



Paola De Pietri  
In superficie. Appunti sulla natura

con un testo di Alessandro Rabottini

Opening: Wednesday April 2, 2025, 6–8.30 pm  
Duration: April 3 – June 21, 2025

An everyday estrangement

“We are used to relying on figures, and the landscape has no figure; we are used to inferring volition from movement, and the landscape, when it moves, ‘has no will’. The waters flow, and in them the images of things oscillate and tremble. And in the wind, blustering through the ancient trees, young forests grow, towards a future that we shall not experience.”<sup>1</sup>  
Rainer Maria Rilke

The most intimate contact that may be established with a writer is through their notes. It is not through listening to their words, for like what is printed, they are carefully honed beforehand. Instead, it is the pages of notes that bear witness to the daily unfolding of thought, albeit often in a slipshod manner: there is a feeling that lingers, not yet fully resolved in the form that remains; a shifting sensation that, in the final draft, will probably be suppressed if not magnified; a reasoning interrupted and never resumed, distracted like an inconclusive afternoon. Or an intuition that, from sudden and impatient, develops over time into a cathedral.

If notes—be they gathered in a notebook or jotted down in the margins of a text—are the realm of reflectivity as it listens to itself, they often also embrace the intrusion of something that comes from afar: a murmur, the echo of a house that has lost all its inhabitants but one.

Paola De Pietri defines the photographic works brought together in this exhibition as “notes,” the product of an accidental glance that punctuates research developed with rigorous sensitivity over decades. These photographs do not belong to the series through which Paola has presented her work over the years, both in exhibitions and publications. They are scattered elements, like those occasional texts that, in the interstices of the daily practice of writing, at a certain point might be collected together in those individual anthologies you never really know quite where to put on bookshop shelves. Books that are dispersed and episodic in nature yet which exude experience, for the daily commitment to something—be it writing or photography—is full of everyday impressions that transcend the coherence of any framework, be it theoretical or iconographic.

Indeed, photography is as much an art as it is a way of seeing that visually organizes the otherwise exorbitant experience we have of the world day after day, and by organizing it, often ends up producing it. And this is especially true if we observe how crisp Paola’s photographic gaze is, with how much clarity, in series such as *Da inverno a inverno* (2019–2020), *Questa pianura* (2004, 2014–2017), and *To Face* (2008–2011): the landscape is tactile and present, even though it appears remote in all its thinness. A common landscape, like the rural one that extends across Emilia Romagna, yet one that Paola captures almost by distilling it, with frugal intensity. The result of her dilated observation, one that defines certain moments and the contours of things and, by doing so, transcends them.

The format of the photographic series ensures a further level of intelligibility within the visual experience, because in some way, within a narrative unit, it manages to manifest the single experiential unit that each photograph withholds. And it is from this level of organization and intelligibility that the works in this exhibition tend to escape, slipping through the net of any cohesive story.

There is no horizon. These photographs lack one of the elements that best organize natural space on a visual level to the point that we call it a “landscape”: the horizon—also one of the main features of distance. Here instead, nature—the shadow of a bare tree, a snowdrift, the fullness of a field in bloom—saturates our field of vision. The photographic lens is immersed, steeped in it. These are pages from a diary that documents the search for intimacy with the manifestations of nature: that substance of which we are made yet of which any ultimate knowledge constantly eludes us.

For centuries, the words of poetry and philosophy have attempted to decipher and make intelligible this paradoxical and constituent participation in a world of elements whose language we do not fully understand, despite incessantly subjecting them to all kinds of investigation, control and dominion. Ours is a constant, intrinsic estrangement from nature, something the poet Giacomo Leopardi characterized as the substantial indifference of nature towards humankind, and that Romantic painting expressed in the solitude of the subject before a landscape. It is that extraneousness on which Rainer Maria Rilke based his proposal for a history of landscape painting: a proposal in which some anticipation of our current sensitivity to the ruinous character of extractive policies begins to seep through between the lines:

“So what does it matter if we transform the outermost surface of the earth, if we give an order to

