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**Raymonde April: Bifurcations, Notes, and Materials**  
**by Jean-Claude Rochefort**

*Clouds are . . . unseen bodies of wind, which sweep sea and land, yea, and the clouds of heaven, and tear and harry them with sudden hurricane; they stream on and spread havoc in no other way than when the soft nature of water is borne on in a flood o'erflowing in a moment, swollen by a great rush of water dashing down from the high mountains after bounteous rains, and hurling together broken branches from the woods, and whole trees too. . . . – Lucretius, De rerum natura, libri sex<sup>1</sup>*

The concept of landscape cannot easily be reduced to a specific genre or a particular type of visual or linguistic representation. Whether speaking of a space or its transposition into images or poetic words – as, for example, in Lucretius's writings – landscape remains labile and cannot be fixed by a simple impulse of consciousness. The common phrase "an unobstructed view of the river and mountains" is a perfect expression of the almost metaphysical dimension inherent to this term: the eye that delves far and wide in such a way that the subject is unable to actually grasp the cause of such transports. As it signifies both the space viewed and a view of the mind, the landscape is always a vague and subtle blend of self-projection and an invitation to go beyond the self.

–*"Raymonde, of all the landscape pictures you have produced, which seems to correspond most closely to the quintessential landscape?"* –*"The wind that blows through the tops of the poplars in Une mouche au paradis."*

According to Joachim Ritter, it was the fracture between man and nature that paradoxically gave birth to the landscape. Petrarch, in his story *Ascending Mount Ventoux* presents a major shift in the evolution of this concept. Petrarch points out that without a doubt "nature and landscape are the fruit or product of the theoretical mind."<sup>2</sup> In the fullest sense, landscape invariably takes us back to the perceptible link and aesthetic relationship that we foster with the natural environment. Might we extricate some essential aspects of landscape from a specific place, as expressed in Raymonde April's most recent photos? And why not? We are not on some quest for a

contemporary, original notion of landscape based on a well-affirmed discursive practice – exactly what we are doing when we take the time to see and analyze Raymonde April’s most recent photographs – rather, we seek to identify a specific sensibility, a sensibility that gives greater importance to an emotional connection to an the inhabited site.

The landscapes that Raymonde April is fond of are essentially anthropic: not only has human presence left its mark on the landscape, the natural order shapes the human presence in them. We are not witness to some osmosis or fusion between human being and nature. No, they remain parallel to one another. However, we may notice that each informs the other. A line stretched between two tiny poles is enough to understand that at this precise spot in the world, someone is drying their laundry and is presenting it for the contemplation of the surrounding nature. Independent of this obviously anthropic dimension, however, there is this essence of landscape that is set in motion and concretely manifest when we observe Raymonde April’s recent photos – an essence in the sense that we suddenly begin to question the being-there of represented nature from just a few signs, of its way of appearing and the way it keeps its distance from the self. In short, we ponder nature’s impermanence and its evolution. It is an essence that becomes even more explicit the longer we look at the fragments of the series *Sentier national*. “Essence” in this sense refers to a diffuse set of qualities in virtual movement, wandering over the surface of the images. These constituent qualities may come from the depths of the background, but not from nothingness. They seem to reach their destination, meaning the self, after covering their long and patient course: the photographic processing that April has the original shots undergo.

The tenuousness of the movement in these pictures reproduces, or re-creates, the look that gave them life. These pictures incorporate me into their field of vision and are therefore of my utmost concern. As they are directed at me in a face-to-face encounter, these pictures become, by this very fact, an incarnation of the look.

. . . The look, we said, envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things. As though it were in a relation of pre-established harmony with them, as though it were them before knowing them, it moves in its own way with its abrupt and imperious style, and yet the views taken are not desultory – I do not look at a chaos, but at things – so that one cannot say if it is the looks or the things that command.<sup>3</sup>

The essence of landscape in this way assumes that there is a deep harmony between the type of look cast upon objects of the perceptible world, of its pervading nature, and the final rendering through the chosen mode of representation. The picture links together the look cast upon the object and the object of the look to forge the framework of a filter. The world seems to come to light when I focus on the figures on the surface of the filter, only to vanish again and then be reborn when I go to the next photo.

