

*Q and A with Martyn Hook and Erieta Attali*

Martyn Hook: Our understanding of architectural history is often dictated by the view from Europe and the east coast of the United States, but you seem to be drawn away from this perspective. Your photographs are of places that do not normally register in the architectural press, such as Chile, Australia, and Norway; what has drawn you to these places that others regard as the “end of the Earth”?

Erieta Attali: Faraway landscapes—regions that demand true effort and dedication to approach—have monopolized my imagination since I was a child. Before engaging with photography, my fantasies were mainly nourished through science fiction, both in film and in pulp magazines. Later, as a young photography student, I rediscovered these outlandish visions while exploring barren landscapes in the mountainous south of Greece and the desert landscapes of central Anatolia—an itinerary that would eventually lead me to a long-lasting involvement with archaeology. The documentation of excavation sites and underground tombs in the remotest of territories, bereft of human presence, would solidify my attraction to this abstract image of the “end of Earth” and the human structures, or traces thereof, which persist there. What you call the “end of Earth” I have come to name “the edges of the world” or the “periphery,” and it is a realm that almost by definition pulls me away from an often Eurocentric or Occidental view of architecture and architectural photography.

MH: And as a photographer, what do you “see” in these places that simply do not exist elsewhere? What are the qualities of these environments that you seek to capture?

EA: The way I “see” things was largely shaped by my upbringing, and itinerant way of life. Constant traveling and the absence of a permanent residence are reflected in my main photographic pursuit: capturing landscapes at the edges of the world. I am very attracted to the expression “edges of the world,” which dates back to the time when the Ancient Greeks believed the known world to be surrounded by the world river, Oceanus: where the human realm transitioned into uncertainty, a place for monsters and deities. There was the expectation that toward the edge, reality becomes less tangible, less certain. Nowadays, having stripped the “edge” from its mythological associations, we define it as “the line or part where an object or area begins or ends,” thereby still signifying a passage into a different set of circumstances, a new environment. That transitional environment is what I refer to as the periphery. The periphery is a realm defined by edges: a subjective condition, shifting according to one’s frame of reference. My very own, constant, frame of reference has always been the Mediterranean. Always held back by an “earth enclosed sea,” I was at the same time centrifugally pulled towards the periphery, the outer limits of my mental map, where human presence gives way to outlandish landscapes, over and

beyond the expanse of water. What draws me there, in the end, is the pervasive sense of continuous change, not only through the harsh natural processes that shape those landscapes, but also through my own movement within them, beyond the end of human geographies.

MH: The sheer remoteness of these locations suggests that each image conceals a journey to find it. Could you describe the physical process of making a photograph under these conditions?

EA: Unfamiliar landscapes often imply unexpected and violently changing weather conditions, which can be particularly challenging from a technical perspective. One cannot trust light readings since sunlight behaves differently in extreme latitudes, a difficulty which is aggravated by the unforgiving format and the use of film in punishing temperatures. Rain, strong winds, and desert dust offer the worst possible conditions for the operation of such sensitive equipment, even more so since I use a large format camera with a panoramic film holder: a heavy, bulky instrument that I have to carry by myself across the world. It is difficult to overstate the regularly overlooked tactile aspect of landscape photography. The struggle of trekking on foot for miles while carrying a chest of equipment, patiently waiting for a change of light, a gust of wind or the descent of fog, is a fundamentally different experience to that of mingling with the crowd in constant vigilance for a decisive moment. The whole effort turns into a personal challenge that motivates me to keep pushing forward; it is a fight against one's personal limits. I have been a long-distance runner since a very young age. When running, you have to physically engage with the landscape; you are neither a spectator, nor an intellectual commentator. This is not necessarily a comfortable process, but it offers a particular perspective, which I carry over into both my profession as a photographer and my academic research. For me, photography is an embodied act, inseparable from the rugged reality of its creation.

MH: The realm of architectural photography often reduces the architecture to an object devoid of context. Your photography treats the built form as part of the landscape, perhaps an artifact within the context. Could you elaborate on your position in this regard?

