



LUOGHI COME PAESAGGI

Fotografia
e committenza pubblica
in Europa negli anni '90

Photography
and Public Commissions
in Europe in the '90s

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Ekodok-90
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per la Fotografia Contemporanea
Mission Photographique Transmanche
Osservatorio Venezia-Marghera
Vinex Photo Project

A cura di
Edited by
William Guerrieri
Guido Guidi
Maria Rosaria Nappi

Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali
Ufficio Centrale per i Beni Ambientali e Paesaggistici

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per la Fotografia Contemporanea**
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Comune di Rubiera

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PLACES AS LANDSCAPES. NOTES ON LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY

Antonella Russo

Image of the Landscape and History of Photography

The arrival of globalisation heralds a total eclipse of the experience of the natural, almost as though the global society feels the need to re-design the universe, eliminating from the space that surrounds us all other situations that do not directly refer to the totality of the new hyper-technological condition. As the third millennium dawns, human society is preparing to experience post-natural culture and live in nature "after the end of nature".

With the threat of a total annulment of the experience of nature, the accounting for contemporary landscape has assumed a new centrality. Observed, scanned, monitored even, this landscape represents the cross-roads of different disciplines (geography, anthropology, philosophy, town-planning, history of photography) that consider the possible outcomes and inevitable consequences of today's impact of the global on the natural. In order to see the landscape, we must experience the natural, and this is primarily an aesthetic experience. In order to observe and consider a landscape, we must always visualise it, take observation of it or, according to Adorno, experience that which is mainly concerned with the production of images¹.

Each landscape is defined by a gaze that gives it a shape and identity. Indeed, a landscape can only take on a form and acquire its own image when it is looked at. The landscape therefore has profound implications as regards the theory of vision, since it gives shape to a way of seeing that is not univocal, but differs for each one of us and changes during the course of the various ages.

Thus if we wish to consider the historical aspects of a landscape, we must try to define its significance as an image in a certain period of history and consider the impact that it has had on culture at different times in history.

The photographic image is strictly connected to the landscape and derives from an impulse to transcribe the visible world, to create a mechanism capable of measuring and verifying the space that surrounds us. More specifically, it developed from the convergence of two mathematical systems that constituted the most advanced technology in the modern age: linear perspective and modern mapmaking, both capable of reproducing precise and, at the same time, verifiable images of segments of an external reality². In the sixteenth century, the Camera Obscura, a primitive and rudimentary photographic instrument, consisted of a large, cumbersome structure to be used in an external location. By the eighteenth century it had already become a more manageable apparatus, not only for use in helping painters to reproduce drawings, but also in investigating and "interpreting" the sphere of the natural.

In 1765, Francesco Algarotti wrote: "[...] nothing can show it better than the Camera Obscura, in which Nature paints the things closest to the eye with brushes that are so fine and still, using brushes that are progressively blunter and slacker to paint those further away. [...] Painters should make the same use of the Camera Obscura that Naturalists and Astronomers make of the microscope and telescope; for all these instruments equally contribute to make known, and represent, Nature"³. According to Algarotti, painters were already able to reproduce photographic images of landscapes, since each work was constructed and constituted using the optical schemata available at that time.

In the eighteenth century, reproductions of landscapes were known as Views, a term meaning "the point that meets the eye"⁴. According to the art historian, Giuliano Briganti, throughout this century the term View had also come to mean the vision of the topographical reality, i.e. the systematic observation of data and information concerning places.

Topography was a key word for photography of natural places. It was crucial for both the understanding of nineteenth-century landscape photography and for contemporary pictures as well.

In 1867, the government of the United States appointed teams of geographers, geologists and photographers to effect a series of photographic surveys of the nation's unexplored territories and geological regions.

In the images of William H. Jackson, Andrew J. Russell and especially in those of Timothy O'Sullivan, the topographical description of the territories, emphasising the geological morphology of the places, prevailed over panoramas of enchanting natural scenarios with all their uncontaminated natural beauty. These topographical views divulged images of the impact on nature of the wild and unknown, mysterious and majestic American frontier. As Sandra Phillips underlines, these photographers took great care to aim their cameras on carefully studied spots, eliminating all traces of industrialisation. Magnificent, unexplored open spaces depicted the vastness of North America, giving a new impetus to the innate desire of

Americans for freedom (entrepreneurial) and to colonise new, bigger and richer territories.

The images of the topographers presented a wealth of natural beauty, uncontaminated places, virgin territories where there was no sign even of the Indians, whose settlements had been there for over two thousand years; there were no traces of urbanisation or the agricultural settlements of the colonisers and their industries that exploited the rich mineral resources of the West⁵.

