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Debris and sadness
Visual poetry between elegy and irony

The central theme of Alberto Petrò's pictures are urban scenes in decline. He registers a status quo, not a slow process. To make this difference clear, let us first consider the general stages that a building's life cycle goes through. Buildings usually last several generations, and even centuries are not unusual. Only disasters can destroy buildings in minutes.

The life cycle is always a process of decline and it typically takes place as follows: the use – i.e. the utilisation of the function – decreases. This can manifest itself, for example, in flats no longer being rented out and therefore standing empty, shops being abandoned, the city council no longer maintaining its parks, craft businesses dying out. Use is the condition that prevents decay, because the user (i.e. the occupant or owner of the building) is interested in preserving the building fabric because it is the guarantor of protection or income. The less the building is used, the faster it deteriorates. The main causes of decay are as follows: Depopulation of the region, inability of residents to carry out necessary repairs, deliberate vacancy of old dwellings, damage caused by weather and the natural decomposition of building materials. Finally, when buildings are completely empty, we have a state that could be described as pre-ruinous or decline. The final stage of the cycle is the uninhabitable ruin. This continues to decay into debris. Etymologically, the word "drum" comes from Old High German where it means "splinter" but also "end piece". The verb "drümen" means "to break into pieces". As fragments, debris is only material evidence of the building and marks the end of a process of destruction.

This introduction is a theoretical model that describes the physical decline of inhabited buildings, it does not take time into account. The aspect of time that lies between the loss of function and the abandoned object can be called *appropriation*, in reference to a corresponding art movement. What does this period of appropriation look like? Buildings are usually only vacant for a short time, as new users are quickly found after people move out because living space is scarce in

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cities. When this change no longer takes place, the period of appropriative use begins. The abandoned architecture continues to be used in grey areas of legality, i.e. "occupied". In the meantime, different social groups carry out activities for which the sites were not originally intended. Flats, courtyards and industrial zones become arenas for skaters, training grounds for parcour athletes, labyrinths for paintball players, sleeping places for the homeless and drug addicts, meeting places for lovers and simply "cool places" for young people. When houses are deliberately squatted and a semi-official housing situation arises, these buildings become the focus of press attention, or more precisely, they become targets of criminal prosecution. These types of temporary use are all ephemeral, not desired by city administrations and lie outside the tolerated forms of legal use. The temporary users appropriate the protective features that the buildings offer for a certain period of time, but have to live without the comfort that building services and public utilities provide. This means that there is no electricity, no water, no heating, because these materials have to be bought. The buildings exist only as stone shells that lack the utility functions of normal middle-class housing.

We are familiar with the events of evictions by the police and the accompanying sensationalist reports in the bourgeois media. Such events are used to denounce people on the margins of society and turn them into populist projection screens for hate and fear. Many squats are demolished after eviction. However, the opposite behaviour to this illegal use also occurs, namely the recharging of function through renovation, conversion or expansion of the possibilities for use. It is regularly observed that the city administration or investors discover or seek out these abandoned and shabby places because they have great potential to be "renovated" as urban prestige objects in artificially created luxury neigh-

bourhoods, to continue a completely different life. Investors and wealthy buyers or tenants are lured by the "adventurous" appeal of the former shabbiness in order to enhance their image and attract attention as connoisseurs of the luxurious, avant-garde style of living. The former building must still exist in a suitable form as a brick quote in order to be presented as an attractive feature. This phenomenon exists in practically every large city: let's call it the migration of wealth within the city. The decline of the original is transformed into a desire for its remnants, because they have the aura of something unique that people want to own. The former dreariness of the survivors becomes the lust for life of the fun society that can afford this luxury of rarity. Both the one and the other phenomenon mark times of transition, because after that it is no longer possible to speak of a "lost place", as it simply no longer exists.

However, a fundamental distinction must be made between an abandoned and a lost place. If a building is abandoned, then it is unoccupied, but it is not lost. Loss presupposes an owner who has lost his material possessions. What has been lost has fallen out of the care of an owner who looks after it. Loss occurs in two forms: firstly, the actual, material loss through external destruction and neglect because there is no rental income. On the other hand, a building can also be lost in an immaterial, emotional sense. Two examples of this: a house has been lived in with a partner for a lifetime and this partner dies. A family has to leave their home because circumstances force the owners to leave. Fleeing political persecution, displacement due to war and poverty are typical causes.

A historiographical or typological investigation and documentation of such life cycles can therefore only take place by means of regular and constant records, i.e. in a chronological series of pictures and other documents. This is never possible in a single image, because the individual image shows a status quo at the time of the photograph, nothing else. In this sense, Petró is not documenting history, but showing situations in specific places.

The second aspect we need in order to fathom what Petrò captures as an image is the concept and phenomenon of place.

The following passage from Siegfried Kracauer expresses well the atmosphere of many of the scenes that Petró captured: "Every typical space is brought about by typical social conditions that express themselves in it without the disturbing interposition of consciousness. (…) The spatial images are the dreams of society."[1] Krakauer's "spatial images" are materialised into real images in the photographs in this text and the dreams have long since disappeared.

[1] Kracauer, Siegfried: Straßen in Berlin und Anderswo, Berlin 2020 (Suhrkamp Verlag), S. 63

In order to describe the three-dimensional, on which spatial theories are based, the impression is created that there are only the concepts of space, place and square. But in addition to these physical-geometric terms, we should also use more open terms such as place, zone, area, region and areal. They broaden the discourse considerably and provide equally strong or weak, precise or vaguely defined designations that denote both physical three-dimensional entities and take account of the anthropological moment. Marc Augé's invention of the "non-place" encompasses all of these meanings because they have the characteristic of the static geographical reference system as a reference. Augé's places, spaces, squares and buildings refer to – and are thus conditioned by – the transit movement, the transit of people. The non-places are not inhabited (at best temporarily), but are visited for the purpose of travelling or for the satisfaction of vital activities such as shopping or sleeping and then immediately left again. Although they are heavily frequented in terms of numbers, from a sociological and anthropological perspective they are *empty places*, because they are not a habitat, not a place to live that lacks privacy. Even if one were to say that they are used as workplaces by the same people every day, this use either only takes place for a few hours or the groups of users change in the rhythm of their work shifts. They are not meeting places of an interpersonal nature, although many people come together there, but they are situations without communication: Checkouts at supermarkets, buying tickets, information at information desks, advice in boutiques, ordering food.

