

*The Shutter and the Circle:
the photographs of Erieta Attali*

Ralph Waldo Emerson begins his essay, "Circles", "The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end." If the invention of photography were explained as mechanical simulacra of the human eye with its gaze fixed on the arc of what Emerson named "the second circle" then we can say that Erieta Attali's photographs of landscape and architecture respond to this Emersonian ideal. Emerson then writes, "There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile". Using this axiom Attali discovers her own horizon where an individual and solitary architecture is embedded. Her photographs record a unique exposure of a subject that is always changing. The silent stillness of her images is the illusion of timelessness. This primal illusion is her quest and also allows us to perceive architecture as unfixed – a temporary occupant of nature.

In 1858 Nadar using a hot air balloon made the first aerial photographs his subject was Paris. These photographs revealed an unknown Paris to the world. Modern in the sense of Eiffel's ingenious structures, Nadar's aerial images reveal an urban landscape previously hidden. 19C photographic explorations of architecture, landscape and the human figure constituted the inevitable and common subject. This common subject is transformed once more in 1906 when the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris commissioned Eugène Atget to photograph old buildings in Paris. He reveals a Paris that was hidden in plain sight. An intimate view that is both permanent and ephemeral.

Architects require a controlled and idealized representation of their work. Even the author of "Crime and Ornament", Adolf Loos, while choosing the medium of photography "touched up" every image to hide or reveal details of the built work that conform more faithfully to his original idea than the original photograph. A photographer who refuses to make images for mass consumption aggravates this dependency of architecture and is aggravated especially by the photographer who believes in the documentary truth of the image as composed within the camera. Erieta Attali belongs to the tribe who refuse the digitally corrected view. She is not interested in making iconic images of architecture. What does her work reveal about architecture or nature?

To my eyes, Attali's work can be seen as Romantic Realist in the tradition of Flaubert. The photographs of Chile tell us that while Architecture is ephemeral it is also capable of a momentary gesture towards the sublime. Not in the sense of the picturesque but a more scientific sublime is felt. The shadows and reflections characteristic of her mostly black and white photographs are the elements that frame a composition indexical of the sublime. This is not an endgame; it is a reminder of our own human limitations. The absence of the human figure in the image allows us to inhabit a landscape that is extreme and hard to access. Precisely, it is this difficulty wherein lies the key to decipher the enigmatic relation between man and cosmos without words or prayer.

The fixed image of the photograph is a function of the optical mechanics of a particular instrument. If it were possible, a true representation of reality would be frightening.