

Double Landscape

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A Journey

An aptitude for work “on the road” and the ability to merge art with research are two distinguishing traits of Italian photography. It’s an indication of how artists who work with photography aim to preserve the precious interdisciplinary nature of their practice. In fact, beyond the artistic value of the image per se, photography—especially the well-known lineage of Italian “landscape” photography and the artists who have made it their language of choice—has always provided a means of knowledge and analysis, of generating dialogue, of creatively investigating both phenomena and the identity of spaces and the people who inhabit them. It is not uncommon for photography to be a tool of proactive research that aims to redefine the meaning of places. Everyone remembers *Viaggio in Italia* by Luigi Ghirri, in which, in 1984, the Emilia-born master led a group of nineteen national and international photographers in a visual survey of the Italian territory. It was a collective project that placed individual artistic ambitions alongside the shared goal of turning the perception of the Italian landscape *upside down*, toppling the traditional chiaroscuro of monuments and backgrounds and instead focusing on the power of the *ordinary*. But more than Ghirri’s curatorial masterpiece, Giada Ripa’s precious work for this publication calls to mind the *Sezioni del Paesaggio Italiano* portrayed by Gabriele Basilico for the 1996 Architecture Biennale, which was also a commissioned work, curated by Stefano Boeri. These are two interesting works to compare with Giada Ripa’s project for this book. Especially the latter: a political project that documented how lack of care and planning nullified the proverbial differences between the South, the Center, and the North, all of them

apparently sharing a lively inclination for the unfinished and the chaotic. In addition to a series of enthralling physical and biological micro-narratives, *The Thin Line* describes to readers how, in a little over twenty years, sensitivity and awareness have finally changed for the better, even on the part of key industrial and economic players. In short, if back then Basilico’s approach resounded a millenarian zeitgeist flirting with congestion and chaos, today Ripa constructs a story that tends to bring to our aesthetic attention the values of environmental respect and conservation that require considerable ethical awareness.

It is no coincidence that in Basilico’s photos the presence of humans is generally banned. In Ghirri, people appear now and then, but they cannot claim any identity; they are slightly alienated figures, essential to the definition of a location. For Ripa and her narratives, humans are obviously important. Thus *The Thin Line* overturns the usual protocol of landscape photography and restores people to the most significant part of the work. She does not settle for just showing them, or understanding their appearance in the frame of this or that shot, but instead she wants to listen to their voices and make it so that their words occupy central storylines in her project and in this book.

It is never easy to ruffle the reassuring cynicism of the critic (or of anyone who, on occasion, practices this controversial art). When it comes to photography, the initial impulse is to quickly look over the texts and quotations included by the artist, then really focus on the images and contentedly dedicate oneself to the free exercise of literary *purovisibilismo*, “commenting” on the pictures and jumping right into random hermeneutics. But this trick doesn’t work with *The Thin Line*. For the reader it seems impossible to separate the various and intertwined layers of the artist’s practice. No one can look at the photos without thinking about the format of the journey or even maps or assessments. No one can deny the mutual support between images and texts, or—as the critic mentioned above would say—their unity of expression. After reading the first few lines of the interview with Dino Massignani, head of the San Massimo farm (rice production), under whose soil the infrastructure runs, we immediately understand how these conversations with “witnesses” are an essential part of the work: we become enthusiastic about the stories or follow clues that could never even have been suspected before (an award-winning gold prospector!). We feel disappointed when the interview has come to an end.

Hypertexts

Giada Ripa is not new to this hypertextual inclination. In some of her earlier works there is already a kind of “travelogue” used when exploring a physical and cultural landscape, historical research, or an anthropological investigation that is both partial and impartial. Two previous works come especially to mind: *Beyond the Oil Route*, which conducts an attentive yet estranged exploration of a group of individuals and communities that are semi-hidden in the folds of the old Silk Road; and the more recent, highly praised work *The Yokohama Project*, in which she follows traces that lead to Felice Beato’s extraordinary photo reportage of Japan from the 1860s. In these two works, Ripa pinpoints the intermingling of landscape, anthropology, and geography that today helps to give the right balance to *The Thin Line*, with its slow examination of lands that host, underground and far from human eyes, networks and infrastructures, where green gas like hydrogen and biomethane transit. Moreover, *Yokohama* offers another, more complex level of interpretation: that of photography semantics and its history. Ripa isolates Beato’s surprising *native types* to create a relevant replica, thus triggering a kind of magnetic storm of meanings—between the permanence of Japanese tradition, modernist displacement, anthropological study, the representation of reality, and the self-representation of photography. Both of these projects gave the artist the experience needed to resume working in Italy—and what is more, on a commissioned project—without losing that exotic frisson or the ability to reveal connections between special people and special places, or her talent for continuing along a line of expressive investigation that is deep and radical. Moreover, she has other prerequisites that are essential to this work: the habit of following a set course, here repeated and multiplied; the power of landscapes; the preference for crisp shots that can embrace variations in altimeter and tone.