One can follow the thesis that physical spaces – i.e. regions that are developed or undeveloped, architectural ensembles or natural areas – can only be accessed by walking. In contrast, the term place describes a subcategory within a space that can only be grasped by looking at it without walking, i.e. while standing. It is not possible to speak of an absolute resting position, because of course this also requires a movement of the eyes and a movement of the head, possibly even a rotation of the body. Places are bounded spaces, but it is not necessary for the boundaries to be material barriers. Places can have immaterial boundaries. The even smaller region within spaces or places would be the *spot* and the spot may well only be a plane, i.e. only have two dimensions, even though it is in a three-dimensional situation.

The path, the road, the railway tracks cannot be classified under geographical categories, as they are connections in space between two or more sites. However, places, spaces and spots can be located in, at or on these connections. For example, the spot or location where an accident occurs, the crossing or the junction are places, the railway line between stops A and B are both places and spaces.

Since Marc Augé introduced the term "non-place", it has become an integral part of urban research and literature, but does it really apply?

What clear visual and material characteristics should be defined to determine what a non-place is? In the second edition of his book of the same name, the author himself admitted "(…) that there are no 'non-places' in an absolute sense." His "empirical non-places" are "traffic, consumption and communication spaces. (…) According to my definition, an anthropological place is any space that is sustainably shaped by social relationships (for example, by strict rules of behaviour) or by a shared history (for example, places of worship). Of course, this kind of characterisation is less common in spaces that are only used temporarily or as transitory spaces. However, this does not change the fact that in reality there are neither places nor non-places in the absolute sense of the word. The place/non-place pair serves as a yardstick for the social or symbolic character of a space."[2]

From a phenomenological point of view, a non-place could allow the following three interpretations: firstly, it is nothing, because it does not physically exist; secondly, it is not a place, but something else in the landscape or the city; thirdly, it is an existing place that can be found, but which is not willingly or rarely visited because it is dangerous, repulsive, harmful to body and mind. Non-places exist, but only the stories and the events that take place in them give them this quality, because they were never built as such, because no planning would construct places so that

[2] Augè, Marc: Nicht-Orte, München 2010, C.H. Beck Verlag, S. 124

they would not be visited. Exceptions are security zones, protected areas or spoilt war zones and demarcation lines, i.e. borders.

Augé observes people who meet at railway stations and airfields and shortly afterwards drive and fly off in all directions. Lingering is designed as waiting for a departure: Waiting rooms, waiting halls, airport and railway platforms, lounges, snack stands and restaurants are such places of passage. Marc Augés is an anthropologist and his non-places are characterised by human interactions within them. He observes people's mobility behaviour and notes an increasingly widespread "decentring" of people through globalisation. People constantly travelling create a centrifugal force and Augé discovered the phenomenon of what I would call *transit places*. They are created by the absence of centres and the need to linger in the transition from one place to the next. Of course there are always encounters, but they are passages without attention for other people. In tubes, tunnels, on rails, in devices of acceleration, one is in a passageway, they were invented to be moved quickly to other places. Even the pedestrian "walker" travels on conveyor belts and escalators. They become a mechanical part of the conveyor belts, a mass that has to be transported in a coordinated and portioned manner to the points of departure or arrival. Ray Oldenburg describes the anonymity of large shopping centres, which, despite being filled with crowds of people, are characterised by the non-communication of people: "As people circulate about in the constant, monotonous flow of mall pedestrian traffic, their eyes do not cast about for familiar faces, for the chance of seeing one is small. That is not part of what one expects there. The reason is simple. The mall is centrally located to serve the multitudes from a number of outlying developments within its region. There is little acquaintance between these developments and not much more within them. Most of them lack focal points or core settings and, as a result, people are not widely known to one another, even in their own neighbourhoods, and their neighbourhood is only a minority portion of the mall's clientele."[3]

In the USA, we know the term "third place". It refers to a place that is not home ("first place") and not work (second place). It comes from a time when things were still attached to places and it didn't matter where you were in order to do something. The "third place" is a place from which you are not chased away and where there is no pressure to consume. It is a rare commodity in a world that seals and sells off areas where metal spikes are attached to benches and banisters to prevent young people from skating on them and homeless people from sleeping on them. The need for a term like "third place" may seem strange in Europe, but in the USA there are signs everywhere prohibiting loitering: "no loitering."

[3] Oldenburg, Ray: Celebrating the Third Place: Inspring Stories About the 'Great Good Places' at the Heart of Our Comunities, 2002, Da Capo Press, S. 45

Former places that were built for people to meet and that were triggers or catalysers of communication are becoming fewer because public gatherings are no longer taking place. A collective history is created over long periods of time, it has to be repeated often and it needs a centre such as an agora, a forum or a village square as a place for the polis to gather. A meeting place is a place where people can come together, and the corresponding word in German would be *Treffpunkt.* There are public meeting places such as town squares and parks and private places such as stadiums, churches, theatres, cafés, beer gardens, barber shops and clubs. Also of interest are stairs, fountains and other public buildings that are used as seating areas, even though they were not designed for this purpose. They offer informal zones for spontaneous meetings, they are everyday places of urban communication. They are not central attractions, but their attractiveness lies precisely in the fact that they are not the focus of public attention. They are *casual places*, you see the building or pass through the passage, but if you don't know that there is a meeting place there, then their meaning also changes.

Places as photography

Naturally, what is visible is arranged in a plane when a photographic image is taken; this is unavoidable with all technical media and perspective lenses. The photographer uses the process to determine his image sections and arrange the image elements. The staging takes

place when the picture is taken, when the shutter of the camera is released, at the moment when the image is created on the digital data carrier or the film. These situations of architecture, nature, object and light existed or exist regardless of whether they are translated as a photographic surface and thus continue to exist in another medium. Apart from the conversion of colour to black and white in some pictures, Alberto Petró does nothing to alter his subjects in terms of photographic aesthetics. The basic gesture of documenting dominates, the author remains in the background. The methods of visualisation are representative, sometimes typological, sometimes symbolic, but our view is not one-sidedly influenced by them, as the methods are obvious and we can adjust to them.

