Conversation
Hans Ulrich Obrist with Alois Mosbacher

Hans Ulrich Obrist: And that brings us to the very first question. What role do photography and the Internet play in your work; where's the starting point for your pictures?

Alois Mosbacher: They only play a role as a working method, they've got nothing to do with the result. So it's really not so very important that that's where I get my image material from. At the same time, of course, I can see that the Internet is a medium that's very good to work with, especially for research purposes. It's a kind of surfing around, not just on the Internet, but also around the theme. After all, I didn't plan the whole thing in advance; I just sort of stumbled into it.

HUO: You mean you just came across these live role-play games on the Internet and then …

AM: Well, basically there are two different levels. First there are my children's computer games, primarily role-play and strategy games like *Dark Age of Camelot*. I can't play it at all myself, it doesn't interest me either, but of course it immediately generates associations with the games of my own childhood, like cowboys and Indians, for example – this desire to simply slip into some role or other, to escape, or to be stronger … And the second thing was that I then stumbled upon the pictures of these live role-play games on the Internet. To start with I had no idea what the point was supposed to be, all these crazy blokes standing around with weapons and fighting. And it only gradually dawned on me what it's all about. All over the world there are these role-play clubs whose members meet up to play these games. Sometimes the whole thing goes on for a few days, with very precise rules; usually they're medieval battle games, but there are also fantasy games like *The Lord of the Rings* or *Star Wars*.

HUO: And new communities come into being?

AM: Yes, new communities come into being. And they're not children, they're adults. To start with I was primarily interested in the landscape they're set in. The backdrops, the actions, and the games were equally barmy everywhere, but you were immediately able to define that it was taking place in Finland, or somewhere in Germany, or in America. And at first I just looked at all this stuff and had no idea at all that I could do something with it.

HUO: It's not really a break with what you were doing before. These narrative fragments already pop up in your earlier work.

AM: Yes, exploring the narrative possibilities of painting has always been a theme

Geisterhaus / *Spook House,* 1996

of mine, a longing for stories and history. At the same time I also see how difficult it is and that it never really succeeds. So, in the end there's no history and no stories left in painting. I've always worked with these two extremes. The starting point was the game, then I stumbled upon it and started playing, and now I'm simultaneously the controller of the game and the player; I'm a perpetrator, I'm a victim, at the same time I'm also a spectator, everything. And so I control the whole thing and that's what makes it interesting. And now it's developed a momentum of its own.

HUO: We watched the video with this central character, what's his name?

AM: Leo.

HUO: Leo. You say that outsiders are actually the underlying theme. I think it's really communities of outsiders as well. And then you make reference to Walden, to an utopian text, as it were.

AM: The thing with the woods is a very complex affair. There's always a sinister vibration about it. We're familiar with this motif from Grimm's fairytales and so on. And if you put the big bad wolf against a right-wing extremist background, for example, he turns into the "Unabomber", he becomes Theodor Kaczinsky in the forests of Montana. And then you've got a negative utopia. The woods make a good stage for outsider roles, simply because there are still places and spaces there where you can build up a parallel world or a counterworld. And that was always there too within this whole motif of the woods.

HUO: It was also there in "Spook House." After all, that's also all about this outsider who builds this hut.

AM: Well, it's not only about the outsider, at the time the principal issue for me was irrationality, and the fact that the individual has to learn to handle it. I was living in the country at the time. I don't think this irrationality or insanity is any greater in the country. It's just rooted in different circumstances, and I wanted to attach that to an architecture. Anyway, there was a man there, a man who was already getting on in years who was building a house out of refuse material, illegally or whatever. It was really fantastic, and it was also lovely to watch him building it. I wanted to make something out of it. But this man was also an old Nazi and at the time I didn't have the nerve to use it directly. So I tried to see what else you could hang this irrationality on. Then I found these children's playhouses, or fragments of children's playhouses, in the woods, and I spent the whole summer in the woods painting this big picture, "building" it, so to speak. And that again brought completely new implications into painting, the fact that I'm just there building all summer long. And when the summer comes to an end, the picture is finished.

