

The Antarctica photography of Adriana Lestido

A fotografia antártica de Adriana Lestido

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Abstract:

During early 2012, the Argentine photographer Adriana Lestido spent two months undertaking photography on the Argentine Peninsula of Antarctica. Hers is the first systematic photography of the region, and it demonstrates the attempt to capture visually the fully range of that landscape. Our customary imaginary of the Antarctic landscape is very impoverished, one of ice and white snow, with some scattered fauna. Lestido's systematic project reveals, by contrast, complex patterns of shifting climatic process and how shadow and light are far more complex than the conventional imaginary holds. A Guggenheim Foundation fellow, Lestido, who is known for her uncompromising photography of urban feminist social subjectivity, has, in a new phase of her work, turned to landscape photography and her Antarctica photographs constitute an highly original artistic undertaking to visualize how we might expand our understanding of the natural environment.

Keywords:

Lestido, Adriana. Landscape photography. Antarctica in photography. Environmental photography.

Resumo:

Durante o início de 2012, a fotógrafa argentina Adriana Lestido passou dois meses fotografando na Península Argentina da Antártica. A dela é a primeira fotografia sistemática da região e demonstra a tentativa de capturar visualmente toda a extensão dessa paisagem. Nosso imaginário habitual da paisagem antártica é muito empobrecido, um de gelo e neve branca, com alguma fauna dispersa. O projeto sistemático de Lestido revela, por outro lado, padrões complexos de mudanças no processo climático e como a sombra e a luz são muito mais complexas do que o imaginário convencional possui. Uma colega da Fundação Guggenheim, Lestido, conhecida por sua fotografia compromissada com a subjetividade social feminista urbana, em uma nova fase de seu trabalho, voltou-se para a fotografia de paisagem e suas fotografias da Antártica constituem um empreendimento artístico altamente original para visualizar como podemos expandir nossa compreensão do ambiente natural.

Palavras-chave:

Adriana Lestido. Fotografia de paisagem. Antártica em fotografia. Fotografia ambiental.

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In February and March, 2012, Adriana Lestido (Buenos Aires, 1955-) participated in a program in residency in Antarctica under the auspices of the Argentine Navy.¹ In the beginning she was going to be sent to Bahía Esperanza, a comfortable naval base on the tip of the archipelago that lies only a stone's throw from the South American continent. But because of the weather and higher orders, she ended up at the bare-bones base on Isla Decepción, which is still located on the Península Argentina but more in contact with the volcanic mass that characterizes the landscape of the Península. One nevertheless understands that, fundamentally, the continent that contains the South Pole is a vast unbounded extension of landscape that lies perpetually snow-covered: part of the unbounded or boundary-less nature of the continent is quite literally now due to the consequences of global warming, whereby traditional maps do not reflect its real contours, whose shifting nature can, however, be charted by Google Maps and more professional scientific instruments. This unstable, shifting geographic circumstance is part of an essential imaginary for Antarctica.

Yet in addition to the otherworldly nature of its white expanse, a whiteness whose tonalities bring with it a fundamental challenge to the photographer, the Península Argentina offers another visual circumstance: the presence of a competingly vast extension of volcanic rock whose blackness contrasts in a vibrant fashion with the legendary whiteness of the snow. Owing to geological conditions, the volcanic rock does not lie covered by the snow, because of which the first thing that one sees, whether the photographer or her reader, in a rather jarring fashion is the panorama of volcanic blackness on its own or, in patches, the black mass covered by white patches of snow: since this is an area of semi-active volcanoes, a fair amount of the snow melts. It is this conjunction that interests Lestido in particular, allowing us to experiencing what is, to the best of one's knowledge, a unique entry in the photography of Antarctica: not images grounded in the complex and seductive whiteness of the continent (which often provoke concepts of blindness associated with optics, weather,

¹ Lestido provides an account of her personal experiences, invaluable for understanding her affective engagement with her surroundings during her photographic expedition, in *Antártida negra: los diarios* (2017). It is a fascinating document on its own because of its deep emotional intimacy, although some readers will regret the total absence of information regarding the details and challenges of this unique photographic undertaking.

and wind conditions), but rather in the intense blackness that profoundly alters our understanding of the Antarctica. The results of Lestido's residence on the continent were published in the photobook, with a black cover to echo the volcanic rock, *Antarctica negra* (2017). Between August and November 2019, Lestido undertook a similar photographic expedition on Svalbard, a large Norwegian island that lies in the Arctic Ocean, approximately midway between continental Norway and the North Pole. Lestido has yet to publish the results of this expedition.²

