

THE MATERIAL NATURE OF THE LANDSCAPE

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Photography as a medium is intrinsically linked to science and knowledge. Yet it was not until a few decades ago that the photographic image, long subordinated to the academic disciplines, gradually achieved a degree of transversality and interlinkage. Freed from its subservient role as a mere tool, photography – in terms of both theory and practice – started to draw on the methods and knowledge to be found in those disciplines. Recent years have, to some extent, seen a reappraisal of the role played by the intrinsic referentiality of the photographic image and its descriptive “writing”. The work of some contemporary photographers cannot be understood without reference to this shift in the relationship between photography and knowledge, a shift often closely linked to the training of the artists themselves. Jorge Yeregui is a case in point. His photography is, in a sense, inseparable from his background in architecture and town planning. This approach provides an initial framework for the examination of Yeregui’s work; a second element is to be found in the conceptual outlook implicit – and at times clearly explicit – in his photography. Not that he is strictly an exponent of conceptual art; rather, he makes use of certain references and quotations, finding in the formulations, strategies and solutions of the conceptual art movement answers to some of his own questions and challenges. Over the last ten years – particularly in photography – there has been a growing interest in conceptual art as a way of enhancing the transformation of visual information into knowledge and analysis; this is especially true among artists of Yeregui’s generation. This outlook is marked by a number of distinctive features: a radical exploration of the issues involved in photography as an informative, documentary tool; the elaboration of readings and the construction of meaning; the deployment of sign systems such as maps and diagrams; the widespread use of series or serial repetitions, of taxonomies, classifications and various methods of accumulation; and finally, the references (sometimes little more than a nod) to scientific or technical documents and to different academic disciplines. Yet this range of fairly direct “conceptual” references is accompanied by another uniquely significant element: the return of the figurative dimension of the image. This prompts an interplay of aesthetic choices far removed from the func-

tional, anti-aesthetic approach to photography largely typical of the conceptual art movement. Indeed, we often encounter a conscious, well-structured tension between the functionality of photography as a source of information or a transparent record, and the development and presentation of photography as an “aesthetic” medium. A tension, in other words, between what Ed Ruscha termed the banality or vulgarity of the informative image, and its development as an “aesthetic” choice. It is a tension that underlies much of Jorge Yeregui’s work. His photography is also remarkable for its ability – largely a reflection of his transversal training – to build tensions, to construct linkages and leakages between photographic genres and applications, and especially between landscape photography and architectural photography, two clearly-defined domains which often engage closely with each other in his work. Other tensions are discernible at conceptual or observational level, informing his practical approach to landscape photography. “Landscape” is a very broad concept, with a multitude of often very different interpretations, which can essentially be reduced to opposing terms: aesthetic versus socio-economic; a cultural or mental construct versus a visible objective reality with a social and economic meaning. This opposition, rather than linking or integrating the notions of land and landscape, tends to set them against each other. In recent years, attempts have been made to forge new links and bonds between these two concepts, through the use of ideas and terms such as place, space, and site. A number of photographers have been involved in these attempts, among them Jorge Yeregui.

Thus, the confluence of photography with disciplines such as anthropology, geography, history, town planning and architecture has gradually given rise to a way of looking and interpreting which broadens the scope for a dialectic between image or representation and socio-economic reality, between actual facts and artistic approximations. The application of this dialectical confluence in the treatment of landscape is by no means a new feature in recent photography; it was the cornerstone of the approach adopted by the *New Topographics* movement. But Yeregui’s work is not simply a literal return to that position; rather, it marks his *recognition* of the precursors who to some extent examined similar issues in the past. The approach to the landscape as an occupied, altered territory, freighted with social and economic meaning – as explored by several generations of photographers from the late ‘60s onwards – has given way amongst younger photographers to a more complex exploration which draws on a range of legacies and references, including conceptual art, the *New Topographics* and some of the strategies and procedures espoused by Land Art. The aim is no longer to record and illustrate the actual state of the landscape and its transformations, nor to chart the effects of new forces on

