

Next Level

SOCIAL ISSUES ON THE SLOPES Next Level Magazine #18 (Montreal Edition), London UK, 2009

By Nicolas Mavrikakis

We are in the middle of the forest in winter. The night is black. No moon to illuminate the trees, buried beneath a thick layer of snow, or to help us find our way. Yet far off, beyond the woods, a light shines with intensity, entirely eclipsing the few pale glimmers which escape from a handful of houses, just distinguishable in the distance, lower down. The light is of a magical, almost blinding whiteness. In other pictures, this mysterious lustre seems to engulf the whole sky. Those who look at Thomas Kneubühler's most recent photographs feel themselves plunged into the atmosphere of the film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. His photos do indeed create a mood worthy of films about extra-terrestrials. The illuminated peaks of Electric Mountains, displayed at Galerie ProjexMtl (from May 1st to June 13th), evoke landing strips for vessels arriving from another planet. But what is it that tempted the artist to go in search of so many mountains (Avila, Habitant, Chantecler, Gabriel, Morin Heights, Olympia, Bromont, Saint-Bruno, Stoneham...), all lit-up in the middle of the night and all host to ancient rituals? What drove him to transport up there, beyond all roads and paths, lost in the woods, his heavy photographic equipment, a camera with a large-format chamber (a Sinar F1), which makes the operation all the more complicated? Of course, Kneubühler is motivated by the desire to document a new activity, night skiing, a phenomenon which exploded in Europe in the nineties but which seems to have been developed first in North America in the sixties (and was possibly born in the fifties on Mont Gabriel in Quebec). These ski-slopes illuminated at night possess an unquestionable visual interest. Kneubühler even explains that they appear to him like forms of "land art." But there is more.

This relatively recent phenomenon which might, at first sight, seem to show man dominating nature, is actually not without disconcerting consequences. Astronomers with observatories situated close to the ski-slopes complain of the light pollution that they create. Some people question whether intense lighting at night has an impact on animals, plants and whole ecosystems (certain species flee en masse from artificially lit areas, others are attracted to them). Others highlight the need to reflect on the consumption of electricity by the slopes. At a time when individuals are asked to cut their energy use even by reducing the

power of every bulb they use, this decadent display of lighting seems almost indecent and anti-ecological. Also discernible in the blaze of light is the incarnation of our society's desire for spectacle (a desire which is not unique to our epoch, as some might believe). Kneubühler's current work is not his first attempt to address this subject. Earlier, in a series entitled *Office 2000* (produced between 2003 and 2008), he captured, at night, various Montreal tower blocks almost entirely illuminated. The waste of electricity in our towns allows these buildings to become radiant art installations, monuments of light to the glory of modern society and technology. These excesses of light also illuminate a desire to see everything, all the time, even at night. In an earlier series, *Private Property* (2006), Kneubühler photographed buildings and car parks (these too, brightly lit) at night, as well as security guards and even a surveillance room with its monitor screens. In his accompanying text, he explains that the surveillance of these private spaces gives rise to situations well described by Michel Foucault (in *Discipline and Punish* and elsewhere) where "order, visibility and power fall into a natural equation." While some might believe that intense interior and exterior lighting help reduce crime, this is far from certain. To give one example: the Dark Campus Program, established in several American universities over recent years, has shown the contrary to be true. Vandalism has fallen by nearly 30% on the campuses which imposed voluntary black-outs, which seem to have the paradoxical effect of discouraging delinquents who want their actions to be visible. Furthermore, this measure has saved energy and cut electricity bills at the universities involved. As Kneubühler points out, his photos display an "interest in social questions, in the impact of new technologies on the modern world and how they change our lives." We could also claim that this photographer shows how technology is used to create a culture of very artificial reassurance.