

Botanizing Architecture

Erieta Attali who started her career as an archeological and landscape photographer before venturing into architecture, has in the last 18 years compiled an expansive body of work that spans three continents: Europe, Asia and the Americas. Rather than providing a descriptive representation of specific buildings and landscapes, Attali in this book chooses to focus on relations between architecture and landscape. Buildings for Attali rarely seem to function as “machines of habitation.” They are rather treated as “found objects” that have surrendered to nature, leading the photographer’s gaze to explore and rethink the world. At times, it even seems that her chronic preoccupation with architecture has established such deep structures in her photographic approach that even bare landscapes are being photographed as if they were buildings themselves. In this book architecture and landscape are not intellectualized constructions, but deeply sited materialities; earthly substances that are experienced with a fullness of sensorial presence.

By having chosen to trot the globe rather than to ground herself in a specific place, Erieta Attali has inevitably compiled a body of work that, like herself, recognizes no boundaries. This is the first presentation of her work that boldly acknowledges the insignificance of bounded spatialities. This book celebrates the importance of place, by suggesting spatial affiliations that lie beyond physical proximity or socio-cultural stipulations. Unlike previous presentations of her work that were attached to specific national confinements (Greek, Japanese, Chilean), this book sets free landscapes and architectures to establish new affinities: the Japanese with the Uruguayan (pp. 32-33), the Swiss with the Chilean (106-7), the Greek with the West of America (26-27). The pictures of Solano Benitez father’s memorial in Paraguay (110-111) evoke the sound of water streams, and the same mystical quality of nature as an ancient Japanese cemetery in Kamakura (54+55 spread). The dense vegetation of the tropics poses the same threat to overturn the tight geometry of modernist structures, to botanize architecture, to eliminate any national or regional specification for the sake of a deeper quality of the earth that spans continents. Obviously, nation-bound characterizations mean very little within the new spectrum of relationships that emerge through Attali’s pictures, as if signaling a post-national imagining of the world. Language is insufficient here to describe this type of geographical reordering, as if a by-product of an old world order. Whether architects whose photographs are featured in this book would accept to rid of their national or regional attachments for such broader affinities is a moot point. The photographer has the license to reorder the world and to show relations that architects or inhabitants may be oblivious of, or even, in some cases, opposed to. This does not come as a surprise given her personal trajectory that spans the Mediterranean (Algeria, Israel, Turkey, Greece), and her personal choice to deny the notion of home for what is yet unfamiliar.

Traveling through the pages of this book reminds me of a recent visit to the conservatory of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, in which botanical classifications are based

on climatic zones: the temperate, the tropical, the desert. Climatic zones span the continents suggesting a new way of classifying places in the world through analogies of their climate and flora. Here, Sahara, Andalusia and the American West, despite their physical distances, are proven to be alike. Similarly, the jungles of South America form a conglomeration with those of Asia or Polynesia. It is the tropics and the desert that seem to interest Attali the most, what she calls the “remote landscapes:” In this book, Attali even treats these two types of landscapes as if they belong to the same category: landscapes with not only formal analogies, but terrains in which habitation, as every other human act, including her own act of photography, is being challenged. Here architecture, despite its geometry and rationality, seems nothing more than a product of re-ordered materiality, less powerful than the simple mound that one discovers while walking in the woods, that Adolph Loos saw as the predecessor of architecture. These deserted landscapes point more towards the unbuilt, the uninhabited; in them architecture seems almost an incidental, discontinuous gesture.

But it is not the search for the exotic, the challenge of breaking the frontier, or the imperial gaze of the colonizer that draw Attali in these locations. The tropics for instance are reminiscent of her childhood in the Princes Islands in the Bosphorus of Istanbul. The desert is familiar from her exposure to Mediterranean landscapes in the summer, when, as the geographer Fernand Braudel has taught us, coastal sites in the basin are being invaded by Saharan winds. Attali’s photographs not only defy traditional geographical categorizations but also evoke a post-archeological view of the world that obscures the temporal specification. Her pictures are almost undated; they focus neither on the present nor in the past. Unlike the work of many of her contemporary traveler-photographers, they are no prophecies for the future.

As you look at Attali’s pictures, you travel through a reordered planetary topography that awakens the senses into their highest capacity. Here the photographic lens augments the eye by offering overexposures and panoramic views that the naked eye could not grasp. With it, you dare to look straight to the sun, when otherwise the eyes would hurt. A new sense of coloration and materiality is evoked therefore. The white buildings of the Aegean islands will appear to be black, as in the picture of Galfeti’s house in the Aegean (p. 13) coming into contrast with the whiteness of the horizontal concrete plate that mirrors the reflectiveness of the sea. The plate of crushed marble breaks the slickness of the sea, bringing memories of the Atacama desert (p. 77), and echoing the texture of the surrounding hills that we have seen in pictures of Deca’s architecture on the nearby island of Antiparos (p. 45). But, besides what may often seem as an optical illusion, a product of her mastery of the photographic lens, the breathtaking quality of Attali’s visual manifestations evokes a strong sense of tactility, accentuating the textures and the materiality of the world: from masses of extreme softness (vapor, water, or even stone illuminated by the sun) to a roughness that poses a threat to the body.

What kind of spectatorship does this work bring to the fore? What does it tell us for our current age? Attali’s work seems to be apathetic to the virtual aspects of the world that governs our daily reality. Her photographs are not seduced by google earth views of the world. Her work makes no commentary to the commodification of visual representations that surround us, as if they never existed. The digital does not seem to concern her.

Her work is deeply embedded in the sensuality of the body: it involves long walks, early wake ups, carrying of heavy equipment. Her craft relies on the tangible world with an uncompromising persistence: 4X5 inches view camera, black & white and color film, silver prints. Still the process that makes all this travel possible depends heavily on cyber-information. Attali spends no day without her laptop, her dates of travel are determined by persistent attention to satellite weather forecasts; her photographs are becoming possible by painstaking networking with architects, clients and various impresarios. She travels trans-continently several times a month, and has no home. She draws the most out of the virtual in order to reach the apogee of experience in the physical world; reminding us that the earth is still there.