—in this case, Tokyo, a city whose size and population density permit it to evade both perception and imagination, while at the same time brushing up against their boundaries. This city consistently portrays itself as an ever-present attempt to provide orientation in an expansive space. Every small address card contains a miniature map with signs marking points of orientation: here the flower shop, across from it, the gas station; then simply turn right, go down the little path, etc. Tiny buildings are scattered throughout the entire city, staffed with people whose only job is to provide addresses and directions. The residue from Tokyo's buildings—neon lights, images, and signs, all want to give information. There are also signs that guide the blind, and in this sense, maintain a certain kind of visibility though they are intended for those denied of sight. These are markings in the ground, forming a guidance system that can be felt by a blind person's cane. As a rule, marks are long, yellow grooves or dotted surfaces that inform whether a route continues or changes direction. These marks constitute a city within the city, the markings of an unseen city in the midst of the visible city. It is significant that Holzapfel's attention is drawn precisely to this motif: at the intersection of visible and invisible, a system of coordinates exists for a visual concept that uses the discernible to discuss the imperceptible.

His photographs are aimed at subjects that escape the sight of those who have only imagination, and appeal to the imagination of those who look for the imagined in spite of what they see. Left over from these orientation aids is an abstraction of space and image, an abstraction that goes beyond the visible and invisible in equal measure. Instead of linking imagined space to the visible environment to allow orientation then and there, Holzapfel abstracts the visible and the imaginable in favor of an arrangement that regards the picture itself as space and place. Confronted with his photographs from Tokyo, both sight and the mind's eye are directed to a space and to places separate from their geographic origins. This abstract relationship between space and image, visibility and conceivability, is valid far beyond geographic coordinates. This Tokyo exists in every city of any considerable size. Perhaps that means a specific sense of direction in any one place is lost, but it also offers a sense of orientation that is valid everywhere. In this

sense, Holzapfel's publication is a kind of atlas that also holds the promise of orientation—even if one has never been in Tokyo or will never go there, preferring to spend time elsewhere.

The coordinates of these pictures, which are allocated to both the visible and the imaginable, are oriented towards a visual language that reflects both urban space and painting, whether it is composition, density, texture, palette, light, or the relationship of various components to each other. For these coordinates, Holzapfel uses only the camera and the point of view that aligns the photograph's documentary traces according to other basic principles. In the process, he creates pictures that are as devoted to painting and its history as much as they are to photography and its documentary nature. It is about Tokyo, and at the same time, about a type of urbanity that can appear everywhere in its abstract form. These are photographs that remain beholden to painting for their visual concept. It is not only the one, but also the other: not an assemblage of options, but a form of synchronicity.

This synchronicity of image and space—of one place appearing in another, of the visible and the imaginary—forms a guidance system, which, as paradoxical as it may sound, goes nowhere because it is valid everywhere. The pictures themselves provide enough examples to make one doubt the actual "helpfulness" of these types of guidance systems; they show road markers that end literally anywhere, leading to a space beyond functionality. Their dysfunction recalls a transitional region of the imagination, commensurate with the basis for new developments in language and form, while bordering on the absurd. What Holzapfel shows with this guidance system is a form of geographical thought, which is not so much a tendency toward globalism and the homogenization of cultural difference than it is a plea for the synchronicity of absence and presence. To put it more simply: you are never only where you mean to be at a specific moment, but also always in a place or in a space that is parallel to both the here and now. The question of where one believes to be present in or absent from at a certain time is merely a question of attitude, a question of perspective. The abstract perceives the phenomenon in the documentary, and the phenomenon cannot help but be substantiated into any type of form. The accidental encounter between the heel of a shoe and a marking on the ground connects each sort of subjective with a system that only attempts to establish an abstract order for an imagined public. As closely linked as the subjective and the public in this order are supposed to be, both also remain simultaneously present and absent to each other. To the shoe, it is just a mark on the ground, and to the mark on the ground, it is just a shoe.

The motifs that represent this order are as arbitrary as the form of this encounter seems to be. The pictures in Holzapfel's atlas and guidance system mark a section, which is, however, set up in such a representative way that he depicts the structural argument both within the works themselves and still further. The pictures here represent themselves and at the same time, a model that regards the situations and the images that are not depicted, but evoked—as memories, as transcriptions, or translations of one's own experiential space. Holzapfel fuses the model and the specific image to form a cartography of the everyday, a geography of the familiar: visible and memorable, perceivable and imaginable.

What is true of buildings or streets in a city that are not only meant to be observed, but also to be considered points of orientation, is also true of Holzapfel's pictures, which offer both vision and a view that is searching for orientation. In this sense, they represent both images and maps alike. They show specific situations, and allude to an abstraction that liberates itself from place in order to point to the imaginary. Seeing the imaginary, the eye moves through the image to return to the coordinates of perception itself. The geography that Holzapfel sketches with this atlas describes perception as a territory—the view of the visible and the imaginary, as a city, appears anywhere the relationship of each to the other can be seen.

¹ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (Orlando: Harcourt, 1974), 61.