

"Telling a story, you understand that if you try to talk about someone else's history, whatever you do, you will always describe your own. That is a good thing and a task to face."

A talk with Andrea Geyer on her current project "Spiral Lands"

On an evening in January Andrea Geyer gave a presentation at the Art Academy in Copenhagen. It was a talk, or rather a sharing of material, of "Spiral Lands" (working title), a project she is currently working on. At this stage the project was presented as a slide show showing black and white photographs of landscapes of the American South West, landscapes that seem so familiar because of their extensive use in movies. Two images of the same landscape shot from slightly different angles followed each other. Along with the slideshow Andrea Geyer read aloud from an unauthentic diary of traveler who is observing the land and the landscape, meeting people, listening to and reflecting upon their stories as well as on writing of history as such. Many very interesting considerations came up around writing of history, ideas of authorship and questions of identity in relation to land. It gave me a lot to think about, and in a recent conversation I had a chance to ask Andrea some further questions:

AG: "Spiral Lands" is a continuation of my interest in the constitution of (national) identity and belonging that started with my work Interim, investigating the experience of immigrants in New York in 2002 and continued in "Parallax," an observation of the state of citizenship of the United States, in the summer of 2003 when the U.S. invasion into Iraq occurred. "Spiral Lands" looks at questions of identity in relation to land, and entitlement to land on the basis of cultural identity, using the American Southwest as an example.

I am interested in the Southwest because it is a land and a landscape that as a site and an image has been claimed and appropriated by many different cultures and groups: First and foremost the people who have lived and are living there since thousands of years, especially the Dineh (Navajos), the Weeminuche (Ute Mountain Ute) and the many Pueblo societies of that region, then the Spanish and later the European/American settlers that came with the Westward expansion to claim this "undiscovered" land for them. When I say the Southwest, I am referring to the four corners region where the states of New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Utah meet. The local cultures ground their identity deeply into the land, they are situated there through layers of histories and generations. From the settlers perspective the land seemed to stand for an undetermined wilderness rich of natural resources. A place to have a new start, away from the density and repression of Europe and the urban centers developing at the east coast. Photography and the photographic image played a mayor role in creating this image of the West. The natural sublime was merged with the technical sublime of progress. The term Manifest Destiny and the Frontier was created to create moral justification and the frame into which the individual settlers could inscribe a secure space for themselves as part of higher aims.

With this came the shift from the idea of land to landscape. "Land" is something else than "landscape." The land is the physical earth, landscape is a land that has a view put on it, an angle of observation, a perspective, an order. It is important to mention that a frame in that sense is something utterly European, it always implies a form of mastery. Visually and metaphorically. The Settlers came with that frame, they came with an organization in visual terms. The image of the land had come first. Then as a third element in my investigation, I am looking at my own fascination that I share probably with most contemporary European travelers in the Southwest. The enormous impact this waste nature has on the body, the light and the space. Why am I interested in taking my camera there now again, this time it is an old fashion tool, and take pictures. What are my desires that I bring to this land...now not as a settler but a tourist.

NDB: "Spiral Lands" is based on immense amounts of research. How has your work process been in relation to this project?

I am collecting material, visual, oral, written. It is a process of learning, and of storytelling. To tell a story that you have been told, you need to listen first. I have been told, I am learning a story to retell. If I don't retell there is no need to listen. The characters, the sites, the events to be re-articulated at any given moment any number of times, that is the potential of listening. It is in its repetition that histories are woven, thin transparent layers stacked on top of each other, each retelling a small piece in the building of the (hi)story over time, over people, over sites of the telling. My work is part of that process.

NDB: In your talk I thought it was really interesting how your role or your position is reflected through the framing and the lens of the camera, and that leads to the question about how your identity, or the identity or desire of an artist come into play in a project like this...

AG: I think if you don't describe the position from which you start your investigation, your investigation is not interesting, it does not have a ground. It is also a critical reflection upon this idea of a modern (hero) subject who "puts the finger on the pulse" of the earth and translates through art the truth to a general audience. It is a role that I find deeply problematic and would like to challenge in me as an artist and the audience as the recipient. I just don't believe in this figure. What I am doing as an artist is in a way creating another document put into the mix. And in that document, I chose to include the artist/the researcher as part of it. The critical and the uncritical desire that drives me to work is as much under investigation as every other thing that I encounter in this project. It is right here where it becomes messy, uncomfortable and complicated, where you have to deal with failure, desire in the making, the viewing, and the impossibilities... But it is also here where you can find a lot of possibilities and a lot of good and productive questions to ask. Where you don't know the answer it is interesting to stay.

