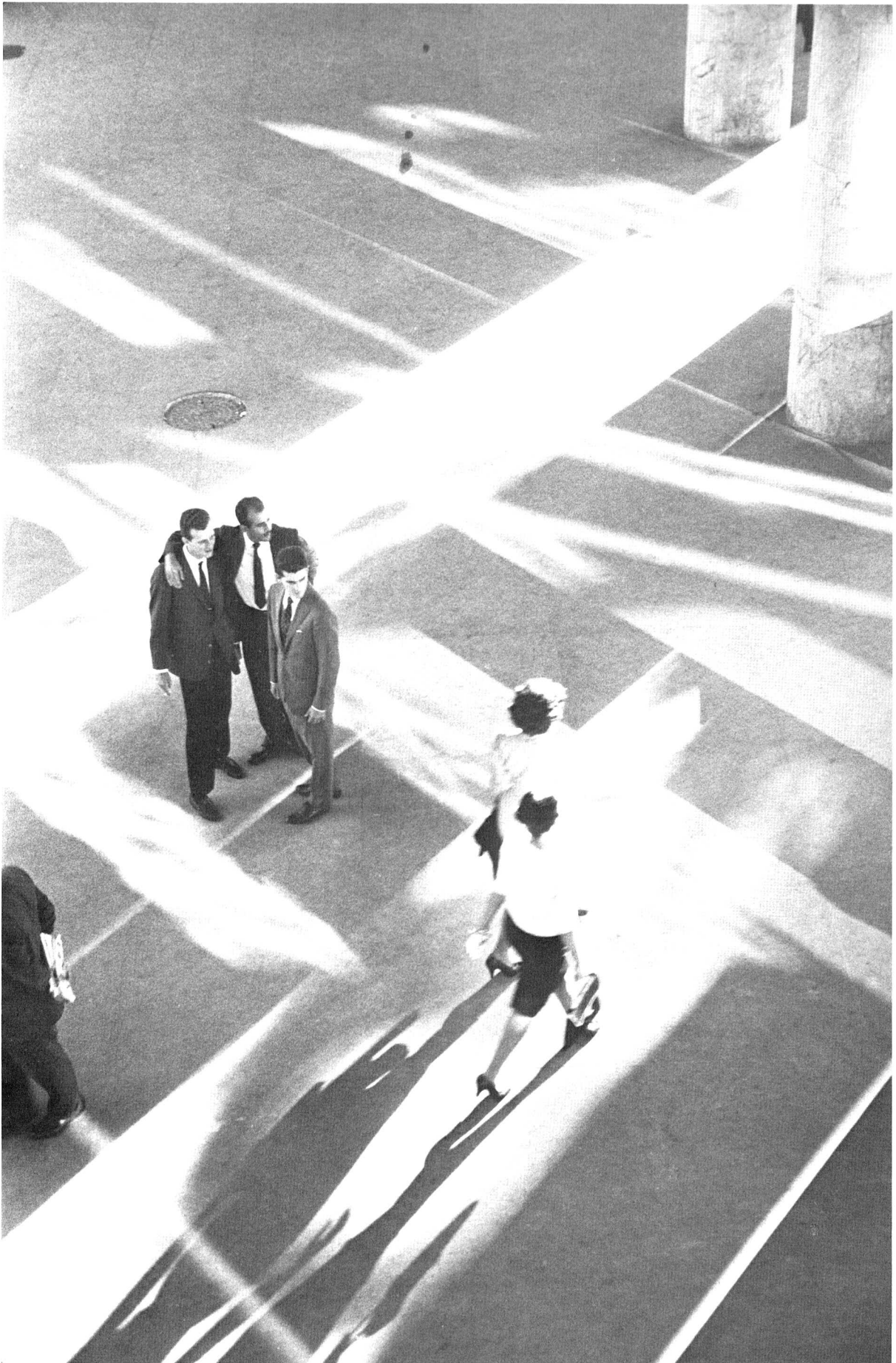




RENE BURRI  
ONE WORLD:  
AN EDIT



Ministry of Health, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1960

# RENE BURRI ONE WORLD

An Exhibition at the Burden Gallery  
and the Swiss Institute

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May 5 – June 11, 1988

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Exhibition organized by Corinne Diserens.