HUO: Let's just stick with this concept of utopia for a minute: which underlying concept of utopia are we talking about here? After all, on the one hand there's this "Walden" utopia, and at the same time, if you seek utopias nowadays, there's also a scepticism towards this idea that you're forcing utopias upon others.

AM: Well, it's not that I'm trying to put forward a countermodel. I don't take sides with any of the protagonists in my game. I just see that a lot of people in our society simply can't keep up, and in some form or another have to build an alternative world in which they can live. And in the most extreme case they drop out altogether and build their own hut in the woods. It's just a fundamental fact that this society is leaving less and less free spaces in which to do that. And I think that's a big problem. So it's not so much a moral thing. I just realized that this apparently romantic landscape painting can suddenly encapsulate something that is of great topical relevance.

HUO: That's something I've often noticed, with your Winterthur exhibition *Haus*, for example, that you work on a big group of pictures that then go to a museum or

gallery. But they're not just series; in fact, you've always defined projects. Projects that are something bigger than just a series of pictures.

AM: Yes, and at the same time, of course, the project itself gives a new definition to the picture. Once one of these pictures is finished, as it were, the whole thing is always completely different. And things like composition, style, bravura, incidentality, sloppiness, precision, and all the other stuff that constitutes painting are repeatedly redefined. And just the way I'm working at the moment – a very nervous way of working. Everything happens at once, it drives me on, I research …

HUO: It's restless.

AM: It's restless. I've got a huge amount of ideas and I'm perfectly aware that it'd be better to take something or other and really do just that one thing, to take it right through to the end, as it were. What's being completely redefined here at any rate is what I now accept as valid, what's finished and what isn't.

HUO: You mean by this larger project …

AM: Yes, the picture is being completely redefined in the context of this larger project.

HUO: That's very interesting. And something else that occurred to me just then – another underlying theme that repeatedly crops up in your work is the house. Has architecture had an influence on your work? I mean, are you interested in architecture or architectural models?

AM: Well, not really. It's more these utopian models or counterworld models. Of course they're extremely primitive, all that's defined really is that you build the house yourself, that you yourself determine and have control over who comes in or not and how the whole thing's designed. So it does have something to do with architecture in that sense.

HUO: Can you tell me a bit about this forerunner project, the Wintherthur house project we were just talking about? Strictly speaking that was really an installation.

AM: First and foremost it was a painting project. Different groups of pictures took on different functions, architectural functions. And the concept was very naïve in places, but that also gave it a certain warmth. There's this naïveté in saying tall narrow pictures are columns and a horizontal picture is a ceiling on top and then there's a roof. At the same time, of course, I know that what I'm doing here now is at least equally naïve, but at the moment I've perhaps got more of a feeling that it's right and that the political or social components of the work are more easily communicable to others.

HUO: That brings us to the question of politics. How do you see the ethical and political dimension of painting, in general and in connection with this project?

AM: Well, I don't think painting allows you to exert any direct political influence. It's more a kind of responding and pointing to processes within society that simply take their course, processes you perhaps depict and encapsulate. After all, we don't only think in logical terms either; there's also something that happens deeper down, a way of thinking that has more to do with images. And I do believe that from this whole flood of images there emerge those that are right, or those that are right for the times. So the fact that I go and pull some images out of the Internet isn't interesting in itself. It only becomes interesting when I select images, and in selecting them place them in relation to one another, and by doing so create a picture that is valid for me, and maybe for somebody else too. And I have a fundamental belief in the image, that's why I'm a painter: I believe in the power of a picture.

