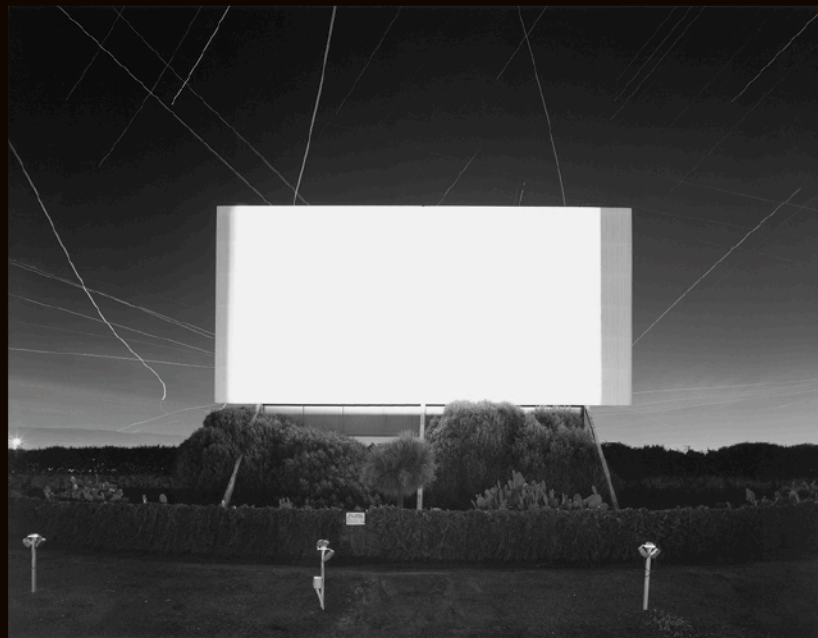


WRITING WITH LIGHT

Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Union City Drive-In*, 1993. The Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto used a large-format camera to photograph different drive-in cinemas in 1993. The only source of light is the film itself; the camera's aperture remains open from the first to last scene.



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 – *photo-graphy*. Cameras (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 have not superseded the photograph. In fact, it was not the use of light which puzzled early 19th century researchers; Plato had noted the principle of the Camera Obscura and, in Europe, lenses date from mediaeval days. Rather, it was fixing the image, making it permanent, which proved troublesome. In 1849, when Louise 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 metaphoric affects, 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 Adam's account of driving down the road, noticing the Moon Rise over Hernandez, New Mexico (1941), 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 exploring 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.thirdview.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.

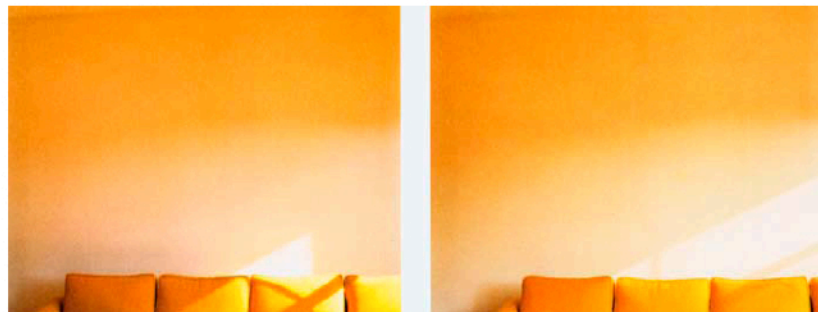
THE TIME FACTOR: LIGHT CHANGES OVER THE COURSE OF DAYS AND SEASONS

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, *Ohne Titel (not 7) aus der Serie "... and of time", 2000.* In her frequently blurred photographs of streets and empty spaces, Uta Barth avoids anything that would identify the location or how the idea for the

photograph originated. The almost ungraspable emptiness of her pictures encourages the observer to dwell awhile and look for fine nuances as in this case, namely the interplay of light and shadow on the sofa and the rear wall of the room.

ble at Sidmouth on the south-east Devon coast involved regular visits over a period of 18 months (December 1995 to May 1997). 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 metaphoric implications, but they are not operative. Rather, his pictures, shot in uniform light, allow us to examine environmental detail.



He is by no means alone in this interest and methodical approach. For instance, Danish-Icelandic artist, Olafur Eliasson, best-known for kinetic light sculptures and ambitious light installations (see *Daylight and Architecture*, issue 1) also makes photographic series wherein, 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 not only to individual facades depicted, but also to geometric difference as the frame of the picture echoes the shape of each edifice. Evenness of light adds emphasis to formal similarities 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 distinctions come to seem highly significant. Both these photographers 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 *Modernistic Journey* (2002) Norwegian 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. In

effect, she explores inter-relations between the natural and the cultural. In one image, the light falls on an earthy-coloured apartment block; in another, it falls from a similar angle and direction illuminating the side of a mountain, likewise the colour of earth. This use of light makes both appear monumental. A further picture captures the reflection of a white block of flats in the lake landscaped into the foreground. The photographer as observer is not modernist in the sense of extolling modernity, so much as post-modern in observing ways in which nature has been re-organised to incorporate culture. We read the reflection metaphorically, whilst noting and taking pleasure in the literal information that we are given as well as the pictorial effect. We are reminded that landscape pictures, however abstract and symbolic, tell us something about place and the effects of human intervention.