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Photographs © René Burri/Magnum  
Catalogue Design by Christy Hale



Rio de Janeiro, 1958

## FOREWORD

Happily the exhibition, "René Burri: One World" is shared by the Burden Gallery and the Swiss Institute, allowing the viewer a more comprehensive look at this important body of work.

From the start René Burri has cooperated in every possible way, lending his observations and support. For this we are most thankful.

The curator, Corinne Diserens, organized the exhibition and catalogue in a collaborative spirit, making the unfolding of this project a pleasure.

A special thanks must go to Lisa MacDonald and Tessa Lowinsky for their invaluable assistance in assembling the catalogue, to Claudia Bohn who helped translate the captions of the photographs used in the catalogue and to Catherine Chermayeff of Magnum Photos for her assistance.

Sam Samore  
Director, Burden Gallery

For more than thirty years, René Burri has traveled incessantly to record the world around him in countless fascinating photographs. These images not only stir our feelings, they demand our attention. Burri's world is a place where the incidental has been cleverly captured and exerts an enduring effect on the viewer. These qualities have earned Burri's photographic work a place among the greatest of our time.

The Swiss Institute is extremely pleased to present, in conjunction with Aperture, an exhibition devoted to Burri's photographic work.

We are indebted to those who have lent works for the exhibition and we thank Corinne Diserens for her enthusiastic organization of the exhibition.

Finally, we would like to extend our gratitude to René Burri for his significant contribution to the field of photography and for his collaboration in the planning of this exhibition.

Ziba de Weck  
Director, Swiss Institute

## INTRODUCTION

*"In my youth, I did a lot of mountain hiking. During the last 50 meters, I often started to run, not knowing why. I could not wait to see what the top was hiding—I was discovering new mountains. Always reaching for the horizon, I never had any vertigo. But I remember arriving one night, years later, in the Libyan desert. In the morning, opening the door of the military shed, I saw a void in front of me. The telephone cables disappeared at the horizon. I was seized by vertigo, and I screamed. I was in front of the Absolute. It's possible that I am still looking for what is behind that horizon, when it is maybe just around us, or right behind me."*

—René Burri

René Burri was born in Zürich, Switzerland in 1933. After studying at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Zürich under Hans Finsler—from the Bauhaus—he started making abstract compositions, lending a strong sense of design to his photography. Since that time, Burri has had a facility in constructing images which organize structural relationships and aim at a natural geometry. "This comes from my rigorous training in graphic design, against which I fight. The method taught in academia yields beautiful images—but my relationship with the world doesn't consist of using people as elements of composition. "I never engage in a power or hierarchical relationship, but a human one." The structural relationship of Burri's photographs takes place at the intersection of space and time, in the passage from the quotidian visible to the particular visual. His pictures stress depth and spatial definition.

Burri became a member of Magnum Photos in 1956. Well known for his essays on Castro's Cuba and Nasser's Egypt—both produced for *Look* magazine—his work also includes extensive coverage of Sadat, the Oil Potentates of Oman and the Emirates, essays on China, Japan, Thailand, the Argentine Gaucho, Bahia, Chicago and a study of Le Corbusier, which were published by such magazines as *Life*, *Stern*, *The London Sunday Times* and *DU*. Burri also spent a month covering the Vietnam ceasefire for *Newsweek*.

ONE WORLD presents Burri's photographs: thirty years of world history, thirty years of everyday life. ONE WORLD is a temporal con-

tinuum. It underlines geographical unity, the dialogues of "North-South" and "East-West" and the necessity for a global vision of common problems. In 1984, under this same title, a large exhibition with an accompanying publication toured the Kunsthhaus of Zürich, Le Centre National de la Photographie of Paris, the Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea of Milano and the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Lausanne. Other publications of Burri's include his 1962 book, *The Germans*, and his story *The Gaucho*, which appeared as a book in 1968, with a preface by Jorge Luis Borges. *An American Dream: Photographs from the World of NASA and the Pentagon* was published in 1985 and was the subject of an exhibition in 1987 at the International Center of Photography in New York.