HUO: And how does this translation, as it were, take place? I mean from this flood of images on the Internet to the picture that is then valid? Of course you make the selection, then there's the editing, but is there an archive? How do you deal with archives? Do you download the images? And the other question I ask myself is:
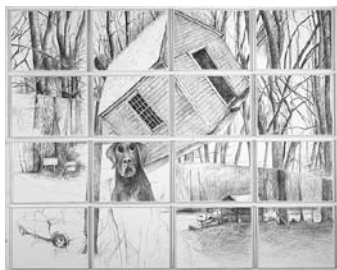
Waldendog, 2008

does drawing still play a role in this translation process? After all, you've always done a lot of drawing.

AM: There's the classical term: sketch. Nowadays I tend to refer to it as research. Effectively it's the same as a sketch but it's not pre-eminently hung on a specific medium like drawing. It's not just images that flow into the preparation either, but language and text too. And of course that's interesting in itself, the fact that when you search for images on the Internet, you have to enter a linguistic definition. The amazing thing about it is that I often end up finding the same images using a whole range of different search terms. One's linguistic capacity is limited and you get stuck in your own tracks.

HUO: In earlier conversations we've had, and also in previous interviews, you've frequently talked about the significance of language for your work: the fact that it's very important, yet at the same time it's seldom been directly incorporated into the work.

AM: Text in an image is simultaneously form, painting, and conveys content or some kind of meaning. That's always caused me great difficulties. The problem was usually that it only produced well-intentioned pictures.

HUO: And at the same time, while we're on the subject of language, you've always made very intensive reference to literature. Last time we talked about Henning Mankell. Perhaps you could say a little bit more about that?

AM: Well, I'm no expert; I sometimes have phases where I read a great deal, a pretty chaotic jumble. I'll even be reading twenty books at the same time and I won't finish a lot of them, and then suddenly I'll really devour something and somehow it'll find its way into my work. I have an interest in narratives; in a story that has a beginning, then it develops and has an ending, a terrible ending or a happy one, and one where you can follow how it came about. So it isn't my intention to bring story and picture together; they're two separate areas, but sometimes they just touch on one another.

HUO: You also read a lot of Mankell while you were working on these pictures. And I asked myself if there isn't perhaps a reference there …

AM: Yes, I don't know if this Wallander stuff is such great literature. It kind of draws you in when you read it. And equally it's the stupid triviality of this Swedish province. What I did like about it is that it's constructed as a crime story. But the crime story isn't the real point. The point is this atmosphere, this feeling that something can and must happen. And that it'd be interesting to imagine that something can happen in the picture too, or in the next picture.

HUO: In the Wallander books, of course, this interlinkage is also very important. It struck me that there's this chain of interlinked circumstances in *The Dogs of Riga*, for instance, and Mankell once said in an interview – and perhaps there's a connection to your new series here – that it's not that human beings are a priori evil, but that these circumstances lead to a kind of escalation. But of course that's very much a generalisation.

AM: Yes, but what I don't have is this wagging moral finger, as it were, that gets on my nerves in Mankell's writing. That's not really what I want to convey. I'm not saying, these pictures have this or that purpose, to lead somewhere or other, to some kind of moral or whatever. They haven't. Pictures can't do that, or only to a limited extent. And maybe that's also what I mistrust about language.

HUO: Yes, that's very interesting, but it's something in which you differ from Mankell. That's important. Something else that occurred to me earlier in connection with the Internet: you search for these different images and this relationship between text and image. What about the archive? That's something that always interests me a lot in connection with painting – the inventory of images, the
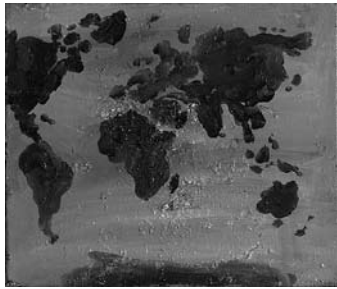

Whichway, 2003

Whichway, 2003

Map, 1991

Map, 1994

archive from which something emerges. Gerhard Richter has this atlas. Have you got a sort of atlas of the Internet on your computer?

