Photographing the altered identity of landscapes

Jorge Marum

"As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands. A description of [the city] as it is today should contain all [the city's] past. The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the bags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls." 1

Italo Calvino

The use of photography as a research tool and as an artistic form of expression to represent landscapes involves the challenge of representing their physical, cultural, social, and political marks, as well as their identity and perceptual singularity as a place. Landscapes represent territories which were transformed by human action and, as such, reveal an understanding and a set of values of past and present societies, witnessing the various (trans)formations of space - natural and artificial space - in line with article 5, a. of the European Landscape Convention of the Council of Europe, the landscape represents an "essential component of the human environment, an expression of diversity of its common and natural heritage and a base for its identity".

According to Lefebvre in "La production de l'espace" (1974), one way of conditioning social reproduction is through economic and political restrictions on access to space, therefore it is vital to draw attention to how landscapes are being (trans)formed, conditioned and controlled, so significantly. In an era that is deeply marked by climate change, as well as restrictions on actions and freedom of movement caused by the compulsory confinement arising from the current COVID-19 pandemic, several processes of social reproduction have occurred 'in' the changing landscape and are derived 'from' it. At the very limit, the restriction of access to a space, that is, the absence of human transformation, also results in an altered landscape, establishing a principle of causality. Photography thus has the ability to represent the identity of an altered landscape, through a documentary record, and to be an undeniable testimony of the human presence or absence in that principle of causality. In fact, if it is true that to alter means to cause change - that is, it presupposes a nexus of cause and effect - it is also true that it means to disturb or falsify - that is, it presupposes an action or omission, more or less harmful - provoking a strong or violent change. At the very limit, the landscape on a metamorphosis that is not biological or evolutionary, but rather of transmutation, where the landscape that originated it is transformed into something else.

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1 Italo Calvino, Cidades Invisíveis (Lisboa: Editorial T eorema, 2003), 14-15. transl. by the author.
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