NDB: In several of your projects you work around ideas of citizenship and national belonging, and you combine abstract considerations with a more personal voice in

form of a protagonist. In your presentation of "Spiral Lands" you used a diary format of writing...

AG: The diary format of writing will not stay in this project. It was just a try-out to see what happens, when you put a text into the diary format. Spiral Lands can not only have one voice, and this is exactly what this format produces: a coherent subject that has the power to write its own history. That is limited as a mode of thinking, because it personalizes the experience, subjectivize it, but I am much more interested in "the personal" beyond one individual, beyond the researcher and its subjects and beyond the conception of having the power to write what that is.

NDB: In your earlier projects "Parallax" or "Interim" you have a main character, which you use in order to introduce different perspectives or voices...

AG: I call them protagonists, because I think what they do is, that they put something into action. I am interested in them as figures, written into their position and writing their position at the same time. That is something, which is always a part of my work and always has been; this moment when you are performing an identity that you are assigned at the same time as you are producing that identity. And those two processes are not congruent. I am invested in that tension, in the multilayered contradictions that are played out when a position / an identity is put into action. That is why the protagonists play such an important part in my work.

In "Spiral Lands" I will have more than one protagonist. In this project I would rather call them "voices," and I think there will be more than one. There are a lot of challenges at the moment I start talking about Native American history (or any other history). Telling or I should say representing a story, you understand quickly that if you try to talk about someone else's history, whatever you do, you will always describe your own. That is a good thing and a task to face. It has not been easy to face these challenges and go into these problems and not shy away from it, but just take them as the inherent failure, which is actually what makes this project possible and relevant.

NDB: I guess this space between documentary and fiction gives a possibility of using a research-based strategy in relation to working with art...

AG: If I should be polemic I would say, that documentary is fiction and fiction is documentary. For me it is not so interesting to go into these binaries created by certain disciplines, because I don't work with these terms or categories. So for me all the projects I do are documents of a certain moment, they are documents of a present moment in one way or another. Art for me is a creation of layers of documents among many other layers that are created. I think it has become really important in this country, and I am sure in Europe too, to be aware of the struggle that happen right now from all kinds of places trying to claim in this very moment THE historical voice, the voices who try to write the past as "History". The voices that create knowledge, social memory and therefor the identities that come along.

But these questions have been recurrent in my work. The project "Information Upon Request"(1999-2000) is an observation of the status of gender. I am born in the early 70s, so I grew up with feminism already as an institution. Being then 30, I was wondering: Who am I? What does the term "woman" mean to me, or to my contemporaries? The project "Cambio de Lugar"(2000, a collaboration with Sharon Hayes) considers the status of feminism if you look at it across different nations; in "Interim" What is the status of being an immigrant in New York City in 2002? Or "Parallax": What is the status of citizenship in the United States under the Bush administration, the invasion into Iraq and all the legal and illegal changes that are happening?

"Spiral Lands" is very much about the present moment, where there is this air around in the language of the Bush administration even if not spoken of a "manifest destiny", "we are called to do this as a nation..." Furthermore claims of entitlement to land are made here and in the middle east. Moral Values are proclaimed that were never lived, again, capitalist interests are the driving force. The Iraq War has the rhetoric of being the faith of the United States, but it is *rhetoric*. For me it is interesting then to go back and look at the westward expansion and the genocides that went along with it under the pretense of the quest of "civilization," (while acting most uncivilized) and along this effort demonizing another culture, another religion and trying to systematically destroy it. I do not want to parallel these two events, but they certainly relate to each other as strategies, which are very dominant in our so called "western" cultures. The entitlement and the presumed moral superiority is yet again put into action...

NDB: I guess it also relates to your working title to see historical patterns as spiral movements...

AG: Yes, you can say (as Marx did) that history repeats itself. I think it is very important to not only to compare the present moment to the past and learn from that, but also to learn from the present moment about the past and how it is written. The learning here goes in both directions. I have been told that the Dineh don't perceive the present as separated from the past, that all events of the past find their representation in the present. The Spiral can be seen as the representation of the world in motion, in time and space, where lines lay side by side without touching but nevertheless shaping each other. Somewhere else I have been told that you need to separate the past from the present to gain perspective on history. Saying that it reminds me of my experience while being in Chaco Canyon standing on an overview where in my experience the land and the landscapes seemed to be inherently opposed and nevertheless inseparable.

Andrea Geyer was born in Germany (1971) and lives and works in New York and Freiburg. Her work has been exhibited internationally (among others: Witte de With, Whitney Museum of American Art, Serpentine Gallery, Manifesta 4) She also is and has been involved in various curatorial, organizational and collaborative projects. She is currently a professor at Konsthögskolan in Malmö. For further info: www.andreageyer.info