Black is a mysterious "color", first of all because it absorbs all other colors and customarily prevents us from focusing on details that, in one way or another, organize semiotically what it appears to hide or cover over: hence the force of the metaphor of the "black hole" so important in theoretical astronomy and in its extension to the interpretive process of visual artistic creation. Anyone who works in fashion design knows there is no such thing as "black"; rather there is a broad spectrogram that colloquial speech synthesizes with one simple adjective. And when black appears in a place where we hardly thought it possible—the Antarctic landscape "that we all know" must be white (a "color" that has its own broad spectrogram), and when black occurs alongside the assumed overwhelming whiteness of the snow, the reader suddenly feels the need to recalibrate in a radical way the process of seeing and interpreting. In fact, a recurrent theme in the diary that Lestido kept during her experience in Antarctica concerns, in the segment that relates to preparations for the excursion, how she is going to deal with the white vastness of the continent. It is clear that she did not know in advance that she was going to end up based in the volcanic beds.

Lestido, who has, among many other important distinctions, held a John S. Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship for Latin American Writers and Artists, has pursued two main thematic lines in her photographic oeuvre. She is internationally known for her examination of the lives of marginal individuals in the urban sociohistoric context of Argentina, especially as regards their life experiences contingent upon the material complexities of the city. Moreover, her work has focused on the status and experiences of women. Lestido first came to prominence as part of the photography of postdictatorship (late 1983-) in Argentina and numerous projects

² Lestido's interest in the Arctic clearly references William Bradford's pioneering work in the region. INTERIN, v. 25, n. 1, jan./jun. 2020. ISSN: 1980-5276.

associated with redemocratization and the organizing principle of **nunca más** (nevermore), which became the title of the report of the government commission on the disappearance of persons during the neofascist military dictatorship of 1976-1983. Her intervention into questions of social justice in the context of the redemocratization of Argentina is represented by the photodossier of images from the women's prison in La Plata (the capital of the province of Buenos Aires), *Mujeres presas* (2001). In addition to addressing implicitly the social question of the imprisonment of women, the dossier also alludes indirectly to the utilization of incarceration by the military of socially inconvenient citizens or their internment in psychiatric institutions like the Hospital Borda (see Eduardo Gil's photography in this regard). Alongside the images of violence in prison, Lestido also focuses on the affective relationships that develop between incarcerated women. Subsequently, Lestido will explore the complicated psychological and affective relationships between mothers and daughters in *Madres e hijas* (2003), a long-term project involving four mother-daughter pairs that was the subject of her Guggenheim award. Coming out of an early career in photojournalism, Lestido evinces in this body of work a deep and moving connection with her subjects and the ability to portray them as complete social subjects and not merely as icons of dehumanizing sociological categories. Of particular importance are individual images such as that of a mother and her female child in one of the women's marches in Buenos Aires's Plaza de Mayo (*Madre e hija de la Plaza de Mayo*) or, as in her possibly most famous photograph, the women-centered close physical affection of Argentine *salsa* dancers in a dance hall (*La salsaera*).

Lestido's second line of thematic interest, on which her current efforts focus, involves the Argentine landscape, including the Argentine Antarctic, although her forthcoming work on the Norwegian Arctic represents a significant addition to her geographic focus. She has, to be sure, engaged in photography throughout Latin America, as confirmed by the publication *Interior* (2010), a title that is both geographic (in Argentina, interior refers to any locale that is not part of Great Buenos Aires, where a third of the national population resides. And it is, of course, also affective in resonance as concerns the need to reconnect with the national landscape as a whole. *Antártida negra*, with its radical lateral move to a landscape necessarily little known in the Argentine conscious, is confirmation of the importance of moving beyond a

specifically urban subject matter that is so insistently the emphasis of the Argentine photographic tradition.

Lestido's work has also included architectural photography, such as her record of the transformation of the former Palacio de Correos in the central historic core of Buenos Aires into the Centro Cultural Néstor Kirchner (*La obra* [2011]).

