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Geo-photographers

Danièle MÉAUX

In the field of contemporary photography, as in other sectors of cultural life), a real geographical tropism is undeniable. Many use the expression of “spatial turn”¹ when referring to this rise of interest among artists and researchers from varying disciplines in the different types of spatiality in which man evolves. The exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, presented in 1975 at the George-Eastman House in Rochester, New York, partly initiated a new vision of territories in the field of photography, where the imprint of man was now apparent². The DATAR³ Photographic Mission (1983-1989) confirmed the trend between 1983 and 1989 and had an important impact on the way landscapes were to be viewed, no longer presenting them as external objects of contemplation but as spaces of human life. Geographical tropism is now a developing theme in many photographic practices, including in particular those where photographers use protocols, more or less directly inspired by those used by geographers. Those protocols are often more revealing than the actual photographic subjects. Photography is an art of space, but not all landscapes relate to a geographical approach. Nevertheless, using the protocols confers upon the works a form of scientific empiricism inspired by the field practices of certain geographers.

‘Repeat’ Photography

The DATAR Photographic Mission was a commission that brought together town and country planners and photographers in pursuit of a triple aim: to observe the evolution of French landscapes, to re-create a culture of landscape and finally to promote photography in the artistic domain.⁴ The photographers, selected on the basis of their work and projects, were given freedom in pursuing the aims of the project.

¹ See Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies. The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso Book, 1989); Lévy J., *Le Tournant géographique. Penser l'espace pour lire le monde* (Paris : Belin, 1999).

² William Jenkins, *New Topographics. Photographs of a Man-altered landscape* (Rochester: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975). This exhibition catalogue was reproduced in *New Topographics* (Göttingen: Center for Creative Photography / University of Arizona / George-Eastman House / Steidl, 2010). In his introduction to the catalogue, William Jenkins insisted on the importance of protocols which allowed a topographical approach.

³ DATAR : Délégation à l'Aménagement du Territoire et à l'Action Régionale. (Delegation for Territorial Planning and Regional Action)

⁴ See on the subject the analyses of Jordi Ballesta, in *Le Projet photographique comme expérience et document photographiques*, Doctoral Thesis defended on 10th December, 2011, under the direction of Yannis Tsiomis, Director of Studies at the EHESS, 37-87.

Created in 1991 on the initiative of the Ministry of the Environment, its goal was to “constitute a collection of photographic series – shots repeated in an identical way at regular intervals – to allow an analysis of the mechanisms of spatial change and the actors involved, in order to orientate the future development of landscape areas”.⁵ The protocol imposed was one of “repeat” photography. This constraining feature was to guarantee that the results could be exploited. All the photographs taken are precisely dated. The Landscape Photographic Observatory set up a form of monitoring activity around a certain number of sites.⁶

The aim was to observe the transformations of sites and premises, generated by the interaction of multiple parameters, of which certain cannot be controlled. There is the work of the town and country planners but also the individual initiatives of inhabitants, the effects of climate, the growth or retreat of vegetation ... For the Observatory, landscape is viewed as a complex and dynamic reality, with changes subject to different rhythms. The changes observed concern for example the colours of facades, the development of industrial or commercial zones, the growth of urban sprawl, phenomena of abandon of agricultural land, deforestation or reforestation This type of observation and monitoring is now considered essential: the period of modern architecture has moved on and it is now accepted that projects can only be conceived by taking into account the complexity of the present.

The photographs, in the manner in which they are repeated, take on the function of providing information and knowledge. They are designed as documents which will subsequently be subject to analysis. The adoption of a strict protocol places the operator in the role of an observer of the obtained results. It restricts his freedom and limits subjectivity. A certain neutrality is required to enable comparisons to be made. The photographers who are solicited to carry forward the project are nevertheless renowned as authors or artists.

Itineraries and Transects

In all, nineteen “itineraries”⁷ have been officially designated by the Landscape Photographic Observatory. The use of this term emphasises the importance of the field experience. The sites must be surveyed; the visits carried out with the technical help of maps and maybe even a compass. In *Pilat Itineraries*, Sophie Ristelhueber accompanies each image with a section of the 1:50,000 scale map indicating her position and orientation.