René Burri's photography is not anecdotal, but it offers a vision of a universal "human condition." Burri goes beyond particular events, and follows the process that brings him to the essentials of human life. Though he has traveled to the hot zones of the world, his images are not violent. They show a modern life, but its violence, pain and voraciousness, as well as its pleasure and triumph, are all sublimated under the concept of the "human condition." The isolated event doesn't interest Burri so much. Rather, he moves around it, rummaging around the margins of the action's place, looking beyond the first row. He shows not the event, but its effect. His photography has never depended on the latest news story. Just as his portrait of Che Guevara has become the symbol of the Cuban revolution and of all rebellions for a whole generation, his portrait of Sadat at the Suez Canal evokes the tragedy of war in the Middle-East more powerfully than any single news photo of actual combat. Burri doesn't believe in conveying the "truth" of photography, but his photographs analyze truth's meaning. For him, the foreign can be familiar. He works with obsessive yet difficult to define themes. Underneath the banal is the inarticulate, the mysterious, the unexplained, the enigmatic. Stories unfold behind us, and others wait, ready to be made.

C.D.

## ONE WORLD: AN EDIT

Looking down from the sky, from a rooftop or from a balcony, the earth opens up like a book.

1954. On the white snow, a page, lines of abstract signs are vibrating. The caption says, "Soldiers Going to Inspection." But what I see first is the score that is drawn and then undone: the moves of a dog, the slow ballet of men that seem like musical notes or birds on wires. But moved by what?

I'm looking at a contact sheet made by René



Contact Sheet of Che Guevara, Havana, 1963

Burri more than thirty years ago. The voice that commanded the soldiers' ballet has long since become silent, the winter wind does not blow on the roof of the Aarau barracks anymore, and the silhouettes holding thin guns have scattered elsewhere, outside the picture.

1967. The caption says, "Six-Day War." First, confronting me, is the slow unfolding of flecked sand, the tanks like giant beetles. Somewhere on the sand is a frontier for which people fight.

René Burri's photographs are first perceived in this manner, in a trajectory that brings the eye and the body of the viewer (like the photographer's) from the very near to the very far. Often, man is inscribed like a microcosm in a universe on the verge of abstraction, where things are almost signs.

This can be felt in all of what Burri calls his "abstract landscapes," but most strongly in his photos of Japan<sup>(1)</sup>, a country where more than

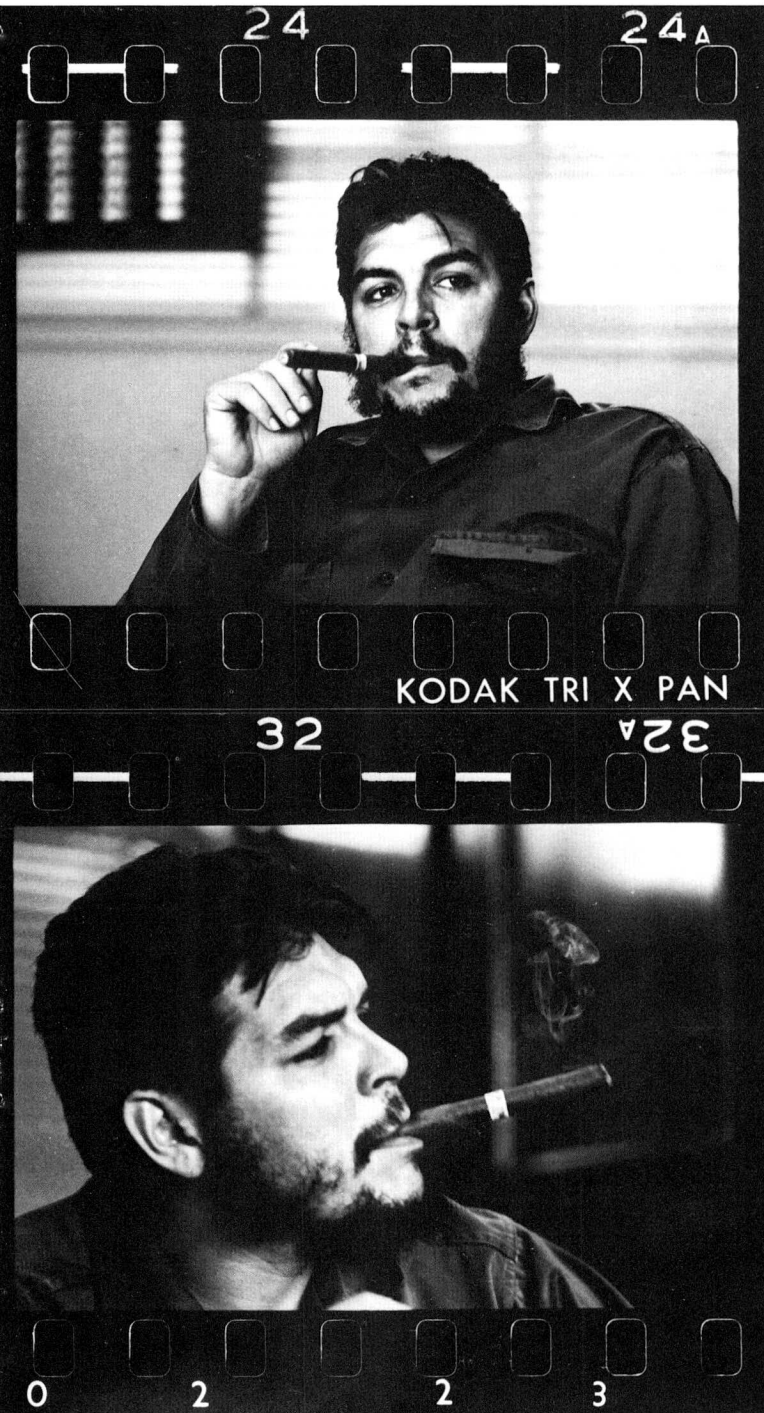
anywhere else the frontier is thin between natural landscapes and landscapes worked with man's hand: the water plants of the Ryoan-ji Temple in Kyoto resemble the calligraphies on the walls of a Sung dynasty Zen Temple. In the Zen garden, the photographer squats down near a plant, attentive to the bamboo's ligature, to the way the straw strings wave with the stem; or he views from afar the ridges of the sand freshly raked by a barefoot monk whose relaxed and regular movement is like a prayer in itself.