Do the documented places still exist in the same state in which the photographer saw them? This question is important because it offers several ways of gaining insights into the history of the places, the position of their possible inhabitants, the situation of discovery, the aesthetic perception of them, and political or sociological analyses. The many possible answers only add up to the overall picture of why these places and situations can be called abandoned, disregarded, unworthy of attention, repulsive, inhuman, ugly or attractive. The images never have just one characteristic or it is not possible to make a uniform judgement about them. Irrespective of this, it must be taken into account that the situations as photographs require a

different approach than if one were to encounter them in situ. The observer position of the photographer and the intention of recording the situations encountered are the conditions for accepting these images as substitutes for the real situations encountered. Aesthetic, socio-critical and urbanistic approaches overlap and interact in them. Occasionally one of these aspects comes to the fore, but the others can never be ignored. This always raises the question of whether the situations have ever been the focus of urban planning. In detail, for example, it would be interesting to find out when and by whom the houses were inhabited, how the places and squares were used, what kind of aesthetics characterise these areas? Their content – or their meaning – is always philosophically centred on everyday life, the present and the past. Husserl's concept of the "Lebenswelt" applies to urban situations. The urban situations represent the lifeworlds/Lebenswelten of different social classes. The stones therefore refer to people, and if the characteristic of the former applies to most houses, then this also applies to their inhabitants.

What kind of artefacts are photographed can be an important question when approaching the conditions of the habitat and the habitus of everyday life. These are a wide variety of houses in cities: Flats in apartment blocks for the social middle class, workers, employees, "normal average citizens" probably. Next, there are feudal villas – "manor houses" – surrounded by parks and gardens, which in turn are enclosed and protected by high walls. The affluence is shown by spacious entrances to parks, adorned with stone statues and wrought-iron gates. It continues with brickwork, sandstone window frames made by stonemasons, oculi, columns, capitals, consoles, stone benches and countless other architectural ornaments that only the wealthy classes or the clergy could afford. In public squares and streets, Petrò registers cars, scooters and utility equipment that everyone can see every day. Nevertheless, the motives seem unreal. One is puzzled by the fact that none of the objects photographed are undamaged, functional or complete at the time the picture was taken. As everything he has seen

is old, the photographer seems to have travelled back in time. He is the observer of phenomena and symptoms that could be described as urban archaeology, but he is documenting processes that are just beginning, processes that will soon become much clearer. The typologies of disappearance range from ruinous fragments that are impossible to reconstruct to minimal damage that gives the impression of intactness and normality.

As viewers of these photographs, we are virtual travellers. The photographer is a travel guide who takes us with him, leading us to places that had attracted him. We are confronted with a double past: the past of the real places and the past of the journeys undertaken by the photographer. We first have to pass through the first layer – let's call it the photographed time – to get to the historical, the physical time of the cities and situations. We are not there, we are dealing with mediated, transformed realities, but that does not prevent us from putting ourselves in the position as if we were actually there. Photography makes such an approach possible and allows us to view and analyse the places without – as the ethnologist or cultural historian would do – carrying out real in situ field research and observations. Of course we look through the frames of the camera's viewfinder and of course these are flat visual worlds, but they are clearly far from being pure fictions. It would be naïve to assume that we are dealing with finds of an urban archaeological, sociological, historical or anthropological nature that have been discovered for the first time like pioneers. The photographer finds himself in a context of knowledge, the knowledge that the phenomenon of urban flight, empty centres, poverty, unemployment, migration, slum formation etc. exists.[4] He also knows that for some years now there has been a movement of "urban explorers" or "urban creachers" who legally and illegally search for urban places and buildings that are abandoned to decay. Their often extremely aesthetic images of interiors have long since taken over the book market, exhibitions by amateur photographers and internet sites. Petrò does not follow this popular trend.

Looking at these photographs is an imaginary journey into time and only secondarily to the places whose images we are looking at. We only get to see the places in the pictures because the photographer was there and captured them in the way he presents them to us here. We owe their and our presence solely to this fact. It is a second-order perception or a medially coded realisation of situations that the photographer has seen. What does that mean for him and for us? Is it an exclusivity? In other words, do we only see what the photographer wanted us to see and how we see it? In this case, we would have to start from a concept that pre-

[4] cf. Oswalt, Philipp (Hg.): Schrumpfende Städte, Ostfildern-Ruit 2004, (Hatje – Cantz Verlag)

supposes the existence of such situations in the first place, because the photographer would have attempted to create a collection, an atlas, an archive or a visual compendium that we now have before us. But it could also be the case that, like a traveller, a flaneur, an attentive wandering visitor, he came across the situations by chance and they appeared to him to be "worthy of a picture". In this case, his judgement to make the picture would have been guided by aesthetic, expository, social, political categories, etc. We are not there, so we can pretend that the photographs represent the actual circumstances, or we can be critical of their author and constantly ask whether it is his message that we are supposed to read here and the photographs are merely sections and chapters of a narrative that is his fiction, in the best sense his report.

Every optical medium that still has a physically recording mode of operation and does not invent purely digital images, which can be pure constructs, always requires contact with the material world through the projection of light by means of glass lenses, but this is also the only condition for the existence of these image forms. All other components are either technical limitations and/or decisions made by the operators of the apparatus. Thus the images in this book are only true in the sense that they are true images of a medium, but of course they cannot be categorised as true – no photograph is. They are undoubtedly witnesses to the act of taking the picture and to a situation that has been, but whether it has been exactly like that is beyond judgement, because the conditions are too uncertain to be able to take an objective and honest standpoint. So we always have to keep these parameters in mind when we look at the places through these photographs and the photographer is always invisible next to us when we interpret, describe or narrate them.

