

Photographing the Barents Region

Morten Torgersrud



[Fig. 1]

I am based at the Bergen National Academy of the Arts, where I am now in my final year in the Program for Research Fellowships in the Arts – a program that is still being developed. Since I am still enrolled in the program, the work at Apexart is “in progress”, at least in the sense that I will be presenting it for a final evaluation in June 2009, possibly with more pieces.

I think of my project as a photographic landscape project, where I try to consider ontological and conceptual aspects of photography and space, and the relationship between the two. The research seeks to develop perspectives on photography through its relation to a particular political-economic landscape.

Geographically, the project relates to contemporary political configurations of the landscape in northernmost Europe. This area includes the northern parts of Sweden, Norway and Finland, as well as northwestern Russia. It could be referred to as Barents Region (a concept from transnational foreign policy) or as Sápmi (ethnic/indigenous territory). Additionally, it could of course be seen from the perspective of nation-states. These different configurations of landscape exist “together” as contradictory understandings and practices in the landscape. This is the backdrop of the project.

The sociological or philosophical theory on space that I have been examining has a common view of “global capitalist modernity” as a structuring “form”, so to speak. Examples of that type of theory are Saskia Sassen, Peter Osborne, or David Harvey. What I derive from these theoretical perspectives is:

<http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n2/torgersrud1.html>

- 1) An understanding of place as constructed or produced. This is important in relation to structures such as Sápmi or Barents, as geographies that are configured by cultural, political, and economic practices.
- 2) The status of the local in relation to this, including a consideration of a dynamic between the fixed/local and the circulation of commodities or capital.
- 3) The questions that this raises with regards to topographic readability.



[Fig. 2]

In order to say something about the relation between photography and space in this context, I am trying to develop some parallels between sociological/philosophical perspectives, and photographic theory and practice.

From a photo-theoretical point of view, the writings of Walter Benjamin might be a place to start. In his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, Benjamin describes how technical reproduction breaks down authenticity and uniqueness in terms of space and time. Although he is talking about “works of art” in relation to technical reproducibility, he is likewise describing effects of photographic technology.

A return to Benjamin could be useful, since photography, in addition to being a medium of the frozen moment and representation – which have been dominant ways of discussing photography since the 1980s – is also a distribution medium. Photography might be seen as site-specific and concrete in its representation of reality, while at the same time also opening up avenues for circulation of spaces and realities. In such a perspective, photography might be understood as both of the place and as placeless. So, reproduction creates a situation where the “placement” of the photograph becomes uncertain. In this sense, there could also be something spatial at stake in how photography is used.

Building upon this perspective, I hope to explore in greater depth the relationship between the photographic form and modernity. Proposing that the photographic has certain structural capabilities with spatial implications, the assumption is that the reproducibility of photography is related to features of modernity such as fragmentation, uprooting, equalization, and the breaking down of distances.

The book presented in the *Nameless Science* exhibition at Apexart consists of pictures from sites that have some kind of political-economic function or value, including sites of cultural value, which I also consider political/economic. Containing 372 photographs (in this show), the publication reproduces the landscape as a series of individual sites [Fig. 1-4]. As a form, it unites a differential landscape and shapes it through repetition and systematic display. The volume of images presented without much contextual information pushes Walter Benjamin's concept of reproduction to the limit and levels the relation between the photographs. Benjamin described “the universal equality of things” made possible by reproduction.



[Fig. 3]

The equalizing also de-emphasizes the importance of the content of the individual image. This is also further emphasized by the choice of subject matter – architecture and built structures placed in the landscape. Architecture is used here as a cultural form shaped by economics, politics and technology, but whose readability in itself remains questionable. (Objects, buildings, monuments, landscapes).

The publication also “works” through a series of juxtapositions, producing shifting comparisons which unsettle clear readings of the meaning (or identity) of the places depicted. In one sense, this is visual; the forms of the structures in the photographs connect to each other in a way that displaces the content of the image to its surface. Or, in other words, lifts the attention of the work to the “surface” of the image, to a formal level. This might be described as an equalization of image and content. The paradox that follows from this equalizing is that the site-specificity of photography becomes equal to any other photograph within the system. At stake in this is a photographic vacillation between form and content, perhaps more precisely articulated by Peter Osborne as a “general specificity”.

Further, there are some historical (or contextual) references that I would like to mention here. Landscape; there is also a whole history where issues of culture, nation and identity have been constructed and discussed in terms of landscape and landscape images. A tradition that might be particularly strong in Scandinavia. Anthropology, ethnography; it could be related to anthropological or ethnographic projects that would map a place in a certain way by collecting photographic images of landscape and artifacts.

It also positions itself in relation to documentary work tracing a kind of embeddedness or belonging in the landscape. The failure of the book to speak of place in a “proper” way might relate differently to the idea of cultural mapping or representation than some other photographic projects from this area - I refer to both art projects and photographic projects outside of art.