⁵ « Presentation of the Landscape Photographic Observatory », *Séquences / Paysages* n° 2 (2000): 5.

⁶ Sophie Ristelhueber works in the Pilat Natural Park, Raymond Depardon on an itinerary from the « Causses » region to the Mediterranean, Dominique Auerbacher in the area of Northern France crossed by the motorway and the HST, Gérard Dufresnes on the outskirts of Valence, Alain Ceccaroli on the Arbois plateau in the Bouches-du-Rhône department, John Davis in the district of Saint-Benoît-du-Sault in the Indre department, Thibaut Cuisset in the Côtes d’Armor region, Gilbert Fastenaekens in the Duyes and Bléone valleys in the Alpes de Haute-Provence department, Thierry Girard in the North Vosges Natural Park...

⁷ Other observations are subsequently created through local initiatives.

Each “observation point” is numbered. A text specifies each time the characteristics of the site and the theme adopted.⁸ All these elements contrive to illustrate the geographical nature of the approach.

Thierry Girard is a photographer who constantly associates itinerary with his photographs (whether it relates to a commission or not). He notes: “My work has now for some time consisted of the notion of a *restricted*⁹ circuit [...]”. Many of his outings are in fact regulated by specific protocols. For “*From one sea to another*”¹⁰ a straight line drawn on the map determined his route from Nice to Ouessant. The colour photograph on the book cover shows sand and water trails; the image is cut by a prominent diagonal slash in the form of winding and irregular roads on a map with the red colour usually used to depict national arterial roads.

In a similar fashion, Dennis Adams and Laurent Malone followed a rectilinear itinerary from Manhattan to the John F. Kennedy Airport; each time one of the two associates took a photograph, the other did the same in a diametrically opposite direction, without taking the time to compose the image, to regulate the aperture or to adjust the focus. The 243 pairs of photographs they produced were brought together in a book¹¹ – the two shots taken from the same view-point were placed opposite each other, one on each side of the page, thus more or less materialising the trajectory they followed.

Adopting a pre-arranged itinerary differentiates the journey from a simple promenade or stroll, resembling more an exploratory circuit, a controlled progression interspersed with the taking of test samples. The protocol restricting the freedom of the practitioner appears as the condition of a methodical collecting process, allowing a form of observation of places and their appropriation by man.

This method is similar to the transect process used by geographers; a virtual line is drawn in order to study the incidence of such and such a phenomenon. Along this axis, samples are taken or observations made – relating perhaps to the vegetation, the geological composition of the soil – which enable the region to be mapped. The method could also be applied to urban zones in order to study different types of housing, the land values or the population density.

⁸ Sophie Ristelhueber, *Pilat. Itinéraires* (Pilat Natural Park / Ministry of the Environment, 1994). The following themes were planned: « development of wastelands and urbanization » (p. 34), « development of afforestation and sites (restoration and promotion)» (p. 64), « development of infrastructure equipment» (p. 48), « development of agriculture – wasteland – afforestation » (p. 44).

⁹ Thierry, Girard, « La route de Tôkaidô » in *Une route, un fleuve. Itinéraires récents au Japon et en Europe Centrale*, catalogue of the exhibition organised at the Marine Gallery, Nice from the 5th of December 1998 to the 24th of January 1999, Published by the City of Nice, 1999, work unpaginated.

¹⁰ Thierry Girard, *D'une mer l'autre* (Paris: Marval, 2002).

¹¹ Dennis Adams, Laurent Malone, *JFK* (Paris: LMX, 2002).

The geographer's transects however are not drawn up in a haphazard form. In forest zones they are perpendicular to contour lines. To be representative¹² they need to cross all the geological formations. To establish a transect requires preliminary study before going into the field. When a transect is drawn up for an urban zone its route is also deliberately delineated. According to Bernard Jouret, who carried out a study of the Brussels conglomeration, the transect should be drawn radially to allow pertinent observation.¹³

Transects of photographers are not always based on a scientific analysis of data; they have an arbitrary and playful dimension. The diagonal line followed by Thierry Girard contrasts with the usual route, more often than not based on a north/south axis. His trajectory allows him to pass through less populated areas, poor and often disinherited regions. Following a restricted route also leads to a focusing on ordinary sites which are not usually taken into consideration.