In *Sentier national*, April has chosen to record her relationship with nature over time – more precisely, within the temporal range that she uses to divide it into sequences. Once the images in the series are mentally collected together, they become a unique site of lived experience perceived within a time lapse that we imagine relatively short. Sometimes they are colour shots, sometimes black-and-white. This alternation emphasizes the paradoxical actuality of phenomenological experience that the artist persists in piecing together – a futile act, as she well knows. What remains of this experience is its obviously faded character. Then, in the foreground of the second photograph is the hieratic profile of a friend holding a walking stick and looking behind her, perhaps for reassurance from the kindly presence of another friend a little farther along the slope of the path. These two figures not only occupy this place, they take part in it and emanate from it. They become one body with it. In this way, it becomes easy to think that this place inhabits them as much as they inhabit it. Moreover, the rocky outcroppings, the trees, the breaks in overcast skies, and the gravel path – all of Earth’s natural details – are formed out of the same unstable, minute particles moving about freely in space, holding on dearly to their visibility, as their existence is continuously threatened, their disappearance so imminent. In these photographs, an atomistic notion of nature is expressed in filigree and fabricated from countless inanimate corpuscles. It is a notion not incompatible with the phenomenological experience resulting from the exploration of the physical geography of this territory which is linked to the artist’s childhood.

Compared with the multidimensional sensations actually experienced during a walk along a park pathway or a hike in the mountains, the levelled photographic window cannot compete with the intensity of the aesthetic experience of direct contact with the elements in the outside world. As Raymonde pointed out in a recent video interview<sup>4</sup>, “A photo is a synthetic operation.” Any attempt to capture a landscape through the small opening operated by the camera’s optical device brings out the shortfalls and limitations of this means of expression. This is why this operation sometimes produces dramatic reductive effects that can be broken up through the redistribution in

time and space of the order and the succession of micro-events that sketch the course of life. But, according to Raymonde April, it remains that we have to be especially cognizant of the fallibility and limitations of the photographic eye when it collides with reality.

The landscape breathes in, swallows, devours, and draws attention toward it. Where does the landscape get this power of attraction? In *Inconsciences*, the landscape seems secondary, but hardly insignificant in this layout of antagonistic shots fighting for position. The intervals here may be perceived as tension regulators, which lend a rhythm to the breathless visual prose. Within these sequences, landscape serves the function of indispensable arbitrator. It serves as a topos of convergence, a place that assures a transition between the different shots, notably by filling emptiness with infinite space. As part of this personal cosmogony, landscape serves as the place of multiple horizons, a topos where everything transpires and expires. This is why these segments of the outside world may be described as internalized and are often reduced to powerful archetypes (the fog over the river, the wind in the trees, a path, a rock, clouds), presented as a kind of crystal-clear echo of the artist's self. Pondering landscape's place as a revelation of these short-lived states of being, it is located at the intersection of two or more pictures, inserted carefully within this circular, non-linear semasiology. Landscape becomes that inserted plane, a blank, a break in the phrasing of a sentence. This juncture provides the transition between the inside and the outside, a plane embedded between the subject looking at the object and the object struck by the look. There is a reference here to the Lacanian device of the picture screen.

Impediment, failure, split. In a spoken or written sentence something stumbles. Freud is attracted by these phenomena, and it is there that he seeks these phenomena, and it is there that he seeks the unconscious. There is something other demands to be realized – which appears as intentional, of course, but of a strange temporality. What occurs, which is produced, in this gap, is presented as the discovery. It is in this way that Freudian exploration first encounters what occurs in the unconscious.<sup>5</sup>

The unconscious, as Lacan repeated on many occasions, is structured like a language and is as structured as what are called lucid languages. To understand the ways a language operates, the transitional zones – the articulations – must be targeted. In some circumstances, a language might even be defined by the nature of these articulations. It is in these articulations that we find the amplitude, breath, and momentum that language needs to slip and slide from one image, metaphor, and symbol to another. In *Inconsciences*, April has created a full range of articulatory

strategies. This includes the analogical interplays between the natural and artificial, the temporal breaks and the transgressions of the unity of place, the inordinate deviation of scale between objects, the conflicted coexistence of animal and human kingdoms, the unlikely continuities between the minute details of close-up shots and distant horizons, the studied contrasts between scenes of clarity and the depths of obscurity – in short, a whole dialectic that makes use of a dynamic of opposing forces, organized and displayed in highly atomized sequences. But what's the point of raising so many possibilities?