AM: Yes, I have.

HUO: How is the atlas structured, and how does it work?

AM: Well, my searching isn't always so precisely targeted. And of course it's not as if I can use everything I've found or seen from the very start. It's often very spontaneous: something interests me, so I click on the button and then it's stored. The archive is naturally a lot bigger and more comprehensive than the actual project. And also, of course, the archive already contains material for work that I won't start until much later, or perhaps never, but which arouses my interest. And I've always, even back in the 1980s, practiced a kind of encyclopedic painting – the idea being that I can use everything and paint everything.

HUO: Yes, that's what prompted my question about the atlas. After all, in the catalogue of your Palais Liechtenstein exhibition there's also a drawing of an atlas …

AM: Geography as a certain definition of place: where something is, where you are yourself, or where something or other can happen, that's always interested me. And the fact that a great deal is already determined by the place itself. And the fact that maybe it's not always a question of "what."

HUO: That was also very true of your exhibition I saw back then in Zürich, the one where you showed those objects; I think it was "Thürnthal." After all, that was also very obviously all about characterizing a place, wasn't it? It was about a place.

AM: Well, sort of … it was all about walking through a certain place – it was almost a religious moment. It was about how you cover a certain route. The route was broken down into its individual sections, that is, into a lot of individual places …

HUO: Like a land survey, you mean?

AM: Like a land survey, yes. The walkers in the woods pictures I'm doing now have a similar function.

HUO: And the walker is the male role, you say?

AM: Yes, but in my narrative there's no real logic of a continuous story. It's more like a video game. I think video games have changed narration and storytelling to an unbelievable extent; maybe not for us yet, but my children can handle it. The structure of a story no longer follows a linear course; instead, you are in control and can join in the action yourself. You have to complete certain levels and then it becomes an entirely different story.

HUO: You mean like the walker, who also says now left or right, or up there or down there …

AM: Yes. And it might appear strange that at the same time I use such a classical medium, i.e. painting, to depict things like that. But again it's perhaps also the need to hang phenomena of this kind on pictures, on more valid pictures.

HUO: But that's exactly how it is: after all, when television was invented, radio didn't become obsolete, it was reinvented. In fact, you could even say that you are reinventing painting for the Internet.

AM: I think my figures and the individual groups of pictures are inherently very functional. They have certain characteristics that can influence one another, and from that a story can emerge.

HUO: And what you're saying is that you have to fight out the story, the narrative, as you go along, level by level, like in a video game; there's no predefined direction.

AM: Yes, exactly. There's no predefined direction. The story isn't linear. You can join in at any point. And that means that the story is a constantly changing one that you make up yourself as you go along. When you see two pictures next to one another it already creates a relationship, with three pictures it becomes more complicated, as it were, and the possible story becomes more complex.

wait here, 2005

Leo walking, 2005

HUO: And what role does the viewer then play in this game or in this story? Because after all there's the argument, derived from Duchamps, which says that the viewer does at least half of the work. How do you see the viewer?

AM: The viewer plays an active role in the story and is assimilated into the picture. Look, for instance, there are these messages which directly address the viewer: "Wait here for me!" or "leave the main road" but of course that's also a fundamental characteristic of painting, of a good picture, that the viewer can jump in, that's always been the case. And then there's these portraits, these Leos, that function as a figure with whom the viewer can identify; they're like a mirror that draws the viewer into the picture and assigns him or her a role. In the extreme case, of course, there's a perpetrator role and a victim role – the two are in a permanent state of flux. You can constantly redefine yourself.

HUO: Are the Leos actually real persons?

AM: There's a real person there in the background. I actually used this real Leo as a model, I actually went into the woods with him and took some photos, but the whole thing didn't really work somehow. So then I started photographing and filming anonymous men, mostly younger ones – but in the urban environment, coming out of the underground, etc. It was only in the painted picture that I placed these figures in the woods. They've now become the "Walker" series. To unify them I gave each walker a peaked cap.

