

**Press Release**

December 16, 1996

**The Lost World of Ernst Brunner  
Photographs 1937 - 1962**

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Artist: Ernst Brunner (1901-1979)  
Dates: January 7 - February 8, 1997  
**Opening: Tuesday, January 7, from 6 to 8 pm**  
Gallery hours: Tuesday - Saturday, 11 am to 6 pm  
Catalogue: with text by Peter Pfrunder, Swiss Foundation for Photography,  
Zurich, \$30, \$25 for Swiss Institute members.

For further information or photographs,  
please call Christine Crowther at (212) 925-2035.

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A carpenter by training, Ernst Brunner became one of Switzerland's most important documentary photographers during and after the Second World War. With his camera, he captured a world of hard-working peasants and farm laborers far removed from the ideal of pastoral life presented to Switzerland's tourists today. Brunner's photographs are exceptional as both ethnographic documents and artistic creations and parallel the documentary work done by American WPA photographers. They represent a world that has since completely disappeared but was of tremendous political significance at the time. A recent rediscovery, Brunner's photographs are now returning to New York, after their first introduction to the city in Edward Steichen's seminal exhibit "Family of Man" at The Museum of Modern Art in 1955.

In 1944, even Switzerland experienced some of the more direct effects of World War II. In Schaffhausen, on the border of Germany, an Allied bomb killed forty people. Food shortages increased dramatically, and a sense of fear and exhaustion pervaded the country. At the same time in southern Switzerland, seemingly unaffected by world events around him, the photographer Ernst Brunner continued his photo essay "A Bridge for Someo," capturing on paper the construction of a small footbridge across a little stream to the village of Someo. Intermittently, between calls to army duty, Brunner continued his photographic work, most often for the illustrated magazine *Swiss Home* ("Schweizer Heim"). The caption did acknowledge that the bridge's construction was "... certainly not a world shaking event but ..." nonetheless worthy of documentation. Series such as this one—and many others that were published in Swiss magazines at the time—illustrate the enormous stretch between an outside world at war, and the concerns of everyday life pursued by many Swiss.

Throughout the war years, Brunner followed his interest in simple farm life. The result is a portrait of Switzerland during the Second World War, however, quite oblivious to the War's repercussions and all the more serviceable for political purposes. Brunner's photographs were tremendously popular, as they showed average citizens in their struggle to continue ordinary life, describing in respectful terms their efforts to maintain that life in the face of disaster and death.

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Born in 1901 in Mettmenstetten, a village of 1,400 people in central Switzerland, Brunner was the son of a carpenter and was expected to take over his father's shop some day. He studied in Nurnberg at the School of Carpentry from 1923 to 1925, and later in Zurich at the School of Applied Arts, which was then heavily influenced by Bauhaus ideas. Unable to pursue his modern aesthetic ideas in his father's shop in the countryside, Brunner switched professions, moved to Lucerne and studied to become a draftsman. He worked for several architects, among them Albert F. Zeyer, a significant representative of *Neues Bauen* ("New Building"). But during the Depression of the mid-thirties, the entire construction and real estate market suffered greatly, as in the rest of Europe, and by 1936, Brunner had become unemployed.

Like many other communities in Europe and the United States, the City of Lucerne offered training for the unemployed. Brunner was assigned to the photographic registration of historic buildings. His diaries reveal that in the same year, he took several photographs of chestnut roasting, a custom of southern Switzerland. In 1937, he also noted a series of works entitled "Behind the Scenes of Winter Sports." It is presumed that these two series landed him a freelance job with *Schweizer Heim* for which he worked almost exclusively until the mid-forties.

