

Vive la forgotten France!

Dale Berning Sawa meets the duo who are capturing the everyday architecture of France's emptied towns and overlooked villages - before they lose their unique identities for ever

From the industrial north to the sun-baked south, Eric Tabuchi has spent two decades scouring the landscape of France with an obsessive eye. In 2008, the Danish-Japanese-French photographer created a beguiling series called *Alphabet Truck* by sneaking up on 26 different articulated lorries on the move and photographing the single giant letter adorning each one's rear, from A to Z. In 2017, he made *Atlas of Forms*, a 256-page guide to all the shapes, from pyramid to polygon, the world's buildings are based on. And in 2017, he joined forces with the painter Nelly Monnier, also his partner, to create the *Atlas des Régions Naturelles*. This sprawling, unwieldy

multipart portrait of a nation takes as its foundation the 500-odd *régions naturelles*, or non-administrative areas (a bit like British counties) into which mainland France is divided. Monnier and Tabuchi are slowly making their way around the country, arriving in each area with a minimum of preconceptions. First impressions are key, the idea being to shoot a few characteristic landscapes, then to work their way up through the area's vernacular architecture, with everything dictated by local conditions.

There are great photographs of the two of them sitting on maps the size of living-room floors, plotting routes through suburbs, semi-industrial zones, emptied towns and overlooked villages. Each region gets exactly 50 pictures so, once completed, there'll be 25,000 shots in all, always centred and flatly lit, as descriptive as they are elegant.

Just before Covid hit, the pair were in the Massif Central, which is about halfway through, geographically speaking. Unable to get back on the road, they started picking through what they had, to put it online. The result is a searchable map, a sort of digital museum of France, or at least half of it, with images tagged by theme (agriculture, religion, business, entertainment) but also by colour, shape, pictogram or series. They even plan to print out the entire *Atlas*, all 9,000 pages of it.

Browsing through the online archive is a uniquely digital experience. A search for "pink" yields a water tower, a silo, a casino, a *Dégustation Midi et Soir* cafe, and the metal gate to a private museum

in the Vosges called *Le Musée des Oubliés*. There is a whole series on the late-19th-century geodetic towers built across the north, mostly along wartime frontlines, that were used by cartographers before aerial photography. There are the shopfronts with "2000" in their signage, as well as the makeshift shelters used by *gilets jaunes* protesters. The resulting grids echo the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, the German artists who spent decades photographing disappearing industrial architecture around America and Europe to produce series of water towers or gas holders.

Right after the launch of the *Atlas*, the pair received a detailed message from a boy who had found the spot where he'd first kissed a girl. There's no such place as nowhere - or as Tabuchi puts it: "You realise everyone is from somewhere." The writer Denis Cosnard, meanwhile, instantly hit the archive's backstreets, tweeting that, with its "erstwhile modern bars, shuttered factories, the kind of building that's just not built any more ... the *Atlas* is a deep dive into a forgotten France".

We see fine old buildings that are now past their prime, but haven't been fixed up or changed by gentrification, since they're in economically depressed areas. This is the strength of telling your story through vernacular architecture: the Côte d'Azur, by contrast, is a jumble of new builds and bland taste.

"Towns and cities account for less than 5% of the land," says Tabuchi. And in between them is a whole lot of country, of which 60% is agricultural. This was one of the big revelations for the duo: that France has returned

to a rural state. "It's just not what we talk about," says Tabuchi. The popular image of France, he says,

is "the TGV, the Eiffel Tower, luxury fashion houses, the *chateaux de la Loire*. But actually there are as many cows and pigs in France as there are people." Filling in this gap, or chasm, is what gives Tabuchi and Monnier's *atlas* such power. It's a journey into the local, the particular, the unique.

It also highlights things under threat. Many of the structures have since disappeared. And, when economies do pick up, there is a shift in the built environment towards homogenisation, which is tragic since the regions, traditionally, have had unique identities, from the culinary to the architectural to the cultural.

While Tabuchi draws a parallel between savouring a region's wines and getting to know its colours, the pair's odyssey has been no road trip through a foodie paradise. "We've neither the time nor the budget to enjoy local *gastronomie*," says Monnier. "We drive 10 hours a day with some bread and a hunk of cheese." But there was another factor: "We've also noticed that traditional dishes have all but disappeared." If there's enough of a tourist industry in an area, passable meals aren't so hard to come by, but otherwise it's yet another example of the distance between the real France and the popular projection. Brittany, which actually grows great vegetables, is

2000 was the future once ... shopfronts



Catalogued ...
company signs



all industrial pork and ready-grated gruyère apparently, and sometimes all they can find anywhere is burgers and fries. “That warm *auberge* - comforting, welcoming - just doesn’t exist any more.”

Tabuchi adds: “The fact that I am half-Japanese and half-Danish is super important. I’m looking at this country that my parents somehow decided to have me in.” He is as unrooted as Monnier is grounded: she comes from the countryside

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The pair received a detailed message from a boy who had found the spot where he had first kissed a girl

between Lyon and Geneva, where her family has lived for generations. The contrast between the two, united in their exploration, deepens the sense that this is a real questioning portrait of a country in flux. Globalisation, says Tabuchi, makes the planet feel small. “The world is much, much bigger,” he says. “It is rich and diverse, irreducible and impossible to summarise.”

That is certainly the feeling I got browsing this

archive. At a time when Emily in Paris is bringing caricatured France to the small screen in a way not seen since the days of Peter Mayle’s *A Year in Provence*, their atlas shows my home country to be both mysterious and broken, unknowably huge and a place I want to safeguard.

Tabuchi and Monnier are thinking of expanding into other countries.

Imagine what an atlas of Brexit Britain might look like.

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Hay bales ...
documented
by colour
and shape



PHOTOGRAPHS: ERIC TABUCHI AND NELLY MONNIER