Over the years, abstractions have been a constant preoccupation in Burri's work. Different methods allow him to structure the image while stressing geometry: sometimes he uses venetian blinds that entirely stripe the image, while sometimes a whole landscape is framed by a windshield, and doubled by another miniature landscape seen in a rearview mirror. A picture taken in Athens juxtaposes a *trompe l'oeil* that evokes the *Teatro Olimpico* in Vicenza, a rank of columns, a sky looking like a backdrop and a cornice. In another picture taken in Ronchamp, France, the space is perforated with squares of light; in several images a foreground silhouette creates a shadow-theater effect. Sometimes the photographer's eye skims along the ground and assembles in the same image, for example, the head of a child, shoes, the top of a stairway.

But if today we read the pictures in Burri's *The Germans*<sup>(2)</sup> first as documents, we will find there an impressive quantity of information on Germany at the end of the 1950s.

1961. The Berlin Wall is brand new. It has been 15 years since what Thomas Mann, Edgar Morin and others have called "the year zero" (the year when the Third Reich crumbled). At this crucial point in its history, Germany is well on its way to becoming, just behind the United States, the second exporter in the world. What has been called "the German miracle" is indeed, according to Burri, a very strange country with very strange citizens. "Nobody seems hungry," writes Wolfgang Koppen. "Nobody seems to remember, either. . . . I'm living in the Federal Republic. Is it paradise?"

The cafes are brilliantly lit. There are cocktails,





Antonio Cubillo, an advocate of independence for the Canary Islands, is on the left. He is now in the Canary Islands, where he is the head of the movement for independence.

### Wreck of 747's Sets Back Cause Of Insurgents on Canary Islands

By JAMES M. HARRISON

LAS PALMAS, Canary Islands, April 1.—A major political victory of the Canary Islands, self-proclaimed secretary general of the Movement for the Self-Determination and Independence of the Canary Islands, which took more than 400 votes, the 46-year-old Mr. Cubillo, a former leader and the other group of the movement, known as MPAAC, won the election.

Mr. Cubillo, who was elected secretary general of the movement, said that the independence of the Canary Islands is a matter of time. He said that the movement will continue to work for the independence of the islands.

The Madrid press has been following the progress of the movement. It has reported that the movement is gaining momentum and that it is a serious threat to the Spanish Government.

During his Guatemalan sojourn, he had been living with a Peruvian named Hilda Gadea—an ex-member of the left-wing Peruvian A.F.R.A. party. He eventually rejoined her in Mexico City, where they were married in May 1955.