the land, nor to highlight the productive encounter between art and nature through varying degrees of intervention. Instead, today's practitioners seek to reveal non-visible structures and forces, and identify their agents: the political substrate; the effects of the market and of planning policy; new cultural patterns and changes in social behaviour; the role of the real-estate developer and the planner; the "ideology" of the landscape. Gone are the stable dichotomies of an earlier age, which stressed differences but at the same time provided a clear view of interferences, linkages and spread: country vs. city, centre vs. periphery, nature vs. city, nature vs. landscape, or nature vs. artifice; place and non-place, landscape and ecology, to give just a few examples. These dichotomies have been superseded by new concepts, new approaches. This has prompted a need for new tools for their analysis and interpretation, and for the identification of new or future challenges. Jorge Yeregui's work reflects these inescapable demands, and often contains references that seek to respond to this need, whether he is exploring new ideas and concepts, developing new approaches and interpretations of old questions, in the hope of finding new answers, or attempting to discern new trends and situations. In his various series – in their titles, their author's notes and reflections – his outlook and his contributions to the new debate are evident: eco-topographies, minimal landscapes, vertical garden, third landscape, sitescape, pre-ruins, greenwashing, protected natural space, regulation, value, ideal. His work clearly seeks to shed a modern light on old issues and dichotomies, and at the same time to develop new approaches from a largely prospective standpoint. The methods used have also become more complex. In addition to scientific and instrumental documentation and information, they now include *in situ* investigation, surveys, historical research, charting and mapping, classification and typology, serial repetitions, semiological readings. The primary purpose of most of these ancillary tools and procedures is to focus more clearly and more closely on context and setting, perfectly defining the specific features of the situations investigated and recorded. The resulting picture is no longer interchangeable with any other, as tended to happen in the past, and as still happens all too often in landscape and architectural photography. Abstraction and generalisation – as it were, a kind of newly-wrought sublimation of the landscape – have ceased to be either operational or effective. Nor is there room, now, for the new *formalisms* of architectural photography. The aim is to highlight and identify actual facts and concrete realities, to explore local conditions, study the site, search out the marks and traces of non-visible models and structures. Only from that starting-point can photography hope to penetrate beneath the surface, avoid poetic excesses and – above all – locate the points where land meets landscape, where real conditions, i.e. material and planning, meet the artistic concept or construct.

Looking back over Jorge Yeregui's career, which began in 2005 with his first series entitled *The Value of Soil*, one can readily identify certain key areas of interest on which subsequent series have focussed. Generally, his work takes the form of closed projects which may take several years to produce, for example *Minimal Landscapes* and *Sitescapes*. The time factor is worth highlighting, since to some extent it reveals the whole process of research, documentation, production and aesthetic choice underlying each of his series, the development and execution of aesthetic solutions meeting the specific requirements of each project. Although the end product matches the format of the series as a whole, a variety of techniques may be used, including variation, repetition, typology and inventory. Formats may also vary between projects: large-format photographs, small-format works, single panels containing several images. Presentation ranges from reticulation through serial linearity to the individuality of the large-format pieces. Several major areas of interest are apparent in the course of Yeregui's career. His first series, *The Value of Soil*, offers an extensive analysis of town-planning and property-development issues, to which he returns in his later series *Small Investments* and *The Suburban Ideal*. A key feature common to these three projects is their conceptual grounding in a shift from the individual to the social: from the house to the estate, from real-estate capital to consumer commodity, from singularity to repetition. These are the series which perhaps owe most to conceptual art, with their deliberate and clearly-visible references to the work of Dan Graham and Ed Ruscha. The use of architectural taxonomy, scattered references to printed materials such as magazines and property advertisements, and the echo of real-estate photography, largely define both the content and the structure of these series. Another interesting feature is Yeregui's way of making visible the dynamics of the property market and the involvement of the various agents: the developer, the buyer, but also the small and large investor, as well as the planner. The titles give a clear indication of the broad outlines of these projects, as well as suggesting complementary approaches to their analysis: land, value, the town-planners' ideal, individual aspirations, differences in taste across the social spectrum, and collective references of a sociocultural nature, all these elements are brought into play in property operations and town-planning issues.

A second area of interest is the construction of a "geographical reading" of the land, to be found in the projects *Cotacero* and *On the Road*. Both rely on physical movement, on travelling, and also on the perception of the landscape as the product of a whole series of actions, initiatives, plans and regulations – or indeed of a lack of planning and regulation. The landscape, in short, is seen as the outcome

of transformative processes of various kinds. Both projects are framed as overland “expeditions”, aimed at drawing up a particular kind of inventory. *Cotacero* offers a photographic record of the various development schemes implemented over the years in the Cadiz Bay interurban space, while *On the Road* focuses on the unfinished buildings visible beside certain stretches of main roads. Each series conveys a marked sense of topography and place; the photographs not only define very clearly the site and position from which they were taken, but also succeed in constructing and transmitting an experience of the land itself. The flatness stressed in *Cotacero* captures and illustrates the physiognomy of the terrain, its conditionality. In *On the Road*, prominence is given to the roadside, which becomes an implicit element in a reflection on the way the road itself “shapes” the landscape. Common to both projects is the inclusion of objective, documentary information in the captions, providing dates and topographical details which enhance the appearance of the photographs as an inventory of the trails and traces of a specific, clearly-defined area of land. The projects also share a feature which is likely to become a hallmark of Jorge Yeregui’s career: the perfectly-balanced counterpoint or fusion of architectural and landscape photography. The half-finished buildings of *On the Road* are *pre-ruins*, the term itself being a felicitous modern slant on Robert Smithson’s “ruins in reverse”. They are recorded as buildings, but also as elements that define and shape the landscape; similarly, the ruins occasionally appearing in *Cotacero* become landmarks signalling the evolving nature of the land.