Typologies

Elements, be they natural or man-made, can be combined on the basis of determined criteria to establish a category. Deciding on classifications of objects based on defined parameters appears as the means to attain a certain form of generality or abstraction, both in geography and observation sciences in general. Establishing a typology refers back to the world of science (even if rather bizarre categories exist such as those defined by Borges). Discerning a "category" is « [...] the methodical process, the path (*odos*), the simplest way to allow the *recognition* and *appreciation* of an object obscured by an indistinct crowd of qualitative differences or particularities"¹⁴ noted Pierre-Henry Frangne. He continued: "classifying allows one to leave behind variety (necessarily cumulative and inchoative) to take on *variation* which places the difference within the identity and the identity within the difference".¹⁵ Hence the constitution of a series of images, corresponding to a given category, legitimises comparison. It enables the observation of discernable variations and potentially incites a questioning of their causes. The visible leads to one wondering about the invisible.

From the 1960's Bernd and Hilla Becher promoted the conception of typologies, driven by a powerful attraction for categories and systems which tended to place them with the conceptual artists. They were also drawn by the aptitude of series to contribute to an analysis of reality.

¹² « A transect is a rectilinear itinerary of prospection and/or sampling covering a maximum diversity of topographical, geomorphological and vegetal situations » See René Delpech et alii, *Vocabulaire : Typologie des stations forestières* (Paris: Institute of Forestry Development, 1986).

¹³ Bernard Jouret, « The transect method applied to urban analysis. Example of Brussels », *Revue de géographie de Lyon*, volume 47, n° 1 (1972): 77-96.

¹⁴ Pierre-Henry Frangne, « Inventaires et inventions », in *Classifications* (Rennes: Rennes University Press, 1996), 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

The observable differences between the listed industrial buildings were highlighted in pictures featuring several views; it's up to the spectator to wonder if they were used for markedly different purposes, as properties in natural settings or for aesthetic considerations. At the Düsseldorf *Kunstakademie* (Art Academy) the couple's teaching was based on a few simple principles: they asked their students to choose an architectural or social subject and to adopt a uniform and neutral style so as to produce a large quantity of images to extract a typological perspective. Erik Verhagen noted: "All the students went through this initiatory stage ... making it easier for them to subsequently rid themselves of the constraint".¹⁶ While Becher's students were later able to assert their own personal styles, there is a strong tendency amongst current photographers to produce typological work (to the point perhaps of establishing a trend).

These productions often involve landscapes and geography since they highlight the way in which man appropriates and organizes the space in which he lives. They emphasise the fact that the planning and lay out of sites is a collective task of societies since human activity leaves its mark an imprint on the ground and transforms it. Jean-Marc Besse wrote: "The landscape is an expression of human effort, always fragile and to be recommenced, to inhabit the world".¹⁷ Further on, when referring to the work of John B. Jackson, he pointed out that "Landscape in reality is a reflection of nature and society, an integration of natural elements and human projects, a *synthetic reality* [...]".¹⁸ Many series produced over the last few years have questioned this hybrid reality. They don't always possess the austere rigour of the typologies elaborated by the Becher couple, but the inventory of a category (of sites or lay-outs) does however allow an analysis of how social activity has come to organise space.

Naoyama Hatakayama recently published a work entitled *Terrils* (Slag heaps)¹⁹. Page after page is full of these artificial mountains, usually reflecting extraction activity which has ceased, and which now in differing ways fit in to the surroundings. The varied shapes are undoubtedly the result of different operational methods, and various solutions have been found to transform the sites once the extraction over. The series highlights certain visibilities, and the causes deserve being examined.