Only a dozen men, including the Castros and Che, occupied the guerrilla school run in Mexico by Gen. Alfredo Bayo, who had fought in the Spanish Civil War. Che was among the 82 men on the Gramma, the small boat in which Fidel set out in December 1956 to conquer his home country.

Hilda followed Che to Cuba, but the marriage soon broke up. She said: "I lost a husband to a revolution."

This was a c of recent Soviet give the consan and seemed to en attacks against "revisionism" in I word has sprea America, further Che was much in reviving Sov Czech and Yugosl lists" in private t in Algiers, Cairo Communist party a circle. Rewarded figurehead Preside

WITH Fidel—"Behind the split-up of the inseparable Fidel-Che team, there was once a certainly a personal drama."

# le nouvel OBSERVATEUR le grand défi de GUEVARA



THE official wish for Che Guevara was that he should be able to see his second wife, in 1956. Since his disappearance, he has not been seen since a Government would be requested to make them "Historical documents" of the revolution.

THE farewell letter that the Cuban leader had written to his wife, Hilda, in 1956, was a touching and intimate letter. It was a letter of love and devotion, and it was a letter that was never to be read.

Early last April his disappearance had had a stormy with Fidel after a President Osvaldo Torrado. A middle-timer, Dr. Dorticos, Communist party a circle. Rewarded figurehead Preside



## ¿Dónde Está? Whatever Became of Che? By PAUL HOFFMAN

THEIR standard conversation... K 151 • DO 4 AU 10 OCTUBRE 1967 • 21 • 25 19 • 250 15

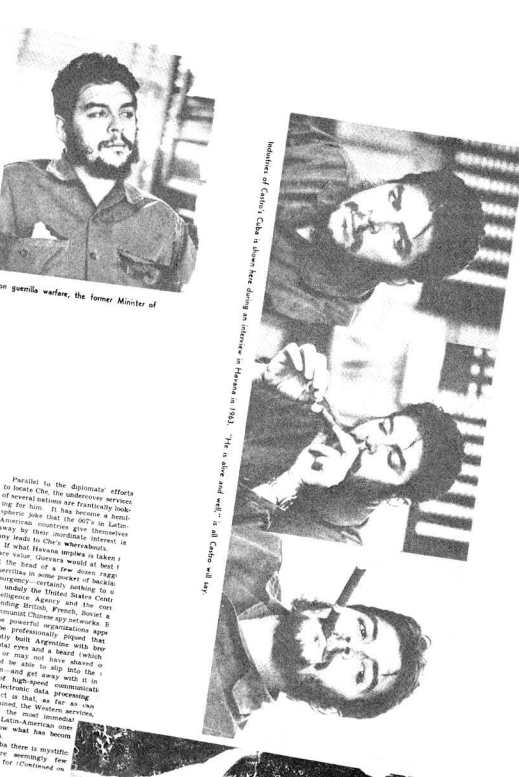
about Guevara that from the West and other countries... He was a man of great energy and a great idealist. He was a man who was always ready to sacrifice for his cause.

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WITH ALIDA—The Argentine-born adventure with his second wife, in 1956. Since his disappearance, he has not been seen since a Government would be requested to make them "Historical documents" of the revolution.

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garden parties, shop windows. West Berlin looks like a new airport, East Berlin is still blackened by the smoke of war. We can see, flirting in the streets, brandishing plastic transistors, driving bumper cars, wearing the first jeans or the first miniskirts, the post-war generation that has no memory but hurtles towards the future.

This obsession with comfort does not go without malaise. What Burri's photographs demonstrate so well is that time in Germany does not pass at the same speed everywhere. There is no comparison between the provincialism of a village in the Rhineland and the modernity of the Kurfürstendam, the commercial mainstreet of West Berlin. Elsewhere, in the Ruhr for instance, these time-lags become painfully visible in the very heart of the image, to which they give a touch of unreality: sheep are grazing in front of a coal-processing plant, a farm still stretches (though not for long) in front of a mine pit not far from a village with no cars in the streets. Burri shows us several time periods in the same geographic space, several spaces in the same image. And as a punctuation to the book, the Berlin Wall stands like a frontier between two worlds that just became visible.

