

On the Edge: The Freedom of the Periphery

Erieta Attali describes herself as an itinerant, a wanderer, who is drawn to far away landscapes at the “edges of the world”—to what she calls “the periphery.” This is both a physical and an existential borderland between the center and the edge, the known and the unknown. Because there can be no periphery without a center. For Attali that center is the Mediterranean Basin, the region in which she was born and lived as a child, and to which she continuously returns. These are ancient cultural landscapes that she has explored extensively in her photographic work always focusing on the interrelation of what she calls “culture and nature”—the human acts, physical interventions, and territorial incursions through which land becomes landscape, resonant with history. Indeed, the centrifugal pull of the periphery that Attali describes has its origins in the historical landscapes and human geographies of the eastern Mediterranean center of her world. It was in fact in that center—in the harsh mountain and desert landscapes of Greece and Turkey—that she first discovered the periphery of her imagination; a place of rugged beauty beyond the sea, ultramarine, that beckoned with the promise of the unknown, of discovery, and reinvention.

The peripheral landscapes of Attali’s imagination were first prefigured in the imagined world of science fiction that fascinated her as a child. Her interest in science fiction is telling. The world of science fiction is a speculative narrative space that conjures an imaginary, but also a realistic (and therefore believable) future from the hard science of the present. The periphery to which Attali is drawn is likewise a narrative space, an imagined place that is also deeply rooted in the material world, in lived experience, and close observation. Indeed, the “otherworldliness” of the periphery derives from projecting the known onto the unknown, looking outward from the center to the edges. In her photographs, Attali reverses that trajectory to look from the outside in and to reimagine the center.

As borderlands, the edges of the world offer what the mid-twentieth-century Yugoslav art historian, Ljubo Karaman called the “freedom of the periphery.”¹ That freedom has less do with physical distance from the center than with the presence of difference in the territorial margins of centers of power and culture—the freedom that decentering affords to wander, to discover, to invent, to tell new stories. Peripheral places, Karaman argued, provide access to many centers; they consequently foster experimentation and innovation that expand the boundaries of established practices. As Attali’s practice shows, the exercise of that freedom requires not only curiosity and discipline, but also a certain fearlessness, physical courage, and stamina. Each photographic project begins with a long and arduous journey that is undertaken on foot. Attali (who is a long distance runner) walks great distances across rough and unfamiliar terrain and in extreme climatic conditions, while carrying a punishingly heavy load of unwieldy, but also delicate camera equipment. The journey, as she describes it, entails both a personal and a professional challenge—a test not just of her own physical and mental endurance, but also of her powers of invention. The arduousness of the challenge seems almost perverse. The large-format camera with its finely

calibrated mechanisms is not designed to withstand the hostile conditions of weather and terrain in the extreme latitudes to which Attali exposes it. On top of that, the large-format camera and panoramic configuration of the images it produces are, as Attali often notes, a constraining format for capturing the particular qualities of light, form, and space that interest her in the peripheral locations she seeks out. So why does she burden herself so heavily with the (technical and cultural) baggage of her métier? Why not devise less cumbersome protocols for her encounters with the edges of the world? The answer is evident in the images she produces. In bringing the awkward and finicky instruments of landscape photography to the encounter with the otherworldly extremities of human settlement on the planet, Attali is putting both her own artistic practice and the broader cultural practice of landscape photography to the test—by taking them (quite literally) to an other place.

The results are perceptive. The encounter with different ecologies and temporalities not only challenges the established practices of landscape photography, but also the concept of landscape itself. At the northern and southern extremities of the planet, the magnetically-charged atmosphere of the polar regions gives material substance to the suffused light that neither penetrates nor bounces off of the still surfaces of the arctic water and ice, but renders them opaque. The effect is to visually dissolve the boundary between matter and energy. That fusion disaggregates in the arid mountain landscapes of Chile and Peru where enormous fluctuations in temperature alternately saturate and desiccate the atmosphere. Here space is highly articulated and deeply shadowed; the formations of land, cloud, and fog are sharply defined, and every detail jumps into focus.