This symbiosis between architecture and landscape, or between architecture and nature, is examined and illustrated in greater detail in three later series: *Sitescapes*, *Minimal Landscapes* and *Ecotopographies*, which look at the ways these two elements clash, fuse and shape each other in different situations. All three projects are carefully site-specific, and focus on the conditions in which architecture and nature intersect. Together, the projects cover a wide range of issues: the relationship between the planned and the random, between controlled or constructed nature and nature in the wild; the architecture of the landscape and the landscape in architecture; the tension between nature and artifice, between nature and technology, between ecological values and landscape values; and finally, “green worship” and the ecology drive. Refusing to take up any easy stance, Jorge Yeregui remains firmly at the heart of the debate, highlighting the tensions but deliberately refusing to speak out in favour of more or less prevailing political or cultural trends.

Sitescapes addresses the loss of centrality of a space perfectly defined and structured as the centre by city planners. The most interesting feature of this project – apart

from Yeregui's treatment of issues concerning the alteration or inversion of the relationship between centre and periphery and the failure of city planning – is that he highlights the dialectic generated by the transition from what might be seen as an overdesigned reality to a reality marked by the uncontrolled growth of nature. What we are witnessing, therefore, is the very process by which a ruin comes into being, rather than the message of the ruin itself, which tends to be the focus of most work in this field.

Minimal Landscapes and *Eco-topographies* provide a definitive expression of the confluence of two clearly-defined genres; architectural photography and landscape photography. In strictly photographic terms this is in fact the theme of the two series, even though the content underlines the dichotomy between nature and technology, nature and artifice, landscape and architecture. The question, put simply, is how to photograph a landscape within an architectural context. Two of the options essayed by Jorge Yeregui are of particular interest. One approach involves a detailed search for intersecting points, points where the dialogue between two constructive systems is captured and expressed; this is not just an evident formal dialogue, but also a more complex engagement that highlights the implantation of these systems in a given *site*, at the same time subtly revealing the elements that serve to support, maintain and showcase these *fragments* of nature. As part of the other approach, Yeregui penetrates – becomes immersed in – the natural setting itself, in order to bring out its own internal structure and its wholly artificial character, although still treating it very clearly as landscape.

Another stage in his career is summed up by the various pieces that together make up the generically-titled *PNS (Protected Natural Space)*. The serial nature of these pieces is essential, in that it allows Yeregui – either through repetition or using grids that enable a spatial restructuring of the site photographed – to provide a reading of codes and signs that reveal the state of the land and the value assigned to it. A set of signs on the road, a network of walkways crossing a natural space, suffice to highlight the specific nature of the place, its attributes and meanings. The title makes clear what kind of space we are dealing with. What is interesting is the way Yeregui reads that space, reads the signs pointing to the construction of a landscape in the midst of nature, to discover a process of “artealisation”, to use the fascinating and graphic term coined by Alain Roger. These Protected Natural Spaces are thus seen as “artealised nature”, a landscape signalled by codes, signs and marks. The value automatically accorded nowadays to every protected natural space requires that its potential status and use as landscape be clearly in-

licated. In these series, the idea of a journey, a trip, a route, is an essential aspect of research and recognition.

To end this review of Jorge Yeregui's work, mention should be made of a recent project created in Italy, entitled *City, Country, State*. This is an extensive series of pictures that chart, visualise and analyse the perimeter of the Vatican City State. Here again, the route – in this case a route marked out beforehand by the walls that surround the *country* – is essential to the conception and execution of the project. The photographs show fragments of the wall, taken over its whole length, ignoring the city that surrounds the country. The project, full of interesting assertions and paradoxes, explores the scale, the state and the meaning of the walls. One paradox is that this is a country surrounded by a city; like any other country, it has a border, but here it is a physical, material, visible frontier, an architectural construction of a political and defensive nature, that disrupts the whole layout of the city. Architecture treated simultaneously as a political landscape and an urban landscape. This twofold status is a superb example of an oeuvre whose most distinctive feature is the dialogue between two highly-structured and codified photographic genres, architecture and landscape, approached from an unbiased standpoint through which Yeregui seeks to examine the material nature of the landscape and its status as an occupied, inhabited territory.