In these landscape photographs, the topographers attempted to dissimulate the mechanisation of the American landscape by burying it deep in the gorges of the canyons of the South West or hiding it in the heart of the forests along the fortieth parallel; however, although it was dissimulated, that industrialisation process, which already in the first half of the nineteenth century had invaded a significant proportion of the North American territories, re-emerged in these images, having undergone a metamorphosis, in the form of high resolution topographical descriptions of the rock formations and vegetation of the American forests.

It was not by chance that the use of photography, which was invented in the nineteenth century with the industrialisation of Western society, became more widespread during the age of modernism and was able to divulge images of the transformations taking place in the society and territories in which these changes were occurring.

The postcards by anonymous photographers depicting the suburbs of the big European cities at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constitute eloquent documents of the important transformations that were taking place at the beginning of the modern age. In particular, they help us to understand the beginnings of the dramatic conflict between culture and nature. These vernacular images, candid, involuntarily spontaneous photographs are not, for the most part, considered to be of importance in the history of photography but can, at times, be fundamental in understanding the cultural conflicts and contradictions in progress at that time.

Indeed, it is as if the postcards portraying the areas around the modern city and its suburbs, with bridges, chimneys and buildings on the horizon, were already indicating the destiny of these places. The suburbs represented the true landscape of modernism, nature having to comply with the requirements of industrial society. Stemming from the harsh contrast between town and country, this suburban landscape was no longer the extension or the degradation of either, but rather a precise place that could no longer be defined as nature nor yet completely as city. It is a terrain vague, an empty space, an area of doubt, suspended between two different realities that are continually being re-defined. Modernism transformed nature into a landscape on the fringe of the town, turning it into a suburban district, driving it beyond its confines, creating a territory difficult to define and represent, in that it has become a land of transit destined to transition. From the beginning of the twentieth century until the middle of the century that has just ended, the suburban district was the landscape image that acted as the back-drop for the cultural transformations that were taking place in Western society. All one had to do to examine these changes was to observe it, cross it, enter it as if to inhabit it. Photography was the work of a new flâneur who introduced images of modernity, looking at them and revealing them. He was the new Baudelairean hero, a kaleidoscope with a conscience but also philosophical observer who, in the words of Benjamin: "[...] great expert of the thresholds, knows the smallest passages that separate city from plain, one part of the city from another: work sites, bridges, subway flyover and squares, are all contemplated and respected, not to mention the liminal hours, the twelve sacred minutes or seconds of the lesser life, that correspond to the macro-cosmic twelf-nights and may, at first glance, appear so unsolemn."⁶

From the Image of the Landscape to the Photography of Places

Subject to continual examination and re-definition, the landscape genre has been completely reconsidered, particularly as regards contemporary photography. For more than a decade in this country, photography historians and critics have been suggesting that a radical re-examination of the "photographic landscape" category is necessary, as this should include not only the traditional contrast between nature/culture, but should also take into consideration the rapid transformations that are taking place in our hyper-technological society.

Contemporary photography considers the landscape to be the landscape of everyday life, the landscape of everyday pathways, familiar to each and every one of us, a space of routine and anonymous flânerie⁷.

Photography historian, Paolo Costantini, felt the need to re-examine the

concept of contemporary landscape, in order to take into consideration the important contribution to Italian photography of an entire generation of authors, who had worked to rid it of the stereotypes that had been diffused by images destined for use in the tourism industry.

Costantini's concept of the photographic landscape consisted of an image able to represent the scenarios of the contemporary world, that placed emphasis on the vision of places on the margins of the big Italian cities, focussing on landscapes that had been transformed by industry and senseless urban development. It was also the image of degraded areas that must be re-developed, recuperated as a possible landscape.

Starting in the mid-eighties, some Italian landscape photographers set about defining contemporary places, concentrating especially on the most peripheral areas of the cities, where the suburban territory was gradually being eroded day by day, diminishing and receding towards opacity until eventually becoming a mere line on the horizon.

Landscapes and Passages: The Establishment of Linea di Confine

For Luigi Ghirri, one of the most refined and committed Italian photographers, and according to the teachings of photographs by Niépce, Daguerre, Nadar and Evans, Cartier-Bresson and other more contemporary photographers, the landscape was primarily research into places⁹. Landscape photography was a means of investigating reality in order to glimpse those urban and suburban spaces to which modernity had accustomed us; it meant rediscovering the "feeling of belonging" of places. For Ghirri, no landscape image could exist unless it also portrayed that phenomenology of the landscape between one space and another within the territories of modernity and post-modernity and, at the same time, recorded the events and interior motions that took place with these movements.

For Ghirri, photographing a landscape was equivalent to photography in itself; it meant being conscious of making a profoundly ethical, as well as aesthetical, decision.

