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Thomas Flechtner: *Snow*, 2001

When Thomas Flechtner's book came out in 2001, it caused quite a sensation. It amazed, it surprised, and above all, it propelled the photographer to the forefront of the international photography scene. Landscapes, a major genre since the invention of photography, were enjoying good times, particularly after the Düsseldorf School had brought them back into fashion. The part of the world photographers were training their lens on, however, was urban and industrial. Shot with view cameras and offering the utmost in detail, these photographs proved to be cold and neutral.

In *Snow*, Flechtner's photographs were abstract and vague. The book boasted a white cover, protected by a dust jacket in translucent tracing paper that gave the impression of a layer of snow. On the back, a rectangle in white ink printed on glassine paper looked like a layer of frost. *Snow*: these four letters signaled a new era in landscape photography. The purity and restraint were such that they could not help but catch the eye of curious readers. The name of the author and the title of the book were barely discernable. No ink detracted from the immaculate whiteness. The embossed title itself presented an irregular relief, like ski tracks in the snow.[i]

The book, printed in a large format,[ii] is certainly an imposing object. Expansive on the page, it allowed the designer to highlight the images with large white edges. It is indeed a "white" book, inside and out. We owe the quality and care that clearly went into this edition to the publisher, Lars Müller, who had been very impressed by the limited edition of the *Colder* series that Egli.Kunz & Partner, Glattbrugg, had put out a year earlier for their clients.[iii] The photographer and publisher wanted a book that was out of the ordinary. Even before opening *Snow*, readers were meant to have a precious, delicate object in their hands that they would handle with care. The ritual could then begin.

In Flechtner's work the modern world, vibrating with color and frenetic movement, gives way to silence and snowy spaces. Nature, or more precisely snow, is shown in all its power. It is the link between the high mountains and the vast plains in Greenland. But if Flechtner's book signals a new direction in landscape photography, it is not because of its subject matter; it is rather its treatment. Since the 19th century, photographers had been making their way towards lofty peaks, while journeys in the Alps were already attracting early practitioners of the medium in the 1850s. Often mounted for scientific purposes, the photo expeditions were more on the order of exploration. And despite their bulky equipment, photographers would tread right alongside mountaineers. In the second half of the 19th century, topographers, geographers, and geologists regarded photography as a precious tool in their work that was capable of offering accurate views.

In the 20th century, photography provided images for tourists and lovers of mountains and mountain scenes. The virgin beauty of high summits or glaciers was as spectacular and fascinating as the discovery of new lands. Thus mountains came to be seen as aesthetic material. Painters had already demonstrated that quality with their romantic views of snowy expanses. Photographers also liked to make use of the vastness of certain places. And the search for the sublime, peculiar to romantic landscape painting, appealed to photographers as well. *Snow* belongs to that tradition. In Flechtner's work the elements pulse with life, while winter muffles all sound.

Flechtner's photography is about introspection. His work invites us to follow him on his solo treks. Separated into four chapters, the book begins with his travels on foot ("Walks"). It follows with the passage between mountains ("Passes'), then takes us to a snow-covered town ("Colder"), and ends with expanses of ice ("Frozen"), by far the most abstract series of photographs in the book. *Snow* has no introductory text. It is a silent book. After the title page, the first chapter begins with a strikingly somber image: slightly curved horizontal lines on a black background. The next image depicts traces of wind-driven snow. The lines surprise us with their regularity. Are we in fact looking at some form of Land Art? The line motif continues like that, page after page. Shot during the day or at night, the images are striking in their abstraction; they offer not a hint of context. The first chapter is thus akin to a series of works that play with black and white, night and day. This monochromatic world reminds us of a painter's gesture. In what place or what country, we wonder, were these photographs taken? Gradually, the horizontal lines formed by driven snow afford us a glimpse of a horizon line or some raised feature. Mountains appear only to disappear once again, leaving the viewer alone in front of these traces, these sparkling lines.

Flechtner used a flashlight and long takes to produce this series. The glinting lines are the photographer's own tracks, in fact, when he made his way over these ski areas at night. The second chapter belongs to more traditional landscape photography. Readers are led through the passes in the Alps, where they discover the galleries that run along the slopes there, those passageways built to enable travelers to skirt the towering peaks. Man has left traces of his presence in this landscape. The roads, tunnels, and buildings are scattered about in a snowy landscape where all forms of vegetation are absent. Only rock can occasionally be made out beneath the snow. A feeling of claustrophobia takes hold of the reader when snow is shown in the tunnels, plugging up their openings. Snow blown by a blizzard weighs down heavily on these man-made areas of respite from the oppressive surroundings. Flechtner also shows places where the snow has gained the upper hand in the constructed landscape. Has man deserted these sites transformed by human intervention? The rhythm between the images takes shape, builds; pictures follow one after the other, corresponding to and balancing one another, relentlessly, without

repose. The chapter ends on a symbolic image, a road disappearing into the fog. *Snow* is a world of disappearance, a world of silence.

