WRITING WITH LIGHT

By Liz Wells.

No photography without light – this much is evident simply by dissecting the word photography on the etymological level. This article by Liz Wells analyses the role played by light as the working material of contemporary photographers. Light renders things visible, creates pictorial atmosphere and adds drama, provides information about the time of day and the season, and offers clues about the photographic location.

To talk of 'light in photography' is, of course, to repeat oneself; photography literally means writing with light – phography. Camera (method) and film stock or digital disc (medium) are also crucial, but without light there is no image. Even newer technologies (X-rays, holography, computer graphics...) have not replaced the photograph. In fact, it was not the use of light which puzzled early 19th century researchers: Plate had noted the principle of the Camera Obscura and, in Europe, lenses date from medieval days. Rather, it was fixing the image, making it permanent, which proved troublesome. In 1839, when Louis Daguerre in France and Henry Fox Talbot in Britain both announced their Inventions and Fox Talbot claimed photography as 'the pencil of nature', what they had achieved was (relatively) permanent and portable images. The idea caught on, and the rest is history.

between documentation and drama: light and the photographer

This article considers some of the ways in which contemporary photographers make use of available light to achieve particular image effects. The artists whose projects are discussed, all make work primarily for gallery exhibition and book publication (although some also take on commissions from time to time). Light gives shape to the detail of observational images and may also be used for dramatic effect. The relationship between that pictured and metaphorical effects, is a matter of individual style and also of the purpose or context for which the photograph or series is intended. US West Coast modernist photographers, such as Edward Weston or Imogen Cunningham, were famous for photographic studies that attempted to transcend the literal, to achieve a poetics of form. But the quality of available light, whether natural or artificial, is crucial to image-possibilities. Arctic light produces different effects than the more concentrated 'hot' light of tropical latitudes. Of course some effects can be constructed through digital studio adjustments (although painting in with pixels remains labour intensive), and landscape photographers may now use digital backs on medium and large format cameras (expensive, but available). But whether using new or older technologies, they work on location, experiencing the particularities of an environment, and enjoying observing and working with the effects of natural light.

Time of day, season, climate and weather all influence angle, colour and intensity of natural light. In pre-visualising images, photographers consider the aesthetic possibilities of particular light characteristics. Many are particularly fascinated by the effects of the sun, lining up to capture the first intimations of dawn, or the horizon before dusk. Ansel Adams' account of driving down the road, noticing the Moon Rise over Hernandez, New Mexico (1947), stopping the car, grabbing his camera – not forgetting a lens filter – and catching the last rays of sunset lighting up the tombstones in the foreground of the chapter is legendary. Such heroics remain commonplace, not the least in landscape photography which attracts the more adventurous.

Historically there has been a strong interest in exploiting the topographic light is used to foreground detail in that which is being documented. Among the best known pioneer photographers were those who charted the geographic contours of the American West in the second half of the nineteenth century, often employed on government or commercial surveys. Since the 1970s, Mark Klett and associates (www.thethreeways. org) have been revisiting sites, seeking original viewpoints and re-photographing 'views' in part in order to explore problems of accessibility, movement of light, effects of climate and weather, which influenced and limited the achievements of their predecessors. Their work testifies to renewal of interest in older procedures and processes. The process is painstaking: it can be a long wait until shadows replicate the 'correct' time of day.

the time factor: light changes over the course of days and seasons

Re-photography is central to the working method of English photographer, Jem Southam, who revisits sites which he has previously photographed, documenting the same place at different times of day and year or returning after a gap of many years. Through revisiting he becomes very familiar with the characteristics of particular locations and seasonal change. A series of detailed observations of change as the cliffs crum-
Below Uta Barth, "Ode to Tidal (out 2) der Serie "... and of time," 2000.
he frequently blurred photographs of streets and empty spaces. Uta Barth, artists, working
that would identify the location or how the idea for the
photograph emerged. The almost impossibly magnified
the picture engages the
observer to dwell on details
and look for fine nuances in this
case, namely the interplay of
light and shade on the
sofa and the rear wall of the
room.

