

How to Talk to a Mountain

Mimicry and Wonder in the Photography of Andreas Züst



Andreas Züst, *untitled (Spiegelberg)*, 1998



Andreas Züst, *untitled (Säntis)*, 2000

Measuring, surveying, recording results in lists and numbers, arranging, classifying, registering. These are not only scientific methods, but also methods that require technical equipment: thermometers, telescopes, radiosondes in weather balloons, a camera. The photographer and geographer Andreas Züst, who never finished his studies at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (ETH), incorporated these methods of observation and the technical object of the camera into his artistic work.

As an artist, he began to question techniques of observation through the use of analogue photography. His artistic career, which ended with his death in 2000, took place during the transition from analogue to digital photography, while the practice remained largely rooted in analogue techniques. But although he followed the conditions of optochemistry, without which it is not possible to produce a legible image, he went further, towards blurriness, perspectives beyond recognition and shifted exposure values. In doing so, he moved from a supposedly precise depiction of reality to an interplay between different states of being, transforming the camera into a medium capable of speculating on other realities and bringing about different (industrial) uses.



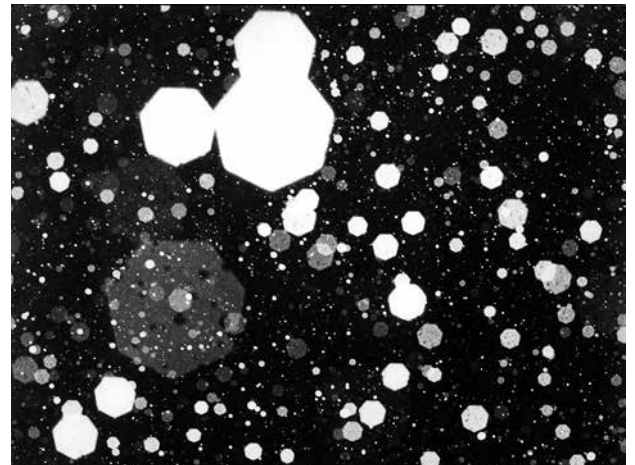
Andreas Züst, *untitled*, 2000



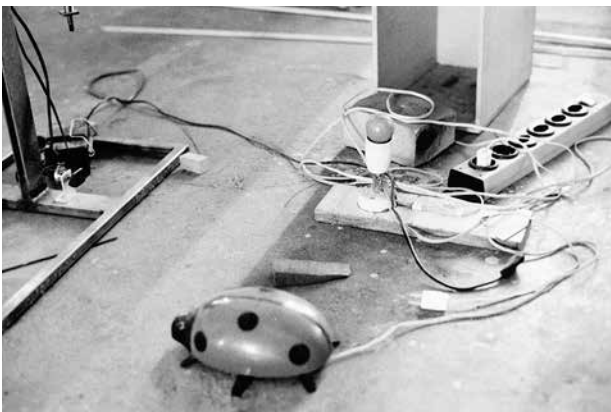
Andreas Züst, *untitled* (from the series *Nacht*), 1995



Andreas Züst, *untitled (Spiegelberg)*, year unknown



Andreas Züst, *Mickey*, 1998



Andreas Züst, *untitled*, year unknown

For an artist trained in the observational techniques of the natural sciences, this step cannot be accidental. When extreme experiences, such as research in Greenland during dark winters or eating toadstools, are incorporated into the use of the camera, it becomes a barometer of conditions beyond precise measurement, listing and classification. What is sought is the inversion of a moment-based medium: a nocturnal light, underexposed, disappears into the darkness, moulds, out of focus, grows into an active landscape, light glistening into smoke that forces us to blink, while the snowflakes illuminated by the lightning have already disappeared, as if a sunlight falling over a carpet. This takes place while the camera captures Peter Mettler filming an out-of-control chimney fire in Andreas Züst's house,

a lemon keeps on rotting, and a mountain at night expands into a (seemingly endless) photographic series — as a slide in a carousel labelled *Nacht* (Night).

If we push the idea of “it matters what concepts we think to think other concepts with”,¹ Andreas Züst not only captured another state of being, but perhaps even a world in motion beyond the human. He did this not only by taking photographs that transcended technical precision, but also by co-authoring the camera. To erase the poisonous age of the Anthropocene and go beyond its logic, could that be a possible concept — letting decay, heat, and aggregate states speak in the face of the camera?

Following the paradox inherent in this claim, Andreas Züst explored a possible concept rooted in poetics, moving his camera between mimicry — see, this is science too! — and astonishment — wow, this is scientific! — using a supposedly high-precision technology to expand a moment rooted in technology into a moment of affection. Moving between mimicry and wonder, he led the “trans-technique” of his art find a crack into another possible world. A poetic process to unlock another layer of time, to those moments when a shutter speed produces a foggy sky or a reflection of light, the attempt to reverse time in a moment of pause. A pause to look through, to “trans-look”, with the seemingly familiar technique of photography.

Doubts remain: the hope of using photographic technology to see beyond the reality it was invented to represent is (again) turned on its head when the question arises as to how to present the photographs to which this article refers. Taken with an analogue camera, in a “trans-industrial” poetic state, the images must be shown in their original form, as precise as Andreas Züst’s, representing something that has left precision behind. In this way, technology takes over again, having been hijacked as technology by a poetic, partly mystical, partly ironic approach. Either we let it happen, or we seek solutions, towards another “trans-industrial” step.

Please keep experimenting! 

Mara Züst is an artist, cultural educator and researcher. She works for artasfoundation at the Centre for Art and Peacebuilding CAP/ZHdK and is in charge of the Andreas Züst estate as *Bibliothek Andreas Züst*. Her greatest passion is the development of tools in the field of cultural pedagogy, including hands-on print production and publishing as a collective mode of work (*Mini-Zine-Library*, since 2019, *Chapakhana Archive*, in 2022, in Bangladesh and Switzerland). Furthermore she loves to publish feminist books that combine research, text and images, in a unique design. (e.g. *Doris Stauffer Sourcebook*, 2025, *Denn wenn Chloe Olivia mag...*, 2022).

Andreas Züst, 1.9.1947 in Bern, †7.8.2000 in Wernetshausen. 1967–1970 studied natural sciences at the ETH Zurich and sociology at the University of Zurich, 1973-1980 research assistant for climatology and glaciology in Canada, Greenland and the Swiss Alps. Photography and painting since the 1970s, numerous solo and group exhibitions in Switzerland and abroad since 1979.

Nachlass Andreas Züst, Zurich, and Swiss National Library, Prints and Drawings Department, Bern. Courtesy: Galerie & Edition Marlene Frei, Zurich.

¹ Donna Haraway, “Introduction”, in Ursula K. Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (London: Ignota, 2019), 10.