The third chapter sets up a contrast with the previous images. The town of La Chaux-de-Fonds, located at 1,000 m above sea level, is shown at night in the middle of winter. The light from the lampposts colors the snowy landscape, offering up shades of blue, pink, and gold. The palette of colors is striking since Flechtner has accustomed us to monochrome till this point. As in the first two chapters, people are nowhere to be seen, while lights inside the houses indicate where they have taken refuge. The photographer travels along the avenues and perimeter of the deserted town. He ventures down silent streets, at dusk and daybreak. Here and there the lights of the houses peek out timidly, as if the inhabitants were afraid to show themselves to some invisible force.

The chapter ends with two pages of text written by the English scientist Gerald Seligman. Entitled "Snow Structure and Ski Fields," the piece was published in 1936 in London.[iv] The tone is sober and austere. Yet the text has a certain poetry about it, too. By choosing a scientific paper, Flechtner makes clear his intention of avoiding the overly personal feelings associated with the topic of snow. Excerpted from a manual, the passage describes the many different varieties of snow. It can be variable, light, heavy, soft, hard, fascinating, dangerous, render the surroundings peaceful, or announce the coming of a storm. Snow is a material that changes from place to place, period to period, climate to climate. It can be dry or wet, while its surface, weight, and movement vary. Seligman's text ends on the subject of avalanches. The tone is serious. How can a victim be heard when the snow's weight blocks out all sound? Taking in these words, the reader is put in mind of the previous images of mountain passes, where driven snow had covered up all trace of human existence.

The title of the last chapter announces a different direction. The images must now be viewed by turning the book ninety degrees. The pages do not turn from right to left, but rather from bottom to top, a gesture that is akin to a kind of peeling off. The layers are delicately lifted away, each one revealing a vast landscape of ice. We have left the Alps for Greenland. Flechtner now focuses on the earth and sky, with the line of the horizon lying at the center of the image. The misty atmosphere makes the sky merge with the snowy landscape. The images of the last chapter are striking because of their minimalism. These compositions—a painter's touch indeed seems to be on display here and there—are extremely spare and offer variations on the theme of appearance and disappearance. The further the reader delves into the book, the harder it is to make out the images. Snow melts into fog and ends up covering the whole page. Occasionally a shadow conjures up a volume. A totally abstract image suddenly looms up. The environment no longer reveals any relief or horizon. The eye tries to make out a few details, but in vain. Then, right on the

next page, the horizon reappears, the outline of rocks becomes visible once again, and water can be detected through cracks and slits in the snow. The chapter closes on one final image: Greenland's pack ice seems to have become fragile; water is present and the ice is being swallowed there.

The book ends with a quotation from the American poet Robert Lax: "Sounds come and go, but the silence remains." These words sum up Flechtner's book, which unquestionably generates a mood of contemplation and meditation. Flechtner's approach differs from many works produced in the 1990s that followed the aesthetics championed by the Düsseldorf School. In addition, the photographer manages to train the reader's eye so that gradually it is able to grasp the various nuances of white on view. Snow is never completely pristine, its tones vary. Flechtner wanted the blank pages separating the chapters to be just a bit off-white, to obtain a slight contrast with the white paper used for the plates. Page after page he insists that readers sharpen their eye, sharpen their perception of white.

Flechtner's work is imbued with a sense of timelessness. His photographs are produced using a large-format view camera, a technique that requires a slow, precise, and methodical approach. The result of long exposures, the images inspire calm. Time seems to have come to a complete standstill or slowed down. Flechtner's work is neither theatrical nor narrative. Viewers must simply allow themselves to be absorbed by the environment—just like the photographer, who indeed traveled the length and breadth of his landscapes during long solitary walks. Not even a hint of movement is to be seen in this nature, frozen in place by the cold. Only the last image shows that the snow is temporary. In that shot it is getting ready to disappear.

When it appeared, *Snow* truly struck readers because of its radical approach. The landscapes it portrays are so spare, so vague, they end up vanishing. The culmination of a cycle of work that stretched over six years, *Snow* allowed the photographer to set off for other horizons: toward nature's essence, its movement, and colors.[v]

Thomas Flechtner, *Snow*, Baden, Lars Müller, 2001, 180 pages, 37 x 28 cm, 105 illustrations, English, graphic design by Thomas Flechtner and Lars Müller, color separations, Egli.Kunz & Partner, Glattbrugg/Zurich, printed by A. Schöb Buchdruck-Offsetdruck, Zurich.

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[i] Flechtner himself wanted this irregular embossing, a request that must have seemed quite odd to a printer who felt duty bound to deliver regularity and precision.
[ii] In 2002, the publisher came out with a smaller edition (24 x 31 cm). Whereas the first edition had a print run of 1,500 copies, the second comprised 4,000 copies at a forty percent reduction of the price with respect to the original edition.
[iii] Only 300 copies were printed of this twenty-page edition. The lithographer wanted to demonstrate the precision of his work, notably in the subtlety and delicacy of the tones he was capable of obtaining.
[iv] Flechtner came across this text while doing research in Davos, Switzerland.
[v] *Bloom*, the book that followed *Snow*, was published by Lars Müller in 2007.