

NATURE AND ARTIFICE

Nadav Kander's *Yangtze, The Long River*

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This chapter discusses recent photographic work that illuminates one of the most ancient encounters between nature and artifice – that of river and city – an encounter which acquires renewed significance in our fraught late modernity. Through this discussion, the study aims to contribute to the argument about the relevance of photography as both an interpretative and poetic device for architecture and landscape. Nadav Kander's photographic series *Yangtze: The Long River* (2006-08) is the specific focus here. Beyond its subject matter, Kander's work interrogates the tension between natural and artificial, understood as 'found' and 'constructed', in the photographic process itself.

Photography's ambiguous relationship with the real allows it to be simultaneously revealing and concealing, documenting and interpreting, recording and imagining. As extensively theorised from its early analogue days to the digital present, photography's deictic or indexical quality, its 'truth claim', derived from its contingency upon a given reality, is set against its fundamentally constructed being, which results in varying degrees of artifice.¹ This ambiguity places photography in a particularly useful position for reading landscape, including urban landscapes, a term itself fraught with tension between the natural and the artificial. Discussing landscape photography, Liz Wells reminds us of W.T.J. Mitchell's suggestion that landscape is best used as a verb, 'to landscape', as it is invariably the product of human action, whether in terms of its actual shaping through agriculture, architecture and so on, or its perception through various modes of representation.² In other words, landscape is a cultural term, implying a process of framing and appropriation for its very definition, even when the parameters of this appropriation, not unlike photography, are at their subtlest and most concealed.

The meeting of photography and landscape has a long history, as long as photography itself. Nicéphore Niepce's image of the view outside his window, the earliest known photograph, taken with a camera obscura sometime in 1826-27, is arguably also the first landscape photograph. Whilst the relationship continues for two centuries in a great variety of ways, it is a loose trend, or sensibility, developing in the past three or four decades, that is of particular interest for this chapter. A growing number of photographers are producing land and cityscapes aiming to interrogate our late-modern notion of place, and to reveal complex modes of appropriation, alienation and destruction, without representing action but focusing, instead, on the settings within which it occurs. The 'topographic' sensibility, originating in the seminal New Topographics exhibition of 1975, which included such luminaries as Bernd and Hilla Becher, was a key moment for this development. It has proliferated through the Bechers' Düsseldorf School and others across the world, such as Gabriele Basilico, and has expanded remarkably in size and scope in the past couple of decades.³ If the original intention of the New Topographics and the Düsseldorf School was a return to a New Objectivity – the *Neue Sachlichkeit* of the 1920s

– and to take an ostensibly documentary and affectless stance towards our environment, what grew out of it was far more complex and interesting, both in terms of the work’s reception and its legacy. These photographs were increasingly accepted as ‘art’ and influenced variations and offshoots into the realm of self-conscious artifice, which problematises our increasingly complex environment through a hybrid gaze. For images in this hybrid topographic sensibility, the found or ‘real’ condition is as important to the work as the artifice of its representation, but the aspirations clearly transcend the merely evidential. Andreas Gursky’s *Der Rhein II* (1999), which became the world’s most expensive photograph when sold in 2011, is one such example. The image shows a stretch of the river Rhine and its embankments, digitally manipulated to produce an almost abstract effect of colour and texture, dramatically distancing the specificity of place and time.

Ultimately, beyond distinctions of ‘documentary’ and ‘art’, which rely increasingly on parameters and structures outside the work itself, what matters in this conversation is a mode of seeing. Walter Benjamin writes:

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully poised the subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) ‘seared the subject’, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may discover it.⁴

Arguably, neither the moment nor the discovery thereof should be taken literally or instrumentally. What is at stake is not a simple ‘capturing of a moment’, but a collision of temporalities, of *situations*. The temporality of the image relates to the temporality of the landscape in a complex and indeterminate way. The gaze of the camera helps us see not only what was there and is no longer, but what is right in front of us and has passed unnoticed, or what is not there but *could* be. In these different iterations of photography’s potential we see enmeshed its recording and projecting capacity, the extent to which it speaks to both memory and imagination.