Walking, the slow movement of people in the city, is a central topos that has been analysed by several important authors, who are also references for this text.[5] The walking city dweller, the person

[5] Corbineau-Hoffmann, Angelika: Passanten, Passagen, Kunstkonzepte: Die Straßen großer Städte als affektive Räume; in: Lehnert, Gertrud (Hg.): Raum und Gefühl. Der Spatial Turn und die neue Emotionsforschung, Bielefeld 2011 (transcript Verlag).
Tiedemann, Rolf (Ed.): Walter Benjamin. Das Passagen-Werk, Bd. 1 und 2, Frankfurt M., 2015 (Suhrkamp Verlag.
Auster, Paul: City of Glass; in: The New York Trilogy, Collected Novels Bd. 1, Los Angeles 1985 (Sun and Moon)
Stierle, Karlheinz: Der Mythos von Paris. Zeichen und Bewußtsein der Stadt, München 1993 (Hanser Verlag)
Cole, Teju: Open City, Frankfurt Main 2016 (Suhrkamp Verlag).
Hallberg, Ulf Peter: Der Blick des Flaneurs, Leipzig 1995 (Kiepenheuer Verlag)

who appropriates urban space as a passer-by, a flâneur, a stroller, is important not only as a rhetorical figure in narratives, i.e. utopian or fictional projections of imagined or remembered places, but also – and first and foremost – as an observer who takes note of spaces and conditions in the first place. He already knows them or is surprised, overwhelmed, attracted, repelled or touched by all kinds of other emotions. They urge an answer to the question of why exactly *this place* and what is the difference in its characteristics that makes it a different place from its surroundings, the context in which it always stands. Semiologically, one could ask *what makes the place or the circumstance a text* that is worth deciphering. There must be an implicit moment, a visible something that triggers the pause of the passer-by. The attraction – the feeling of being drawn in – has a lasting effect, is impressive or differs significantly from the surroundings. Again, the boundaries that create the difference, i.e. that separate the familiar from the interesting, are not physical, but can also be mentally "imagined", fictitious or deliberately constructed thought patterns. Alberto Petrò's photographs show surreal places that are the opposite of non-places, as defined by Marc Augé, because they are not transitory passages, but special places where a *slow time* prevails that wants our attention.

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The places photographed have no names, the pictures have no titles and the series is called "Marginalia". The observer Alberto Petrò registers traces, signs, results of the decay of cities, which are the consequences of impoverishment, emigration and political decisions. The transformation or decline of towns and villages that are not centrally located or that no longer offer good conditions for survival are abandoned. The transition or transformation can be interpreted as a metaphor that leads from life to death and the cities are the bodies that the photographer observes in this process. This visual reportage does not deal with a city specifically sought out for this book,

nor is it a deliberately compiled typology of the remote. Such places, squares, buildings and constellations of things exist in many cities and they are similar – I call them "*situations*" in the following.

The situations that Petròs photographs are places that tell of human use and utilisation; they are private homes, residential complexes and squares, streets that are and were frequented in everyday life in order to carry out meaningful tasks. Despite their desertedness, the places are filled with an atmosphere of life and emotion, even if life is disappearing and the atmosphere is becoming thinner. You can sense that the residents here have done their shopping, played football and basketball, prayed in the churches and in front of the statues of the Madonna, placed candles or rested from work in the park and on the benches, walked the dog and exchanged a few words with the neighbours: in other words, the residents have led a normal (city) life. If you were one of them, the buildings, squares and streets would have names and you would probably know who lives in which house or that this door is the entrance to the tax office. So you would be part of the history of these places, you would live through it and probably leave your trace.

Layering and strata are a central motif in these photographs. Petrò has the working method of a geologist who has searched for fractures,

edges and folds in order to secure evidence of the deposited layers of time. The method is subtractive, a kind of materialised chronology that can also be found in cracks and ravines in the landscape, on whose walls geologists "read" the ages of the earth as if in an open book. The architectural deposits that the photographer finds, however, are not horizontally layered layers of rock, they are not sediments of a landscape soil profile that formed naturally, but were created by humans. They are fragments, *stony palimpsests and collages* that no human being has deliberately shaped in this way, but have been created by an unpredictable interaction of nature and culture. They can therefore seem like brutal over-mouldings and deformations of the buildings, whose arbitrariness makes them repulsive. We can read from these images how a generation of inhabitants no longer wanted the previous forms of material culture or simply ignored them. The legacies were not honoured, but used to furnish their own existence with the bare necessities. Repair, improvisation and patchwork dominate; it is not possible to speak of a new future era that was deliberately superimposed on the previous one, because there is no uniform sign language that reveals a collective style.

Although real ruins are rarely seen, one would not hesitate to describe the scenes as *ruinous.* The places and situations radiate a melancholy aura of decay. They are run-down, dirty, neglected and have reached a state of poverty. Nevertheless, they are still human and their impression of humanity stems from the fact that you can feel the natural everyday life in the corners and behind the signs of closure, remnants only, but at least they are still there, but a pulsating life will no longer fill them. The photographer has contributed nothing to this, it flows from the things themselves. If you wanted to decide clearly whether people live behind the walls or not, you cannot do so with certainty. This state of limbo also makes it difficult to judge whether the photographed neighbourhoods have always been poorer regions of the cities or whether they were once prestigious centres that now look like the pictures show them. It is uncertain whether anyone lives in these walls, as some of the pictures show clear signs of current use – although the term "present" must be defined relatively in months or weeks.

There are no people

The places appear in an everyday normality, no extraordinary subjects, no breathtaking backdrops, no shocking dramas are captured. There is no special architecture to be seen and one could call them boring and fleeting photographic notations of a flâneur if they were not so irritatingly devoid of people. If these pictures showed architec-

tural views of cities, it would be usual for them not to show any people, because the buildings would be the centre of attention as monuments. However, the photographer does not wait for this architectural photographic emptiness, be cause the character of his pictures is journalistic, even documentary – the photo reportage is in the background as a reference – and it is therefore unlikely that there are no people to be seen in his photos. The lifelessness of the streets and houses is so disturbing that we have to ask ourselves what could be the cause.

