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We can now define our universe, its origin and end, more precisely than ever. We know – and this is a comforting thought – that its temporary reprieve promises to last longer than we thought. Moreover, researchers tell us that further worlds, even a “multiverse”, are only waiting to be discovered, promising a future safe haven to the human species should our valuable little planet become uninhabitable due to our own folly or some cosmic catastrophe. Soon, scientists will divulge the “absolute formula” to us, the one that explains everything – from the Big Bang at the beginning to the one at the end, with Life itself in between. On the other hand, contrary to the state of our knowledge today, perhaps we will discover that neither beginning nor end really exists.

At the turn of this century, this sort of speculation was once again all the rage, prompting the editorial staff of our magazine to devote the first of its year-2001 issues to the broadly interpreted themes of “beginning” and “ending.” At the time, of course, we did not have the slightest inkling that just a few months later we would be overwhelmed by an end-of-the-world mood of global dimensions. The fun-time spirit and “wellness” culture that flourished over the summer came to an abrupt end. Pondering the “end” is now a deadly serious matter, and life-and-death decisions have become the order of the day. Nowadays, to take a dispassionate, humorous approach to the theme would be almost immoral. This holds true not only for our own editorial staff, but for all those called upon these days to publish anything targeting the general public, since everything is being interpreted in the narrow perspective of current events. Today, artists are seen either as possessing clairvoyance (Christoph Draeger, Anselm Kiefer) or lacking tact (Olaf Breuning). Storage rooms of various venues are being avidly ransacked to set works on display that cater to the momentary emotional state of the public.

Notwithstanding the current end-of-the-world mood imposed upon us by external circumstances, and the ensuing if still hesitant spirit of renewal, we each go about defining our own individual beginnings and ends, periodically and daily. That is how, given our modest human capabilities, we manage to more or less find our way in this universe and ensure that our tasks are properly carried out: we define a beginning and end to our working days, note deadlines in our agendas, meet our

goals in successive stages. Thus, too, time and, in the last analysis, our accomplishments and successes can be measured: new sports records get set, the shelf-life of foodstuff gets lengthened, and our own end gets postponed, while the traces of our aging and decline get swept away or concealed. Even the life span of artworks can be prolonged thanks to improvements in conservation and restoration techniques. But the message behind art seeks to rise above our fastidiously commonplace strivings and their underlying pragmatic goals. Thus, over the last decades, artists have sought to counter these prosaically conservationist trends by programming their works to include natural decay, the incalculable end, the process itself. Dieter Roth's work based on organic materials is a perfect example of this development: the minute a work of his goes on display, the clock inexorably starts ticking away the time it takes for the process of decay – part and parcel of materiality – to run its course. Diametrically opposed to this approach, the American artist Robert Gober uses organic materials to parody our conservation-oriented arts: his appetizing and fragrant donuts are meant for neither consumption nor natural decay, since he adds a highly poisonous preserving agent to his “baked goods” to prolong their life span!

Despite existing possibilities for lengthening life, our stubborn resistance to ending and decay has hardly diminished – an attitude that has also come to include a growing impatience, a demand for rapid and promptly presented results. This is something that seems to have struck the Geneva artist Hervé Graumann, whose Web site takes us to the virtual “art studio” of the painter Raoul Pictor. Graumann allows viewers to observe the creative process of a traditional artist, to follow the first strokes of his brush, his lost-in-thought comings and goings from the canvas over to the library shelves, on to the armchair, and then back to the paint pots. Impatient viewers can check on the work's progress by reading the exact percentages equally on display: 1%, 2% ... 98%, 99%, and there you have the finished painting. Our dependable and schedule-bound artist takes three minutes to finish a work, and then invites us to print it out. In so doing, we become the proud owners of “an original painting by Raoul Pictor”, signed, numbered, and inscribed with the date and time. More impatient viewers will discover that the picture can be printed prior to its “completion”, and thus realize that

each work exists, or is at least programmed, even before the first stroke of the brush. Raoul Pictor, however, seems quite oblivious of all this; he goes on working tirelessly, day after day and year after year, forever seeking his own style ("Raoul Pictor cherche son style"). He will continue to do so until his creator, Hervé Graumann, decides it is time to close down the "art studio" and pull his artist out of circulation.

Inevitably, the assiduous Raoul Pictor's destiny reminds us of our own. We too were set down into a world, into a finite space, which we call reality. And ever since, we have built and worked and struggled there for something that, at best, has

been conceived and generated somewhere else, in an imaginary dimension, and according to a formula that incorporates everything – every impulse of the creatures, every movement of the stars, every thought and every brush stroke. How very much we would like to set our eyes on the screen script and, as in some films, rewind the reel from end to beginning and replay our lives, making some corrections to it this time round. Who knows, maybe that way we could change the ending a bit or even obliterate it entirely, so as to catch a whiff of eternity. For the time being, though, such an adventure still belongs to the world of fiction, metaphysics, virtuality, and ... art.

Jean-Paul Felley: Christoph Draeger – Apocalyptic Journeys

On the black day that was September 11th, still before the events took place, I sent off an e-mail off to Christoph Draeger, inviting his contribution to this issue of Swiss Art. Of course it was only once the dust spread by the collapse of the World Trade Center's twin towers had begun to settle that Draeger received my message.

In but a few hours, my proposal, written in such a light vein at the time, took on a whole new significance. His answer was curt, asking me to wait for a last photograph that would again have New York as its subject.

Draeger began his Apocalyptic Journeys photographic series in 1994, with a shot related to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center that, on 26 February 1993, had left five dead. Since then, Draeger has kept on traveling and his series growing, for rare is the city that has never experienced a catastrophe. Until last September 11th, however, he had never been present on the site of a catastrophe at the very time it was happening.

To date, this still ongoing series consists of 47 medium-format (46 × 58 cm), color photographs. Each has a landscape as its subject an urban or rural scene or an architectural aspect thereof, such as a villa with swimming pool, a harbour, a football stadium or, though more rarely, an interior.

At first glance, nothing in particular seems to link the pictures together. It is only the captions accompanying them that provide us with a first inkling, which makes

us tremble. Yet the captions are somewhat confusing: the name of a place and a country, together with a date. We don't know what to make of the date, since it is that of the shot and not that of the event so discreetly brought to mind. Indeed, many of the photographs show no trace of a catastrophe. No need: the sites and their events are already impressed upon our collective memory.

Be that as it may, the date of the event evoked is beside the point. At times, it forms part of our recent history, like the shot of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack, but at other times it involves facts harking back several millenia, such as to the time when Pompeii was buried by an eruption of Mount Vesuvius. Beside the point, too, is its real importance. Thus the artist applies the same stringency and matter-of-fact approach to all of the shots, whether evoking the bombing of Nagasaki or the death of a princess under a bridge in Paris. Every accident, terrorist attack, earthquake or social upheaval exists above all in our subjective perception of it, in the way it has marked human history.

In short, Draeger's Apocalyptic Journeys are akin to the erection of a strange monument, like a stela that, photograph by

photograph, provides a vision of humanity that is, basically, made up of events marking its end. A monument that, too, draws our attention to our amnesia, and to our faculty for masking life's risks and dangers. A monument to the very fragility of our lives.