Roland Barthes, a self-proclaimed ‘realist’ in the conflict over photography’s truth claim, also pushes the ‘evidential’ quality of the photograph towards something more fluid, when he writes that ‘[...] the realists do not take the photograph for a ‘copy’ of reality, but for an emanation of past reality: a magic, not an art. To ask whether a photograph is analogical or coded is not a good means of analysis. The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time.’⁵

Riverine settlements offer a particular challenge to representation. They embody a complex encounter of nature and city, where the water is not a border, as in coastal towns, but a vein of permanent strangeness. The river is subsumed by the city, even as it cuts through and shapes it, enacting a tension which never clarifies into a standoff, but is perpetually in the process of becoming. The river is not an opposite to the city – the city moves on it, inhabits it and consumes it, so *it*, also, *is* the city – but, at the same time, the river remains a rift, the powerful presence of another order, another fabric and temporality to those of the human habitus.

Artists working with photography in recent years have taken on this challenge producing work which contributes to the exploration of the riverine theme in a number of ways. The considerable variations in their approach is revealing. The work seems to question not only *where* the river is, but *what* it is. The body of water, the banks and the world dependent on those beyond, including the urban fabric and the people, appear interchangeably as embodying the riverine condition. Naoya Hatakeyama’s *River* series, from 1996 onwards, is a

project looking at Tokyo's concrete canals, with several iterations across many years. Taken almost level with the water, the photographs compress the buildings above in extreme perspectival distortion, or ignore them altogether, showing instead their reflection, abstracted into intensely coloured patterns. Although not strictly 'rivers', these narrow bodies of water dominate the frame of Hatakeyama's images, and set up a tense dialogue of edge conditions within the city. Lewis Francis's *Amargosa* (n.d.) is a series exploring an invisible river that flows underground for most of its course, under the Mojave Desert, from Nevada through to Death Valley in California. Francis's black and white images trace the course of the river through its scattered clues on the surface. These include signs of inhabitation and infrastructure for the rare occasions of overflow, which, in the absence of an obvious body of water, appear entirely surreal in the middle of the desert. Diverting from the norm of the topographic sensibility that refrains from depicting people, Natalia Pokrovskaya's *The Edge Effect* series (2011-12) presents the Moscow River through the everyday life taking place on its embankments. The square images are set up in pairs, deliberately resisting the panoramic, and frequently omitting water from the frame. They set up a dialogue between the prohibitive conditions imposed by the state – forbidding swimming, mooring a boat or having a picnic – and the fact that these activities do regularly take place. Edward Burtynsky, perhaps the best known landscape photographer today, produced work during the building of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze, published in a volume entitled *Before The Flood* (2002). Here, once again, the river itself is largely absent from the images, but the powerful force of its waters, as natural phenomenon and economic driver, looms palpably over the destruction we are witnessing. The Yangtze River is one of the most photographed in recent years, presumably due to the global fascination with China's explosive growth. It is the third longest river in the world, and of profound significance for the Chinese, not only as physical presence and resource, but also as symbol and cradle of myths embedded in the national consciousness. At the same time, those who live along its banks number more than the entire population of the United States: one in every eighteen people on the planet.⁶ The dramatic changes wrought on the river and the riverine settlements in the past few decades are difficult to avoid across its 6,300 kilometres.

Nadav Kander's *Yangtze* series is perhaps the most ambitious on this river to date. The artist, who lives in Britain, travelled its length over two years, 2006-8, from its mouth in Shanghai to its sources in the rural Qinghai province. Selected photographs from Kander's journey have been exhibited in a number of galleries and museums around the world, including London's Barbican Gallery, at the exhibition entitled *Constructing Worlds: Photography & Architecture in the Modern Age* (2014). The most complete iteration of the project is a book of the same name, published in 2010 and featuring seventy-six photographs. The images are presented in four groups, corresponding to the four stages of the journey: *The Mouth: The Beginning & The End* looks at Shanghai and refers to the end of the river and the beginning of the photographer's journey; *The Upstream: Lost Scenery* looks at Jiangsu and Hubei provinces; *The Flooding*, subtitled with a quote by the Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu that declares 'The state is shattered, mountains and rivers remain', looks at the massive Three Gorges Dam in Hubei province; and, finally, *The Upper Reaches: Between Heaven & Earth*, crosses three different provinces, Sichuan, Yunnan and Qinghai, and ends the photographic journey at the sources of the river, where the battle between natural landscape and human construction finally shifts in favour of the former. Across the series, the images range in type and scale from panoramic shots of the river and its banks, to more focused aspects of the urban and industrial development along its shores, including some interiors. Several images also feature people, although at all times such presence is clearly subservient to its setting and the landscape

