

# In-between the Rural and the Urban: A quick reading of Contemporary Landscape Photography.

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“To be able to observe with a stranger’s eye helps one to see with an artist’s eye. What alienates us inspires”.  
Jean Rostand

Landscape does not exist but in our mind, it is an invention. The landscape is made, it is nothing in itself. “The idea of landscape can not be found in the object we observe as much as in the observer’s way of looking. It is not what we have in front of us, but what we see”<sup>1</sup>, Javier Maderuelo asserts. Landscape is a construct, a concept that allows us to interpret cultural and aesthetically the characteristics of a territory, spot or place. In other words, it is an empirical-perceptive unit, or codified interpretation from a proactive look. The look that builds a landscape should be reflective. “The simple fact of looking something does not allow us to go ahead” –Goethe explained–. Each looking at turns into a considering, each considering into a reflecting, into a connecting. We theorize every time we have an attentive look to the world”<sup>2</sup>.

When we look at the land and make it something specific, we build it and transform it, relocating it in a landscape. As a consequence, every natural or urban landscape is artificial, which implies the existence of a point of view and an explicit difference between the person who observes and the observed. Landscape exists when a concrete and physic or territorial reality is filled by a subjective, cultural or social look that is appropriated by the temporary or causal result of interaction between the human being and nature.

For the contemporary man, landscape is what remains framed by the car or train’s window screen. It does not even remain a concrete nature, transformed by the action of man. Thus, nature has remained domesticated, and reduced to the domestic garden or the urban park’s redoubt.

Nowadays man’s natural territory is the city and it is there where we can wonder based on the new aesthetic codes and not taking into consideration any traditional idea of beauty. Thoreau asks, “where are the unexplored lands but in what we have not still try? For and adventurous spirit any place – London, New York, Worcester or its own garden– is an unexplored land”<sup>3</sup>. With these precedents we dare to do a brief exploration about the contemporary idea of landscape through photography telling about its broken identity in the hiper-modern city where the limits of natural and urban landscape vanishes.

Taking for granted the *kantian* distinction, the hybrid and complex identity of contemporary’s territory – frontally separated from the ideal purism of modernity– provides us with a new interpretation of the sublime: praising Marc Augé’s *Non Places*<sup>4</sup> or Ignasi Solà-Morales’<sup>5</sup> *Terrain Vague* (vacuous terrain) of a new and unexplored landscape, it goes deep into the visual and aestheticized reinterpretation of industrial ruins, peripheries, abandoned or generic places like huge commercial malls or airports.

Postmodern landscape seriously rejects monumentality and nineteenth century’s romanticisms landscape’s sublimity to go deep into daily routines as much as into carelessness, degradation or disdain. In fact, tired of denying the ideal virginal nature that doesn’t exist anymore, we gloomily resign ourselves believing that those new complex, contaminated and heterogenic contexts are likewise liable of constituting a new landscape, ‘our’ landscape, that contemporary photography has paradoxically committed to enhance. “Photographic seeing –writes Susan Sontag– meant the ability to find beauty in what everybody sees but ignores on account of being too ordinary”<sup>6</sup>.

In the case of the United States, it went from the iconic, pictorial and sublime description of the American landscape by **Ansel Adams**, **Edward Weston** o **Alfred Stieglitz** to a new look as

1. Maderuelo, Javier, *El paisaje. Génesis de un concepto*. Madrid: Abada, 2005, p. 38.

2. Von Goethe, Johann Wolfgang, *The Theory of Colors*. Quoted in Milani, Raffaele, *El arte del paisaje*. Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2007, p. 23.

3. Henry D. Thoreau, quoted in Olivares, Rosa, “El paraíso estaba aquí al lado”, *Exit* n. 38, 2010, p. 9.

4. Augé, Marc, *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*. London & New York: Verso, 1995.

5. Solà-Morales, Ignasi, “Terrain Vague”, in Davidson, Cynthia C., *Anyplace*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995.

6. Sontag, Susan, “The heroism of Vision”, in *On Photography*. New York: Anchor Books, 1990.

contaminated as accurate. This vision passes from Ansel Adams's Yosemite to Stephen Shore's: from the formal, technical and monochrome virtuosity of Adams' *f64 Group* to the realistic color of the *New Topographics –Photographs of the Man-Altered Landscape*<sup>7</sup>–. The proper American landscape is the one that makes clear the self-destruction of the urban environment recounted by Guy Debord<sup>8</sup> in 1967, this is, the one that is looked around from the car, the one of the endless road and the distressing highway, the one of the ramshackle gas stations and the extensive parking lots.

