



Swiss Camera Museum – Vevey  
Vestiges – Jean-Marc Yersin

## VESTIGES

Jean-Marc Yersin

Exhibition open from 9 september 2021 to 2 January 2022

Press release

Downloadable at [www.cameramuseum.ch](http://www.cameramuseum.ch)



Noville, Grand Canal, 2019

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**Swiss Camera Museum – Vevey**  
Vestiges – Jean-Marc Yersin

Former co-director of the Swiss Camera Museum, Jean-Marc Yersin started out as a professional photographer. Since 2018, he has returned to his first passion, continuing a cycle of images that inspired him thirty years earlier. He frames tightly, in black and white, motorway structures, factories and mountain buildings. The compositions are geometric, contrasted, sharp. There is no human presence. The forms are abstracted from their functions. The silence is absolute.

These are photographs under tension. They show the conflict between the built environment and nature, between concrete and the landscapes of the Lake Geneva region, the Rhone and the Alps. They also project themselves imaginatively into the future. This is what the great engineering and industrial architecture will look like in several decades, Jean-Marc Yersin suggests. These structures will be abandoned. Still intact, still proud, they will evoke monumental sculptures or Land Art installations. For how long?

This inventory of a territory in the making is magnified by the photographer's rigorous eye and his art of printing. Between scouting and preparatory sketches, Jean-Marc Yersin designs his shots with care. He takes advantage of a 24 x 36 digital camera, most recently a Leica M10-R, and reframes the rectangular images in a square format. With the help of tilt shift lenses or perspective control software, he corrects distortions, takes care of the verticals and establishes the right horizon. As you can see, Jean-Marc Yersin's images are as well constructed as his subjects.



## POINTS OF VIEW

Photography is a matter of point of view. Jean-Marc Yersin adopts two of them, one spatial, the other temporal. He first takes up a position in space, facing the engineering or industrial remains that has caught his eye. He determines the right distance, the right focal length, the right perspective, the right framing, and of course the right light. His images are as constructed as their concrete and steel subjects.

Jean-Marc Yersin also chooses a point of view in time. Thirty years ago, when the photographer began to take an interest in the conflicting tension between the built environment and nature, he imposed an imaginary constraint on himself. How, he thought, will these massive infrastructures be seen in the future, when they will probably be abandoned? Will future generations preserve them as symbols of unreasonable times? Will they leave them to their fate of rubble and rust? The important thing is not the answer, but the question posed by a gaze that looks forward rather than back.

The square format chosen by Jean-Marc Yersin is not only intended to create homogeneous sequences of prints on walls or in publications. The square format allows the construction to be better isolated from its environment, its time and its function. The choice of black and white reinforces this desire for abstraction, in the sense of what separates or subtracts. The square also has the quality of containing the image well, of concentrating its energy. Especially if it is as rigorously structured as a photograph by Jean-Marc Yersin.

Points of view in space, in time, but also on photography. The "vestiges", to use the title that the author gave to his series, are traces. "Vestigium", in Latin, was the "trace of steps". Passionate about the history, technique and practice of photography, Jean-Marc Yersin knows that his chosen art is a print. "The permanent mirror of nature" or "the mirror with a memory", said the pioneers in the 19th century. To capture these vestiges with such science is also a reflection on the very being of photography.

**Luc Debraine**, director of the Swiss Camera Museum, Vevey  
(text written for the book « Vestiges » by JM Yersin)



## VESTIGES

At the beginning of the 1990s, I was taken for several months on the same long motorway journey where I tirelessly plunged my gaze as a captive spectator into a landscape from which a succession of structures sprang up from the ground or penetrated the décor. Driving at daybreak on still deserted roads, I contemplated these constructions like a traveller discovering the remains of a lost civilisation whose original function he would struggle to understand.

In their own way, these monuments spoke eloquently of the brutality of our relationship with our environment. We were still far from being aware of the risk of collapse of our civilisation, but I wondered how our infrastructures could be seen, one day, by others, in another time.

From this questioning was born the desire to draw up a sort of photographic inventory of these places in the making, taking care to detach them as much as possible from the slightest temporal link so that they escape their role, their functionality, in order to appear like new monuments freshly uncovered.

This journey in search of our future vestiges led me progressively to the mountains where the confrontation between the built environment and the landscape reaches a dazzling intensity. Buildings simply intended to curb the power of water take on the appearance of ancient temples and rub shoulders with dykes designed like sculptures or protective structures that function like forgotten Land Art installations.

Moving away from the tumult of our time, I usually take advantage of a few furtive moments to act, imbuing these images with a form of quietude similar to the one that could well settle around our last traces, which have become ephemeral and fragile, surrounded only by the rustling of nature taking back its rights. Coming from the most diverse places, these images are nevertheless assembled together to constitute a sort of archaeological catalogue of a future times; or a form of imaginary atlas of a territory to come... beyond our presence having so disturbed this world, where we nevertheless continue our mad race.