The reader of *Antártida negra* is thus invited, so to speak, to accompany Lestido in her discovery of the black continent. This is an important point in that a photographer may have an extensive familiarity and contact with her subjects and their lived human experiences before actually photographing them: how many times might Lestido have been witness to the women's marches in Plaza de Mayo or with the popular neighborhood salsa dancehalls before photographing them? Even in the case of her "interior" photography, these landscapes are not unfamiliar to Argentines, even if they are not always their preferred subjects. And while it is true that Lestido may not, in her National Geographic-style photography elsewhere in Latin America and the world (the Indian subcontinent for example), been previously familiar with what she would see, the latter is, nevertheless, part of a continuum of contemporary urban life in its sociohistoric contexts that is fundamental to her most reputed work. Consequently, and in contrast to the work of a photographer who may know profoundly the visual profundities of her subject and who decides at any moment to intervene in them with her camera, Lestido's Antarctic expedition involves as much the sharing of the experience of discovery of the Península Argentina and her affective reaction to it as it does the resulting images. Or, to put it differently, we read these photographs as involving as much the discovery of the subject matter as the recording of it, and that process of recoding is very much contextualized and highlighted by the affective experiences that underlie it. This, too, is an important point, especially to the extent that our culture "naturalizes" photography of other human subjects (that is, other as regards the photographer) as high on an affective scale. But while we recognize that a landscape image is, in some way, a part of a photographer's experience, is justified or motivated by an emotional engagement with it, we tend to focus on the physical contours of the image rather than the affective engagement it suggests: another human subject "smiles" or "frowns" back at the photographer, but a landmass or an oceanic expanse is "simply just there." Or so it seems to be if we choose to ignore the

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overarching affect that engages the photographer with that landmass through the camera lens. And this may be even more so in the case of Antarctica, where the prevalent icon is that of the white continent, populated exclusively by cute penguins—or by “child birds,” (“pájaros niños”), as Argentines call them colloquially. If affect is involved here, it is purely stereotypic in nature and hardly subject to complex emotional experience on anyone’s part. Thus, it is inevitable that the cover image of *Antártida negra* captures in such a visually impactful way the geological reality at issue. The result is a brilliant and impressive image, one that only falls short of being coextensive with the frame of the photograph in its entirety in allowing a band of open space that effectively underscores the massiveness of the rocky outcropping. Rather than a solid surface of black volcanic texture, it evinces traces of surface erosion that evoke the force of the wind and the temperature variations that, because of their intense frigidity, are so inhospitable for human life.

Picture 1 - Photo: Adriana Lestino.



This mass is set against the clarity of a sky that, while it is overcast as is often the case in the area, is free of the environmental contamination beyond the continent. Such will be the case as long as that continent is still only populated by military base

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personnel and the occasional scientific expedition and, still scant, adventure tourism. All three of these groups, to be sure, bring with them their own level of contamination, but it is still more likely to affect the ground surface than the air envelope.

The majestic hostility represented by this black mass of rock, as much unexpected because it is so relatively unknown—or “unfamiliar,” in the rhetorical sense of the word in formalism, is touched off by the emotion-engaging elatement of a solitary penguin that presides over something like a circumscribed level surface of the black stone. Penguins enjoy a heavy investment of poetic evocation for humans: their strange isolation; their quirky dissimilarity with what is customarily associated with the category of “bird”; their unearthly wide-eyed stare; unusual mating habits associated with them; and, most singularly, their ability to survive in the frigid landscape, made all the more poignant because of their quirky evocation of human figures. One thinks immediately of the Biblical injunction: “Go set a watchman” that concludes with the lesser known hemistiche “let him declare what he seeth” (Isaiah 21.6). In this way, via this “prophecy from the sea” (an attribute often assigned to oceanic birds), Lestido signals implicitly that the legendary flightless birds, ancestral, millenary inhabitants of Antarctica, mount a silent vigil against the invading forces to which their territory is exposed. It is well known how extensive the ecological threats are that penguins and other continent life are exposed to. Suffice it to say that one cannot ignore the consequences of the presence of military bases (and, eventually, the bases of scientific exploration and likely, ensuing exploitation). And needless to say that the photographer herself is one of the invading elements that threaten the region’s ecosystem. No one can believe that photography is merely objective documentary and that it does not constitute a measure of (potentially deleterious) intervention in whatever it chooses to bring into focus. The mere provocation of interest in a phenomenon is merely the first step toward material encroachment, the inherent pathos of so-called nature photography and its many parallels and derivations. Understanding this is an important question, because it shifts what might be a charming image of a penguin looking out over its natural habitat into a warning call regarding the dangers of the very presence of the human being who enjoys the ability to effect the photograph. The fact that the surroundings is that of the black volcanic rock is a strong

metaphor referencing how the continental landscape is much more than an untouched expanse characterized by accretions of romantic pathetic fallacy.

