

Christoph Engel

»Superficies«, 2008-2009

Dense housing developments take on the appearance of an ornamental mesh of interwoven lines, the flat roofs of countless greenhouses become a thick mosaic carpet. Golf courses in a barren, rocky landscape suddenly start to look like the palm of an outstretched hand, and the outlines of farm fields could almost pass for a pattern of sequins adorning decorative cloth. Detailed structures of natural and urban landscapes merge in the distance into expansively laid out constructions. The *transcendent* gaze from above allows abstraction into surfaces and lines, and creates an ambivalent overview of formal clarity and deceptive beauty: the subject matter of these works visualizes the consequences of human interventions into nature and the radical transformation of entire swaths of land, pushed to the brink of ecological catastrophe.

But the Superficies-series not only unmask landscape as a human construction and as artificially planned nature; the images themselves reveal that they are also constructed. Engel does not photograph the landscapes himself; his works are digital collages comprised of many hundreds of individual photos, except sparse adaptations in matching the multiple layers there was no further digital manipulation. The source materials are images freely available through Google Earth, which Engel fits together, picture by picture, into a larger whole. Using this method, he challenges his position as photographer and author. Who actually took the source photos? Can his pictures even accurately be called photographs? It was not he who pressed the shutter release; he was not even present when the pictures were taken.

Furthermore, the photographs lack concrete temporal references. The image material shown by Google Earth is taken at different points in time – as evidenced by the different nuances of color in some works. This juxtaposition of different temporalities within a single picture undermines the apparently documentary character of the photographic image. Furthermore, Engel consciously leaves out any concrete, comprehensible reference to place and any details about location – although this information was undoubtedly available to him when he downloaded the photos. He thereby calls into question both the overarching structure of landscape, which is constructed within the image independent of place and time, and the resulting unique reality of the picture itself. In the tension between picture and representation, the artist engages in a creative recasting of the image surface.

The formats of the exhibited pictures are 110 cm × 130 cm or 175 × 230 cm (diptych). The images are archival pigment prints on photolux-paper and are presented unframed and mounted on the wall cartographylike with clamps.