

**Maybe Marco Polo was really a photographer  
disguised as a merchant.  
He did have the capacity for  
photographic observations,**

a photographic memory, and photographic descriptive skills... John Stathatos has taken over for Marco Polo and he tells us, more than seven hundred years later, of Daedala and Gazaka, of Tigranocerta and Arkitois.

In *The Book of Lost Cities*, Stathatos reviews, with photographs and text, a Borgesian labyrinth of unearthed cities. Some existed in the remote past; others in legends, myths, or archaic texts whose scientific validity is doubtful; while others only existed in the fantasies of the artist. The book, though, treats all the cities equally and gives the job of distinguishing them to the reader. Each of the images is overflowing with ambiguity and contradicts the principle of "identification of place" that one would assume a documentary photo would contain—for example, insignificant landscapes, without more than a passing reference to deserts of the Middle or Near East, splattered with some prosaic ruin or completely empty. It is impossible to determine if they are authentic or artificial ruins; the angle of view is exceedingly wide and the small architectural structures are hidden in the vast dialogue of mountains and plains. In the text, Stathatos acknowledges his debt to Borges and to ancient wisdom. He presents literary inventions filled with dates and bibliographical references that would put any encyclopedia to the test: Charax, Ptolomy, the Pseudo-Aristeas, a Chinese translation of Milandapahba, the Tabakat-i-Nasiri, and on and on. In some cases the data is factual, but more frequently Stathatos' erudition is infused with delirium.

In spite of the fact that Stathatos really has traveled to these desert landscapes and, therefore, has not had to resort to tabletop creations, the viewer cannot help but be suspicious. Here the relation between image and text is inverted. The density of information required to establish evidence has changed immensely. Under these new parameters our perception of geography, history, time, and place is diluted. It could be that Stathatos is guided by the true eagerness of an archaeologist, but, as with Borges, his is an excavation done not in the fields, but in the library—

an excavation informed by books, by the occult, and by the origins of our culture. Unlike Borges, Stathatos deciphers the change of the millennium, transforming melancholy into sarcasm. Alternating between ecstasy and torment, his work also responds to the impact of mass media. In some form, the dull landscapes in *The Book of Lost Cities* call to mind the same vague landscapes of the Iraqi deserts that were transmitted onto our television screens during the Gulf War: nonexistent landscapes for a nonexistent war, iconic constructions for an iconic war. As on television news, the connection between words and images has suffered a displacement that affects the politics of meaning and their control. As Yves Abrioux writes, "the artist does not explore the literary epistemology, he shows us the art of going through a minefield where planetary communication has been transformed through the dawning of multimedia communication."

Joan Fontcuberta, "Archaeologies of Tomorrow"  
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