¹⁶ Erik Verhagen, « Une objectivité en trompe-l'oeil. Bernd et Hilla Becher et leurs élèves », in *Objectivités* (Paris: Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris / ARC, 2006), 63.

¹⁷ Jean-Marc Besse, *Le Goût du monde. Exercices de paysage* (Arles/Paris : Actes Sud / ENSP, 2009), 41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁹ Naoyama Hatakayama, *Terrils* (Light Motiv, 2011).

Laurent Guéneau recently produced a series entitled “Dominante verte”²⁰ (Dominant green), consisting of photographs from workers’ allotments in the Saint-Etienne region²¹. Through the colours and the subtle lighting the spectator tends to focus on the varied lay-outs of the plants, the structures and tones of the garden sheds, the rudimentary systems set up to collect the rainwater, the common functioning, but with all its diversity, and the integration of the gardens in the environment. “Living in a place [...], transforming a site into an inhabited environment, is generally [...] a question of forming habits, of living there in a systematic way [...]. What Jackson calls the vernacular landscape corresponds in fact to this manner of gradually inhabiting the world by establishing habits”²². The series of Laurent Guéneau seeks to highlight this imprint of lifestyles on the site.

Surveys

A survey based on the use of a questionnaire can be used in geography²³. During the presentation of the results the record of people’s answers is often associated with a photographic representation of the sites concerned. In this way sites are addressed through a relational and cultural dimension. The aim is to know how they are appropriated by the inhabitants. It is more or less this relation between man and his environment that Augustin Berque refers to as “mediance”²⁴.

Sophie Calle, a proponent of “relational art”²⁵, according to the definition of Nicolas Bourriaud, takes up this survey protocol to produce “*Memories of East Berlin*”²⁶; a title used both for the installation presented at the Berlin gallery of Matthias Arndt, at the Strasbourg Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in 1999, and then for a book published by Actes Sud. Following reunification, the Berlin Senate created a commission to decide on the approach to be adopted towards the structures symbolizing Soviet power, located in the East Berlin sector. Some were covered up, others dismantled. For ten of these constructions Calle used the following procedure: she photographed the site where the monument had once stood and questioned the inhabitants on their feelings towards the site and their recollections. In the installation, as in the book, she juxtaposes the coloured photograph of the now empty site, the listed statements and an old image of the site, smaller in black and white, showing the monument which had been removed.

²⁰ « Dominante verte » was exposed at the Arles International Photographic festival in 2010, at the Montmajour Abbey, then at the French National Library from September to November, 2010.

²¹ Saint-Étienne was one of the first cities to introduce workers allotment gardens on a large scale in 1895.

²² Jean-Marc Besse, *Le Goût du monde. Exercices de paysage*, op. cit., p. 131

²³ Lydie Goeldmer-Gianella & Anne-Lise Humain-Lamouré, « Survey by questionnaire in geography of the environment », *L’Espace géographique* n° 4, December 2010.

²⁴ Augustin Berque, *Écoumène. Introduction à l’étude des milieux humains* (Paris: Belin, 2000), 128.

²⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 1998).

²⁶ Sophie Calle, *Souvenirs de Berlin-Est* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1999).

The collected phrases reveal an assortment of feelings, from satisfaction to regret, from indifference to an impression of humiliation.

But what emerges in general is the powerful relationship which unites the inhabitants with statues and symbols that accompanied their daily lives for so long. On the subject of the bust of Lenin which stood in front of the Russian Embassy and which is now concealed in a type of box, we can read: “I don’t miss it, but I would prefer it still to be there. Even now when I pass in front of the façade I keep looking for it”²⁷. On the gigantic statue of Lenin which stood in the United Nations Square and is now gone: “I think it had its place here, it was part of the architectural design of the district. It was a prominent landmark, occupying the front of the stage. Everything around had to measure up to it. The traffic system in place meant you had to drive around it, whatever your direction. I no longer know if Lenin was put up before the surrounding buildings, or vice versa, but the square with its houses in an S shape, almost in the form of waves, created an ensemble with the monument. Today it no longer works”²⁸.

