

A CONDITIONAL PRESENCE

Women landscape photographers in Europe

To consider the work of women within the field of landscape photography begs a question about the purpose of considering such work in isolation from the genre as a whole, since it is obvious that the study of any human activity in the light of factors extraneous to that activity itself – factors such as sex, race, nationality or religion – is meaningless if approached prescriptively. An investigation of, for instance, the work of francophone African film-makers or male heterosexual Scottish painters will very likely lead to the discovery of a number of traits common to each group; if, however, these traits are subsequently held to be intrinsically African, Scottish or heterosexual, in such a way as to attribute the nature of the work examined to supposedly inherent and immutable characteristics, the entire process becomes intellectually and politically suspect. Such investigations, on the other hand, are analytically valuable, helping explain why and under what influences or pressures the activities of a particular group developed in a particular way at a particular time.

If research into aspects of women's photographic representation of landscape throws up any one significant fact, it is the relative rarity – seen against the whole sweep of photographic history – of such representation, and some of the far from insignificant practical reasons for this are discussed below. There is, however, a more general consideration which bears examination, which might be called the conditional nature of women's presence within the landscape. Except in the case of nomadic or hunting and gathering cultures, women have traditionally been excluded from the physical experience of landscape and from participation in its working and shaping. Women have not by and large owned land; they have usually been restricted to work in and around the domestic sphere; and under normal circumstances they have been discouraged from travelling any great distance from home, and then always under the protection of male members of their family. In other words, in most periods and societies, whenever women have ventured into the landscape, they have in effect been there on sufferance.

This conditionality appears even more marked where the intellectual and emotional shaping of landscape is concerned. In one of the most complex examples we know of, that of Aboriginal creation myths, the processes through which landscape is assimilated to narrative structure, and in particular the ritual songline journeyings, have always been a specifically masculine activity. Inevitably, physical and intellectual exclusion from the landscape has entailed an imaginative withdrawal: landscape and its appreciation, for instance, are largely absent from women's writing, particularly prior to the 20th century. As far as contemporary photographic practitioners are concerned, there is a clear realisation that not only is landscape not a natural given, but that it is a cultural construct in whose construction women have not participated.¹

To begin with then, some unavoidably raw data. The single largest international photographic database currently available to researchers is probably Michel & Michèle Auer's CD-ROM *Photographers Encyclopaedia International* (1997).² This includes entries of varying length and quality on a total of 6,515 photographers. European photographers, excluding Britain but including Russia, come to a total of 3,862, of whom 435 are women – a ratio of roughly 8:1. If search criteria are refined to include landscape among the genres or themes pursued, we end up with a final count of 170 continental women photographers whose output is said to have included at least some landscape work. It must of course be emphasised that these figures are far from complete, particularly where eastern Europe is concerned, and that the term 'landscape' has been interpreted very loosely by the compilers of the database.³ Nevertheless, the results of such a search are not without value, and offer some interesting pointers.

For one thing, women appear to have been almost entirely absent from the 19th century landscape. Only 17 women of all nationalities are listed as being active in this area prior to 1900, most of them British; a mere four could be described as continental. One obvious reason must be the fact that given the size and weight of 19th century photographic apparatus, and having regard to the impracticalities of feminine attire at the time, few women would have been inclined to wander across hill and dale in search of the picturesque. In view of the high cost of equipment and the financially dependent status of most women, economic considerations would have been equally decisive. Furthermore, as Liz Wells has pointed out, "Other limitations also intervene. These include safety considerations: it may be reckless for women to traipse around the country in remote open spaces on their own. Regardless of whether there is really any great risk involved, simply feeling insecure is in itself enough to limit what women undertake".⁴ Wells is here writing about the 1990s, but these considerations would have been even more relevant to the previous century. If further confirmation were needed, of the 124 19th century 'travel and regional photographers' listed by Witkin and London in their *Guide*, not one is a woman.⁵

Additional research only seems to confirm the paucity of early women landscape photographers. A useful source of information on early Portuguese photography, for instance, is the catalogue of *Provas Originais, 1858–1910*, a survey exhibition of 272 images drawn from the extensive municipal photographic archives of the city of Lisbon.⁶ Of the 272, one only, the photograph of a mountainous landscape in the Caldas de Monchique, is credited to a woman, Rosalina F. Lima, and she proves to be the only photographer in the exhibition about whom nothing further is known, not even her place of residence.

The investigation of other national photographic histories proves equally unrewarding, and even the existence of a vigorous tradition of landscape photography does not seem to guarantee more than a token feminine presence, if that. Finland is another relatively small country whose early photographic history has been the object of intensive recent study. According to an apparently exhaustive survey of the

subject published in 1992, “The commercial and industrial reforms of the 1860s brought about a fundamental change in the structure of society. Although the road and rail network improved, few people still travelled further than the nearest market town. Photographs, therefore, offered the first authentic picture of Finland, concrete images on which people could focus their national aspirations”;⁷ the large number of topographic and landscape images reproduced in this same survey include, however, only a single example by women, the sisters Anna and Maria Renfors who were active during the 1870s and 1880s.

