

# When a tossed stone appears to hang motionless in the air

Art historian Ulrich Schneider discusses the photographs of Steff Gruber (extract)

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The focus of Steff Gruber's artistic work is photography, a genre to which he has been able to devote himself again more intensively since 2019. He has received numerous prizes and awards, most recently the 2023 Gold and Silver Muse Photography Awards for his series *MEAT*, 2023. Gruber has always given viewers of his photographs the feeling that he was in the right place at the right time. On the morning of November 2, 1975, for example, during a much-anticipated trip to Rome, the 22-year-old learned that the revered filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini had been brutally killed the previous night in Ostia. Gruber immediately set off for the scene of the crime, a illegal garbage dump in the late-fall tristesse of the seaside resort. In two shots taken with his Nikon F2, Gruber perfectly captures the hopelessness of the location against the backdrop of the Pineta, where the driven man had willingly risked his life and where Gruber saw himself in the broken mirror of a heroic time.

In 1981, Gruber, the professional filmmaker, crossed the dramatic landscape of the Sinai Peninsula, where the scars of the Yom Kippur War were still painfully preserved. Symbolically, the corpse of a gray reef shark on completely parched ground reflects the absurdities of man's encounter with nature. Again and again, Gruber's attention is drawn to the loneliness of people in hostile environments, like at the turn of the year 1988/1989, when he spontaneously accompanied a Zurich acquaintance to freezing cold New York. Standing on a windy street corner in Spanish Harlem, surrounded by household trash and graffiti-covered walls, he gives her a dignity that results from the depicted word "SOLIDARID[AD]" with her drug-addicted sister. Numerous analog landscape photos taken between 1972 and 1992 testify to Gruber's great affinity with the wild beauty of his Swiss homeland. Especially when artifact meets nature, he has an ability to visualize an equilibrium of forces. A stream at the foot of a high mountain range, surrounded by mighty witnesses of countless rockfalls, is traversed by an artfully crafted double-arch stone bridge clinging to a central rock. The entire scene is captured in magical late-fall blue, contrasted by a smattering of yellow leaves on the far right.

Despite his new objectivist precision, Gruber always manages to generate a lyrical symbolism in this genre. From the start of his career as a photographer, he has been drawn to abandoned homes or fake cities, like the *Paramount Studio* film sets in Los Angeles in 1974, where a clean-swept New York street awaits never-to-happen reutilization. He is fascinated by the seemingly authentic design of the buildings that end in slatted nothingness above the second floor but which may once have been filled with buzzing movie life around Radio City Music Hall. Another example, from 2019, is the *S-21 Torture Prison* in Phnom Penh, where the Pol Pot regime killed thousands of people between 1975 and 1979 and which now serves in meticulously sanitized form as a shocking memorial to the Khmer Rouge genocide.

For a number of years, Gruber has been working on his opus magnum *Vanishing Cambodia*. In it, he affectionately observes the comfortable lifestyles of the friendly residents of the floating towns on central Cambodia's great Tonle Sap Lake. But in his series *MEAT*, 2023, he also enters the hellish world of a clandestine pig slaughterhouse in Phnom Penh, where exploited workers have to mutate into veritable devils to endure the bestial piecework.

Alongside these very bold undertakings, of which there are several in his body of work, Gruber has been a portraitist throughout his career as a photographer and conveys the emotional states of his models with enormous acuity. Aged just 23, he masterfully captures the sensitively fragile beauty of the young *Patti Smith*, on October 12, 1976, during her first concert at the Rote Fabrik in Zurich. And in 1993, with his portrait *Anke*, he references Hemingway's portrayal of women in the first chapter of "A Good Café on the Place St-Michel" from "A Moveable Feast" (posthumously 1964), just as Louis Stettner (1922) had done in 1951 in his photo "Woman seated in a Café, Pigalle, Paris". Interested in a wide range of subjects and activities, Gruber has always focused on people in both his photographic and filmic work, on their beauty but also on their deep emotional voids. A never-waning interest in the new and unknown takes him as an objective filmmaker to many parts of the world, from which he reports as a passionate photographer. This passion results in what is usually a worthy depiction of people and places in aesthetically pleasing, well-balanced images, often produced at that fortuitous moment, similar to the moment a tossed stone appears to hang motionless in the air before falling to the ground again.

#### About the author Ulrich Schneider

Prof. Ulrich Schneider was Executive Director of the Museum für Angewandte Kunst in Frankfurt am Main from 2003 until his retirement in 2011. Prior to that, he was Director of the Museums of the City of Aachen for 13 years. For many years, he was also a lecturer at various universities and honorary professor of art history at RWTH Aachen University and Goethe University Frankfurt. In addition to worldwide research and exhibition activities, Ulrich Schneider has received awards for bilateral cultural work and served as a jury member for several art competitions. Today, he works as a consultant and conducts art historical and provenance research.

<http://schneiderundtoechter.de>



Ostia, Italy, November 2, 1975



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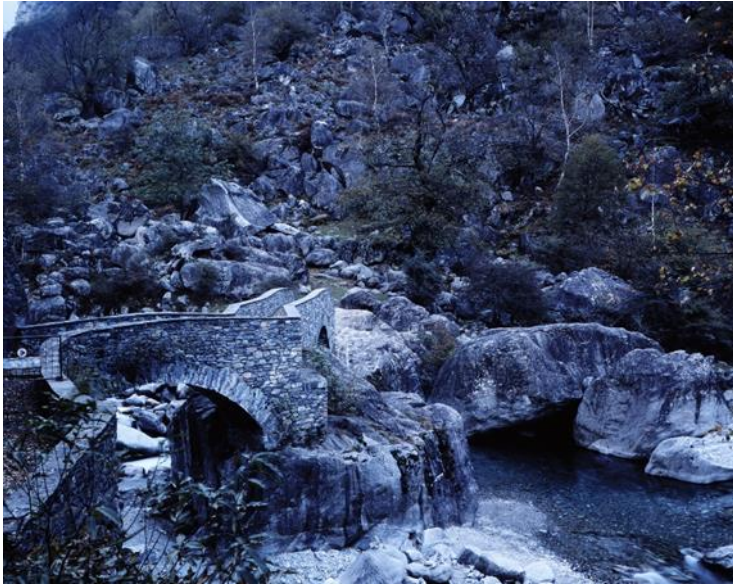
Sinai, Israel, 1981



Sinai, Israel, 1981



Sinai, Israel, 1981



Analogue Landscapes, 1972-1990



New York City, New Year's Day 1988/89



Los Angeles, 1973



Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, former torture prison S-21, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 2019



Living on Water, Tonle Sap Lake, Cambodia, 2019



Meat, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 2022



Patti Smith, Zurich, October 12, 1976



Anke, Paris, 1993 (left); Woman seated in a Café, Pigalle, Paris, Louis Stettner, 1951 (right)