

Site-seeing

Meggan Gould

Bowdoin College



In *Site-seeing*, I look to address the disciplinary structures surrounding photographic vision through a series of photographs in which I have removed the camera from its habitual proximity to the eye, allowing it greater corporeal liberty. The images in this series are photographed while walking, driving, bicycling, gliding through landscapes on buses or trains. The continuity of my motion is not interrupted for the shutter's blink; the camera, clenched in my right hand, documents as much the swing of my step as it does the subject that triggered my finger to press the shutter release. Often, in fact, the latter escapes the frame altogether—hand/eye/subject/shutter coordination is surprisingly difficult at 60 miles per hour—and the processed film reveals fragments of the passing landscape that I often do not remember having seen.

Through this series of mobility-induced images, I seek to explore the visual experience of embodied interstitiality, of being at neither point A nor point B, but caught in motion between the two. The images are seen as 4 x 6 inch prints, evocative of the picture postcards that are sent or collected as evidence of a successful voyage to a specific site. Instead of postcards of the end point of a voyage, the Destination, I present postcards of the voyage itself, of the dynamism inherent to the journey, of the blur—and often beauty—of the mundane world traveled through on the way to the Scenic Overlook. These images reject the glossy,

hygienic conventions in tourist photography, where the postcards available for purchase at the kiosk overlooking the Destination—be it canyon, monument, battlefield, or cityscape—cannot but be simulacral in nature; we stand for a few brief moments, witnessing the landscape stretched out before us, and allowing the color-saturated, static version prettily packaged in the postcard we will buy to send to our family to supercede our vision of the clouds, the rubbish bins, the fellow tourists jostling for the best view.

I present this series, which now constitutes hundreds of images, unedited. The formal pleasure of some of the images—the rhythm of a passing pedestrian stride, the stark isolation of an abandoned car in the middle of a field—must be seen in the context of the vast quantity of unremarkable images—too blurry, too skewed, perhaps—that are documents of the tedious, ill-focused monotony that constitutes much of daily motion. The temptation to highlight the more “successful” images is a false lure; as Clément Chéroux points out in his *Fautographie—Petite histoire de l'erreur photographique*, “The fickleness of [photographic] errors is essentially that they are the responsibility of those that judge them as such. The verdict relies on the person who pronounces it, and, thus, the context in which he/she is located—a context greatly determined by the here and now”¹ (Chéroux, 2003, p. 42).

The notion of photographic error must be reconsidered in an exercise such as this series; it is rather the hundreds of images, as a whole—good, bad, or indifferent as they might be judged—that are used to probe a larger theoretical issue than the success of individual images. To carefully edit a series such as this, to glean all but the most formally pleasing images, would be to contradict its purpose. Movement through landscape, and our vision thereof, is not “picture-perfect,” it is indistinct half-glances, missed chances as we round corners, moments of clarity foregrounded with motion blur. Graham MacPhee aptly states: “Vision has come to imply a paradigm of meaningfulness based on clarity and coherence, against which alternative forms of experience are cast as aberrant, incoherent, and false” (MacPhee, 2002, p. 17). The decision to not edit this series allows me to insist that these latter, “alternative”

visual experiences are not cast as aberrant. To favor some of the resulting images over others would be to reify the popular conception of clarity and formality that I question in the experience of vision.

These images, or instances of landscape, were recorded in France, South Africa, Zanzibar, Zambia, New York, Florida, Germany; they attempt to document the experience of active reception, nose pressed against the glass, watching the countryside or city streets pass by. How we interact with spaces unrolling on either side of us—both as we speed through them in our daily journeys and when we assign ourselves the role of ‘tourist’ in new places, intrigues me, for the experiences are dissimilar. In this series I am away from home, traveling as a passenger in unknown territory, concentrating on my role as viewer, attempting to photograph the gaze of the embodied viewer. As it is this gaze itself that interests me, I do not separate the resulting photographs by place—continent, city, or state—or by physical means of transportation—foot, automobile, or train, the distinction is only a matter of relative speed; the experience of my traveler’s gaze remains constant.

I have chosen to present these images, unedited and irrespective of physical location upon firing of the shutter, following the form of an extensive grid, covering the entire space of a wall. As Rob Shields indicates, albeit in the context of mapping cyberspace: “Grids are a modernist model of space...The grid of the nineteenth century colonial map imposed latitude and longitude to encompass, define and therefore possess all possible places. By having a potential grid reference of anywhere everywhere was reduced. On a grid, here and there are irrelevant” (Shields, 2000, p. 149). To impose a rigid structure on such disparate and undisciplined imagery is to reassert an element of control, via presentation, into the chaotic reality of the encounter of the embodied viewer. In so doing I can confirm the irrelevancy of place as well as disallow the dominance of any individual image, allowing the viewer the freedom to meander through the photographs much as I did through the landscapes—doubling back, taking a side road, or carrying on straight through the frenzied mix

of motion blur and haphazard focus of which my own myriad voyages were constituted.

References

- Chéroux, C. (2003). *Fautographie - petite histoire de l'erreur photographique*. Crisnée, Belgium: Yellow Now.
- MacPhee, G. (2002). *The architecture of the visible*. London: Continuum.
- Shields, R. (2000). Hypertext links: The ethic of the index and its space-time effects. In A. Herman and T. Swiss (Eds.), *The world wide web and contemporary cultural theory* (pp. 145-160). New York: Routledge.

Endnotes

¹ "L'inconstance des erreurs repose essentiellement sur celui qui les juge comme telles...Le verdict dépend donc de celui qui l'énonce et, par conséquent, de l'environnement culturel où il se situe. Ce contexte étant très largement déterminé par son ici et maintenant."