

LANDSCAPE-PHOTOGRAPHS AS ESTHETICAL OBJECTS.

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Herdis Maria Siegert's photographs in this selection do place themselves within a direction which until quite recently was considered 'fine art photography'. The direction was defined from the point of view that this was not images which should be viewed as functional, but regarded as esthetical objects in their own right. Through her exhibition at Haugar, Norway, she makes her appearance with a distinct choice of images as the institutional context has been decisive. The images she exhibits can be, through their form, located within a photographic context developed through the idea of esthetical communication. These communications take place within a context of photographic directions which, way back to photography's childhood, have found their identity in relation to a wish to establish photography as a part of the art-field.

Next to the portrait and the city-projects, landscape-images are a section of photography which hardly anyone can have missed to be experiencing. As motives, at least Norwegians nourish a close relationship to them. The documentary function which photography has achieved in our culture, entails that we deal with photographs in a manner where we most often identify the photography with the theme of the image. The pleasure we feel about a landscape-photograph is to a great extent the pleasure we feel about the theme conveyed. We regard sea and skies and not the photograph itself. This identification with the photograph and its theme diminishes as soon as the attention is directed towards the photograph's accomplishment and form. To devote one's efforts to the esthetical form to such an extent as Siegert does, is a way of creating a space for reflection upon what is seen, and what the *theme seen* is indeed referring to.

The esthetics, to which Siegert links her expression, has its roots way back to the establishing of fine art photography in the beginning of the 20th century. At that time, a specific direction was established, with its own magazines, exhibitions and institutions. This direction was determined to give photography an artistic status, and gradually managed to establish itself within the art museums. This tradition, combines the views that photography is a specific art-form with its own traditions and norms, and that these are established in the qualities of the photographic medium itself. These views have contributed towards research in the very medium's possibilities as a challenge in itself, and carry implicitly a belief that the medium has got its own possibilities. Accordingly, the qualities given expression in an image, are not qualities added through the context of the image, but qualities in the image itself.

Siegert's landscape-photographs tie together various aspects, easily linked to names as: Alfred Stieglitz, who combines poetry with precision; Edward Steichen, who masterfully moves within many styles; from a romantic atmosphere celebrating sentiment, eradicating themes towards a new reality, synthesizing forms demonstrating clear volumes and planes; Man Ray's technical experiments leading to an expression related to dadaists and surrealists; Edward Weston's and Imogen Cunningham's precision carrying a pronounced expression whereby the details often become the focal

points, and where lines, volumes and planes tie the image together in striking compositions; Aaron Siskind's abstract photographs from the 1950's, related to the abstract expressionism; Harry Callahan's simplification, expressing abstract qualities in the often minimalistic compositions containing however, distinct dynamics; Minor White's images, leaving the impression that what we see is hard to identify, because he seems to have removed large amounts of information, and therefore establishing a context can seem difficult. This might be due to his attempts to estheticise the form of the images, using strong contrasts of lightness and darkness, leaving however in the images an expression where the details are pronounced; Lucien Clergue's texture and sensualism; Paul Hill's fascination of nature's details carrying no symbolism whatsoever and Hiroshi Sugimoto's mysterious dreamlike minimalism expressed through his description of lightness and darkness.

Siegert's images add to a direction in photography where the profile of a modernistic paradigm establishes itself. The mutual frame for a number of Norwegian photographers of Siegert's generation, is more a matter of mutual references than of direct impulses. The point of view concerning the image and the essence of photography within this framework, has in many ways been crucial for what was considered fine art photography in Norway in the 1970's. This period has strongly influenced Siegert's preferences.

A distinctive stamp on Siegert's photography, is her strong link to a romantic view concerning landscapes; creating a contrast to the majority of contemporary Norwegian photographers, who have made landscapes their preference. Few references exist as regards the topographic tradition with the background in exploring untouched landscape-formations demonstrating no occurrence of mining, transport or tourism, or for that matter, other profitable enterprises. Closely linked to the topographical tradition is the contemporary photograph, which from a critical perspective, deals with landscapes marked by human exploitation of natural resources.

Despite the fact that Siegert's photographic references mainly are taken from elsewhere, the threat against nature documented through the topographical photography, which initially was based on utility considering photographic practice, which has turned towards critical practice, casts also its shadow upon Siegert's photographs. For better and for worse, the place itself is formed by its history, whether the place concerned is untouched by human beings, or is a place like Venice, which in our culture has become a symbol of a death in beauty, as one can also interpret the image of the water gathered as a dam on top of the halfway sunken gondola. Siegert has chosen to pay homage to places from the experience of the beauty they can give, rather than to emphasize the traces of deterioration and gloom; it will not say, however, that these places are unworldly locations. In the images of clouds sweeping endless surfaces of the sea, one can experience an unapproachability in the greatness of nature; it is however, a greatness not alarming but formidable.

Siegert has worked with coloured photography as well as with black and white. She has chosen to present an exhibition consisting exclusively of images in black and white. Within the context of references in which Siegert operates, black and white photography has been the technique preferred. For the ones who seriously worked with art-photography up to the late 1970's, black and white images had an aura of radicality and seriousness alike. These elements contributed also to mark a distance to

the idea that the image was merely a representation, because colour, an aspect so central to the imitation of nature, was absent, hence not underlining formal aspects linked to light and shadow, lines, planes and volumes.

Siegert has chosen an esthetical expression which leads to images presented as beautiful. She chooses to do so in a time where one can get the impression that a majority of artists who profile themselves in the context of contemporary art, consider the term beauty as irrelevant within a discussion concerning contemporary art. One can get the impression that beauty can operate merely as a contrast, in order to visualize and to make esthetical of that which is ugly or hideous. An image of nature, representing what is conventionally regarded as beautiful, presenting itself without cuts, crevices, traces of destructive actions or demolition and ruin, will by many be regarded with suspicion. Traces of deterioration and destruction are by many artists, transferred to the object itself, thus displaying an object which, literally speaking, demonstrates a surface of rifts, perforations, holes and scabs. In the 1950's, an increasingly codified iconography for depicting the hideous has developed. This kind of esthetics influences fashion-industry as well as the works of art which are aiming to demonstrate criticism of society. How quite different, therefore, are Siegert's photographs; they come across as blamelessly executed and with the highest degree of dexterity and perfection.

Herdis Maria Siegert has performed in most genres of photography; portrait – reporting – documentary – flowers – nature - landscape. Her images have been applied in several contexts; in books, in newspapers and as posters. The images are represented in numerous institutional contexts where the framework can be a museum, a publishing business or in the press. This entails that she has an archive consisting of a manifold images to relate to, when selecting what to be presented at The Haugar Art Museum. The selection of her works she has chosen to present and 'make' her exhibition at The Haugar Art Museum, bear witness to a desire to give a clear message, because she is limiting her exhibition to a narrow spectrum of the motives concerned, an evident position regarding the photographic heritage. She exhibits an esthetic where that what is beautiful plays an essential part and in addition links the images together under a joint heading; *Hommage*. The title of the heading makes the question arise: to what end is this homage? Directly one can draw the conclusion that this is an homage for what we see in the images; motives-of-nature. We can, however, just as well interpret this homage as an homage to a certain form of photography and a photographic tradition.

Translated from Norwegian by Hilde Raastad O'Hanlon.