**Jean-Marc Yersin**, photographer, Blonay (text written for the book "Vestiges" by JM Yersin)



## GEOMETRISATION OF NATURE

Truths have long been carved in stone. The Ten Commandments of God, for example - in Judaism at the heart of the Torah and in Christianity, the main source of Christian ethics. Moses received them on Mount Sinai, the Bible says, twice, because he broke the first tablets in anger and grief at seeing the people dancing around the cult image of the golden calf. Later, inscriptions and signs on cathedrals, castles and houses testified to the absolute will and action of sacred and secular rulers.

With the Enlightenment, with modernity, with the emancipation of people, with the experience of self and other, these orientations changed. It was no longer a vertical, God-centred relationship, but a horizontal, open, constantly changing relationship. The view of the landscape was decisive in the conquest of the expanses, the immensity, the world. Little by little, men began to occupy the earth, to determine it, to design it according to their ideas, their plans, their methods and their imposing buildings. Nature was rapidly transformed into a directed, vectorised landscape. Over the past four centuries, we humans have increasingly imprinted our truths, our needs on the surface of the earth.

Today, as Paul Virilio said in the 1990s, we are "on the threshold of a new 'city of light' under the sign of electro-optics and electro-acoustics, which will replace the old 'city of matter', itself having replaced villages and rural settlements. The VIRTUAL CITY, the last of the cities, is therefore no longer a precisely locatable urban entity, but a METACITY..." In his "Vestiges", Jean-Marc Yersin shows us such signs of man's takeover, of the conquest of space, of time, of the geometrisation of nature. And he makes us aware of the way in which we have now applied our will to the surface of the earth, anchored it in it, not with natural stones, but with materials that we ourselves have developed - with asphalt, tar, but above all with cement, concrete. The mass, energy and information of human beings, according to Virilio, have blended with the landscape, inscribing themselves into it.

Yersin's black-and-white photographs stand out impressively from the depth of the landscape to the square surface of the image. Their materiality makes them so clearly defined, sharp, contrasting, and at the same time usually so tightly framed - in the case of bridges or elevated roads, often seen from below - that they seem, so to speak, to be doubly detached from reality. Through pictorial intervention, through reframing, they appear on the one hand as aesthetic objects, as artefacts without function, and on the other hand precisely as "vestiges", as remains, as predictable ruins of a time that apparently is gradually passing away.

Who will be next, where, when and how, to fix the signs of the future? This question arises almost automatically when one looks closely at these photographs. And who will record it, in what materials?

**Urs Stahel**, curator and author, Zurich (text written for the book "Vestiges" by JM Yersin)



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## MONUMENTAL NARRATIVE

In this volume, Jean Marc Yersin divides his photographic research into chapters and typologies, focusing on artefacts built by the mind and labour of man, still strongly marking the history and memory of places, whether disused or still in use, whether industrial archaeology or contemporary architecture, whether motorways, railway or river bridges, pipelines, viaducts, breweries, mills, service areas, refineries or cement works.

After a long period spent preserving relics at the Swiss Camera Museum in Vevey, Yersin returned a few years ago to his initial training as a photographer with a youthful passion, elegant and never nostalgic, a balance calibrated by the choice of a traditional format modified in the course of production.

These constructions, often surreal and enigmatic, are sought out, found, scrutinised and analysed in the very place where they were built and on which they had a violent impact, and then recomposed in a staging that is essential from the photographer's point of view.

Jean Marc Yersin's intention is a kind of scenographic and monumental photographic narrative redrawing a new reality and seems to want to contribute to relieving the current environmental disorder of a nature that would like to take back what has been taken from it.

A vision in the apparent absence of men, cars, noise, in an isolation that allows us to understand a landscape that we are used to observing with a confused and myopic look.

This new book by Yersin is an intense journey of reflection on the landscape and its transformations, including economic and social ones. A photograph that obsessively springs from his return to places, looking at them again and again, in a coherent black and white investigation that helps to connect to their soul.

**Daniela and Guido Giudici**, Cons Arc Gallery, Chiasso  
(text written for the book "Vestiges" by JM Yersin)



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### Photo captions :

1. A2 Motorway Bionne, noise protection, 2018. Picture JM Yersin
2. A7 Motorway Pierrelatte, under the TGV bridge, 2018. Picture JM Yersin
3. Jullier pass, Red Tower, 2019. Picture JM Yersin
4. Noville, Grand Canal, 2019. Picture JM Yersin
5. Oberwangen, quarry Weibel, 2014. Picture JM Yersin.
6. Post Petra Petroleum, disused refinery, 2020. Picture JM Yersin
7. Val de Bagne, Louvie dam, 2015. Picture JM Yersin

### Short text, approx. 800 characters

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Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 11.00 to 17.30 and bank holidays.