

NC-NCa: Photographing the Formless

“It is not in the realm of public property, with its excessive demands, that the Generic City finds cohesion, but rather in that of the residual.”

Rem Koolhaas

Emmanuel Pinard’s photographs of the contemporary city’s landscape are an effort to make certain of its principle characteristics readable. To take a photograph, to frame an image, is to give form. However the city in which Emmanuel Pinard has taken up artistic as well as private residence – the urban organism outside the gates – while quantitatively superior to the city proper, (invariably defined by its center alone), is supposedly without form. So the photographer is faced with what would at first seem to be an impossible task: to give form to the formless, to photograph the loosely defined spaces of an apparently endless and orderless urban periphery absent any identifiable determinism. Emmanuel Pinard’s approach to this nebulous reality is even more extreme given the fact that he focuses on abandoned and empty spaces which by their very nature lie outside the realm of the easily representable. Yet these are the disordered interstices, the rare bits of pliancy in the planned city that he brings to life with his eye.

Photography as Inhabiting

For it is indeed a matter of *inhabiting* these places from which he refuses to maintain the sort of distance that ends in the esthete’s anecdotal and picturesque view of a chosen object. The anecdotal and picturesque are glaringly absent from Emmanuel Pinard’s gaze as he seeks above all to render the essential structure of the landscapes he photographs rather than capture a particular moment in their existence. In order to approach the essence of his subject and, at the same time, side-step immediate fascination with its strangeness, he simply inhabits the landscapes that he records. He inhabits them to the extent that inhabit – *habiter* – means to make a habit of. And making a habit of a place implies that one frequent it, as does Emmanuel Pinard, with a certain assiduity. If taking a photograph is setting up one’s camera and pressing a button, he takes very few of them. But if one considers that a key aspect of his method consists of enlarging the photographic field to include scouting by map, by foot and, in a general way, a kind of urban drifting – essentially by car in his case – then he could be said to photograph a great deal. Before activating his shutter, he visits the area a number of times and in different periods and ends up spending several days there. He strolls at length through the spaces that he visits, always alone and withdrawn, as if his intention were to place himself in the same position as these fragments of forgotten lands.

At the end of this process, when he thinks that he has reached the essential in a landscape, he takes one photo and one photo only, thereby echoing the spirit of certain masters of Japanese **drawings** who began rendering a long-contemplated landscape only upon their return to the studio. But the inhabitation of these – of his – landscapes doesn’t stop there: once the photo has been executed, he regularly returns to the site in order to continue watching it evolve. In a way, this ever expanding photographic process never ends. The result is very rarely more than one image and, when it is, the relation between the two versions is of no particular importance. The point is less one of

entering into the observation of these landscapes than it is to effectively reveal a meaning and a character that are inaccessible at first sight. It's at the price of this slow, painstaking method that Emmanuel Pinard manages to represent what otherwise defies the eye.

Landscape-images

While the act of inhabiting always takes place in a specific locality, the objective of Emmanuel Pinard's images is to document the basic character of the district as a whole as opposed to that of a given site. His photos always reach beyond the frame of the place they've recorded. His refusal of the simple anecdote is such that he's never really interested in one place more than another as much as he is in the model of the city that crystallizes little by little before his eye. Little does it matter, after all, where and when a given image was recorded. As he puts it himself: "not one of these forgotten zones is more interesting than another." Even though each image can stand on its own artistically, what matters is how it fits into the whole process.

