

The Grand Tour, Kasia Klimpel's first solo exhibition in Switzerland, comprises a series of photos on view at the Mauvoisin Dam as well as an exhibition at the Musée de Bagnes, located some 20 kilometers further down the Val de Bagnes, in the village of Le Châble. The exhibition in the 17th-century building, the former rectory of the village, contextualizes the project exhibited at the dam and shows additional recent works by the artist.

Spanning the 520 meters across a natural gorge and towering 250 meters high, the arched, concrete dam of Mauvoisin was built in the 1950s to generate electricity and prevent floods. Klimpel's "landscapes" are presented on the curved crest of the massive construction. Her images are photographs of collages made to depict landscapes. Placed next to these images are screenshots of Google Maps, which zoom in on the parts of the digital map where Klimpel inserted her landscapes by assigning them geographical coordinates.

Both the dam and Klimpel's work visualize the tension between the natural landscape and technocultural artifacts. As an architectural landmark, an icon inserted in the natural alpine landscape, the dam transforms, tames, and makes use of the natural dynamics of the Val de Bagnes, monumentally forcing its concrete structure between the rocks. In contrast, Klimpel's photographs comment on how images of landscapes are constructed, mediated, and distributed in an online setting. In different ways and through distinct materialities, both the dam and the images show how humans come to terms with the landscapes that they encounter—and both do so by juxtaposing artificiality with nature. Whereas the dam does so by means of its physical presence in the Val de Bagnes, in Klimpel's work this tension is addressed on the level of representation. Moreover, both confront how human-built infrastructures—such as the engineering of the dam as well as the Google platform—transform our perception of the landscape.

Klimpel's photographed collages consist of colored layers of paper. Illuminated by natural light and given texture and depth through a wrinkling and folding of the paper, the collages come to resemble landscapes in which the layered arrangements turn into hills and mountains. Water and horizons with rising and setting suns start to emerge. The artist created these landscapes after looking at images online and analyzing the kinds of photos that surfaced during her Google image searches when she entered keywords such as "sunset horizon," "beautiful horizon," and "horizon." Examining the results of her queries, Klimpel was astonished by the evident similarity between the images. Most were crisp, high-definition photographs in striking colors. They were the kind of images that one might find as standard screensavers, so lushly saturated that they bordered on the unreal. They were the type of images that convey just how far we have advanced in the field of digital photography. Klimpel also discovered archetypes for representing natural phenomena: specific types of horizons, mountains, and sunsets surfaced time and time again. Despite the wealth of online imagery and its potential for virtually limitless aesthetic heterogeneity, the photographs favored by Google image search were disturbingly similar.

In order to come to terms with these archetypes and the formal and aesthetic properties she identified, Klimpel decided to reconstruct the images through analogue means, carrying to an extreme the idea of an archetypal structuring of these images. By stripping their pictorial properties down to the essential characteristics that define them, she points to the normative reality that they perpetuate.

Part of this process of abstraction was the artist's decision to employ techniques and materials whose effects run counter to the properties of the "good" landscape image described above. Klimpel's landscapes contain wrinkles, blemishes, and imperfections, thereby explicitly pointing to the process of their fabrication. Contrasting the seamless quality of the digital images, Klimpel's photographs highlight rather than hide their handcrafted production. The landscapes that Klimpel creates recall Hito Steyerl's concept of the poor image: "The poor image tends towards abstraction: it is a visual idea in its very becoming. The poor image is an illicit fifth-generational bastard of an original image. Its genealogy is dubious [...] It is passed on as a lure, a decoy, an index, or as a reminder of its former visual self. It mocks the promises of digital technology. Not only is it often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur, one even doubts whether it could be called an image at all. Only digital technology could produce such a dilapidated image in the first place."¹ Everything in Steyerl's description of the poor image applies to Klimpel's landscapes, except that its visual impoverishment is not the result of digital circulation, bootlegging, ripping, or copying, but comes from an act of reproduction by simple analogue means.

Klimpel subsequently fed the impoverished and abstracted landscapes back into the online circulation of images, also assigning them one or more geographical locations. The artist chose sites on Google Maps based on where the images would fit in terms of color and composition, and she then tagged her collages with these coordinates. She thus launched the images' "Grand Tour"—a term used to describe the travels undertaken by wealthy young men in the 17th and 18th centuries to explore the culturally significant sites of Europe. In order to connect the images to Google Maps, Klimpel employed a site called Panoramio. Launched in 2005, this service/application allows users to create a profile to store their photographs of landscapes and embed them on a world map through the use of geotags.² Panoramio's increasing popularity led to its acquisition by Google in 2007, and subsequently a Panoramio layer was added to Google Maps and Google Earth, allowing one to view the images as part of the online maps. Now, eight years later, the service is being discontinued, since Google has developed its own image-sharing tool for its Maps applications: the Views - Google Maps platform.³