Patience

The thing that intimidates me the most in the work of a photographer is *patience*. Maybe it wasn’t so for the restless Giacomelli or for many reportage greats, but in the photography I am more familiar with, and which navigates between architecture, landscape, portraits of places and people, immobile patience is often an essential component,

part of an effort involving the body and the character requested of the artist. In *The Thin Line*, Giada Ripa does not work to deactivate this slowness but rather to expand it and turn it into a space that creates meaning. I’ve never seen the artist at work, so I cannot tell if it is literal patience, with extended periods between one shot and the next or lengthy explorations for the right angle, even though I may imagine this to be the case. In any event, the book seems to be the transposition into a story of this drawn-out time: after finding the right angle, the landscape appears, and it is itself reflective and slow; after taking in the landscape, in many cases there are people, a human presence—but also some splendid examples from the animal kingdom—that acts as an element of catalytic exchange between the viewer of the photograph and the place; after a time of contemplation, the artist does not permit us to move on to the next image, but instead makes us linger as she presents a text that familiarizes us with the character portrayed in the photo and allows us to hear his or her words, to discover the place no longer through sight but via a testimony that is both spontaneous and always significant. Within the temporal discrepancy implied by the work, within the space of a diachrony, perhaps one of the most intense meanings can be unraveled: just as the efficiency of the infrastructures that run under the land are based on fluidity and constant motion, so too do slowness and suspension allow the landscapes above to survive and proliferate in tranquility. Ripa’s vision seems to bear witness to this paradoxical and virtuous coexistence, in which the fast network aims to guarantee or improve an efficiency based on very slow movement. All the characters corroborate this story: the gold prospector lives in extreme patience; the farmer protects the slow harvest of his rice; the botanical garden director accompanies the centennial growth of the magnolia; archeologists dig carefully and cautiously. The artist “keeps the secret” for a part of the book, only unveiling intriguing snippets of maps and the discrete poles that she seems to turn into the icon of this project. But at a certain point she begins to enjoy revealing the hidden mechanism, the well-concealed weak point, and allows us to observe a pipeline through a Kubrickian perspective. Thus we pass an absolute limit, between light and darkness, between areas that are accessible and those that are off-limits, between places we can linger in and spaces we access only for the time required to perform a task. Certainly this is not a randomly chosen infrastructure, since it involves an underground passage that crosses the border between Italy and Austria. It thus engages another important feature of the works that generated this book: their collective character that surpasses borders.

Project

In city planning and landscape architecture there are terms like mitigation, compensation, and environmental restoration, intended as instruments in which actions can be planned without causing definitive damage to any environmental or anthropological balance. After an attentive inspection of locations crossed by the pipelines evoked here, Ripa seems to testify to the possibility of an additional and more efficient level of collaboration between those who create infrastructures that allow people to live better and the ecosystems that inhabit these places before, during, and after they are built. What is offered, at least as far as I can tell, is a type of intervention that fosters collaboration, right from the start, between key players and communities, architects and local experts. The goal is to offer these locations a chance to improve. The beautiful thing in this work is that these communities are each small and properly identified. There are no indefinite forms of representation, association, or constituency, but rather people in flesh and bone (and photo paper) with their own faces, stories, and skills. In speaking about *The Thin Line* what often recurs is a magical word—*project*—that expands like a kind of chain reaction in the overall complexity of the work. It is obviously the act that creates the infrastructure, documented by maps, fragments of drawings, and rare technical images; it is the primary force that guides the actions of all the people interviewed by Ripa, from farmers to conservationists, from archeologists to gold prospectors; it is the productive form of the artist's work, a "commissioned project" that multiplies and branches out into a series of places that are explored, fixed on a map, recorded in a travelogue. And so, in order to understand how this chain of planning is transformed into a memorable testimony and into a work of art, one cannot but mention, with discretion and respectful detachment, the intrinsic quality of Giada Ripa's "art." The sequence is terribly convincing and the artistic standard is never lowered. At the most, it follows a further, secret rhythm of expression. The book opens with a stunning image of a white cow, continues with a series of frames that slightly dilute the artistic intention with a documentary tone, and then come right back at us again with an image of deer horns towering above a plantation. This is how the entire book unfolds: amid empathy, surreal micro-apparitions, and more incisive "shots," like the Cinque Miglia plateau, the sea, the pipelines

under the Alps, the unexpected (though not really) gas station attendants who evoke with irony both Ghirri's memory and the client. Like other photographers who are marching toward greater artistic and expressive maturity, Ripa seems to have found in the form of her research project and in this book her ideal medium, one that can reclaim the remaining legacy of representation that survives in photography.