A survey allows sites to be considered in terms of the meaning inhabitants attribute to them, the living memories they have. Memories differ from history²⁹; in the sense that they invest the site with a relational, even an identity dimension, it interests geographers today who are committed to studying symbolic spatiality³⁰.

A Geo-photograph ?

The way in which certain photographers now contemplate space (in its complexity, its plurality and dynamics, in its relational and cultural dimension), takes inspiration – in a direct or indirect manner – from geographical research, recent reflections about the landscape, the place and the region, with an increasingly developed awareness of the environment. A certain number of contemporary photographers, adopting protocols inspired by geography, now use large format view cameras. This cumbersome apparatus corresponds both to the highly concerted character of their approach and to a willingness to record the appearance of a site in the most exhaustive way possible. It is however more especially the adoption of protocols (repeat shooting, itineraries and transects, typologies and surveys) which enable practitioners to come close to a relation with space resembling that of geographers. Through the intermediary of these protocols a whole epistemological dimension is called upon.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14-15.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁹ Pierre Nora, *Lieux de mémoire 1* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 24. Nora distinguishes between history which is « always a problematic and incomplete reconstruction of what no longer exists » and memory which is « life still led by living groups and consequently [...] in constant evolution ».

³⁰ Michel Bédard, « Une typologie du haut-lieu, ou la quadrature d’un géosymbole », *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, volume 46, n° 127 (2002): 69.

It is not necessary to dwell on the objectivity with which the medium is normally credited. Every image stems from a procedure which is partly automated, in such a way that Gary Winogrand was able to write “I take photographs to find out what something looks like when it is photographed”³¹, considering the shot taking to be an operation controlled by a device and making possible a particular form of observation of the world. Scientists from the 19th century immediately understood the service the medium could render to science. This related to its precision but especially to its automaticity. To the extent that it is not entirely filtered by the choice of the operator, the photograph can retain traces which are not considered pertinent at the time by the latter, but are susceptible to become instructive thereafter. They constitute, in short by provision, an archive of reality which can be exploited at a later stage.³²

Combining a defined protocol with the photographic procedure reinforces and extends the inherent empirical dimension of the medium: the photographer seems to be setting in motion an experiment with strict parameters, and thereafter to view the result. Once the constraint is accepted, any deviation is prohibited. If the photographer assumes more or less the role of initiator of the protocol, he then loses the initiative and in the end seems only able to enjoy the fruits of the sampling conditioned by his “programme”. The fact that the adopted protocols are more or less inspired by geographical practices epitomises a marked attraction for the discipline.

The images are not conceived in isolation, they are taken in correspondence with other images or with a text. Above all they are taken in terms of a global approach, hence their worth. More than the photograph itself, it is obviously the project – including the shooting and the restrictive approach – which demonstrate the geographical model. The protocol places the photograph (already subject itself to empiricism) in a context of the uncertainties of research. The project as a whole appears in the light of the dynamic aspects of a previously designed experiment carried out in the field, a venture aimed at the acquisition of observations and knowledge.

³¹ Gary Winogrand G., « Interview », in Peninah R. Petruck, *The Camera Viewed. Writings on Twentieth Century Photography*, volume 2 (Syracuse: Dutton, 1979), 126.

³² “When a zoologist makes a drawing he only represents what he has noticed of his model, and consequently, the line traced by his pencil just interprets the more or less complete idea he has formed of the object to be reproduced, and it is very rare that the detail thus obtained clearly shows characteristics that the author would not have taken into account. Hence, when in the progress of science, one of his successors introduces, in his quest for zoological solutions, elements which the first drawer would not have used, it is again rare that he finds them faithfully represented in the other’s drawings. In order to identify the presence or absence of these structural characteristics, he cannot make do with the examination of figures which have already been published, but is obliged to observe objects in nature once more. But with photography he can act differently, since a photographic image represents not only what the author himself has seen and seeks to show, but also what is actually visible in the reproduced object. Another naturalist can therefore focus on aspects the other has not noticed, and make real discoveries thanks to the image, as he would have done when observing the objects in nature.” In « Rapport sur un ouvrage inédit intitulé: *Photographie zoologique*, par MM. Rousseau et Devéria », *Comptes rendus hebdomadaires des séances de l’Académie des sciences*, t. XXXXVI, 1853, 991-993, in *La Photographie en France. Textes et Controverses : une anthologie 1816-1871* (Paris: Macula, 1989), 78.