HUO: So what role does chance play in the game?

AM: The element of chance is naturally always present, the whole thing could implode at any moment and take on a completely different appearance; this game is really a kind of meta-game and of course it doesn't really function either. The story primarily serves to develop pictures and painting, and to create pictures in the first place. And I know immediately that if I bring in another new element then something will happen to the entire structure, and so it's like a strategy game, as it were, it's like a crime novel. The upshot is that the painting is constantly redefined. And I don't know how it will look in the exhibition either, how it can be read and how it'll come over. So I cram more and more in and people perhaps think to themselves: That as well? So where's that supposed to …? Right, now he's gone completely off his trolley! So it's …

HUO: It's a very open system.

AM: It's an open system. At the same time it's also a very logical system. Take my latest image idea with the "rubbish," for instance. I came across this motif by chance, and then I saw that it's just right.

HUO: About rubbish … I've been reading quite a lot lately, Mike Davis on the city and Bruce Sterling on the future and tomorrow. Both of them focus very strongly on the concept of the post-apocalyptic. And this idea with the broken computers you've listed here, the old refrigerators, the rusty children's bicycles … is that post-apocalyptic?

AM: It's a reality that some people simply dump things in the woods. Then there are other people who use this rubbish and perhaps even need it because they live in poverty. Or those who build their world out of this rubbish on the strength of a specific ideology. The socio-political implication is that people are forced out onto the margins of society or maybe even drop out themselves. And that requires niches. These niches are also to be found in the rubbish dump, and not only in the metaphorical sense. But this rubbish thing wasn't planned in advance.

HUO: So in this whole cycle, in this very open group of pictures, there's no master plan you're following: there's only the unforeseen, the element of surprise …

AM: Yes. I mean, a plan slowly evolves over time. The plan structures itself in the work. I've been working on this for two years now. And naturally I now know a lot

more and I'm pushing ahead with it in a very focused manner. But of course there are unforeseen elements and things, I mean … hopefully there'll still be plenty more things that come into it, until I say, now it's finished, and then perhaps there'll be another new element that interests me, or a different aspect of the whole thing.

HUO: In the short text you showed me before you mention the "investigation" and define it here as a criminal investigation, as a criminalistic take on painting.

AM: Well, yes … I mean, I meant it as a bit of a tease. There's a picture in this series entitled "Investigators," which shows three men who are looking for something on the forest floor, and of course this scene immediately takes on a criminalistic touch. And you can imagine a crime plot and then there's a perpetrator, a victim and maybe the explanation of an event or a crime. But this crime plot can't really be the essence of the picture, so I have to shift the focus onto the painting, onto the medium itself. A pictorial scenario emanates a certain fascination, which first of all is very formally defined. And different possible scenarios give rise to different pictorial possibilities and preferences. A walker in the woods: Who is he? Is he taking a Sunday afternoon stroll? Is he hunting for mushrooms? Does something happen to him? Is he up to something nasty? The plot is repeatedly redefined, but, still more, it is this that defines the painting. I'm fascinated by the idea of seeking these places out as an impressionistic painter and painting just that, painting this innocent landscape. Where a crime might have just been committed. And this picturesque spot, this beautiful position, this lovely motif, this place, suddenly becomes the scene of a crime. It doesn't matter whether something really happened there or what happened; the only thing that's important is that a place is given a different definition. And as a result it's given a different definition within the painting too. So I think it's more that aspect that makes it interesting for me as a painter, or as painting.

HUO: But that brings us back to the question of geography. And there was something I wanted to ask you about that earlier, but then we digressed. About geography: there are often these real places, like Thürntal or Haslach, for example, that played a geographical role, too. And in this case the whole thing really starts out from – if you like – places taken from the Internet. Do you then investigate these virtual places? Do you visit them in reality?