If we take a closer look at the pictures we become even more struck by the small details and incongruities of reality. Germany may be clean and competent as its leaders want it to be, but it is nevertheless neither full nor harmonious. Like Robert Frank did in *The Americans*, Burri investigates some of the mysteries and flaws of the country. Rather than the face of a garden party guest, he makes us look at the shadows of leaves projected on his back. On an oilcloth he finds a still life of the working class—the can used as an ashtray, the opened milk bottle, the tin coffee pot, the aluminum spoon.

The knowledge that we gain from this plethora of details is not precise, but rather a diffused and complex feeling. In that respect Burri's photos, which provide an abundance of descriptive details without being psychologically analytical, remind me of a certain trend in recent German literature and cinema—the films of Wim Wenders and books by Peter Handke, Botho Strauss,

Hans Magnus Enzensberger.<sup>(3)</sup> They are patient and surprised, scrutinizing reality as if we knew nothing of it: and Burri is right, for writing, painting, photographing and filming are activities usually done out of a sense that we know nothing of the world.

Through their very precision the photos of *The Germans* signal an unreality that they then denounce: Germany had become numb and amnesiac, obsessive in its desperate quest for social comfort.

When Burri first photographed the young Argentinian "major," an honorary Cuban citizen, he was only a young politician among others, a bit younger, certainly better looking. We would learn of his quick ascent to power, his ambivalent relationship with Fidel Castro, his cigar chain-smoking between two crises of asthma, his bad humor when he lost a chess game, his strange office hours (from 3pm to 6am), his frequent travels abroad and his proud signature on Cuban banknotes: Che.

The photos became more famous as he became a myth. They had been on contact sheets where picture editors circled their choices. Following the rule that is well known by press photographers—the more a photo gets published, the more it will get published—it was almost always the same photo of Che that was seen in the press: smiling, he wore his familiar beret and had a cigar in his mouth.

This photo became the cover for innumerable magazines in the United States and Europe. I remember particularly a cover of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, a French weekly, where the circled face is seen as if thrown through a plane window or a gun sight, and also the cover of *Adam* magazine where the photo was transformed into a purely graphic design in a fuschia color. The intermediate values of gray had been suppressed, and the face, constructed in colored planes, looked like the bold propaganda posters made by Rodchenko in the 1920s, or the silk-screen posters printed in Paris in 1968. The headline was: "Heroes of our time." Later on the cover photo really did become a poster, the whites lined with red ochre. It was a piracy that must

have delighted Burri because it allowed him to find his enlarged photo on the city walls, like the anonymous posters and signs that attract him.

And in fact René Burri, as if photography was not enough to satisfy him, actually collects fragments of reality everywhere he goes: cigarette papers, boxes of matches or cigars, mineral water labels, pictures in magazines, bits of posters or leaflets. These later become elements in Burri's collages that again synthesize different places and times.

This reminds me of a story told by the French painter Bernard Requichot. He wrote about his walks in the ploughed fields, the damp splendor of the rolled-up fallen leaves, of the twigs and stones sleeping in the pleats of the turned-over soil. He would fill his pockets with them, and when back in the studio, throw his harvest on the table. He would have liked, he wrote, to make a huge collage with them. But he regretted that he could not take away with him the whole field, the soil, the autumn light.

From the day when Che Guevara died, or even before, when people began wondering about his whereabouts, Burri's photographs of Che have started to live another life. But today, along with the retrospective knowledge that Cuban history gives us, other photographs also became important: encounters, embraces with Fidel. Or photos of the year 1963, a few years after the Revolution, images of Che tired, his eyes closed, his head in his hands. Or yet another picture where he is absorbed in his thoughts and paces back and forth in his office, in front of a map of Cuba.

Finally, there is a new photo by Burri that was done last year: Fidel speaks on television commemorating the 20th anniversary of Che's death. The two faces superimpose. Woven through the screen, the face of the absent comes up, invading the features of the living leader as a memory or a regret.

