

SIMON ROBERTS

Sight Sacralization: (Re)framing Switzerland

by Daniela Bär, 2016

With a background in cultural geography, a major theme to Simon Roberts' work has been the exploration of tourists' experience of foreign countries through the photographic lens. He has concluded that even once a foreign place has been encountered, it is very difficult for tourists to overcome the ingrained stereotypes they bring with them. When tourists take photographs, they are often merely re-presenting images they have seen before in guidebooks or advertising. Having spent the past eight years working almost exclusively on photographic projects in the UK, Roberts came to this commission to explore afresh the closely intertwined and complex relationship between tourism and photography.

His premise was to capture images in some of the most-photographed places in Switzerland, deliberately seeking out the picturesque landscape views that attract tourists. In many places in Switzerland, specific viewing platforms have been built where people can stand to admire such landscapes. As Roberts points out, in the 21st century, we no longer have to seek out and discover the best spots in order to get a good view; instead we are led to officially marked destinations to take our photographs, often along with hordes of others. What feelings does this inspire? Are we appreciating an experience or merely capturing a view? Is our enjoyment based primarily on our ability to share it digitally and tag ourselves to prove that 'we were here'?

In the days of the European Grand Tours, travelers would hike and climb for days to reach vantage points in order to experience the pleasure of the sublime. Today's tourists are transported by cable car to the safety of designated viewpoints. The process of discovery has been altered. Of course, this is not only a Swiss phenomenon, but it becomes important when we consider that Switzerland's tourism capital lies predominantly in its landscape.

In the 18th century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau withdrew into the mountains because he was disgusted with the behavior of city-dwellers and hoped to lead a secluded life communing with nature. Roberts' photographs show how Rousseau's Romantic perception of the Swiss landscape has been radically altered as a result of the different ways in which tourists 'consume' this same landscape as a commodity. These days, many tourists upload their photos onto various social media platforms accompanied by a geo-tag. Once upon a time, these photos were intended for private albums back home, but now tourists have become contributors to destination marketing.

In all his works, Roberts strives to examine the relationship between landscapes and the way in which they are perceived, used, and altered. He has no intention of criticizing tourists taking holiday snaps, instead, one of his goals is to invite people to see more in these places than just the consumer product of a nice view. He has shoveled snow and spent hours on a ladder in temperatures below freezing, waiting for the right moment, and noticed how a landscape changes over time. By using augmented reality to pull the viewer into the landscape and emphasize fleeting moments, the essences of these individual locations can be exposed, and their past can be incorporated. His intention with this exhibition is by no means to re-create 'viewing platform moments' but to offer the viewer new, multiple perspectives on the Swiss landscape.