sensibility of the work. Despite this, Nadav Kander cannot be characterised as a ‘landscape photographer’. His work as a whole includes portraits, nudes and object studies, as well buildings and landscapes. Although the *Yangtze* series is a study of place, it is clear that Kander engages with it in a varied and complex way, which transcends the narrowly understood agendas of environmental and sociological critique. There is no doubt that, on one level, the work operates as a document of what is taking place along the river, a factor that earned it the 2009 Prix Pictet, a prestigious international photographic prize with an explicit agenda of sustainability (Fig. 1). Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, wrote the preview to the *Yangtze* book, and in that short text there is little to suggest that the photographs have any other aim than to ‘chart the consequences of the extraordinary pace of Chinese economic development upon the world’s third largest river’.⁷ This seems to be echoed by most reviews of the book, such as the one in *Photomonitor* (2012), which concludes: ‘The photographs thus fulfill a deeply sociological even archeological function in documenting a world that is fading as quickly as the water levels of the Three Gorges Dam are rising’.⁸



FIGURE 1 Nadav Kander, *Shanghai V*, 2006

In the 2014 Barbican exhibition, Kander was one of just eighteen photographers from the past eighty years on show, represented by several images from the *Yangtze* series. Yet again, the curators offered the work as a critique of environmental destruction and of the loss of tradition under the onslaught of industrialisation in contemporary China. This, however, is rather misleading, as the work operates on more levels than such comments would allow. A hint is already offered in the short Artist’s Notes at the end of the publication, where Kander states that ‘it was never my intention to make documentary pictures’.⁹ In a recent interview, the artist further elaborated on this, stressing that he makes work not as a cerebral endeavour, with a clear agenda, but in a much more exploratory and receptive way. The idea of ‘capturing the moment’, which seems to define so much photography and talk about photography, is of less interest to him than the possibility of opening up a bigger

picture and inviting viewers to bring their own experiences and nuances to it¹⁰ In other words, Kander approached his subject with an artist's gaze, where both the aesthetic, allusive or metaphoric qualities of the work were of primary significance. Aesthetic considerations operate on a number of levels in this series, enhancing the impact and scope of the work. The images are poised at a certain distance, where the pictorial effect serves to both introduce and partially screen what might be at stake in the scene. A reviewer of the book writes that 'it exudes a certain surface calmness in its detached gaze, its formal beauty and the muted tones of the often-vast landscapes Kander captures. However, the more you look, the more you experience a creeping sense of unease, a feeling that great chaos looms somewhere just out of the frame'.¹¹ Unlike images such as Burtynsky's, it is not only action that is withheld here, but also explicit visual evidence of destruction, in favour of a more elliptical framing and pictorial sensibility. The colours and textures of the photographs are rarely sharp, with most images shrouded in mist. The presence of mist results from the humid and often polluted climate of the region, but showcasing it is clearly the photographer's choice. It imbues the scenes with a veil of otherworldliness, perhaps that of fables and myths, to which we shall return later. But it also makes allusion to a tradition of Romantic painting, situating the work in a specific artistic context and lineage. According to some critics, the mists and near-abstraction in Kander's images are reminiscent of William Turner, but, arguably, the palette of greys is most evocative of James Whistler's *Nocturne* series of the Thames. The struggle to capture in fixed form the movement and formlessness of water and the ambience around it in the sepulchral greyness of London is dominant in the Whistler series,¹² while the same can be said for substantial sections of Kander's *Yangtze* (**Fig. 2**). However, this is no stylistic mannerism, but simply a response to place and time.¹³ Indeed, once the journey moves to its final stages in the undeveloped western provinces, where the air is palpably clearer and the vast swathes of steppe, mountain and sky dominate the view, Kander's images radiate with clarity and colour (**Fig. 3**).



FIGURE 2 Nadav Kander, *Nanjing IV*, Jiangsu Province, 2006



FIGURE 3 Nadav Kander, *Shigu IV (Great First Bend)*, Yunnan Province, 2006



FIGURE 4 Nadav Kander, *Three Gorges Dam II*, Yichang, Hubei Province, 2007

Perhaps the painter most evoked in the *Yangtze* is Caspar David Friedrich, through his sublime landscapes, sometimes empty of all signs of humanity, and sometimes populated by solitary figures dwarfed by the awesomeness of nature (**Fig. 4**). The relationship to Friedrich's work and the idea of the sublime is regularly picked up in discussions of the *Yangtze*, as both subject matter and manner of representation resonate strongly with themes of vastness and solitude, though the artist intriguingly claims that these were not conscious decisions when making the work. He suggests that his own concerns and associations, which he generally guards so as not to interfere with those of the viewer, seem to have met those of his predecessors in a deeper, instinctive way.¹⁴ In that sense, we could say that the sublime in the *Yangtze* series is 'rediscovered' rather than referenced.