<sup>1</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, “Worpswede,” in *Rainer Maria Rilke*, E. M. Butler (ed.) Cambridge University Press, 1947.

its forests and meadows and dig out of its bark charcoal and metals, if we receive the fruits of the trees as if they were meant for us—if we then recall a particular hour in which nature has continued to proceed oblivious to us, to our hopes, to our lives, with the sublime indifference and haughtiness with which its every gesture is charged? It knows nothing of us. However much men may have conquered, no one has ever been so great as to make nature share in his sorrow or in his joy.”<sup>2</sup>

Today we have abandoned this elegiac tone, and forgotten the sentimental reasons for lamenting nature’s indifference towards us, shifting the emphasis of the discourse to human responsibility and the predatory logic with which, for centuries, we have related to the environment. However, despite changing in manifestation and motive, this indifference remains the bedrock of the misunderstanding between human beings and nature: a misunderstanding that Bruno Latour—more than a hundred years after Rilke—coupled within the expansion of the concept of “living” itself:

“We are plainly affected by all the transformations that they tell us about every day in the papers: the issue of the climate, of these international gatherings to try to control biodiversity, and also by the issue of what progress and abundance really are. We realize that all these issues were associated with the world we lived in until recently: a world organized around the principle that things do not have the capacity to act. [...] Everything we feel, we humans and other living things, is subjectively interesting, but it isn’t what the world is made of. [...] Although it sounds strange to say this about science, it is a problem of metaphysics. The metaphysical background of the world we find ourselves in is one of things that are alive, made of living things. The world that the current situation, that Covid and climate change put before our eyes, is one that looks ever more like it were made of living things [...], yet it is a world of viruses.”<sup>3</sup>

According to Latour, we are no longer subjects who, modernly and through the sciences, attempt to know, control, and manipulate inert objects but ones “living among other living things,” and one of the consequences of this new perception of the very concept of “living” is the modification of the sense of distance: that same distance that lets us organize the world visually as a landscape through the institution of the horizon:

“The moderns had a cosmology that allowed them to expand globally, worldwide. Put simply, it was a very particular cosmology based on division, i.e. on the distinction between a ‘world of objects’ [...] and a subject that was somehow distant from it. When one now addresses the issue of the climate and viruses, that distinction vanishes: no one can say there are subjects far removed from the world where they find themselves.”<sup>4</sup>

The subject evoked in Paola De Pietri’s “notes on nature” lies at the intersection between two different, albeit contiguous, cultural sensibilities. On the one hand, it is a solitary subject, romantically caught in contemplation of a nature perceived as a horizon, thus a subject of distance, of subjective and perspective projection, of aesthetic representation (“Is there a landscape without figures that is not filled with the desire to speak of the one who has seen it?”<sup>5</sup>). On the other, it is a subject of identification, the bearer of a present gaze that adheres to natural minutiae, realizing their incomprehensibility by virtue of a nearby gaze, one that adheres to things and stands in the midst of them.

Many of the photographs in this exhibition were taken during solitary walks in the countryside around Reggio Emilia, a habitual practice for Paola and one that places the silent and prolonged patrolling of the environment and landscape at the center of her photographic practice. And it is no coincidence, perhaps, that the experience of walking alone, inhabiting natural space in solitude, are forms of the experience as much of the subject of Romantic painting as of a subject much closer to us: a subject at once isolated, hyper-connected, and constantly mediated.

Of nature, these photographs capture aspects and moments that border on the intangible, that capture its lability, like the fineness of a blade of grass whose shadow is as thin as a pencil stroke. They give us back a contradiction with which we ourselves are imbued, as if it were the atmosphere we breathe: our everydayness with fragments of nature increasingly isolated from each other, constant exposure to the incomplete sounds of a language we perhaps have never really spoken.

Alessandro Rabottini

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<sup>2</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Bruno Latour, *How to Inhabit the Earth: Interviews With Nicolas Truong*, Cambridge UK, Polity Press, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Bruno Latour, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, op. cit.