The architects **Robert Venturi** and **Denise Scott Brown** accomplished in 1968 their particular road movie in Las Vegas. Together with 12 students from Yale, the goal of this case study was documenting and visually exploring from the car the landscape and the iconographic symbolism of the ultimate pop city.

Symptomatically, **Aldo Rossi** also stated an explicit interest on capturing the instant of his looking at the landscape, as highlighted by the heterogenic pictures taking with a *Polaroid* during his field trips in the eighties. They constitute a sketchy and intimate visual atlas that shapes as a whole the interior landscape of the architect.

The photographer **Stephen Shore** published in 1982 the photo-book *Uncommon Places*, an ambitious photographic-documentary project that shows a selection of 49 photographs of that repertory of dehumanize urban spaces without identity, where the use of the vehicles has cleared the presence of individuals on the streets. The extensive parking lots, the roads on the landscape or the streets and the urban corners on those endless peripheries constitute that harmonic choreography of the new urban landscape.

The ruin as symbolic category is not only exaltation of the past but an opportunity for future transformation: understood as such, the ruin would rather be a system failure. One should explain and justified the persuasion capacity that the landscapes of the ruin exert over artists and photographers. The devastated landscapes of natural cataclysms like earthquakes, tornados and tsunamis, the military destruction of cities, the phantasmagoric desolation of the nuclear accidents and, in general, the 'ruinism' of the industrial desertion produces, paradoxically, an intensive aesthetic pleasure based on the assimilation of the lack of control that man has over himself and over destiny<sup>9</sup>.

The postmodern ruin feeds, again, from the sublime nineteenth-century connotation and from Piranesi's evocative drama. The images that the photographer **Joel Meyerowitz** took during nine months on the *Ground Zero* maybe evoke those misunderstood words of who referred to September 11<sup>th</sup> as an ultimate work of art. The aesthetic that unwillingly provoked Al Qaeda with its destruction was not but the construction, again, of an inspirational landscape due to its terror and magnitude, beating by analogy of the destructiveness of nature itself.

A master reporter of the image of the city, **Gabriele Basilico**, has portrayed the footsteps of the city of Beirut destroyed by the war: buildings with facades eaten away by the impact of the mortar, monumental streets silenced by their emptiness and the invasion of a wrenching loneliness.

At the end, the overexposed nature of landscape and the documentary meaning of its outdated portrait merely lead us to believe, with John Divola, in her disappearance: "The landscape is like a sheet-type surface, –he writes– which does not have much chance of surviving, which may soon disappear from the face of the earth"<sup>10</sup>. A disappearance of, at least, its sense of identity since the term landscape is just covering everything, including that which is objectively ugly or unpleasant, and that paradoxically becomes a new picturesqueness of hyperreality, necessary to achieve beauty.

Let's move to the city. "The representation of the metropolis in different media has, from its origin, rely on a special instrument: photography [...] –this is how Solà-Morales begins his famous text on his vacuous space–. Landscape photographs, aerials, of buildings, of people living in big cities, all of which constitute one of the principal vehicles through which we receive information that attempt to let us know that human and built reality that is the modern metropolis"<sup>11</sup>.

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7. *New Topographics: Photographs of the Man-Altered Landscape* is the title of the exhibition curated by William Jenkins that took place in the International Museum of Photography at Rochester in 1975.

8. Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books, 1994.

9. Cfr. Canogar, Daniel, "El placer de la ruina", en *Exit*, nº24, 2006, pp. 24-34.

10. John Divola, quoted in AA.VV., *Paraísos indómitos*. Fundación Marco y Junta de Andalucía, 2008, p. 32.

11 Solà-Morales, Ignasi, "Terrain Vague" in *Los artículos de Any*. Colección la Cimbra 7, Fundación Caja de Arquitectos, Barcelona, 2009, p. 65.

Today, the urban landscape of the iconic cities of abandonment –la Havana–, modernity –New York–, historical reconstruction –Berlin– or massive development –Shanghai– becomes a target for multifaceted artistic approaches. The discontinuous and alienated post-urban landscape produces a periphery that extends the city on a continuum that makes the natural territory disappear. The periphery has no identity, nor history: it is a landscape in process. “In that abstract construction that defines the periphery, –writes Rosa Olivares– is where we find images in which we see a landscape artificially transformed and not defined yet, without moral category and urban structure, but far from any recurrence to nature, to countryside, to order or previous beauty”<sup>12</sup>.