What can we glean from such deserted cityscapes, how can we interpret them? Whether the photographer deliberately waited until there were no people in the places, whether they were outside the field of view, or whether there are actually no people living in these places makes a decisive difference to how these images are described and interpreted. They could be read like fiction, like a visual novel from the near future. In it there are scenarios of a world without people, but which do not follow a stereotypical science fiction construction, where human life is wiped out after apocalyptic wars. The eerie and uncanny ambience stems from the fact that we imagine that the cause of human extinction must have occurred only recently, because the decay has not yet progressed to the point where only remnants of civilisation remain. We see urban scenarios shortly after *something* has happened, but we can't tell the cause of this something from the scenarios

The people who once lived here have behaved strangely, it seems as if they no longer had the strength or will to stop the decay – they have merely tried to slow it down by touchingly helpless means. Several pictures show how the plants are already beginning to occupy the asphalt, the concrete and the walls again, just as they once did before people built their civilising artefacts here. A kind of second version of nature is emerging here, a layer that is covering the cities, penetrating their crevices, slowly reshaping them until they become invisible. Colonisation will take place with species other than humans. Has the end of the Anthropocene already begun, shortly after it was proclaimed? This idea is never comforting, it is apocalyptic, even if nature (which one?) survives. The question is unsettling, it remains unanswered, it is better this way. Elias Canetti summarised this vagueness in a beautiful aphorism: "Been everywhere. Not telling anyone where you've been. That's how you keep the fear of all places".[6]

Although there are no people depicted, there are traces that point to their existence before the photograph was taken. Rubbish bins, sports

[6] Canetti, Elias: *Die Provinz des Menschen. Aufzeichnungen 1942 – 1972*, Frankfurt Main 1998, S.90 (Fischer TB Verlag). Translation: author.

and play equipment, graffiti, broken glass, planted and empty flower pots, scaffolding, clothing and furniture. Cables are the symbols of energy, they hang loosely from poles and house walls, the poles are crooked, the metal arms that once carried the cables are bent as if by a powerful force, no train runs on these tracks anymore and no electricity supplies the city with power, the substance on which human civilisation and communication is based today. The grid is largely the material network of cables. Streets end in nothingness and courtyards walled on three sides with closed facades and walls stop any progress, they are dead ends, end points, they force the traveller to turn back, at best they are disappointments, at worst dangerous traps from which there is no escape.

The patina and the atmosphere of emptiness

Our desire for the whole, which represents the aesthetic or the beautiful, is certainly one reason why we are so attracted to the fragments, allusions, unrealities, chaos and neglect of the places and situations photographed. We wish the whole thing back as it originally was, because it had positive qualities that we value as aesthetic: the park, the elegantly curved flight of steps, the promenade, the baroque church, the prestigious front door, and yes, even the petrol station, the school and the sports field, however familiar and trivial they may have seemed when they were still busy. The patina as an indicator of time and as a technological, material appeal of the "memento mori" of industrialisation, which is reflected as rust, cracks and fissures, scratches and dust.

There is often something enigmatic, objects for which no plausible explanation can be found as to why they are the way they are, why they were built or assembled in such an unreal way or what is hidden behind them. The gate, which imitates the ashlars of the wall as camouflage, is perfectly executed and you wouldn't recognise it as a gate in the dark if a faint blue glow on the floor didn't show that it was an opening. A closer look reveals the metal frame of the gate, an electronic sensor and a sign indicating that it is a driveway and that you are not allowed to park in front of it.

SOMETHING always lies as a second layer of matter on top of things: Plants, rust, dirt, plastic sheeting, paint in several layers (mostly peeled off), posters, plaster, boards, bulky rubbish, fallen stones, sheet metal, parts of walls – signs that no-one has bothered to maintain and clean the places and buildings for a long time. It is unimportant, there are no responsibilities, the responsible authorities have no money, other parts of the city are more important, or these are abandoned areas ready for demolition, the city has developed elsewhere. These are possible reasons why

the *atmosphere of emptiness* dominates these places. The visitor as a tourist or flâneur would not visit such places because they offer nothing, nothing worth paying attention to and spending time on. These architectures also have the charm of the picturesque, but one cannot surrender to them enthusiastically or with a touch of nostalgia, because their morbidity testifies to the knowledge or probability that they were abandoned because it was no longer possible to live there. People have left these flats to move to more homely areas, to places where the urban structures are intact and the security of being cared for by a community is guaranteed. Social security presupposes what is intact, not what is fading and decaying.

The places are filled with time and time stands still in them. The photo has not stopped time here, but the places are collages of time periods or time zones. You can tell from the parts of which they are composed from which decades they originate. The fragments as parts of the epochs do not necessarily have to be remnants or façade parts, but also buildings themselves, but they are not complete. Parts are missing, they have been remodelled, added to, often weathered and broken off, or they are wedged like foreign bodies into larger architectural forms that make them appear even more grotesque. However, they have not fallen out of time, but fit into a strange structure from a present that is shaped by them, but which seems to have no reality that can be identified as the now.

Despite the abundance of time, no units of time can be measured by which those places are determined, it is a timelessness, they seem to have fallen out of the present, but without naming a concrete historical past. It is rather *the past and the passing itself* that is at work here. The situations are stages in the process of passing, and yet they are not moments that only existed for a fraction of a second when the picture was exposed, but rather these depictions seem like abstract time. What is meant is not the fraction of a second with which each release of a camera stops the passage of time – i.e. what is commonly called the still time of photography – but the present absence that can be discovered in the things and architectures. It is indeed the progressive form of the verb that most aptly describes the state of being of the places, because the process can no longer be stopped. Misery has these places in its grip and there is a subliminal feeling – we have no certainty – that the people are dead: the photographs would thus show extinct areas in declining towns and villages. In a few years, these places will no longer exist or they will have crumbled even further into fragments. The urban will then have moved closer to the natural, culture will have transitioned into a post-civilisation that is neither nature nor culture. Transitional times typical of disappearing cultures.

No point time, no time of day, no date is suitable for capturing the character of their dense atmosphere. Something unreal and unreal takes place that is not evoked by horror, shudders and uncanniness, but by a normality whose trivialities and peculiarities could make you smile. These all-too-human gestures, the way buildings and objects are treated, how blind people are to ugliness or how they endeavour to comply with rules and regulations. The unreal is the atmosphere of a stretched time that takes place parallel to the present. The situations are strangely distant without the people, because you don't expect anything to ever happen there, the boundaries have been crossed.

Let us now take a closer look at the situations and themes that make up the narratives and atmospheres described above.