In France, one could mention the little-known Jenny de Vasson (1872–1920), who began photographing around 1898. During the next twenty years, she accumulated a substantial body of work on rural France, including landscapes and portraits of country people, with particular emphasis on her native region of the Berry. She left some 5,000 negatives of all kinds and around 2,000 prints, though unfortunately many were destroyed by enemy action in 1943. Obviously talented and energetic, de Vasson also kept extensive journals and corresponded regularly with a number of scientists and artists, including the writer André Maurois.

A significant exception to the rule that few women were prepared to venture with cameras into the open countryside during the 19th and early 20th centuries was that of women whose families or spouses actually owned, or were influential over, tracts of that same countryside. While little work has been done on the class origins and economic circumstances of early women photographers, logic suggests that since they were unlikely to be earning a living through their exertions, it would automatically be the economically better-off and higher status women who had access to the skills and equipment of photography. A recently rediscovered and extremely interesting such case is that of Mary Paraskeva (1882–1951), the daughter of an expatriate Greek millionaire raised on the vast country estate of Baranovka in the Crimea, who left a large number of glass stereoscopic lantern slides including some very sophisticated landscapes as well as many scenes of peasant and village life on the eve of the first world war.⁸

Others were simply extraordinarily tough and independent-minded women, like the Swiss photographer Ella Maillart (1903–1997) who took part in the 1924 Olympics, became a stunt girl in skiing films, visited the Soviet Union in 1930 and wrote a book about it, photographed Northern China in 1933 and travelled from Peking to the Himalayas across occupied Manchuria and the Taklamakan Desert in 1935.⁹ Nevertheless, though their numbers increased slowly throughout the 20th century, the great majority of women landscape photographers are contemporary.

This is not to imply that even today, women are represented within the genre in significant numbers; the influential catalogue of the 1995 exhibition *Paysages, lieux et non-lieux*, which examined contemporary European landscape photography in some detail, particularly from Italy, Catalonia, the Netherlands, Germany and Luxembourg, included the work of just two women.¹⁰ Three years earlier, the 23rd edition of the

Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie at Arles, also devoted to contemporary European work, did not include any women in its substantial landscape section. It is difficult to say to what extent these two cases are an accurate reflection of the number of women working on landscape in Europe, or of the quality of their work. Nevertheless, one might note the continuing male dominance of photographic institutions in a number of European countries, as well as the relative curatorial laziness in which the fossilisation of such institutions is apt to result.

Looking at what can only be, at best, a representative sample of work from across Europe, is it possible to make any generalisations at all about the nature of landscape-based photographic work being produced by women today? Hedged about with all due reservations, it is I think possible to identify a couple of areas for which women have shown little or no enthusiasm, and which have as a result become *de facto* male preserves: one is the American new topographics movement, and the other is the German school of large-format landscape photography ultimately descended from the Bechers, with its emphasis on typology on the one hand and on monumentality and the sublime on the other. It seems safe to assume that when they turn to photographing landscape, women are not on the whole attracted to either emotionless or grandiloquent representations of the world around them.

It is true that some bodies of landscape work by women photographers may at first sight appear to fall under one or another of these categories, but in almost every case the resemblance turns out to be superficial. Heidi Specker (German, b.1962), for instance, photographs Berlin office blocks and architectural complexes in an appropriately neutral style, but undermines the whole aesthetic by digitising, blurring and otherwise degrading her images, which end up looking like models, or architectural fantasies. The exhibited images are themselves digital ink-jet prints, a further blow to the German landscape tradition which has usually insisted on large, carefully (and expensively) produced conventional prints.¹¹

Brigitte Bauer (b.1959), a German photographer living and working in France, has produced at least two major series of colour images which seem related to the aesthetics of Struth *et. al.*: *Roundabouts* (ongoing from 1995), and *The City and the Garden* (1999); in both cases, however, the apparently neutral point of view is subverted by irony and a tongue-in-cheek aestheticisation which reveals itself to be a critique. Of *Roundabouts*, Bauer has written that “these spaces are usually designed with considerable care and equal bad taste. Such attempts at adding aesthetic value, at beautifying essentially functional spaces, demonstrate a highly standardised treatment of nature in cities. This perverse aspect is something I try to show photographically: the image is intended at first sight to prettify, to appeal to the spectator, while the critical dimension reveals itself to anybody who lingers a little over the image”.¹² This critical approach to the representation of landscape connects Bauer to more overtly oppositional British

photographers such as Miranda Walker and Ingrid Pollard, while like Pollard, she has consistently engaged with questions concerning the nature of landscape today; writing about a recent series of images of Mont Sainte-Victoire, she notes “I had intended simply to photograph a mountain, and found myself serving an apprenticeship into the matters of landscape”.¹³