A large number of photographs focus on the mythical borderlands—where land meets water—that have long fascinated Attali as marking the passage between the known and the unknown worlds of Ancient Greek mythology. In her work these borderlands constitute key places of encounter between the center and the periphery. In the images she produces—of the eastern coast of Tasmania, of Katoomba Falls in New South Wales, and Iguazu Falls in Argentina and Brazil—the borderland is once again a narrative space of encounter between photographer, water, land, and sky. Although unpeopled, the photographs are all about human incursion into, and experience of, the outer edges of the inhabited world. In each case the foreground fills a major part of the frame, establishing the solid ground on which photographer and camera find firm footing. From that vantage point the camera searches out, explores, and fixes the image of a range of transitional moments of encounter among the rocks, trees, and water in the tidal inlets, churning rivers, and cascading waterfalls on which Attali turns her lens. These are uncultivated but also deeply human landscapes filled with cultural references and shaped by the camera's eye in ways that render those references both legible and meaningful. They speak of arrival and departure, of transit, migration, discovery and recognition, of delicate ecologies, of the inevitability of change, possession, and loss.

Among the most resonant and complex photographs are those that focus on the durable acts of human intervention and incursion—buildings and infrastructures—that are sited in otherwise uninhabited landscapes. Architecture plays a critical role in both Attali's concept of landscape and her encounter with the periphery, adding a new protagonist to the encounter and raising new questions: what does it mean to build in such remote landscapes? How are we to read the intervention? Is the building an alien presence in a place we conceive as “natural,” or is it a familiar presence in an essentially alien environment? In the context of Attali's photographs it is both and neither. The architecture that interests Attali is highly performative and operates as an integrative, transformative, instrument in

the landscape. It is both a material intervention on the land, and an interpretive act. Some structures—raised on stilts and cantilevers—hover lightly above the ground, hardly intervening at all in its complex ecologies. Others are dug deeply into the earth, their forms seeming to emerge from the loam and rock in which they are embedded. Those works that most clearly fascinate Attali and on which she focuses her lens most intensively engage their sites through their own forms and materials and change the way in which the ambient world is both perceived and understood. Mostly houses, they are settings for the repetitive acts of human inhabitation that in this context play out in close contact with the powerful rhythms and unruly tempers of the remote terrains in which they are lodged. They are performative rather than constative buildings—with large expanses of glazed wall surfaces, smooth stone floor planes, and thin steel structural elements that are alternatively reflective and transparent depending on the time of day, angle of the sun, and weather. At times they provide deep views that penetrate into and through the center of the living space out to the land and sky beyond. At other times they become reflective, bouncing back refracted images of trees, water, rocks, clouds, and sunlight; their active surfaces layering glimpses of nature with self-reflection as they project images of the ambient world through the spaces of inhabitation and into the world of the imagination. These architectural interventions act as critical lenses, which subtly inflect and transform time and space around them, doubling and rendering more complex the landscapes they inhabit. In her photographs, with their multiple spatial and temporal layers, frames of reference, and staged encounters, Attali creates otherworldly “counter-environments”: speculative places filled with contingency yet firmly anchored in the material world, “that provide us with the means of perceiving the environment itself.”²

Architecture in Attali’s photographs plays an essential part in her conception of the periphery as a heterotopia, a place apart physically and mentally, as well as a place of human geography where simultaneous and contradictory realities intermingle. It is alien and familiar, remote but accessible, isolated yet culturally embedded, a refuge that is itself precarious. The power of Attali’s images is that they allow the contradictions to proliferate and expand, drawing us into contemplation of the complex conditions and contingencies that bind the contemporary ecologies of the center and periphery. Like Michel Foucault’s mirror,³ Attali’s periphery is a place of reflection and duality—a heterotopia as well as a “counter-environment”—that provides us with the means both of comprehending and reimagining the environment we inhabit.

¹ Ljubo Karaman, *O djelovanju domace sredine u umjetnosti hrvatskih krajeva* (On the Effect of the Native Environment in the Art of the Croatian Lands) (Zagreb, 1963), p. 89.

² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, 1964), ix.

³ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” (1967), *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986), pp. 22–27