The provisional solutions

We find helplessly naïve and yet touching attempts to repair the decay, to fill the gaps, to repair the crumbling facades. No professional craftsmen were used for this work, because a spontaneous solution had to be found for a job such as laying an electricity cable or replacing a broken window, which could not cost any money. They improvised and the bare essentials were sufficient, they took what was to hand, it was unimportant whether the repair looked nice. Who does such unprofessional work? One is tempted to interpret such patchwork as a sign of unkindness or disinterest in the place where one lives. You still live – or lived – there, that's all it was or is. The concept of quality of life is an arrogant cynicism in the face of people's endeavours to survive. Then you find façades where pieces had to be broken up by structural interventions, but they were not restored to their original state, they were not carefully restored, but the slits, cracks and holes were closed with unsuitable and cheap material such as chipboard, sheet metal or simple plastic sheeting. Rarely was the area plastered or the chipped tiles replaced. The intervention was necessary because a broken water pipe had to be repaired, a window inserted or a cable laid in order to maintain minimum functional conditions. There are no aesthetic aspects and the people carrying out the work are unlikely to have had any knowledge, intuition or interest in preserving the existing building. It is completely irrelevant what the building looks like, because nobody pays any attention to it in its anonymity.

The closed

Two frequently encountered elements are barriers, grilles, obstacles and boarded-up or bricked-up doors and windows. What they have in

common is that they are material blockades that do not allow people to enter, move on or look into the spaces behind the obstacles. They are therefore radical manifestations of authorities who want to impose prohibitions and protect their possessions. Barriers can only be opened by selected group members, doors and bars have locks and keys. Once a wall has been built, there is no longer any access.

Such elements of preventing "intrusion" into one's own, private and managed space are familiar; it is a familiar motif that discreetly blocks off the private car park as a chain in peaceful states. As electric fences, barbed wire, security guards or mine belts, they are a familiar sight in dictatorships. The walled-up doors and windows also convey a second message in the context of the entire series of pictures, namely *the final end of a use*. The building may and should never be used again, it has assumed a state somewhere between "still functional" and "already unusable". You could also say that it is being prepared for demolition, waiting to disappear.

The photographs show *end points* that make it impossible to enter or move on, although they have clues, indications and traces that show that they were entrances, passages and windows in the past. Moreover, many of these places have been closed off for various reasons or decay has created barriers, literally burying them, so that it is no longer possible to enter the spaces behind these passages, entrances, windows, gates and barriers.

They are irritatingly mysterious places that can be described as uncanny because of their absurd inaccessibility, their deliberate denial of access and their unsettling uncertainty as to what is supposed to be hidden behind them, what is actually behind them or what used to be there. The absence of observers, passers-by and inhabitants contributes to interpreting these places as post-apocalyptic scenarios, for example as backdrops for science fiction films or as visions of bad dreams or plot locations of novels that could be frightening. You don't want to stay there any longer because the aura of the places, their atmosphere, is oppressive. It is rarely individual objects that trigger this oppressive feeling, but the sum of the images as you move from one to the next. This atmosphere clings to the documented phenomenon of abandonment and the probability that the places will be abandoned.

The remaining barriers or their remnants seem particularly grotesque because they can no longer block anything, and if they could, there would be no more people to block anything from. In a realistic reading, this would be the present of the places that Petró has seen, i.e. geographically limited places and cities; interpreted in a more utopian and pessimistic way, these would be visions of an undefined future that is a world entirely without humans: the Anthropocene has outlived itself, a post-human world would

have emerged. Of course, this is fiction and only appears as a side note to my theses, but I think it is a good way of thinking about the idea of a post-apocalyptic world. In the sense that the apocalypse does not take place at all, but that a slow extinction, a *fading away* of the human species could also happen. This would be a completely peaceful death, but the idea is no more reassuring than the terrible spectres of catastrophes and violent deaths that are becoming more likely today as dire predictions.

Decay and cracks

Faded and partially torn off advertising posters with their carefree, cheerful messages want to entice people to consume, but the artificial cheerfulness of that bygone era turns into a sad reminder of good days that have passed and will never come back here. The people who read them no longer live here. Such signs of suspended time cause anxiety because they prove, as if under a magnifying glass, that finiteness is a reality.

The open doors, which no longer offer any protection or welcome because they have been broken open, but there is nothing left to protect in the rooms behind them and there is no one left to open the door for the guest. If chains and locks are occasionally still on the doors, they no longer lock anything, because the doors are off their hinges, access would be possible at any time – past the functionless door leaves or through open windows and gaps, one could easily get into all the rooms: but who would still be interested in entering these buildings or the ruins?

The demolition presupposes the cracks and these in turn are clear signs of the disintegration of the object, the landscape or the architecture. The term is rarely used for people. If you want to describe a similar phenomenon for people, you say "wound" and such interventions in the human body always have negative connotations: they mean pain, suffering of all kinds, mutilation, blood and pus, operations and stitches. They are the result of permanent damage being inflicted on our bodies (or that we have inflicted on ourselves). Wounds are not wanted because they disturb the flawlessness of the body and remind us of painful accidents … do we not want the wounds of buildings for the same reasons?

Concrete, asphalt, plaster are familiar materials that cover the earth of urban areas. They are methods and procedures to make walking and driving as easy as possible for the inhabitants, because the delicate and elegant shoes are not compatible with the roughness, stones, dust and mud of the land. Carts and cars want to glide along smoothly and without bumps, not stumble over crevices and ditches and shake the bodies of the occupants. Urban planners use the term "sealing" to describe this closed covering of streets and squares, because water no longer penetrates the ground, flooding occurs and, paradoxically, the so-called "greenery" has to be artificially irrigated. It is therefore a typical sign of lack of care, even neglect, when plants grow in the gaps between the sealing materials or at their edges. These are areas that are slowly being restored to the state that will perhaps be called "renaturalised civilisation" in many years' time. Former settlement and industrial sites that are once again "landscape", covered in plants, but standing on ground that is not original. This would not be renaturalisation, because then this process would have to have been deliberately initiated, as is already being done today for abandoned mining regions or excavation sites for ore and lignite. Significantly, plants that are the first to colonise non-natural soils are called "pioneer plants" and this can be understood in a double sense for the places that Alberto Petrò is exploring. The pioneers have to assert themselves against the adverse, hostile environments of the cities and they are the first to come back – again – because the forces pushing them back no longer have an effect on them and prevent them from living. They had not died, however, but were waiting to reappear. They are the first components of nature, but are they also the harbingers of the disappearance of humans? This is de facto the case for some cities and abandoned urban neighbourhoods. Only time will tell how long people in general will still be able to inhabit the earth. Pictures of ruins that have been decaying for several decades are interesting objects of study, because they are in an intermediate stage that maintains a balance between

the still recognisable civilisation and the emerging nature, which is indicated by the wildly growing plants. These are transitions and anticipations of conditions that are likely to become more common in the future. If cities really do shrink, then you often come across these places "in between".