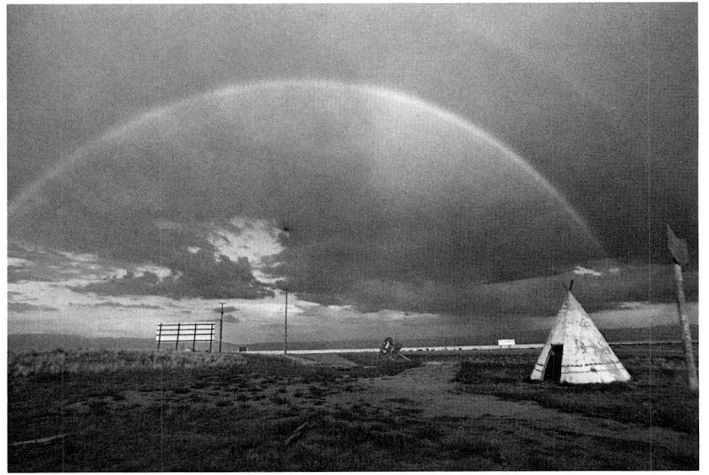
Burri does not find that his favorite moments are peaks of energy: to him, just before or just after an event are richer than the event itself. This statement finds its stylistic expression in



Mithla pass, Sinai desert after Six-Day War, 1967



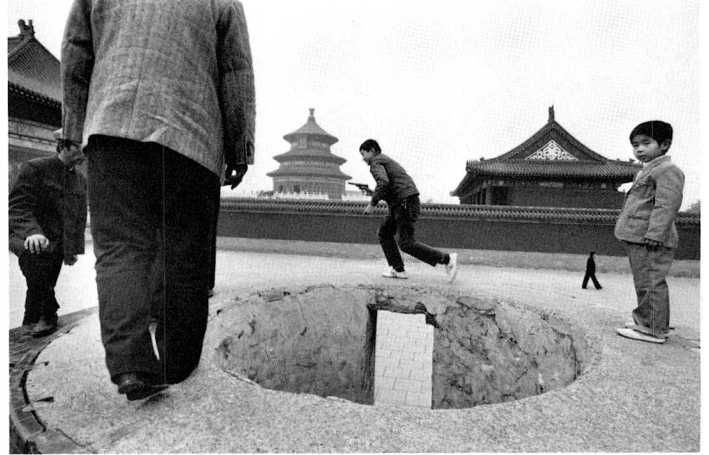
Kunming Lake, Summer Palace, Beijing, 1964



Indian Tradepost between Albuquerque and Grants, New Mexico, 1973



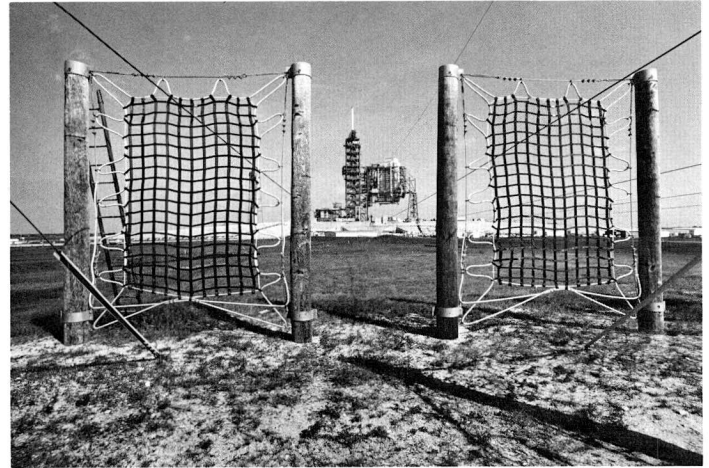
Tien An Men, Beijing, 1964



Temple of Heavenly Rest, Beijing, 1985



Cape Canaveral, 1978



Cape Canaveral, 1978

frames that do not often obey the classical perspectives but divert geometry and invent layouts suited to every subject, giving preference to the juxtaposition of fuzzy and sharp, shadows and reality, an accent more often stressed on the margins and sides than in the center of the picture.

Burri's photos have the quality of being able to escape the instant at the same time that they stop it. This space-time voyager is always conscious of the relativity of images (as seen in *One World* where the timelessness of the Indian sand paintings and the actuality of the Apollo launching coexist). This aspect of his work is best understood by the accumulation of his pictures, not by single images.

In his photographs he chooses not to demonstrate, only to point out, keeping all of his questions open-ended. So that finally what touches me most in his photos is the share of shadow and secret, the enigmas, much more than the articulate geometries.