Furthermore when you photograph the interior of the building we rarely see complete rooms or spaces. Again, the landscape appears to dominate. Are you resisting capturing the architecture in its totality?

EA: From my very first attempts as an architecture photographer, I realized that the relation of the building to its context guides the photographic process. There are two key processes at work when I photograph architecture as a component of its surrounding landscape: one directed inwards and one directed outwards, and they take place simultaneously. During the first process, the landscape is interpreted through the building, which acts like a lens, reflecting and refracting, uniting and separating. At the same time—during the second process—the building is interpreted as part of the landscape and is given meaning via its context. In both cases, I am trying to communicate a continuous experience as opposed to a static visual statement. Transparent materials play a crucial role in this spatial negotiation. A major breakthrough in this respect happened when I visited Water/Glass House designed by Kengo Kuma in Atami, Japan, in 2001.

For the first time I felt that a work of architecture was not imposing framed views of the landscape, but quite the opposite: there was an overlap and a continuation between the building and the surroundings. If we use Kuma's terminology, we could say that the building stopped behaving as an isolated, autonomous "object."

Human-made structures are universally considered to be the subject, or content of architectural photography, while the landscape is usually treated as mere context or background. Content and context however, are equally important and oftentimes even interchangeable. Through my practice, I have tried to stay away from the content-context dichotomy and instead create idiosyncratic images that capture an identity of place: its particular atmospheric quality, lighting conditions, materiality, and mood.

MH: Lets talk a little more about material. For me the images you capture are less about "material" in an architectural sense and more about "matter." Do you consider this a pursuit of representation or do you think light is your "material"?

EA: I think the difference between matter and material is an interesting one. The word material evokes an idea of surface finish, especially when used in the sense of architecture material: something artificial that you pick off a catalogue and apply to a certain geometry. Matter, on the other hand, evokes depth and a raw, tactile dimension. Matter exists both in natural and human-made contexts, it is the physical component of the world and as such is susceptible to environmental and temporal forces as it transforms and decays. By treating architecture as raw matter embedded in a landscape, I want to soften the separation between artifact and context; reinforced concrete is mineral matter susceptible to weathering, not unlike the rocks surrounding it. Then of course, when attempting to frame both architectural and natural matter in a narrative that merges the two, light is of utmost importance since it can accentuate or erase differences between similar matter/materials. Yet, more importantly, light is highly location specific and defines certain geographical regions.

Australian climatic conditions, for example, present continuous change within the same day, which in turn leads to accentuated contrasts. This atmospheric volatility, in combination with the abundance of harsh light and the vast openness of the landscape lies in contrast with the case of central and southern Chile. Chilean mornings are dominated by a diffused foggy light, which begins to open up in the early afternoon. There is a sense of softness in the transition between climatic modes throughout the day and a prevailing atmospheric perspective that, while offering a sense of depth, at the same time produces a fuzzy horizon. A thin layer of grayness drapes everything under a porous texture, accentuated by the fine rain droplets covering plants and earth formations alike. Likewise, during the winter months in Norway, sky and landscape work in tandem as one entity; particularly during heavy snowfalls, they act as a homogeneous whole. In Brazil, on the other hand, heavy precipitation saturates the air while leaden clouds seem anchored to the surface of the earth. Therefore, light and matter are intermeshed in interplay, which is precisely what I seek to capture and communicate.

MH: From your perspective, how do these buildings engage with the culture of each place? Does the narrative you describe extend into a "macro discussion" that situates the architecture in a culture as well as a physical context?