Façades that appear as if they were only built as such and construction projects have been started, but the shells are already ruins. Now there is nothing behind the façades or you can recognise overgrown areas – once they were protected by walls, bars and gates, iron guards that impressively prevented people from entering. Today they are bent and broken, the once feudal private spheres are defencelessly exposed to decay. They may still have an owner, but he has not looked after his property for many years and has let it fall into disrepair. They have probably long since moved away or died. It would be illegal to enter these areas because private property can only be entered with authorisation, but this is not checked. No police watch over the law because there is nothing to steal and damage dominates the buildings anyway.

The hands of the tower clocks are no longer there – is this a sign of timelessness? A melancholy atmosphere hangs over the scenes, even when grotesque combinations of things would allow a comic interpretation of the situation. For example, the two bright green plastic bags hung next to each other on the iron ornament of a door look like cheerful ghosts from a children's book illustration or like summer dresses blowing in the wind. Even the old red convertible, whose folding roof has been taped up all round by its owner with many layers of brown parcel tape, has been transformed into a greasy, shiny, holey and wrinkled object that could have come from the props of a science fiction film. The owner has probably treated his valuable car roof in this way on purpose, because he wanted to protect it from further tearing, but the once chic design of the fabric covering is no longer distinguishable from the plastic rubbish in the dumps on the outskirts of the city. Nobody will drive this car any more, it is inadequately preserved, but the end is present, it is a helpless waiting game. The same argument applies to the green plastic bags: they are not washed and dried out of environmental awareness, but they are reused because people have no money to throw away, even if it is only 2 cents.

There are still clothes pegs hanging on the line, their shadows on the wall looking like abstract birds on electric wires – they are about to fly away. The sign with the inscription "Hotel" is still there, but the doorbell

is taped up, in fact, there are several situations where tape has been used to repair missing and damaged areas. But what does that tell us? Adhesive tape is unsuitable as a permanent repair material to withstand weather conditions. It can stand as a symptom and sign for the message of the entire picture series, because it was used spontaneously by residents as a cheap substitute for professional restoration in order to slow down the decay, cover up the ugly and make the object that had become functionless visually disappear. All of these are inadequate and yet, in their helpless improvisation, very human gestures and traces that also belong in the large connotation field of the word "home". It is the opposite of idyllic and cosy and yet it fits in with the efforts to preserve the place that is home. The glued layers are fragile, they still hint at the forms of what lies beneath, only the surface is covered. It is a sad fact that neither the repair nor the surface lasts for long, and the endeavour is superficial in this sense of the word.

Places that nobody cares about any more become the final repositories of furniture, vehicles and technical equipment that are no longer needed for many different reasons; they have become rubbish and waste, the stuff that has fallen away from the process of development. Like the skin or bark of trees that dies when the new grows back, these remnants of everyday life have the same effect, but it is doubtful whether anything really grows back in these places.

In the midst of these desolate urban places of rubbish, rubble, ruins and shabbiness, there are moments of human presence, indeed of endeavours to create an "institution", which take place outside, on the street, in front of houses, in backyards. Three office chairs stand in a bus stop. One waits more comfortably on a postered chair, because there were never any seats at this bus stop. The mighty column capital is probably in a park and served as a decorative showpiece, but the young people are not interested in this kind of veneration of the past, they use the stone as a seat, they meet there, nibble pistachio nuts, smoke cigarettes and chat. The plastic lighters, cigarette butts and nutshells are thrown on the ground and the packets are left in the hollow of the stone. The proud piece of architecture becomes a bench and a rubbish bin.

Then there are the carefully arranged private *residences,* arrangements consisting of a table with a bouquet of flowers and a glass ashtray, a white tablecloth and chairs with red and white backrests and seats. Carefully and lovingly set up, ready to meet the neighbours for a smoke, a game of cards, a chat and a glass of wine – but the tranquil ensemble is located on the street, in front of the flat door, the travertine cladding of the wall is still intact, the monumental entrance portal made of heavy wood has no damage. Nevertheless, the chipped areas at the bottom of the wall and the faded wood are the first signs of decay. The furniture is made of plastic, as is the tablecloth, a plastic thermometer hangs on the wall and a plastic saucer for flower pots has been placed under the flower vase to protect the tablecloth. A round iron lid is painted with red chalk and next to it is a simple line drawing: a child was probably playing in front of the door. Such photos show that people are still managing to cope with the deteriorating supply situation, empty municipal coffers and rising prices for food and housing. They make do, they live their daily lives and whether they are unhappy with their living conditions can only be determined by conducting a sociological survey. The photos don't show the people and we can't deduce anything more from the pictures than what we have just tried to do.

Epilogue: Splinters and loneliness

Alberto Pertò's photographed situations are only paradoxical if you approach the pictures with the expectation that they show uniformly shaped architectural ensembles designed according to a common concept and based on an urban planning idea. This can be expected in historic city centres that are artificially kept intact – i.e. at the original

status quo – by monument preservation, but not in all other cases where no spatial development plan or settlement typology determines what may be built and what lies outside the legal norms. Flat roofs, gable shapes, façade paintwork, even types of brick can be prescribed by law! The transformation of Western European cities towards a different settlement policy, which has led to the desolation of city centres and the simultaneous growth of metropolises and global urbanisation, continues to accelerate. Bad planning in the 1950s with monotonous blocks of flats on the outskirts of cities, empty flats in city centres, an unchecked proliferation of detached housing estates that destroy landscapes and nature close to the city, and in which only two people per house live at the latest 25 years after their construction, are transforming nature into civilisation. If only a few people live on many square metres, this means a high per capita consumption of living space. However, Le Corbusier's visionary urban planning concept from the 1930s, which aimed to rid the modern city of such individual housing estates and instead planned large residential towers for many hundreds of people, surrounded by large squares with individual green spaces, also failed. It was intended to be functional in order to fulfil people's desire for a prosperous life. But if you look at the apartment block areas of cities like Berlin, Paris or even Glasgow today, you realise that this massing of urbanity has removed all quality of life. There are no open spaces, just streets, concrete, glass and steel façades, underground railways, anonymity and crowds. There are no functionally mixed residential concepts, just pure shopping zones, office towers or industrial estates, which leads to the fragmentation of society. Many buildings are run-down and the residential buildings of the post-war period have been converted into stereotypical apartment blocks, familiar from the prefabricated housing estates of the former GDR or the banlieus in France.