"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 too much is nothing, which makes sense to me." Hiroshi Sugimoto

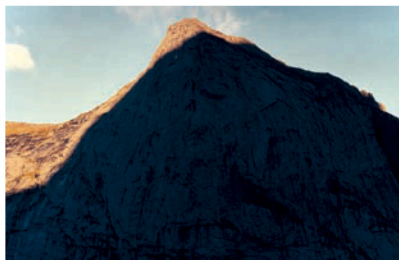
THE PINHOLE CAMERA: MEDITATIONS ON LIGHT AND COLOUR

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 seeing. 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 Pirilä 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 she breathes; the series title *Like a Breath in Light* seems enigmatic, but, in fact, describes a process which is contemplative. Each is captioned simply with a date, and the series is installed as vertical blocks of images, seemingly ethereal as they are behind glass 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 natural 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 cave. She then photographed the inhabitant of the room in this intermingled space wherein the reflected exterior transformed the everyday interior. (Pirilä, 2002: n.p.) The effect is unpredictable; the final picture could not be pre-determined, and the imagery testifies to the unexpected or unconscious amalgams. As the artist remarks: 'the photographs began to take 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 reveries'. (Pirilä, 2002: n.p.)

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 di Corcia 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 seascapes through long exposures and even light, exploring the inter-relation of light, time and space. His *Theatres* series (begun in 1978) is particularly notable: working in the USA, he visited old movie palaces (including drive-ins), exposing the film for the length of the projected 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 luminescence as a rectangle at the centre of a black frame (building, seats and surroundings have disappeared 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 Homecoming*, Finnish photographer, Jorma Puranen, like Sugimoto, used black and white, in this case to reference nineteenth century photography. He re-photographed ethnographic portraits of Sami people (Laplanders) from the archives at the Musée de l'Homme, Paris, printed the images onto acrylic sheets, and carried them to the northern slopes of Norway and Sweden, physically installing 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 went down, the snow froze over again, and it was possible to retrieve the images. He views the experience of waiting, contemplating and listening to the environment in the remote north as a part of the process of picture-making. He uses colour for other series, for instance, in *Language is a Foreign*

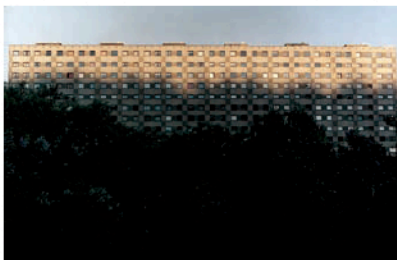


Country, likewise made in the Arctic. Here, the strong light produced extreme blues and whites, which he used as backdrop against which to stage pictures which say something of language and difference. He installed flags (white, red, black or blue) on which various words are inscribed, usually in Sami. 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, sea mists,) and in part due to latitude, that is, closeness to the equatorial range 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 intensity not only lends 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, intimating 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 very different visual effects, affecting our response to the pictures.

SUN, MOON AND STROBOSCOPE: 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 more-or-less abstract 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 garlanded with what appear to be glass beads. In fact these are droplets created through sound vibrations from a strobe light; the drops 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 a 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* (2002) 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 entendre* of 'illumination', light and enlightenment, is surely no coincidence.

For further reading:

Vanessa Couts's *Fire, Water, Air & Earth* – Hirshi Sugimoto at the Serpentine Gallery 02/12/2003, www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/ext-en/ART18855.html (18.7.06)
Susan Derges (1999) *Liquid Form 1985–99*. London: Michael Hue-Williams
Ane Hjort Guttu (2002) *Modernistisk røse*. Oslo: artist's book
Marja Pirttilä (2002) *Interior/Exterior*. Helsinki: Musta Talde
Jorma Puranen (1999) *Imaginary Homecoming*. Oulu, Finland: Pohjoinen
Jem Southam (2005) *Landscape Stories*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press
Liz Wells (2006) 'Arctic sublime' in *Breaking the Ice, Contemporary Art from Finland*. Bonn: Kunstmuseum www.henryart.org/utabarth (14.7.06)

Opposite Ane Hjort Guttu, (left) *Untitled (Bunes)*, (right) *Untitled (Ammerud)* from the series *Modernistic Journey*. Documentation of observed objects is only superficially the main focus of Ane Hjort Guttu's attention in this series. In reality architecture and natural elements play a only a supporting role to the two main protagonists – light and shadow.

Below Jorma Puranen, *Imaginary Homecoming #2*, 1990. Finnish artist Jorma Puranen superposes several levels of time and reality in his black and white shots. Historical portraits of the Sami people are installed in the snow-bound landscapes of Northern Finland and rephotographed. Light and shade occurring in the landscape and on the portraits enter into dialogue with one another.



Liz Wells writes and lectures on photographic practices. She is curating *Uneasy Spaces*, an exhibition of work by 19 British-based artists working in photography and photo-video (forthcoming New York, Sept. 2006) and researched/curated *Facing East, Contemporary Landscape Photography from Baltic Areas* (UK tour 2004–2007). She is editor of *The Photography Reader*, 2003 and *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, 2004, 3rd ed. Her book *Land Matters* (working title), on critical currencies in contemporary landscape photography, is due for publication in 2007.

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