EA: The degree to which a building engages with the culture or the landscape of a place is primarily controlled by the design intent, i.e., the architectural concept and the success of its implementation. Photography reveals relations, but it does not build them in the first place. Like we discussed before, however, even in the extreme case where a structure is consciously designed to differentiate and separate itself from any sort of environment, cultural or natural, it is still inevitably situated into a context and perceived as part of it. That being said, through my photography, I cannot and do not aspire to disentangle the physical from the cultural context. The years I spent photographing excavation sites were formative both in the way I perceive and in the way I photograph artifacts in a landscape. At an excavation you encounter the entanglement of culture and place, in a very literal sense: the two effectively become one as succeeding layers of former landscapes sediment on top of each other and engulf walls, pillars, and courtyards. The process of retrieving and reconstructing culture, archaeological research, demands an engagement with the landscape, a conscious and studied peeling back of these geological layers. Photography has to reveal this relation through its main two components: the physical or spatial, and the temporal or procedural.

Even without considering archaeology, however, I believe it is not possible to separate culture—which is a deeply localized phenomenon—from landscape. The inverse is also true, or as historian Simon Schama has said, “Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock.” Therefore, I would say that the narrative definitely extends into what you call a “macro discussion” situating architecture into a cultural context because, frankly, it is impossible not to extend it. The micro discussion of place and macro discussion of culture is to me one and the same thing.

MH: Collectively, the photographs you assemble of a building or a landscape form a kind of non-linear sequence: they are both documentation and a narrative. Are you interested in providing a cinematic experience through still images or are you looking to reveal a different quality of character?

EA: The intention of the sequence is to read a series of photographs as a whole and to communicate the sense of approaching a work of architecture from multiple standpoints as it unfolds into the landscape. Of course, the static image cannot—and should not—compete with filmography in communicating a smooth and continuous movement through space. It can, however, be employed as a tool for storytelling, where fragmented moments aggregate and reveal unseen relations. In that respect, the static, two-dimensional condition of photography enhances the narrative element.

For example, when I set out in 2001 to photograph *Water/Glass* in Atami—a glass pavilion-guesthouse—it was not in my initial plan to spend several days there, but the chameleonic nature of the setting demanded a broader approach. Overlapping layers of glass reverberated through kaleidoscopic spaces during the day, blurring the spatial distinction between rooms, corridors, and the outside. The water sheet serving as the floor of the pavilion merged with the wrinkled surface of the sea under the light breeze. Had I attempted to reduce the character of that place into a typically photogenic still under afternoon sunlight, set upon a deep blue sky—a lot of the transitory qualities that define it would have been lost.

This thought process eventually led me to reexamine the work of photographers who tried to express themselves through temporal series that unfold as narratives. In retrospect, Atami was one in a series of experiences that made me come up against my responsibility as a photographer of space, eventually rejecting the reductionist approach that tries to distil a couple of static images out of something so pliable and fleeting. Any claim of objective truth in photography is a dubious one. An honest attempt to communicate a temporal and subjective experience, on the other hand, feels like a far more appropriate way to connect with architecture.

MH: Your work is dominated by projects located in rich landscapes, but when confronted by an urban condition, how does your recognition of space shift and what emerges from the landscape of the city that draws your attention?

EA: I have been gradually attracted to urban landscapes during the last few years, perhaps eager to test the visual vocabulary of the “periphery” on the dense, animated landscape provided by metropolises. That being said, I never completely separated myself, or my work, from urban landscapes. The quest to document the tenacity of human existence through its built output has already led me twice to forays deep into the urban landscapes: nightscapes and glass buildings in New York and Tokyo. When the artifact, i.e., architecture, becomes the environment itself by populating all available space, then the processes that drive the diurnal social and material life of the city become its urban atmospheric elements. The city is a mineral/electric landscape, with its own seasons and social ecosystems: dominated by a dynamic sense of horizontality, impressed by continuous traffic, flashes of electrical signs along corridors and masses of people moving on sidewalks and in front of shop windows. Processes of change are at work in a timescale that vastly outpaces the geological. Historical centers coincide with visions of utopian modernism, radiating life towards the urban periphery, where a condition of continuous expansion blurs any notion of a “limit” of the city. From cobbled streets to the concrete highways, urban landscapes unfold, enmeshing past, present, and future. Having already lived in large-scale cities, from Istanbul and London to New York and Tokyo, I am interested in the idea of projecting a global image of a totally urbanized world on dense, metropolitan centers and treating them as yet another frontier.