Quite independent of the political requirements of the day—but serving them successfully with his regular contributions to important weekly magazines—Ernst Brunner had always favored the simple country life with its traditional forms of

agriculture and old-fashioned customs, in short a disappearing way of life. Among the themes that he dedicated himself to were "Market Days in Bern," "The Keeper of a Train Gate," "Mice Hunter in the Emmental," "The Federal Referendum in a Mountain Hamlet," "Gypsies," "A Wood Cutter," "Auction on a Farm," "A Barrel Maker," "A Brush Maker," "A Basket Weaver," "Hay Days," or "A Funeral." Usually on foot, Brunner crossed Switzerland from the north to the south, from the east to the west, across fields, rivers and the Alps. He explored hidden corners of the country, deeply fascinated by the cultural pockets he stumbled across, far from city life. Travelling by the natural rhythm of the seasons, very much like a farmer, Brunner was anything but a reporter in a rush. Rather than using a 35mm camera, Brunner stuck to his medium format (Rollei) camera and carefully composed his black-and-white studies. Even later, he never diverged from this format and never explored color or 35mm photography.

In retrospect, it becomes clear that Brunner's driving force was the urge to preserve. His photographs are straightforward black-and-white documents, free of an overt aesthetic angle, and focusing on the clearest possible registration of the subject at hand. In that sense, Brunner's work can be compared to the work done by his contemporaries in the United States. The Farm Security Administration with its photographic subgroup, the Historical Unit, employed many photographers, among them Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, foremost for the documentation of the plight of the farmer.



Ernst Brunner, *Vrin (Lugnez)*, 1944

By the twenties, illustrated magazines had made a comeback, and many new ones were founded. Photography was an integral part of these publications and enjoyed serious respect. László Moholy-Nagy declared in a 1929 issue of *Das Werk*, the seminal architectural and aesthetic magazine published in Zurich: "It is not a question of making photography like any of the old art forms but rather of the profound social responsibility of the photographer. He performs with new means a task that could not be fulfilled before. This task is the indiscriminating documentation of our reality."

Brunner was profoundly influenced by this moral approach to documentary photography. While seemingly removed from everyday concerns of the war years, his photographs in fact are a very sophisticated blend of Moholy-Nagy's call to duty with patriotic concerns then circulating in Switzerland.

With the increasing threat of fascism, Switzerland developed a new awareness of fatherland or "Heimat." While in the early thirties art was still shaped by a general openmindedness and an international outlook, towards the end of the decade the artistic focus turned inwards. Brunner's photo essays suited the national mood perfectly. The so-called Spiritual Defense of the Fatherland became official policy in 1938 when the Federal Council declared it necessary to organize, protect and advertise Swiss national culture—presumably, as distinct from German culture. Shortly thereafter, the *Anbauschlacht* ("The Call to Farming") was initiated: The goal was to render Switzerland self-sufficient, and the agricultural output was increased by 70% through additional farming on every public piece of land such as city squares, parks and between rail tracks. The farmer acquired new prominence in this effort that was systematically publicized by the Swiss government.

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After some critical success in the 1950's, with features in *DU* magazine, and inclusion in Edward Steichen's exhibit "Family of Man," Ernst Brunner began to focus on architectural preservation. He founded the Society for the Preservation of the Lucerne Farmstead, and with his camera catalogued many thousands of houses. He also began collecting farm instruments that were being thrown away, leading to the foundation of a farm museum at Burgrain in 1974.

Brunner was never sentimental or nostalgic about the past. From his diaries and his published texts concerning the preservation of old customs and architecture, it becomes apparent that it was a rather practical approach that made him believe that one needs history in order to develop. He was most interested in this balance between the past and the present, between the little cottage industry that survives in a forgotten corner of society and society-at-large, between people and the environment: A balance that is a tenuous one at best.

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The exhibition received the generous support of Pro Helvetia, the Arts Council of Switzerland. "The Lost World of Ernst Brunner" has been travelling throughout Switzerland. It was curated for its New York venue by Dr. Peter Pfrunder. A catalogue (in German) is available, with an in-depth essay by Peter Pfrunder.

*For further information, please contact Christine Crowther at (212) 925-2035.*