In 1992, the Estonian artist Eve Kiiler (b.1960) launched a critique of her fellow-countrymen’s unquestioning attitude to the platitudes of both art and nature with an installation entitled *Estonian Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. This consisted of a 3 x 4 metre photomural of a stream running through woodland produced by a firm called ScanDecor, on top of which were hung small framed texts with quotations from a *History of Estonian Painting*. The texts describe a picture by the locally famous landscape artist Konrad Mägi, substituting the name “ScanDecor” for the artist’s name throughout: “Having returned to Estonia, ScanDecor became one of the first artists who consistently conveyed Estonian nature, endowing it with a definite artistic interpretation”. According to Kiiler, “Visitors to the Tallinn Art Hall loved the landscape. They were sure they knew the precise place, which looked exactly like Lahemaa National Nature Park [the scene was in fact shot in England]. The visitors took snapshots of each other, posing in front of the mural as if at a famous tourist spot.”¹⁴

Also frequently encountered in contemporary practice are essentially metaphorical uses of what seem to be straightforward documentary renditions of landscape. The Greek photographer Erieta Attali (b.1966) has consistently taken this approach, most notably with her photographs of the Anatolian highlands in *First and Last Landscapes* (1996); here, the stark black and white images of parched and barren Turkish valleys become a symbolic *tabula rasa* in which the viewer may see either the beginning or the end of the world, “a book waiting to be written in, or the silence after Armageddon”.¹⁵ Though superficially dissimilar, the remarkably beautiful colour diptychs which the Finnish photographer Marjaana Kella (b.1961) is currently working on in the Ticino – distant mountain panoramas tending to abstraction as they merge into banks of mist and cloud – are also about nothing as elementary as the transmission of topographical data.¹⁶

For many women photographers, landscape is not so much an impersonal set of data and conditions to be recorded, as a context within which the photographer locates herself and of which she is an organic part. Natassa Markidou (b. Athens, 1965) considers her own presence within the landscape of defining importance, and she undermines the traditional fixed point of view by moving about and subsequently abutting or overlapping related images, as well as by adding brief, handwritten texts which provide additional or alternative interpretations of the scenes depicted. The process is one whereby, in her own words, “an inscribed, fragmentary narrative of impressions, colours, smells and sounds which complement the images, reminding the viewer once again of the significance of my presence in the space I

photograph and of photography's inability to describe emotional responses to the place photographed."¹⁷

Another Greek photographer who has experimented with composite and fragmented depictions of landscape is Eleni Maligoura (b. 1951), whose *Journal* (1990–91) consists of six large composite images of beach scenes, the longest measuring more than two and a half metres. According to the photographer, "Images are gathered during the course of a day and, after a selection process mediated by memory, are unified into a larger image which recapitulates sensation".¹⁸ Fragmented and repeated, these images are simultaneously a Proustian attempt at recreating the past and a literal representation of time passing. The waves breaking and receding, the footsteps in the sand, the ephemeral marks of wind and water, photographed sectionally but presented synthetically, underline the rarely noted fact that landscape is a dynamic rather than a static phenomenon.

This resolutely subjective experience of landscape is something one comes across time and again in the work of women, almost always closely associated with the processes of memory. Corinne Mercadier (French, b.1955), for instance, has produced a series of mysterious sepia-coloured Polaroids of an unidentified waterfront, prints which Yves Abrioux has called "the after-image of distant days". Whilst these images correspond to none of the conventional aesthetic depictions of landscape, and though the topographical information to be garnered from them is once again less than useless, they nevertheless carry powerful intimations of a subjective response to a particular location. For Abrioux, "These works are untitled, their location some unspecified backwater. They do not, however, show the 'margins of progress', but rather the fringes of an unidentified subject's biography. Mercadier's photographs are almost like memories of holiday snaps; they are the after-image of distant days, which emerge not so much as landmarks but as indistinct forms, or perhaps a particular quality of colour [...] It is as if, from the workings of a memory almost erased by the blank wash of water and sky, all that could be saved were a few such patches of visual intensity".¹⁹

Finally, and very briefly, I should like to touch upon another category of response to the landscape by women photographers which is perhaps less immediately obvious: that of the depiction of rural ceremonies, rites and folk customs. This particularly rich field has of course been mined by men as well as women, but it is one in which women have been particularly active; they include, to take only a few examples, Markéta Luskacová's *Pilgrims* series from Slovakia (1967–74), Marialba Russo's images of religious rituals in southern Italy, Christina Garcia Roderó's *España Oculta* (1989) and subsequent work, as well as the work of Marianna Yampolsky in Mexico during the sixties and seventies. One reason for the success of women in this particular genre may be due to the fact that they can have relatively greater access than men to a number of situations. In some cases, there may also be an emphasis on the sexual and quasi-hysterical aspects of folk customs in largely catholic societies; as an Italian critic has pointed out in connection with