And the feeling one gets before these images is precisely that of strolling through a town that doesn't really exist but whose model – the assemblage of assorted "nowheres" – is present everywhere. The reason for this feeling is clearly linked to the method that produced the images. What is represented in them, beyond the landscape, is the engagement of the photographer's person itself which then engages the spectator's. All of Emmanuel Pinard's photos are taken with the same, strictly defined technique. The camera is always set at eye level, the lens always 50 millimeters. Aside from the fact that this lens' vision is close to that of the eye, its systematic use means that its distance from the subject must be set by moving the camera and the photographer as opposed to a simple change of lens in order to find the point where the landscape reveals itself and can be recorded. This purposely laborious installation produces one very important consequence. As Emmanuel Pinard puts it: "The spectator then takes the place of the camera; the construction of the image will make him part of the landscape as well." This brings us to a fundamental dimension of this work: the images are more than simple representations of a landscape seen through an optical apparatus; they seek, by the disposition of the person of the photographer on the site and that of the spectator before the print, to become the landscape itself. The refusal of any anecdote in these image-landscapes, along with the intensified vision of the recorded object that results, provoke a veritable "hallucination of the normal" in the spectator.

A Surreal Landscape

What is being rendered visible here is not a particular passing moment that might have been accidentally captured on film but rather, on the contrary, the most basic dimension of these landscapes possible.

And the fact of photographing a stable, essentially unchanging situation doesn't imply that these images were recorded at random. On the contrary, they came into being as a function of precise knowledge based on information collected during different stays at the site. This knowledge, these various characteristics thus identified, had to be in evidence for the photo to be taken – a situation which, paradoxically, presents itself relatively rarely. The strength of Emmanuel Pinard's photographs comes from the drawing together of these essential characteristics in one image – an image that merges with the surreal nature of the representation that he gives of the landscapes that he photographs. This principle of "surreality" means that, at times, the photo has to be taken at an exceptional moment. Emmanuel Pinard often says that he "extracts images" from a given area; the images are there but one must

wait for the right conditions in order to be able to collect them for the eye, so deeply hidden are they in the folds of reality.

The human presence is systematically barred from these images. In order to reveal the essential structure of the landscape, any narrative element is best eliminated from it. The action linked to the presence of a human figure, overshadowing as it would the structure of the landscape, would only provoke an anecdotal reading of these images thus reducing the landscape to a simple stage – a décor – for said action. The human figure, if present at all, is on the same scale as the landscape: a simple silhouette in the distance, an object of no particular importance.

NC-NCa – A Representative Locality

The “NC-NCa” series, a work realized by Emmanuel Pinard on the Montesson Plain between 1995 and 1998, has its place in the continuity of his work on peripheral landscapes, but this continuity is not necessarily linear and the NC-NCa series forms a kind of dip where it fits into the larger work. In fact, it functions as a sort of inverse echo of the greater project where a multitude of different sites are photographed in color and in the sun. In the NC-NCa series, the Montesson Plain – a single, specific area – is photographed in black and white and on overcast days.

Against the physical mutability of the assorted wastelands of the Parisian region, NC-NCa opposes a series of thirty-one images of a specifically defined location. Emmanuel Pinard chose this singular place – the largest truck farming expanse around Paris, (just five kilometers from the business district of La Défense) – for the typical characteristics that he encountered there. “A particular universe,” he says: “exemplary of the subject matter that runs through the whole of my research into landscape since 1987.” And in keeping with the general thrust of his work, it’s less Montesson’s particular situation and more what it says about the way we occupy the land that interests him. For him it’s a question of the typical against the local and the common against the singular as the title – “NC-NCa” – indicates by using the generic labels for “zones closed to development” and “agricultural zones closed to development” found in French zoning plans.

An Analogous Representation

In order to capture the most representative characteristics of this place, Emmanuel Pinard added to his usual list of constraints on the taking of a photograph.

First of all, he chose to make a series. In all, seventy-two images were taken of – extracted from – the plain and a second selection further extracted thirty-one of those. This study of an empty place evokes, and the homage is openly acknowledged, that of Lewis Baltz’s Candlestick Point. But Emmanuel Pinard, convinced that the reduction of means increases the power and the quality of expression, takes the notion of constraint even further as he endeavors to establish a single frame – a standard frame – capable of rendering the structure of this landscape. He thus establishes a standard elevation for the horizon which consequently sets up a proportional relation between the earth and the sky that remains rigorously constant throughout the series.