The simplest forms have authority – like a blank
white light, and how do you photograph that?
You need a framework to make it visible. But this
is not simply white light; it is the result of too
much information. So much too is nothing, which
makes sense to me." Hiroshi Sugimoto

ble at Sidmouth on the south-east Devon coast involved
regular visits over a period of 18 months (December 1999 to
May 1999). Botanical and geological detail is revealed as are
effects of season, light and weather. He usually photographs
soon after dawn, and avoids the sharp light of summer. He is not
interested in the poetics of shadow play his observations may
have metaphorical implications, but they are not operatic.
Rather, his pictures, shot in uniform light, allow us to exam-
ine environmental detail.

He is by no means alone in this interest and methodical
approach. For instance, Danish-Icelandic artist, Olafur Eli-
asson, best-known for kinetic light sculptures and ambitious
light installations (see Dagstuf and Architecture, issue 1) also
makes photographic series where, like Southam, he uses
repetition to detail change or difference. Gallery Installation
blocks together separately framed images. One such series
shows a series of fronts of buildings in Reykjavik (Iceland),
developing from landscape format images on the left across
to portrait format frames to the right. Our attention is drawn
only to individual facades depicted, but also to geometric
differences as the frame of the picture echoes the shape of each
deline. Evenness of light adds emphasis to formal similari-
ties and differences. A set of landscape panoramas, also from
Iceland, is unusual in integrating black and white and muted
colour images: the subtlety of change means minor distinc-
tions come to seem highly significant. Both these photo-
grahers work very carefully with available light, but my point
is that they do not draw attention to it.

By contrast, a number of photographers are interested in
the dramatic effects of light. In Modernist Journey (2003) Nor-
wegian photographer, Ane Hjort Guttu, captured the effects
of the movement of light on both the natural environment
(the mountains or the shore) and on modern architecture.

THE PINHOLE CAMERA:
Meditations on Light and Colour

Many photographers are directly concerned with light itself.
Uta Barth photographs exterior and interior scenarios, devoid
of people. She is not concerned with subject-matter; rather
she draws attention to the presence of light and its effects in
any scenario, and also to processes of observation and see-
ing. It is as if she is exploring stages as backgrounds on which
a drama might play out, but is not doing so at the moment.
Finnish artist Marja Piessa is similarly interested in the effects
of light and the experience of looking (see also p.36–39). She
sits, pinhole camera on her knee, facing north across the lake,
open to elemental light and colour. Each print is based on
long exposure, softened by slight movement as the breath;
the series title Like a Breath in Light seems enigmatic, but, in
fact, describes a process which is contemplative. Each is cap-
tioned simply with a date, and the series is installed as verti-
cal blocks of images, seemingly eternal as they are behind
but unframed, supported by (almost invisible) fishing
wire (taut from floor to ceiling). We view the shifting effects
of light as a spatial installation; the effect is sculptural.
Symbolic interpretation is very open. One response is to consider
our own space and how we occupy, impinge upon, or pass
through environments. Just being is important. A further series.
Interior/Exterior, symbolises the extent to which the natu-
ral is incorporated into everyday consciousness. This series
uses long exposure and the camera obscura effect of reflected
external scenery into internal space; the projection becomes
superimposed on the domestic. Her method was to cover the
window with black plastic, cut a hole in it fitting a lens. The
everyday room is transformed, as was Plato's case. She then
photographed the inhabitant of the room in this intermingled
space wherein the reflected exterior transformed the everyday
interior. (Pirillo, 2002: n.p.)

The effect is unpredictable; the final picture could not be pre-
determined, and the imagery testifies to the unexpected or unconscious amalgam. As the
artist remarks: 'the photographs began to form not only as
the charting of the living environment of a human being,
but also of the landscapes of the mind: reflections of thoughts,
dreams, fears and reverses.' (Pirillo, 2002: p.9)

By contrast, a number of photographers explore artificial light
as a dramatic force. Brassai's 1930s street scenes from Paris
by Night exploited the intensity of effects of existing artificial
light and shadows cast. Philip Lorca diCorcia placed trigger
flashlights in public places, highlighting the facial expression
and body language of those who happened to pass by. Hiroshi
Sugimoto achieves his dark meditative scenes through long
exposures and even light, exploring the inter-relatedness of
light, time and space. His Thirteen series (begun in 1992) is
particularly notable: working in the USA, he visited old movie
palaces (including Grauman's), exposing the film for the length of the pro-
jected movie with the film projector providing the only lighting.
The lengthy exposure erases all detail in the ensuing image so
as to create a white luminosity as a rectangle at the centre
of a black frame. Building, cars and surrounding have disap-
ppeared into the blackness. An abstract landscape! He has also
experimented with the effects of candlelight, photographing
candles silhouetted against black backgrounds or, in the case
of his major exhibition at the Serpentine gallery (London) in
2004, installing a candle so that the flicker of light animated
the darkness of the room in which it has been placed.