Already in the mid-eighties, Ghirri was uneasy about the advent of a global society, the full physiognomy of which was not yet clear, but which heralded the passage and transformation of the modern city and suburbs into a contemporary metropolis with its degraded areas.

For Ghirri, photographing the contemporary landscape meant being conscious of starting out on a journey towards an unknown territory. He wrote: "Photographing means being conscious of standing on the boundary line between the known and the unknown, that transforms looking into glimpsing [...] recognising the end of a feeling of belonging. This does not mean feeling [...] the loss of a place [...] not an act of nostalgic melancholy, but the anxiety of starting a journey towards an unknown territory"¹⁰.

Without doubt, the writings and photographic works of Luigi Ghirri strongly influenced the photographers and critics who, in 1989, decided to establish the permanent laboratory for territorial photographic research called "Linea di Confine"¹¹.

The photographic commissions on contemporary landscapes effected by Linea di Confine at the end of the eighties, were based on Costantini's theory that the contemporary was, primarily, "a landscape of modification" and that, in order to photograph this, photographers must trace the places where the natural had been modified up to the point of coinciding with the urban horizon. This landscape must therefore be traced in the extreme outer fringes, in the suburbs of the advancing metropolis.

At the end of the eighties, Linea di Confine was the best qualified observatory for recording the transformations and continuous modifications taking place in the Italian landscape. The actual geography within the region in which this laboratory was located, a mass of villages that were expanding and almost overflowing into each other's outskirts, meant that the laboratory became a sort of fort, a strategic front-line position signalling the disappearance of the Italian landscape between the city and province. Linea di Confine stands out in relation to the other institutions and landscape photography projects that were established during the eighties and nineties, both in Italy and abroad, in that it is also a centre for research into landscape photography¹².

From the mid-eighties and during the early nineties, Linea di Confine concentrated its research on the landscapes of the areas bordering on the cities, in places that were once part of the Italian provinces, with their own economy and culture and that were now inexorably losing their own physiognomy and, with that, their identity. Here, on the extreme borders of

the city, an unknown and unclassifiable territory was developing, no longer the modernist suburb (that was still a suburb that could be identified as unnatural country) but a new area with an ambiguous geography, an anonymous territory, threshold of the surmodern metropolis.

The photographic surveys by Guido Guidi, Rubiera (1989) and Gardenia (1996), Olivo Barbieri, Cavriago (1990), John Davies, Boretto, Brescello, Poviglio, Gualtiori (1992) and Stephen Shore, Luzzara (1993), Paola De Pietri, Parco Casse d'Espansione del Fiume Secchia (1997) and others attempted to define or recuperate some type of identity for these places.

The photographers commissioned by Linea di Confine set out to record, with extreme accuracy and detached clearness the invasion of forms, signs and architecture that had flooded into the territory around Via Emilia, the old consular road that was once an artery of the Roman Empire.

Many Italian critics claimed that the works of the authors of Linea di Confine were a mere remake of the visual proposals of the American New Topographics, and thus a sort of photographic neo-colonialism, a forced superimposition of American visuality, formal and impersonal, that was in contrast with and overshadowed that healthy visual "localism" of our photography¹³.

In fact, as emphasised by Paolo Costantini, curator of an exhibition dedicated to American photography in the seventies, entitled "New American Landscape. Dialectical Landscape", the detached and impersonal vision of the New Topographics was, in some ways, coherent with the work of some Italian photographers, including, among others, Guido Guidi. That photography aimed at portraying the phenomenology of existence in the contemporary urban universe, updating the high definition description of O'Sullivan, thus eliminating any residual hedonism from the image in order to act critically, denouncing the disappearance of places that was taking place in the contemporary reality.

Landscapes, Places/Non-places

Since the mid-nineties, the sites of Italian landscape survive only through the pervasiveness of the topoi of pictorial iconography and the ubiquitous image of tourist industry. If the places of Italian landscape are inexorably and increasingly surrendering their naturalness, those same territories of passage, areas in between places, thresholds between cultural and natural are also disappearing, yielding strips of green and naturalness. Landscapes between places have been increasingly incorporated into the shapes and structures of surmodernity, motorways, shopping centres, large hotel and fast-food chains, swallowed up by this incongruous architecture of the global society¹⁴.

The non-place has crept in and lives parasitically on the place, its forms and architecture invade it; they do not appear to eliminate it totally, but slowly and progressively suck its naturalness and identity.

The photographic survey produced by Walter Niedermayr, Parco d'Espansione del Fiume Secchia (1994-7) and Via Emilia (2000) is a perfect example of the diffusion of the hybrid in the landscape, the opposing of minimal natural forms such as the green borders along the edge of the motorway, a surreptitious segment that crosses the urban spaces.

The image of contemporary landscape increasingly appears to be the photograph of "any" global landscape, on which bits of natural places have been added here and there, more less as a form of decoration.