Whilst the Western Romantic tradition is indirectly, if powerfully, evoked in the series, the artist also references traditional Chinese landscape painting in a more direct way. The Yangtze is the archetypal Chinese river and appears prominently across traditional representations. Kander acknowledges this with a few of his photographs closely matching such scenes, as well as showing a painting in one of his rare interior shots (**Figs 5 and 6**). The strong stylisation and metaphoric significance of such painting is arguably another allusion to Kander's aspiration to transcend the merely documentary. The significance of all these painterly references is twofold. On one level, they suggest an affinity with the themes of its predecessors, most prominently the sublime and man's helplessness in the face of nature, which seems to be inverted in the *Yangtze*, where nature is apparently dominated by humanity's works. On another level, the positioning within art historical traditions reinforces the aestheticisation of the images. The latter is a calculated gesture, which, far from compromising the impact of the work and its capacity to be meaningful, actually enhances it.¹⁵ Acknowledging the distance between viewer and subject – though we could equally say artist and subject – the work is posited in-between, not as a mere conveyor of the literal, as a sign, but as a poetic mediation and enriching metaphor, which 'increases' the world itself.¹⁶



FIGURE 5 Nadav Kander, *Xiling Gorge III, Hubei Province*, 2007



FIGURE 6 Nadav Kander, *Shigu III (Great First Bend)*, Yunnan Province, 2006

The role of the human figure in Kander's *Yangtze* is often ambivalent. It could be seen as equivalent to Friedrich's man, insignificant in the face of a vast and indifferent nature; but, equally, it could stand as a signifier of nature's fragility when encountering humanity's destructive power. More intriguingly, Kander further problematises the role of people in his work with a number of images that cannot be reduced to any dualities: where people are, what they are doing, what they wear, and generally how they engage with the river enhance the ambiguity of what is at stake, and what conclusions we should be drawing about the various tensions conveyed through the photographs. Such images as the man washing his motorcycle, the apparently proud builder in front of what we might judge as horrid new high-rises, the abject house-barges in front of a muddy embankment that might improve with some paving and a bridge for easier crossing, or several instances of leisure in Western-style riverside cafes, prompt us to check our instinct to condemn 'the modern' and yearn for an idealised, antediluvian existence in tune with nature, that may chime with our Western sensibilities but comes up against the infinitely more complex reality of the people who live there now, with their everyday reality, aspirations and fears (Figs 7 and 8).

Kander provides a short commentary for each image at the end of the book. It offers some details about the location and the specific scene, sometimes relating to the conditions of life there – for example the strong military presence in Qinghai bordering Tibet – while at other times relating to the artist's thoughts and free-associations, such as the reference to an Antonioni film, a biblical story, and such like. Between fact and fiction, between the offer of information and the invitation to think above and beyond it, these comments contribute to the art/documentary ambivalence of the project.



FIGURE 7 Nadav Kander, *Chongqing VII (Washing Bike)*, Chongqing Municipality, 2006



FIGURE 8 Nadav Kander, *Yibin IV*, Sichuan Province, 2007

Beyond the impact of individual images, which have obvious autonomy and, on a very prosaic level, are sold as singular works of art, the *Yangtze* project arguably needs to be read as a series in order to be fully understood. While Kander has clearly stated that he is not interested in imposing a narrative on the viewer, he still provides us with ample material for constructing our own. Such a narrative could be, in the first instance, that of a journey. And it is quite significant that this journey began at the end, as Kander himself calls the mouth or the river in Shanghai, and traced the Yangtze up to its sources. Although travelling against the flow of the waters is not unusual in river journeys, in this case it resonates strongly with a movement against the tide of development, seeking a purer riverine world beyond the urban leviathans in the east. Pushing this association further, it is also possible to read this journey as a quest for origins, as a transcendence of the flow of history and its vicissitudes. Not, as already mentioned, in order to idealise a ‘before’, but perhaps to remind us that the remarkably enduring presence of the Yangtze river in the collective imaginary of all Chinese people – a collective, it has to be said, with far less in common than its modern rulers would have it – operates as a powerful vein of continuity across much diversity and disruption. And could also, therefore, serve as a reminder of what ultimately endures beyond the lifespan of a concrete bridge or even a massive dam (**Fig. 9**). The idea of the ruin, which is yet again ambivalently evoked in Kander’s *Yangtze*, showing incomplete construction *as* ruin as often as actual ruination, plays directly into this thematic of origins versus the flow of history, and comes back to the Romantic pictorial tradition.