Each one of the NC-NCa images holds its own: each one can be examined and appreciated outside of the series and each one possesses the previously defined image-landscape qualities in which the distance between the object and it’s representation is as slight as it can be. Still, it’s thanks to the series that this process of representation refines itself even further, unlike his larger project on the urban outskirts where the frames, while similar, could never be as strictly constant. The fact that the horizon lines are at the same level throughout the NC-NCa series

produces a second layer of representation even more hallucinatory than before: when they are shown side by side, these images provide a metaphorical account of the Montesson Plain's horizon thirty meters long. An effort to transpose to the exhibition space the actual structure of the object before his camera is a constant in the work of Emmanuel Pinard. One of his most recent pieces is a polyptych of four images, in color, of the same landscape photographed from four different points along a straight road. Taking the photos from four different locations provokes a discontinuity in a landscape whose unity the spectator may then mentally recreate; the point being to, by analogous means, render the perception of a landscape by a driver passing through and viewing it with separate glances out the side window.

The Series – Rolling Back the Limits of Representation

For the Montesson Plain, the series allows Emmanuel Pinard to focus, in a succession of approaches, on a subject difficult to grasp at first sight and whose complexity cannot be reduced to one simple image. In this way, he uses the series as did Claude Monet who, when painting “Water Lillies” said that he was going after “the impossible to paint – the grass moving under the water.” The series allows Monet to roll back the limits of representation. His purpose is to show a spatial occurrence – grass moving in water. He therefore paints this same motif, found in his garden, over and over but all the while changing his vantage point and his framing of the subject. On the other hand, when his intention is to reveal the complex phenomenon of the forever changing light on haystacks or a cathedral facade, he establishes a strictly unchanging vantage point while the subject is lit differently each time. In both of these examples, Monet varies but a single parameter – the framing of the subject or the light.

In his effort to reveal the structure of the great emptiness of the Montesson Plain, Emmanuel Pinard combines these two attitudes as one: he adopts the static installation which corresponds to the fixed frame of the haystacks while, at the same time, continually varying the images by modifying the nature of the foregrounds and the horizons. Thus, and with great rigor, he manages to show the structural stability of the landscape and, at the same time, its significant internal fluidity.

All of the images of the series hinge on a dialectic between fluid foregrounds indicating the plain's truck farming activity and stable horizons whose changes are only apparent over much longer periods. Both reveal the unlikelyhood of construction spreading to the cultivated zone.

The Montesson Plain – Land of Projects

Caught in a loop of the Seine, the Montesson Plain has been kept at a distance from major land arteries ever since Roman times despite it being the logical continuation of the Parisian corridor. It became a truck farming area in the eighteenth century. Since the beginning of the twentieth, with real estate pressures raising prices everywhere around Paris, there has been no lack of urbanization projects for this expanse – the spectacular “linear city” corridor of 1901; the 100,000 seat stadium of 1961; the inter-town, 200 hectare cemetery of 1923; the major housing project of 1960; the city on stilts, set on an artificial lake, of 1963; the European capital with extranational status in 1970, etc...

While none of these projects ever came to fruition, the plain has still been the theater of unplanned, embryonic urban developments that have essentially eroded its outer edge. In the 1920s, when a city of shacks spread over a suburban area which, after ten years, was as large as inside-the-gates Paris, the plain welcomed what

was to remain the biggest shantytown in the Yvelines department until the 1970s. In order to deal with both this kind of wildcat urbanization as well as the appetite of speculators, the plain was declared closed to development in 1932. Until 1984, it was protected as a real estate preserve in the expectation that a regional infrastructure would be set up: the construction of centers such as the City of Science and Industry or the University at Nanterre were at one point envisaged there. Since 1984, it has been protected as a regional real estate and agricultural preserve. But as real estate pressures build, its status is less and less certain.