There is now talk of an "architecture of loneliness", people live in more cramped conditions, the development of large cities provides for few green spaces, little room for recreation and hardly any opportunity for creative pursuits. According to the United Nations, almost 70% of the world's population will be living in cities by 2025. Many of the world's urban planners who wanted modern infrastructure have designed cities to be used by cars and not by people travelling on foot. Deceleration is a buzzword and the historical example is the flâneur, but do they really still exist?

People have to "put down roots", i.e. settle down, to stay in the same place for more than a few months. If local residents could decide for themselves how their neighbourhood should be designed, i.e. according to what they need, then settling down could take place again.

The emotions that arise when looking at the images and the decaying cities are not only caused by the emptiness, loneliness or abandonment of the places, but by a state of *always-yet,* an unstable balance between a past and a present, possibly a delayed present that does not want to accept that the future of these places will only be their complete disappearance anyway. The patina is not only a sign of a silent time, but also part of the morbidity, a frighteningly beautiful surface in detail and at the same time the aesthetics of ugliness, the chaotic disorder of destruction and decay. Both moments exist in parallel and their simultaneous presence is difficult to bear, as these places began with planning, i.e. the rational arrangement of things under the guiding principle of functionality. The order is based on justifiability, a series of categories and parameters that provide answers to the question of "why" things exist at all and why they are in the world in this way and not otherwise. As the last fragments and concentrated excerpts in the photographs, order and justifiability have been lost, which is why the answers to the question of why things are still like this or why they are like this at all can only be answered inadequately. We try to imagine the past as a whole in the present, but this only succeeds as a hypothesis, as a possibility with open edges, never completely. The situations testify – through their sheer existence – that the whole once was – even more, that they were the whole – but they do not reveal the "how". They remain allusions, have a vague symbolic quality, but lack the grammar by which we could read them. It is not enough for us to know that they are fragments of urban architecture or ruins, because their anonymity and the stereotype that clings to them give little indication of where, what and why they were built.

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Debris and sadness
Visual poetry between elegy and irony

The reference objects of the following investigation are artistic photographs that the photographer Alberto Petrò took in the past two years at different locations in Europe. The set of images is titled 'Metamorphoses' and is published on his homepage. Especially for the second part of this text, it is recommended to consult the images to better understand the analyses, although the imagined images can also be thought of.

In the juxtaposition of this visual research, Marc Augé's concept of the 'lost place' is critically questioned and brought into dialogue with spatial theories by Kracauer, Benjamin, Husserl, Krämer and Canetti. The method of seeing, registering and representing through photography and the perceiving person has the characteristic of the flâneur, who, in a Benjamian sense, seeks out his places and sites and condenses them in open or unclear situations, which are called 'sites' in an in-between space. The analysis in the second part of the text focuses on this phenomenon of the fragmentation of space-time. In the sense in which Cassirer uses it, presence and absence are just as intrinsic to the image as the so-called 'third space', a term introduced by Homi K. Bhabha. Roland Barthes's peculiar method of reading the 'dotted image' is the basis for the last part of the investigation, which turns to the categories of the provisional, the fragment, the atmosphere, the crack and loneliness. The epilogue refers to Karl Rosenkranz's writing on the aesthetics of the ugly and attempts to cite the phenomenon of patina as an architectural-aesthetic momentum and argument in order to answer the question of why the vague symbolism of the architectural fragments can only be insufficiently answered. In this sense, the essay is also an attempt to reconstruct what is absent through the intensive study of photographs, and this discourse includes its failure – it is an experiment on the text of what has been seen.

KEYWORDS: urban photography, visual research, phenomenology of places, decline, atmosphere

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Gli oggetti di riferimento della seguente indagine sono fotografie artistiche che il fotografo Alberto Petrò ha scattato negli ultimi due anni in diverse località europee. L'insieme delle immagini si intitola "Metamorfosi" ed è pubblicato sulla sua homepage. Soprattutto per la seconda parte di questo testo, si consiglia di consultare le immagini per compren-

dere meglio le analisi, sebbene si possa pensare anche alle immagini immaginate.Nella giustapposizione di questa ricerca visiva, il concetto di "luogo perduto" di Marc Augé viene messo criticamente in discussione e messo in dialogo con le teorie spaziali di Kracauer, Benjamin, Husserl, Krämer e Canetti. Il metodo di vedere, registrare e rappresentare attraverso la fotografia e la persona che percepisce ha le caratteristiche del flâneur, che, in senso benjaminiano, cerca i suoi luoghi e siti e li condensa in situazioni aperte o poco chiare, che vengono chiamate "siti" in uno spazio intermedio. L'analisi della seconda parte del testo si concentra su questo fenomeno di frammentazione dello spazio-tempo. Nel senso in cui lo usa Cassirer, la presenza e l'assenza sono intrinseche all'immagine tanto quanto il cosiddetto "terzo spazio", termine introdotto da Homi K. Bhabha. Il peculiare metodo di lettura dell'"immagine punteggiata" di Roland Barthes è alla base dell'ultima parte dell'indagine, che si rivolge alle categorie del provvisorio, del frammento, dell'atmosfera, della crepa e della solitudine. L'epilogo fa riferimento agli scritti di Karl Rosenkranz sull'estetica del brutto.

PAROLE CHIAVE: fotografia urbana, ricerca visiva, fenomenologia dei luoghi, declino, atmosfera