AM: When you see a landscape or a place, you always know more or less where this place could be. I mean, you instinctively feel it. Through experiences, images you have in your head and comparisons you've learnt that that must be in Siberia, or wherever. That's not really so important for my work. The specific places in which a possible plot is set are usually a construct, often they're also a mixture of real places I know personally and anonymous photos. The place is the background to the picture, as it were, and only becomes my picture as painting and through painting. The picture that starts out from a private photo on the net, say, a photo of a person completely unknown to me, is placed on a completely different level and in a completely different environment by the process of painting. Take the group of pictures "Akemi in the Woods", for instance. The starting point was five, maybe six photos on a private homepage. And from these five pictures you already know a great deal: there's this girl who's Japanese or Korean, at any rate of Asian origin, and she probably lives in America. She's got a boyfriend, his name is Michael, and two years ago they went for a walk, probably in a forest in California. They took photos of each other building a fire and then roasting a marshmallow. Out of this brief episode I now create my own story, but it doesn't really tell you more either. So: Is that it then? Is there a plot in the painting?

HUO: Are there actually any immanent properties of painting that act as influences

Akemi working, 2003

or triggers for your work? After all, we've now talked a great deal about the Internet and the material you find there, but are there any references immanent to painting?

AM: When you download pictures from the Internet, they're in digital format. That means they're precisely calculated, with a limited number of colors, a specified brightness distribution, etc. And you can look at them in Photoshop as curves and diagrams and separate color channels. The pictures are mathematical operations, and the fact that you can dissect pictures mathematically like that did exert a certain fascination on me. And through this primitive and naïve amazement there might also have been an influence on my painting: How much brightness? How much darkness? In contrast to the digital image the painted picture really has a very limited color spectrum, but it's still infinite.

HUO: Another thing I just thought of is that book by Bourdieu and Luc Budanski et al from the 1960s, *Photography – A Middle-brow Art*, where this question of high and low sources also arises.

AM: Well, yes – but that doesn't actually play a role in my work. Either the pictures are usable and true for me, or they're not. So that's not a problem for me at all.

HUO: So everything can be a source?

AM: Everything can be a source. I don't make any differentiations in that respect either. Nor do I have any kind of scruples about taking something over, whether it's from the museum or the TV or whatever, I'll pinch it and use it in my work.

HUO: I've got one more question. Actually it's a question that always crops up in all of my interviews. And that's the question about the non-realized projects. We've talked a lot about your realized projects, about this project here that's about to be realized … and I wanted to ask you whether there aren't any non-realized projects, utopian projects, projects that were too large, projects that were discontinued; the roads that got rerouted or the projects that never got built, the unpainted pictures, so to speak.

AM: Yes. Of course there are those, too. In that whole archive we talked about earlier there are a lot of things that I briefly explored but then left for some reason or another. And sometimes I think to myself, maybe it just has to rest for a while. Even for years. Until you perhaps stumble upon it again and this time you're persistent enough to define it, or maybe all that's missing is a little jump or some tiny movement, like a mere tilt of the head, to throw it into another perspective that suddenly makes it right. The essential thing is that you also have to have the feeling that now it's just right. And it's always a question of how you come to that point. What's also decisive is the right moment in time, precisely when you then do it. But generally speaking I'm not afraid of running out of ideas. Of course there are also phases when you're especially productive, when something really develops …

HUO: Like now, at the moment you're in a hugely productive phase.

AM: Yes. And then there are other phases, they can even last for years, two years or even longer, where there doesn't seem to be any result there and the research is in the foreground. Sometimes it's just not the right point in time to pin down a motif, or a theme, or a picture.

HUO: So it's a question of timing?

AM: … of timing, yes. And sometimes it just comes immediately, and it's completely amazing that a result you've been struggling around with for a very long time turns out to be not so very far from the original intention. The jumps you have to make are often very minimal, yet still so decisive.