FIGURE 9 Nadav Kander, *Qinghai Province II*, 2007

To conclude, the profoundly important questions about the environment and traditional lifestyles raised by the *Yangtze* series are situated in broader interpretative and poetic aspirations, which communicate the complexity of the situation and resist simplistic readings. The work remains ambiguously poised, because our own fears and ambitions are ambiguous, and the tensions between modernity and tradition, individual and collective, nature and artifice, are not easily resolved, nor do they always constitute clear-cut oppositions. Ultimately, in the spirit of the art they are evoking – one could risk saying ‘all art’ – these pictures transcend their specificity and become *also* about something else, in their capacity to be simultaneously specific and universal, explicit and allusive, present and elusive. It is useful to remember that an image, strictly speaking, doesn’t ‘say’ anything, for it needs to be interpreted to make sense. In our image-inundated world we tend to forget this, but all imagery is a form of abstraction, a reduction of reality because of dimensional and framing restrictions on one level, and a potential expansion in the realm of meaning on another.¹⁷ The photographic image’s ‘special relationship’ with the real does not exempt it from this condition, but defines its representational and interpretative potential. Kander’s wariness towards explicitness and didacticism, and the sustained overtures of his work towards the viewer, reinforces this interpretative potential to a considerable degree. Balancing between what is shown and what is withheld, what is given and what is remembered or imagined, between reality and construct, nature and artifice, the tensions at work in these photographs echo those of riverine conditions, and enrich our means of understanding the complexities of our late modern world.

Notes

¹ For a useful collection of writings addressing the subject see Liz Wells, (ed.), *The Photography Reader*, (London & N.Y.: Routledge, 2011); and especially Martin Lister, ‘Extracts from Introduction to the Photographic Image in Digital Culture’, pp. 218-227.

² Liz Wells, *Land Matters: Landscape, Photography, Cultural Identity*, (London & NY: I.B. Tauris), 2011, p. 2.

³ See, for example, Britt Salvesen (ed.), *New Topographics*, (Göttingen: Steidl Press, 2010); and Stefan Gronert, *The Düsseldorf School of Photography*, (New York: Aperture, 2010).

⁴ Walter Benjamin, ‘A Little History of Photography’, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2 Part 2: 1931-1934*, (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 510.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections of Photography*, Richard Howard (trans.), (London: Vintage Classics, 1993), p. 88.

⁶ Information taken from Artist’s Notes, *Nadav Kander: Yangtze, The Long River*, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), pages not numbered.

⁷ Introduction by Kofi A. Annan, *Kander: Yangtze*.

⁸ Marco Bohr, Review of *Nadav Kander: Yangtze, The Long River*, in *Photomonitor*, May 2012, <http://www.photomonitor.co.uk/2012/05/yangtze-the-long-river/>

⁹ Artist’s Notes, *Kander: Yangtze*.

¹⁰ Interview with the author, 7 October 2014.

¹¹ Sean O’Hagan, Review of *Nadav Kander: Yangtze, The Long River*, in *The Guardian*, 20 October 2010. <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/20/nadav-kander-yangtze-river-china>

¹² ‘A river runs through it’, review of James McNeil Whistler exhibition, *The Economist*, May 10 2014, p. 81.

¹³ Interview with the author.

¹⁴ Interview with the author.

¹⁵ This point is argued at greater length in relation to another contemporary photographer’s work in Alexandra Stara, ‘Traces of Trauma: The photography of Ori Gersht’, in *The Edges of Trauma: Explorations in Visual Art and Literature*, Benyei, T., and Stara, A. (eds), (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), pp. 188-189.

¹⁶ The notion of enrichment or ‘increase’ in art is explored in Hans-Georg Gadamer, ‘The Relevance of the Beautiful’, in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, N. Walker (trans.), (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 3-53.

¹⁷ Jacques Aumont, ‘Le cinéma, un art d’apparition’, in *Que Peut Une Image?*, Diane Dufour and Christine Vidal (eds), (Paris: Le Bal/Éditions Textuel, 2013), pp. 90-91.

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