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EDITORIAL | BODIES AND TERRITORY: VISUAL FOOTPRINTS OF OUR INHABITED BUILT WORLD

Written by Iñaki Bergera

In recent times, the complexity –and rich potentialities– of our contemporary world is being fruitfully described and depicted by photographers and visual artists. The interest of urban landscape at large, understood as the natural scenario of our contemporaneity, expands its borders and boundaries towards a more intricate appraisal of the territory and our physical (body) and conceptual (inhabitant) relationship with it. As the following papers explore, it is not just a matter of arranging a visual report –from a documentary perspective– of the space we live in but, rather, interpret and suggest the threats and opportunities that our personal dialog with the territory implies. As every negotiation, this conversation implies mediation, a pulse between a desired natural balance and the dramatic and unconscious footprints of our human action. Our presence –passive or active, spiritual and fleshly– is no more innocuous. By being at and dwelling the territory, the place gains the constrictions of an often contradictory conciliation. It is there where a thrilling visual narrative emerges, where the accurate and sensible eye of the visual artist finds a highly potential field of exploration and complaint.

In this regard, the series of Gavin Brown –as McNamara examines– in the city of Houston focuses on the logic transition from a documentary depiction of the some iconic elements of the built environment as once pointed out by the photographers of the American new topography to a wider understanding of those messy scenarios and spots concerning their personal, social and economic imbrications. Playing with ambivalence notion of the vernacular, McNamara sees in Browns' work an attempt to extent the essence of a particular visual target (reality) to a generic or even alienating notion of the speculative ideas it conveys (mental catalog). To do so, Brown uses a particular photographic language: every image is a visual construct in which the techniques and compositional strategies determines the scope of its reading. e camera and the artist's eye become the filters under which to accomplish this disembodied and decontextualized reality interpretation.

Campbell Drake's text takes the subject matter to a higher level of challenge and interpretation. This mediation between body and territory is literally played by a performative action. Music becomes the healing instrument to photographically record the desired reconciliation of people and the transformed space. The ambitious experience –cleverly understood and framed as a research project– becomes a kind of paradigmatic pledge to reconcile communities and their own cultural and social idiosyncrasy with the environment with which they operate. The fact that the stage is physically located on a rubbish dump – therefore a damaged by the human action space– underlines the critical scope of this visual narrative. Extremes meet: human waste overlaps with one of the best possible emotional expressions of human culture and sensibility. The real difficulties to accomplish the project and the threats implicit on the recording processes strengthen the value of this 'tuning' accomplishment.

The last significant example of this revaluation and new operational attitude towards the territory is found on André Castanho's manuscript. His ambitious indexical survey of the disintegration of the Northern shore of Viana do Castelo in Portugal transcends its documentary condition in order to visually depict a wider phenomenon of transformation from degradation and abandonment to cultural resettlement. The strong symbolic elements of the landscape –bales of hay, windmills, shelters, etc.– interrelate with those explicitly attached to the abandonment and disuse – fisheries ropes, garbage deposits, etc.– and, together, refer to the human activity that once produced them. In the same way gentrification has controversially become a way to renovate urban neighborhoods, Correia's project explores new visual strategies to reconsider the opportunities behind every abandonment and deruralization processes. Detached from any nostalgic attitude abandonment becomes an opportunity. The transformation of a whole territory can be depicted with multiple fragmentary visions that read the territory as a geographical and social palimpsest.

These reports have ended up shaping this inspiring preliminary discourse under the umbrella of Sophia Journal. The topic deserves to leave this visual conversation open, pending of present or future explorations and interpretations under the uncertain and constant changes of the way we deal, as individuals, with the built world.