For some years now, we have noticed that the transformation of the landscape image is becoming more rapid and ever more frenetic. The spaces in the big cities are increasingly strawn with what Ghirri defined as squalid places of "sensorial deprivation", incongruous architecture sits beside historical buildings, car-parks, hotels, hospitals and football fields design full and empty spaces. The profile of the cities is changing rapidly, almost intermittently, like the pulsating rhythm of the images that chase each other across the electronic advertising panels.

This pulsation of images in the contemporary landscape also seems to define a new unit for measuring time, as regards the employment of the landscape, no longer a temporal or existential movement, crossing seen as the reflection upon places and non-places, but rather a quick and frenetic rush through different landscape options, a rapid and omnivorous consumption of environmental differences.

Gazing on the contemporary landscape in these first years of the twenty-first century is similar to zapping between places and non-places, a glance (no longer a gaze), rapidly scrolling the urban environment, as if it were a computer screen¹⁵.

In what has already become a mediatic urban space, in this landscape that is pulsating with fragmented images of liquid urban universes, the inhabitants appear here and there as if they were on a gigantic electronic topographic map and, at times, as aporias, tiny black dots to be re-positioned.

1. Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World, How Globalisation is Reshaping our Lives*. London: Profile Books, 1999; for further details on the subject of the post-natural in relation to international photography during the last fifteen years, see my *La natura nell'era del post-naturale in il uogo e lo sguardo*. Turin: Scriptorium-Paravia, 1998, p. 51-60.
2. Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970.
3. John Szarkowski, *Before Photography in Photography Until Now*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1989, p. 11-19.
4. Giuliano Briganti, *Sul Vedutismo e le sue vicende critiche in I Vedutisti*, Milan: Electa-Bompiani, n.d., p. 6-7.
5. Briganti, *cit.* p. 6.
6. Sandra S. Phillips is curator of the beautiful exhibition, *Crossing the Frontier. Photographs of the Developing West 1849 to the Present*, San Francisco, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art-Curriculo Books, 1996, dedicated to vernacular photography recording the process of industrialisation that started in 1849 and continues today in the Western territories of United States.
7. Walter Benjamin, *Il ritorno dal flâneur in Ombre corte*, Turin: Einaudi, 1993, p. 472.
8. Paolo Costantini (editor), *Le immagini. Dovunque abitano*, in Venezia-Marghera, *Fotografie e trasformazioni nella città contemporanea*, Milan: Charta, 1997, p. 21-23.
9. Luigi Ghirri, *Lo sguardo inquieto, un'antologia di sentimenti in Paolo Costantini and Giovanni Culerantonio (editors) Niente di aritico sotto il sole*, Turin: S.E.I. 1997, p. 132-6.
10. Ghirri, *cit.* p. 134.
11. The *Linea di Confine photographic laboratory* was established in 1989, based on the ideas and intents shared by the historian, Paolo Costantini, and the photographers, Guido Guidi and William Guerrieri.
12. As regards this, refer to the emeries submitted for the Italian and European territorial photographic commission projects published herein.
13. In 1987, Paolo Costantini organised the New American landscape, *Dialectical Landscape* exhibition, presenting the work of three very different photographers, Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz and Stephen Shore, known to the Italian public as the New Topographics from the title of the homonymous exhibition in which, together with other authors, they took part in 1975. That extremely successful exhibition is considered one of the foundation stones in the history of photography, and it represented an epistemologic turning point in the conception of the image. A new generation of photographers proposed a vision of the contemporary American universe, replacing the photographs of majestic beauty of the nineteenth century topographics, with urban places and architecture taken from an impersonal and intentionally neutral point of view. The echo of the confused and hostile criticism which accompanied Costantini's exhibition, is still with us today. Among the most interesting criticism of the works of the New Topographics of the 1987 exhibition, there is the one by Luigi Ghirri, who described these images as fascinating and disquietingly "anaesthetic". For a brief debate on the ideas of Ghirri, also refer to my *La via Emilia o il sentire elico del paesaggio*, in *Via Emilia, Rubiera: Linea di Confine per la Fotografia Contemporanea*, 2000, p. 10.
14. The term refers to the theory of Marc Augé in *Non-lieux*. Paris: Seuil, 1992. The text had already been presented to the scientific committee of *Linea di Confine* by William Guerrieri in 1996 and was welcomed with enthusiasm, especially by the young Italian photographers.
15. For a more detailed discussion of themes regarding the phenomenology of the new urban panorama, reference should be made in particular to the essay by Stefano Borsi, *Luoghi in sequenza* in *Mirko Zardini, Paesaggi ibridi. Un viaggio nella città contemporanea*, Milan: Skira, 1996, p. 59-69. (Translation by A. Russo)