The Light of Home: Local Affinity and Atmosphere

For his series Imaginary Homemaking, Finnish photographer,
Jorma Puranen, like Sugimoto, used black and white, in this
case to reference nineteenth century photography. He repho-

ingraphic ethnographic photographs of Sami people (Lapplanders)
from the archives at the Musee de l'Homme, Paris, printed the images onto acrylic sheets, and carried them to the north-
cern dopes of Norway and Sweden, physically imposing them
within their 'home' environment for re-photography. Again
this was something of a heroic process: having put them in
place, he had to wait for the daylight to reach the intensity
necessary for photographing, by which time the snow would
have softened; sometimes he had to wait all day until the sun
down; the snow froze over again, and it was possible to re-
trieve the images. He views the experience of waiting, con-
templating and listening to the environment in the remote
north as part of the process of picture-making. He uses colour
for other series, for instance, in Language is a Foreign

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Country, likewise made in the Arctic. Here, the strong light produced extreme blues and whites, which he used as backdrops against which to stage pictures which say something of language and difference. He installed flags (white, red, black or blue) on which various words are inscribed, usually in Sami. Sharp colour contrasts lent extra emphasis to the foreignness or otherness to which he is drawing attention.

Quality of light is a key element determining what can be achieved pictorially. This obviously varies in different parts of the world, in part due to local environmental circumstances (industrial smog, ice mists) and in part due to latitude, that is, closeness to the equatorial arctic of the sun. There is a striking contrast between the cool white light of Nordic or North Canadian areas, and the more amber tones of Mediterranean or Mexican light. Warmer intensities not only lend colour but also drama to imagery. Mexican photographer Gerardo Montiel, works with a combination of natural light, artificial light and colour filters to stage images which variously reference well-known paintings, simulating the storytelling functions once ascribed to fine art. Like Puranen’s work, the images are highly manipulated. But differences in quality of available light contribute significantly to the different visual effects, affecting our response to the pictures.

**SUN, MOON AND STEREOSCOPE: EXPERIMENTS WITH LIGHT SOURCES**

Light need not be sunlight. Susan Derges constructs images through an amalgamation of transient light and specific artificial light sources, thereby creating mists or abstractions landscapes. In an early series, *The Observer and the Observed*, her own eyes are reflected not so much on water as seemingly behind a surface of water, sometimes garnished with what appear to be glass beads. In fact these are droplets created through sound vibrations from a strobe light; the droplets act as tiny lenses. The same water appears as a flow when exposed under constant light as general light emphasises movement. Shoreline (1998), a further series of experiments with light, took her to Devon, on the south coast of the uk. The pictures record the movement of the seventh wave by moonlight — although not full moon as that would be too bright. The method is direct; there is no camera involved. The prints are made through chemically pre-coating paper, carried on aluminium sheets, which is taken down to the beach and exposed below water, responding to ambient light and to the effects of an bank of flash lights positioned above. The sensitised paper responds to the swirl of water, foam, pebbles and sand, all of which leave their mark. The final picture in effect traces the ebb and flow of the tide. Likewise, in *The Streets* (2003) moonlight causes the reflection of plants and trees, and the effect of movement of water, to register as image.

As can be seen from the above examples, daylight, moonlight, and artificial light can all be used to create particular effects that contribute to the rhetoric of the photographic image. From the photographer’s point of view, light is a part of the material with which they work. As audience, we may be more or less aware of ways in which we are affected by light in photography. It is, however, undoubtedly a major influence in our response to particular images. The double nature of illumination, light and enlightenment, is surely no coincidence.

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