The images uploaded to Panoramio/Google generally underwent two separate reviews. First they were examined to ensure that they matched Panoramio's image policy, before being reviewed by Google for possible inclusion in Google Earth/Maps. As explained above, Klimpel's landscapes are not actual photographs of existing landscapes. As paper collages they do not qualify to be represented on Panoramio or Google Maps/Earth.⁴ The fact that they are nevertheless on view within these applications is a potential sign that Panoramio/Google's review process is dysfunctional. Alternatively, their inclusion could also be an indication of how Klimpel's images capture the current essence of the landscape photography propagated online to such a successful degree, that they were not detected as collages, despite their low quality and amateurish look. Panoramio's reviewing process is done by "a group of hard-working individuals we simply know as reviewers,"⁵ according to an official statement on one of the forums connected to the site.⁶ It is hard to imagine, however, that the human labor invested in the selection process is not at least co-facilitated by algorithmic processes, considering the number of pictures uploaded to Panoramio (a platform that has published more than 80 million images).⁷

The homogeneity of the landscape images that triggered the project can be considered the result of the feedback loop moderated by online image-sharing platforms. The photographs deemed most worthy of representing natural phenomena constitute a visual regime that is subsequently reproduced. Aided by the preferences of Google, this mechanism propagates a dynamic that privileges the known and established over the unexpected and the different. This feedback loop is a phenomenon that was described by Flusser thirty years ago in his prophetic text "Towards the Philosophy of Photography": "[...] images come between the world and human beings. They are supposed to be maps but they turn into screens: Instead of representing the world,

they obscure it until human beings' lives finally become a function of the images they create. Human beings cease to decode the images and instead project them, still encoded, into the world out there, which meanwhile itself becomes like an image."⁸ Klimpel intervenes into the aesthetic order and questions the feedback loop by introducing an analogue ghost, a flawed version of the currently trending, sleek landscape photograph. At the same time, however, she accelerates the dynamics of the feedback loop and shortcuts its process. Rather than going out into the "real world" and finding a landscape that speaks to the idea of a currently fashionable composition, she constructs such an image, basing it on the most fundamental visual common denominators of her online findings. As she bypasses the world out there altogether and creates a pictorial reality based solely on representations, her world has indeed very literally turned into an image, as Flusser describes.

The effect of Klimpel's images is twofold. By radically abstracting the pictorial properties of the images she encounters online, on the one hand, she exposes the homogeneity of their composition and points to the dynamics that perpetuate their visual hegemony. By impoverishing them and drastically degrading their mimetic quality, on the other hand, she imbues her landscapes with the attention-grabbing and disruptive charm of the poor image, pointing to the fact that somebody actually produced the image and introducing a disturbing element into the standardized, algorithmically established aesthetic order of landscape photography.

Another important aspect to consider in relation to Klimpel's work and the technologies she uses is the kind of renewed relationality between photographs and the places they depict that is introduced by digital geolocative platforms. The values currently propagated by digital image-sharing platforms are closely linked to a rather one-dimensional understanding of representation. The images shared and geotagged to the online maps currently in place need to follow distinct rules. As such, they facilitate maps that allow for the integration of user-generated photographic images, allegedly leading to a situation in which "the world of autonomous images and reality are finally reconciled,"⁹ as the sociologist Francesco Lapenta describes. According to this reasoning, the circulating images, hitherto floating in digital space as simulacra without any grounding in a firm physical referent, are finally given a specific location, a real counterpart, a pin on a map. Hence, it could be argued that these photographic images exist in a different kind of spatial and ontological relation to physical reality. The index that relates the photograph to what it depicts—a relation that, as it has been argued, has been undermined by the massive reproduction and circulation of images in our postmodern times—is counteracted by the geotag that assigns a defined place to the image. The "geomedia-based application," to quote Lapenta again "seems to reconfigure the ontological erosion of indexicality."¹⁰

Klimpel's work complicates Lapenta's understanding of a reconciliation between the world of autonomous images, on one side, and reality, on the other, by pointing out that the relation established by the geotag is part of a layered process constituting its own reality. As such, *The Grand Tour* first points out that the uploaded photographs are actually connected to a visual regime (these images are not any more "real" just because they can be taken by everybody, but follow distinct aesthetic patterns and rules). Secondly, the platforms through which images travel and in which they are contextualized are informed by a distinct understanding of landscape photography. This is enforced through acceptance policies, algorithm preferences (as illustrated by the Google searches Klimpel conducted) and visualization mechanisms (on Panoramio/Google Maps images can be rated: the more popular an image is, the bigger it is displayed on the map, which again ensures that the most normative images stand out). The fact that Panoramio will cease to exist and that its functionality will be continued by Google Maps further heightens the specificity of the types of images approved, as corresponding to Google's tighter visual grip of the platform.¹¹ Through geotags, high-resolution images, smart visualizations and interfaces (for instance, allowing for multiple perspectives and views from different angles) as well as Google Maps' omnipresence, Google would like to make us believe that the notions of