One of the most impressive images in *Antártica negra*, one of considerable ideological import, appears placed almost at the end of the photobook. It is an extension of open sky and sea, split into two equal segments. In the lower right corner, one can make out the beginnings of the shoreline. There are three figures in the photograph that are equally distributed more or less in the center of the image. There is a seagull floating over the water, and there is a penguin standing in the waves lapping close to the shoreline. The animal appears as though to be contemplating the horizon where land and sea come together. What the penguin seems specifically to be contemplating is a ship that occupies the horizon formed by the conjunction of sky and sea: we can make out the eyes of the penguin, but not those of the seagull, which allows for us to conjecture with regard to what might be the object of the vision of the planning bird. One might surmise that the ship might well be a military vessel, since there is as yet almost nothing of mercantile movement through the waters of that zone. Indeed, one will recall that it is the presence of the military base that allows for Lestido the opportunity to carry out her photographic project in that sector of the continent.

Picture 2 - Photo: Adriana Lestino.



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There is a long and questionable practice of anthropomorphizing the penguin, something that is readily seen in Luc Jacquet's film *The March of the Penguins* (2005) which, despite its notable visual beauty, avails itself of the biological cycle of the animal in order to erect a regrettable reactionary heterosexist discourse regarding unanalyzed concepts of matrimony and paternity. As self-evident as these concepts may be when applied to the societal parameters of human life—and they are only self-evident to the extent that they have been “naturalized” to the point of being virtually impervious to questioning exception—it is an inexcusable ideological sleight of hand to extend them as metaphors of the domain of non-humans. That is, as a consequence of such a sleight of hand, penguins are made to serve as nothing more than signs of a specific human social ideology. Yielding, nevertheless, to such a project of humanizing resignification of the penguin and extending the allusion to the bird as a sentinel present in the image on the cover of *Antártida negra* commented on above, one could say that in this case the animal serves as a witness to the material presence of the human invasion of the natural territory that the penguin has presided over, almost to the exclusion of any other advanced forms of life, since time immemorial (whales and seals remain consigned to the sea, and in the case of the seals, to the shoreline; the seagulls, although presiding in the air, are also confined to the shoreline on account of the sea life they depend on for sustenance).

Thus, in comparative terms, the enormous bulk of the ship traverses the horizon is its unrelenting arch of invasion of the waters of the continent. The penguin stands posted as a sentinel (a concept that might be extended to the seagull, as generalized synecdoches of nature), left witnessing futilely the human invasion that, in a proleptic fashion, augurs for the inevitable destruction of its world. Of course, one would not want to attribute a range of the human possibility to foresee the future to these birds, but cannot help but recall the powerful fact that the slightest human contact between one of them and a human being is sufficient to render the animal permanently ostracized from the flock. These are, at least, more benign anthropomorphizing attributions that contribute to a moving meaning for Lestido's image. The fact that everything is enveloped in a climatological shroud only serves further to cast an aura that is almost mythic in its evocation of the “epic” human conquest of the continents.

However, there is yet another dimension present here that lends the image a metaphotographic quality, and that is the non-visible presence (but still nevertheless an extremely fundamental circumstance) of the photographer herself. While the image enjoys a certain degree of authenticity in its relationship to the pristine natural setting being recorded in an almost clandestine fashion, it is imperative to understand that the photographer herself constitutes an invading force, given the technology of knowledge and control that she as a human being and as an “equipped” adventurer exercises over the realms she has been afforded the privilege and license to conquer. In this sense, the photographer serves as something like the scribes or chroniclers that accompanied the conquistadores of the Americas: they were far from mere passive witnesses to what they were reporting on. Rather, they were participants and accomplices in the project of invasion and, inevitably, in the unrelenting and irreversible transformation of what they saw and sought to record. Placed almost at the end of her photobook, it is as though Lestido, with this image, wished to problematize, in the form of an ideological metacommentary, the human dominion over Antarctica that her “machine” (to use a basic metaphor of Spanish for the camera) wished to effect.

I conclude with these observations because it is never merely a matter of assembling a dossier of beautiful images of a vast continent still, despite many available photographic images, as yet basically unknown to the world—and even less as regards its volcanic features. Rather, it is a question of postulating, in a synthetic fashion, a way of thinking about what must be our human posture in the face of a territory such as this whose conquest we have only begun to carry out. Moreover, *Antártica negra* demonstrates with renewed emphasis the degree to which Lestido is aware of the ethic questions surrounding photography, the degree to which it can never be merely “objective” or “innocent” and the profound degree to which simple act a taking a picture—not to mention the extensive manipulations to which it is subsequently subject—is always a profound intervention in the world. Far from simply “capturing” reality, photography changes it in incalculable ways, and even more so when we might assume, in its solid “thereness,” that there is little to be disrupted. It is the understated nature of so much of Lestido’s work, here and elsewhere, that most demonstrates the disquieting power of photography.

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