The public administration itself has committed certain violations of this non-building statute – in the 1930s, by authorizing the construction of a water tower that was necessary for the southeastern sector, (images 3, 55, 60); in 1938, by building a garbage incineration plant near the tower, (image 60), and in 1976 when the Ministry of Infrastructure signed a derogatory building permit authorizing the construction of the 21,000 square meter supermarket that has now become a shopping center, (image 24). But also in setting up a naval station, (images 3, 11, 49, 54, 59, 64), whose antennas reign over the plain and, not far from this, the Alouettes housing project, (images 11, 32, 49, 59), a fine paradigm of the many incongruous operations that have run aground in the district. And finally, there's the trench of the A 14 freeway slicing the plain in two since 1996, (image 40, 71).

Images of Relations

Emmanuel Pinard's images allow us to read these elements as a body. Their realization, while maintaining a clearly affirmed artistic position charged with revealing the global structure of the landscape, provides detailed information regarding the constitution of the plain. The problem of a possible building invasion of these agricultural lands – a vital question which brings us back to Emmanuel Pinard's more general work on the empty spaces of the urban outskirts – is omnipresent here. The foreground/horizon dialectic is essentially there to spotlight the presence of two juxtaposed worlds in a power struggle. In general, what predominates in Emmanuel Pinard's work and in the NC-NCa images in particular, is the relation between things as opposed to the things themselves. It's in this way that his work is close to that of John Davies photographing – always from a distant and elevated vantage point – the relationship between agricultural and industrial landscapes in *A Green and Pleasant Land*.

Behind the seeming monotony of the continuous horizons of NC-NCa, there lies the possible colonization of the empty by the full. As Emmanuel Pinard himself wrote: "The architecture in the distance presages the inevitable propagation." When he executed his first series of landscapes on the theme of nineteenth century industry, he was particularly concerned with the architectural description of the factories and substance took precedence over emptiness. Photographing Montesson, he concentrated on emptiness. Material substance is indeed present, but there is no need for the spectators to lose themselves in the finer points of its architecture. In image 46, for example, the houses seem ready to move in on the overgrown wasteland in the foreground. What can be clearly read however, is the texture of the grasses that seem to have been trampled to death; the houses in the mist are nothing but standard, undifferentiated background elements. This layering of subjects enables the various elements to enter into a relation without losing their autonomy.

It is surely image 11 that presents this analytical vision of the relation between things the most radically. Here, through the effective disposition of rows of trees in the photograph, all the major elements of the plain function together while retaining their independence.

Images of Materials

To this reading of the relation between objects can be added another one which is more specifically concerned with the nature of the land itself. This is where Emmanuel Pinard comes back to the trace that runs through the whole of his work. For even if the human figure is physically absent from his overall production, the traces that it has left in these landscapes are everywhere to be seen.

In Brasilia, a city of cars, the path drawn by the steps of the carless poor through great fields of dry grass tell of both a presence and a social condition. Such an image calls up a reference to Richard Long – another artist of the trace, the route and the sojourn – that further reinforces the obsessive presence of mud in peripheral landscapes and in the images of Montesson. If Richard Long paints, with the mud of the River Avon, paintings full of traces; Emmanuel Pinard composes, with identical material, images that are close to abstraction without ever completely falling for the easy charm that would make them into photo-paintings. The purpose here is to render a topographical reality all the while connecting with the artistic qualities that lie hidden there. It is here that the “extraction of images” and the waiting for the right situation in which to take the photograph have their true meaning; in image 52, for example, where the scrap of a plastic fertilizer bag growing from the earth in the foreground gives this peaceful, dark composition an intensity that the simple presence of natural, unspoiled earth wouldn’t be able to reach.

Through this work on the sedimentation of time and traces, Emmanuel Pinard enables us to decipher the reality of a place in all its geographical, social, technical, historical and esthetic complexity. In focusing an eye that gives form to the formless in these dismembered landscapes, he commits, in a very essential sense, an act of photography.

The expression is used by R. Koolhaas in order to characterize the generic city, (“Generic City” in...