Artialisation / artivities

The inclusion of photographs in a project, governed by a protocol, tends to resemble sample taking, listings undertaken according to defined criteria and meant for further analysis. They would appear therefore to oppose the notion of “artialisation”³³ which some consider to be the very prerequisite for “landscape”. In reverse of a pictorial tradition, an image is not valued for its aesthetic potential recognized in its own right; it does not claim to be the equivalent of a “state of mind”³⁴. Making use of a protocol is a way for the practitioner to place himself in another *field*, in fact more precisely to bestow much more importance on the “field” itself. The transcription of reality is highlighted – without being validated by any objectivity of the views.

Does this imply however that these images do not belong to the field of art ? In this regard the Observatory of Landscape Photography called on professionals recognised as authors or artists, and not technicians. While this choice is likely to serve the promotional needs of regions, it is also based on a recognition of the capacity of artist photographers to choose an instructive and embracing focus which render visible the relations existing between things.

Certain planners today have become aware of what they can learn from artists. As for these artists, they have a tendency to assume certain restrictive procedures; accepting commissions which may serve to renew their approach, moving more towards decentering, far removed from usual practices or simplistic effects.³⁵ This is roughly what Thierry Girard says, talking about his responsibility for an itinerary in the Vosges Natural Park:

[...] the constraints and methodological rigour, inherent in the notion of « observatory » have a tendency to restrict the desire for aesthetic experimentation [...], which in the end obliges the authors to remain very modest and to accept the restrictions of a particular commission, rather than subjecting the commission to their artistic *ego*. [...] I have to admit that to begin with, I found the constraints a little too strict and restrictive, but I soon accepted the rules to a point of even finding a form of revitalisation.³⁶

In fact photographers who work on typologies, surveys or transects, are often doing this on their own initiative. While adopting a protocol distances the images from any artialisation, by following a more or less scientific model, it in no way diminishes the artistic dimensions of the production. Quite the opposite: the operator comes to resemble a designer, moving away from the notion of testimony (to which photography has for a long time been confined).

³³ Alain Roger, *Court traité du paysage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

³⁴ Henri Frédéric Amiel, *Fragments of a personal diary* [1880] (Paris: Stock, 1931), 36.

³⁵ See, with regard to the subject, the statements of Gabriele Basilico who notes how much the DATAR photographic commission modified his way of working, imposing more slowness and patience.

³⁶ Thierry Girard, *Un Voyage en Saintonge* (Saintes: CCR de l'Abbaye aux Dames, 1995).

Referring to an exhibition of photographs during the International Photographic Festival of Arles in 2012, Pascal Beausse remarked on a tendency to redefine “artistic activity as a laboratory of knowledge”³⁷. Today photographs reveal a capacity to propose complex and original visibilities, critical representations which even interest the human sciences and in particular geography. Results which can be exploited are of course not always the case. Certain projects carried out in this field serve more to promote the photographer or the accreditation of regions than in-depth studies of spatial phenomena. Nevertheless the protocols planned here are the emblem of the capacity of photography to take part in geographical ventures.

These protocols have also an intrinsic importance: the spectator is appreciative of the simplicity, the scientific nature of the approach which convey a certain recoil from subjectivity. The protocol combined with the shooting constitute, in a manner of speaking, an “attitude”, a “form”³⁹, where the patience and regularity, the empiricism and humility are capable of arousing emotion. It contributes to what could be called a “geographical aestheticism”.

³⁷ Pascal Beausse, « Documents pour une information alternative », in *Les Rencontres de la Photographie d'Arles: une école française* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2012), 274.

³⁹ « *When attitudes become form: live in your head* » is the title of an exhibition organised by Harald Szeeman in 1969 at the Berne Kunsthalle.