Augé’s spaces of anonymity, or the entropic jungle of the places without identity characteristic of Koolhaas’ generic city<sup>13</sup>, are traces and scars of history over the city fabric. The Spaniard **Sergio Belinchón** has masterfully worked with those urban remains, unfriendly spaces of anonymity generated by the real state globalization that invades with impunity the emerging territories. This way, metaphysical spaces, dehumanized, desolated and without any identity, are generated in the suburbs and vacant voids of new cities.

An even more dramatic reporter of the promiscuous transformation of large emerging cities is **Sze Tsung Leong** and his work *History Images* (2002-2005) on the overlap of the ruined old neighborhoods and the massive new modern developments of Shanghai and Beijing. This daunting overlap depicts a spectral landscape, black and foggy, due more to pollution than to the desire of creating a captivating atmosphere.

Leong’s work is part of what art critics have called *eco-aesthetics*, namely, the paradoxical and tragic beauty existing in the destructive processes of environmental degradation produced by wars, industrialization or deforestation.

The Catalan **Xavier Rivas** openly faces his visual reading of landscape as a sociological response. His scenario is located in those *rururban* spaces, as called by Daniel Zarza<sup>14</sup>: the intersection of the traditional rural countryside and the modern suburban, a *third landscape*<sup>15</sup> of hesitant and non-functional spaces between the protected nature and the last row of terraced houses. “Spaces in which there are basically two primitive forms of relationship with the territory: for men, the traffic, for nature, the bush”<sup>16</sup>.

This peripheral universe inhabited by ramblers, shrubs, junkyards and freeways is conducive for the provisional development of a new pseudo-civic activity that find in these indeterminate spots the propitious space for its artificial and freest development.

Le Corbusier wanted to preserve the land tainted by the industrial revolution, raising architecture over pilotis and returning the stolen plot to the garden terrace. Again, Le Corbusier relies on nature as backdrop, as landscape to the extent that it is a visual construct. As Ábalos explained on his *Atlas Picturesque*<sup>17</sup>, the green city of Le Corbusier –illustrated in the 1935 Ville Radieuse sketch– makes compatible the driver efficiency of the great skyscrapers with an interstitial urban space, not only landscaped but strictly natural.

La *Petite Maison* of Le Corbusier on Lake Lemman is not a house but a spot from which to contemplate the landscape. In one corner of the garden, Le Corbusier explicitly wants to build the landscape and thus, he opens a hole on the wall, under a leafy tree. A concrete deck becomes a table and two chairs complete that intimate space, the place from which to build the landscape of water and land.

I end with three quotations. The first is Giacometti’s: “Reality has never been for me a pretext to create works of art, but art as a means to be a little more aware of what I see”<sup>18</sup>. Walter Benjamin, meanwhile, said that we would be remembered for what we leave behind us. And Fernando Pessoa pointed out that “what we see is not what we see but what we are”. Perhaps the new look on the landscape may demand instruments, mechanisms and political, economic, social or environmental strategies, distant in any case from an artistic imprint. But we don’t refuse to believe that the conception of the future landscape can basically go through the construction of what we want to be and what we want to be remembered for.

12. Olivares, Rosa, “El fin de la ruina”, *Periferias* (exhibition catalog). Madrid: Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, 2009, p. 10.

13. Koolhaas, Rem, “The Generic City”, in *Domus*, n. 791, March 1997.

14. Zarza, Daniel, “De la ordenación del territorio al paisaje: Madrid como caso de estudio”, in Maderuelo, Javier (ed.), *Paisaje y territorio. Pensar el paisaje 3*. Madrid: Abada Editores, CDAN, 2008, p. 290.

15. Clement, Gilles *El manifiesto del tercer paisaje*. Barcelona: GG Mínima, 2007.

16. Esparza, Ramón, “Locus Amoenus”, in *Xavier Rivas*. Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 1998.

17. Ábalos, Iñaki, *Atlas pintoresco. Vol. 1: el observatorio*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2005.

18. Giacometti, Alberto, *Escritos*. Madrid: Síntesis, 2001.