



Patrick Rohner

Mass movements»  
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In geology, the term gravitational mass movements is used to refer to downhill movements of stone material caused by the influence of gravity.<sup>1</sup> In Switzerland, geological mass movements, like the recent landslide at Piz Cengalo or the precarious developments in the avalanche zone near Moosfluh on the edge of the Aletsch Glacier not only demonstrate the extent to which these catastrophic events alter the landscape, they also attest to the risks and consequences of today's climate emergency. With the exhibition *Massenbewegungen* (Mass Movements) at Galerie Mark Müller, Patrick Rohner presents new works in oil and watercolor. These works are the result of differentiated processes over a period of many years and are linked to highly interdisciplinary research. In so doing, the Swiss artist constantly challenges the idea of supposedly independent disciplines and allows us concrete access to other realms, revealing the prevailing imbalance between human being and nature. As the artist puts it,

“Based in Glarus for thirty years, I work on developing a view of how humans relate to nature, how they influence it, the impacts these changes have. A concept has emerged that meticulously interrogates my own actions, while at the same time increasingly withdrawing them: perception of reality thus moves into the foreground. Perhaps it is an attempt to sketch out an alternative to the dismaying developments in the progressive destruction of our planet.”<sup>2</sup>

Patrick Rohner is especially interested in geological phenomena and their consequences for nature and our (still) inhabitable planet. He seeks to execute this accordingly in his works and with his own approach. Going beyond supposed landscape painting, Rohner has developed processes and methods that are borne by a decidedly transdisciplinary exchange, detailed archival work, and intense research, as well as constant further education. In addition to works that express themselves on visual supports, he also creates films and offers tours of the landscape and site-specific contextualizations in the form of guided excursions and lectures. In so doing, the artist suspends the standard calculation of time for artistic work and production entirely. Central is neither the result nor the completeness of his work, but a multi-layered process that often extends over years.

A simple work day for the artist is structured in various moments and processes that as a whole define Patrick Rohner's largely systematized approach.<sup>3</sup> The day begins with reading the newspaper. He then classifies what he has read according to certain concepts by cutting out newspaper articles and filing them away in binders and archival boxes. Regardless of the global chaos, the artist thus “orders” the world. As soon as he turns to his daily work in the studio, Rohner chooses a new layer of paint that is part of a larger cycle in creating his watercolors and oils. He takes as his point of departure the immediately visible landscape, his own photographs, and an archive of art post cards with motifs from nature and the landscape. With the help of acrylic and watercolor paints, Patrick Rohner creates a large amount of paint thinned with water: around 150 liters of color water are poured in wooden vessels that are covered in paper. The process of drying, which can take up to a month, leaves behind traces resulting from the changing weather and humidity as well as from targeted inventions with the garden hose and manual creasing, leading to visible wrinkles, unevenness, and condensations of pigment



that are left to “controlled” chance. Each manipulation is noted on an index card.

The paint water is part of a larger cycle in his work process and a preliminary stage to the subsequent making of oil paint. As soon as the desired shade of color has been reached using linen oil and pigment, Rohner records the relevant ratio of quantities for ca. 100 liters of paint. Like a geological cycle, the paint material is applied to visual supports in the studio, and then transferred, removed, and moved again. The specific materiality of oil paint itself is indeed a “mass in movement”<sup>4</sup> and Patrick Rohner uses his paints in exactly this way. The works emerge from the mutual transfer of material, its parallel treatment in the studio and the direct application of paint, always in a reciprocal dialogue. The works develop further over several years and emphatically depart from the sphere of painting: they aspire toward their own reality, a microcosm all its own. Here, too, all interventions, additions or subtractions to each work are noted on an index card. A complex system of evaluation serves the final examination of the oil works. According to fixed criteria, Rohner subjects his works to a last analysis before removing them from the cycle. A valid study of the resulting color topographies can lead to the artist creating replicas of the oil works. With the help of a grid that divides the image surface into smaller squares, Rohner completes drawings on paper and thus casts a targeted gaze at the final state of a work and its formal characteristics. For this exhibition at Galerie Mark Müller, for the first time the artist created a replica of one of his paintings as a mural. Despite its dramatic enlargement, the all-over of the finely curved graphite lines on the otherwise untreated white wall seems quite reticent. This self-referential translation of an existing replica illustrates not only Patrick Rohner’s coherent way of working, focused on process, but also the close affinity between his works and their visible proximity to stone surfaces that can be grasped tactilely.

Rohner uses a specially developed archival system to document the procedures he carries out: each work has its own index card that records each step, each manipulation, each intermediate state using symbols and brief notes. With a targeted gaze at this process, the academic precision with which Rohner approaches his work and layers of paint is similar to a technique of epistemology, a technique that Michel Foucault compared to the activity of an archaeologist. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the French philosopher, historian, and sociologist presented the methodology of discourse analysis as a counter-model to the linear history of ideas. Foucault founded a kind of “discursive family tree” marked by differences, variations, discontinuities, without accounting for originality or imitation, creative genius or triviality: discoveries, uses of concepts, new terminologies and technologies, spaces of vision and thought are excavated and stored layer by layer.

But Patrick Rohner’s entire process runs contrary to this epistemological method, as it were, by no means with discontinuity, but with persistence and tenacity: a measurement of the immeasurable, a recording of the fleeting. It is no accident that Rohner refers to his own process as “a Sisyphean task.” But ever since an existentialist reinterpretation of the ancient myth became established, Sisyphus has been seen increasingly as an allegory of the human condition whose activity is described as providing meaning and is used as a symbol for the necessity to always question science and scholarship. Today, Sisyphus is no longer a figure of suffering, but an emblem of enduring decisiveness. “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Baumhauer et al., *Einführung in die Physische Geographie*, Nürnberg: 2017, 68.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Rohner, «A Working Day», in: *Mass Movements*, St. Gallen/Berlin: 2021, 12-15; hier: 12.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Rohner described his work day in detail in “A Working Day.”, in: *Mass Movements*, St. Gallen/Berlin: 2021, 12-15. The moments he describes here make no claim to completeness and merely provide insight into a few aspects of a typical day in the life of the artist.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Rohner, quoted in: Johannes M. Hedinger, “Introduction,” *Mass Movements*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> The best-known example in this context is Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Philosophy of Modern Biology*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (New York, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” trans. Justin O’Brien, in: *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York, 1955), 91.