[Fig. 4]

I would like to refer now to my other piece in the Apexart show. In my research, I have been using the photographic work of the socialist revolutionary Ellisif Wessel as a platform for investigating certain photographic issues relevant to the project. Wessel was active as a photographer around 1900 and was part of an upper-class elite of state employees that were more or less situated in the area, and left behind a substantial archive of photographic documents from the area, most of them made on different journeys. Today, the photographs she took appear in different contexts or archives, such as the national museum of photography, local historical museums, and sometimes as illustrations in books of different kinds. And also in art projects.

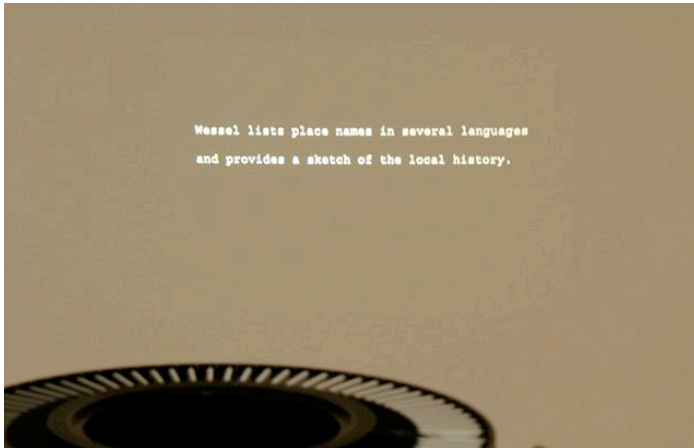


[Fig. 5]

Of special interest is the 1902 book *From our Border towards Russia*, which describes a journey along the Russian-Norwegian border through photography and text - describing both landscape and people [Fig. 5 & 6]. The book was published only a few years before Norway’s independence as a state, and the geographical configuration that the book proposes ties in

with the construction of the territory of the nation-state. Photography participates in this imagined geography – through the tracing of the border it represents. This is possible precisely because of the “distributability” of photography.

All of that has relevance both to the development of theoretical perspectives within the project – in particular the conceptual relationship between photography and locality – and it is also the starting point of one of my pieces in the *Nameless Science* show at Apexart.



[Fig. 6]

While the publication is almost an exaggeration of photographic reproducibility, the slide piece might be seen as a kind of withdrawal from (photographic) representation. The piece takes the form of a continuous loop slide show where text slides make references to Wessel. The journey is re-described by texts that focus on topographic aspects of traveling in relation to the act of photographing, thus examining how the photographic technology takes part in a certain structuring of space.

Response

Tamar Zinguer

First of all I would like to say that I am struck by the inventiveness of the Fine Art PhDs, and the way research is created, rather than conducted.

The archive

It is customary, at least in US doctoral research, to find an archive which has not yet been uncovered and bring its contents to light. Morten Torgersrud's ingenious work *constructs* an archive. His photography constructs data and, rather than categorize those data and organize them, works to create geographies and topographies. The work accesses a late modernist discourse in architecture – one that criticizes the precepts of modernism and involves photography.

The ordinary

Seen together, the photographs counter expectations of Nordic landscapes. They create another kind of site, one that is parallel to the Independent Group's search for the *As Found* aesthetic in the early 1950s in London, the search for the ordinary, or in the language of

Allison and Peter Smithson, a site “without rhetoric.” The same Independent Group created a show in 1953 called *Parallel of Life and Art* that consisted of a display of photographs, without captions, from all walks of life. The photographs were all reproductions, some of architecture, some of plants, others of archeology, x-rays, etc. No hierarchy was present, only relationships that the viewer could conjure up. The superimpositions denied any hierarchies. For Allison and Peter Smithson, what was innovative about the show was its “As Found quality; the statement that art results more from the act of selection than the act of design.” It seems that this is the modernity Morten’s work refers to and takes as a point of departure; a modernity already critical of modernism, of its fixed precepts, and formal logic.

The journey/the eye in movement

Parallel of Life and Art precedes by almost twenty years another photographic journey along the Las Vegas strip, *Learning from Las Vegas* by Venturi and Scott Brown, where the “ordinary and ugly” rose above the “heroic and original” qualities of modernism. Morten’s skepticism towards the character of Nordic places (at least as we New Yorkers expect them to be – full of ice and snow) raises questions about the nature of the ordinary. Is the local ordinary? Or is the ordinary global?

The Smithsons also published *As in D/S* in the early 1980s: the diary of a car’s movement, recording the evolving sensibility of a passenger in a car to the post-industrial landscape. It seems that Morten’s photographs belong in that category of “sensibility primers” to the political/economic values of site – while the nature of the vehicle of transportation here remains unknown. Sights or sites along a journey are usually identified by their monuments. Here the monuments are indistinguishable or missing, reinforcing that *As Found* quality, reinforcing the discovery of the ordinary. I could say that through this work we are Learning from the Barents Region.