In a brothel in Korea, a woman stands near a mirror, offering herself in her flowered dress. But she is in no way an illustration of the cliché "a prostitute." In the floral design wall paper that resembles her dress, she could disappear. The central mirror brings its quiet quivering, its puddle of dim light. The diadem in her hair, her hands entwined with the soldier's, her smile make her look like the young girl in Marguerite Duras' novel *The Sea Wall*. For a moment, war is far away, as if the image had pushed it beyond the frame, beyond that room, beyond that time.

Carole Naggar  
New York, March 1988.

Notes:

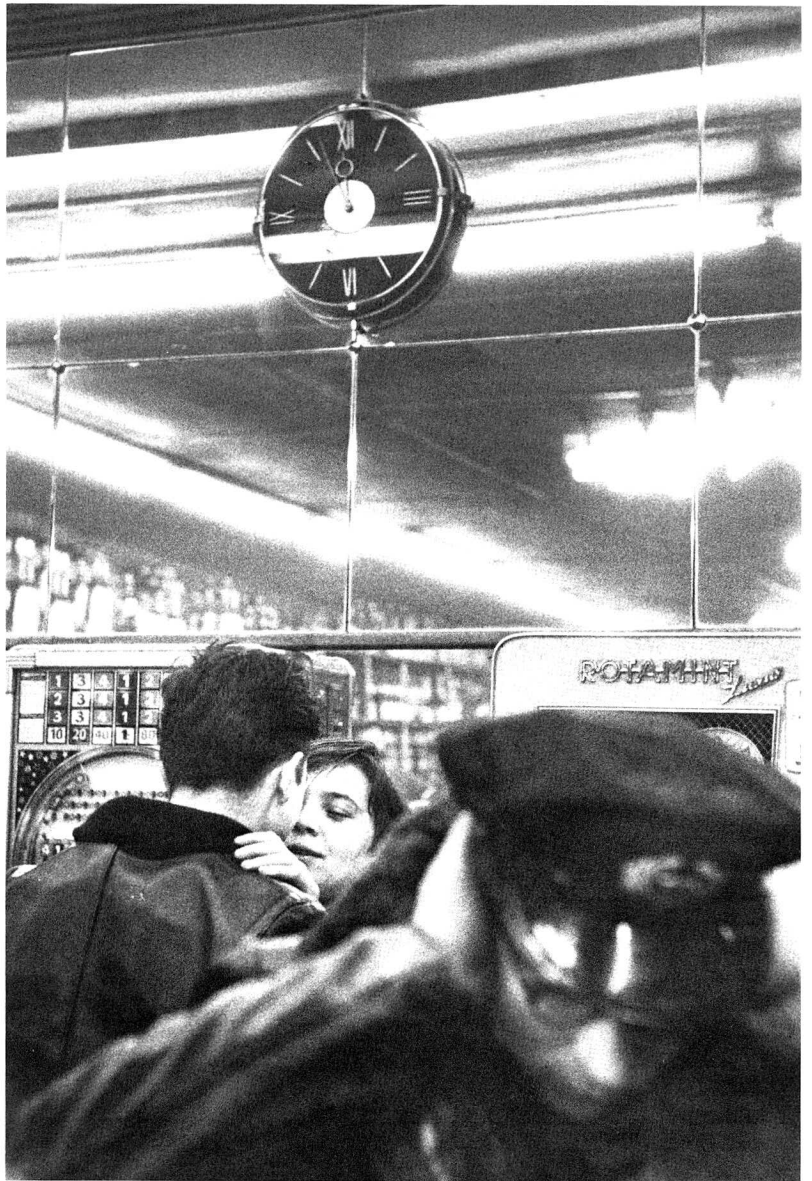
(1) See the special issue of the Swiss magazine *Du*, "Made in Japan" (n. 250, December 1961).

(2) *Die Deutschen*, Fretz and Wasmuth ed. 1962; *Les Allemands*, Delpire ed., Paris 1962.

(3) A poem by Hans Magnus Eizensberger from his book *Landesprache* (1960) was among the texts chosen by Hans Bender for the original edition of *The Germans*. The same writer also wrote the introduction for the new revised German edition of *The Germans*.



Highway near Mannheim, 1959



Hamburg, 1960



Ruhrgebiet, 1961





Würzburg, 1960



"Amalia" Mine, in the Ruhrgebiet, 1961

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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C.D.



Elementary School, Munich, 1962

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