Russo's work, "Some of her most successful photographs – such as those of men entangled in thorns, documents of mass self-flagellation, pictures of black-cloaked, thorn-crowned women – reflect on popular religious festivals as announcements of sexual repression. One of the most striking photographs taken during this period portrays a ritualistic enactment – by men – of the throes of labor, testifying to an ancient awe and fear of matriarchy".²⁰

Clearly, despite the absence of a strong tradition upon which to build, contemporary European women photographers are increasingly addressing issues of landscape, often finding new and original ways of approaching the subject. Some of these approaches have already been cogently summarised by Susan Butler in *Shifting Focus*; they include "the sense of a speculative, imaginative quality within critical observation, the evocation of subjective experience, the apprehension of connections between vision and the other senses and an embracing of viewpoints suppressed or insufficiently acknowledged in contemporary culture".²¹ It is through the application of these and similar strategies that women, and European women in particular, have begun a process which it would not be excessive to describe as a reclamation of landscape.

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¹ I am grateful to Susan Trangmar for suggesting the term 'conditional' in this context, and for discussing the implications with me. Trangmar's own photographic sequence *Untitled Landscapes* (1986) touches eloquently upon some of these themes.

² Michel & Michèle Auer, *Photographers Encyclopaedia International*, Editions Ides et Calendes, Neuchâtel 1997.

³ One source of geographical distortion is the huge preponderance in the database of French and Swiss photographers (respectively 21% and 7.6% of the total), not surprising in a Franco-Swiss co-production. Interestingly, while with the exception of a few peripheral regions for which no women photographers at all are listed (Bulgaria, Slovenia, Slovakia and Croatia), the proportion of men to women in most European countries is relatively stable at around 10:1, Sweden displays the greatest disparity, with only two women listed as against 58 men.

⁴ Liz Wells, *Viewfindings: Women Photographers, 'Landscape' and Environment*, Available Light, Tiverton 1994, p.5.

⁵ Lee D. Witkin & Barbara London, *The Photograph Collector's Guide*, New York Graphic Society, Boston 1980.

⁶ *Provas Originais, 1858-1910*, Arquivo Fotográfico, Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, Lisbon 1993.

⁷ *Valokuvan taide: Suomalainen valokuva 1842-1992* ["Finnish photography, 1842-1992"], Helsinki 1992, p. 465.

⁸ The work of Mary Paraskeva and of her close friend Argine Salvago (1883-1972) was first brought to light by Maria Karavia in her book *Odissos, i lismonimeni patrida* ["Odessa, the forgotten homeland"], Agra Editions, Athens 1998. See also John

Stathatos, 'Pioneers of national pride', *Times Literary Supplement*, London, 16 July 1999, pp. 18–19.

⁹ She was accompanied on this last occasion by the British explorer and journalist Peter Fleming, who wrote admiringly that "she had courage and enterprise and resource; in endurance she excelled most men... She could eat anything and sleep anywhere" (*News from Tartary*, Jonathan Cape, London 1936, p.26).

¹⁰ *Paysages, lieux et non-lieux: le paysage dans la photographie européenne contemporaine*, Café-Crème, Luxembourg 1995.

¹¹ See *European Photography* 60, Göttingen, Fall/Winter 1996.

¹² Brigitte Bauer, written communication to the author, 5.3.2000.

¹³ Brigitte Bauer, 'La montagne des tableaux des paysages', text to accompany the exhibition *Montagne de la Sainte-Victoire*, Galerie Polaris, Paris, May 1999.

¹⁴ Eve Kiiler, written communication to the author, 22.2.2000.

¹⁵ See John Stathatos (editor), *Myth and Landscape*, European Cultural Centre of Delphi, Athens, 1996.

¹⁶ My thanks to Caryn Faure Walker for sharing her research on contemporary Finnish photography.

¹⁷ Natassa Markidou, written communication to the author, 5.3.2000.

¹⁸ Eleni Maligoura, text published in *Photoarchive 1975–97: Contemporary Greek Photography*, vol. A, CD-ROM, Photography Centre of Athens, Athens 1997.

¹⁹ Yves Abrioux, 'The (mis)adventures of photographic memory', *Photography in the Visual Arts*, Art & Design Profile no. 44, London 1995.

²⁰ Antonella Russo, 'The invention of southernness', *Aperture 132: Immagini Italiane*, New York, summer 1993, p.62.

²¹ Susan Butler, *Shifting Focus*, Arnolfini & Serpentine Galleries, Bristol and London, 1989, p.42.