In the photograph *Mosaïque*, we begin to get an answer. Here, we find a mosaic of small photos lying on the floor of the studio waiting to be organized. They are scattered around like letters of the alphabet fallen out of a suggestion box. These are pictures at rest. This latent state suggests, implores in fact, that they be given some sort of order. There is an instant request, to return to Lacan's words, that they be placed in order. In his biography of Sigmund Freud, Peter Gay tells of Freud's passion for archaeology, comparing analysis to the work of uncovering buried cities.<sup>6</sup> Once all the layers that mask these ancient cities have been removed, their appearance and exact layout can be figured out. This layout reveals so much that from a few rescued remains we are able to make out complete civilizational features of a lost society. Following the example of Freud, who was compelled to undertake the daily discipline of self-analysis through writing, April is committed to photographic recording. Through her imposing accumulation of pictures, really just a heap of flickering memories, the artist incites encounters, favouring some combinations to the detriment of others, shakes up established orders and conditioned reflexes as if, for example, to rebuild the world along more linear contours. With gaps and fault lines inevitably arising along the way, a fresco is pieced together from the scattered fragments. Otherwise, the interest of the associative process resides in the fact that structures are never predetermined and they never respect pre-established patterns. It couldn't be any other way, because any analysis of what happens in the bedrock of the mind requires the momentary suspension of the rational activity of thought to open to great chasms. Then we find the articulations that fill them in, or we can dig even deeper.

As soon as something is given a name and is identified, April confides, it loses any fascination or interest. It is undeniably the appeal of the unknown or unforeseeable that pushes the artist to explore the muted stirrings of the unconscious. Lacan, on the subject of the unconscious, has written a sentence that describes that limited space quite well, that split that a subject eager to find what makes it up must delve into: "Thus the unconscious is always manifested as that which

vacillates in a split in the subject. . . .”<sup>7</sup> All one has to do is assess the depth of the abyss that separates one image from another and continue through the discontinuous sequence that forms Inconsciences to recognize that in April’s eyes, something makes sense only when it comes up against something else. Meaning rarely hits one head-on. It always rests just outside of what is obvious. To get at it, one has to take shortcuts, many detours, forget straight lines, and follow zigzags and broken lines. In April’s ingeniously structured pictures, horizontality and verticality are subjugated to obliquity. Obliques dominate the series through April’s preference of a sideways glance on things. There are many obliques, which are used mainly to show the photographer’s movements, the often uncomfortable positions that are adopted when we want to catch a glimpse of something else through the crack in order to see what we stumble against. One never knows – perhaps that is where things are really happening.

Once the pictures are finally exhibited and relinquished to unfamiliar eyes, they start to bring up questions, sow doubt, and end up being disturbing. Is this what I want to do, make such pictorial pictures, wondered April only a few hours after finishing hanging the show. This line of questioning gives the impression that her pictures, so close to painting on a factual plane, when all is said and done reveal an affinity with the culture of the fine arts. True, some of her individual pictures appear like old paintings, their composition is so rigorous. These images are self-sufficient. They have no need of company. They also harbour something mysterious that needs no clarification. They have a certain something, or perhaps an inherent lack at their core, as Lacan says in *Qu’est-ce qu’un tableau*<sup>8</sup>, that demands to be preserved in its entirety. We know very well what attracts us: it may be the undulatory wave of people edging in unison toward their common fate; or the obliquity of a knowing look and a mother’s boundless affection; or a friend literally rising out of a patch of grass; or the flatness of a mosquito screen on the veranda of a roadside diner; or even friends enjoying themselves as time slips by in an overgrown back yard on a summer afternoon. We know that it is not the things that are named that arouse our interest; it is what we are unable to name that suspends us in the void of the scene.

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Friendship is a recurring and important theme in April’s work. Friends, parents, and loved ones – everyone who counts, as Charles Taylor designates them in *The Malaise of Modernity* – play a determining role in the development and shaping of our respective identities. April’s recent works take us to new, inner lands and have us explore new cultures and ways of living from the outside

world, but above all they continue to tell us that the only way we can move forward in life is through our conversations with others: “We define this always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the identities our significant others want to recognize in us. And even when we outgrow some of the latter – our parents, for instance – and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live.”<sup>9</sup> What would Raymonde April’s work be without the presence of those who count? A presence that refers each viewer back to those who count in our own lives and allows them to put together their own memory album! And to survive. Anyway, I have always felt that due to the presence of human friendship, April’s photos have no need for further explanation. Instead, they arouse empathy. For when we let empathy swell within us, it taps into a great well of understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> Lucretius, *De rerum natura, libri sex*, translated by Cyril Bailey (edition with prolegomena, critical apparatus) (London: Clarendon Press 1963) (1st ed. 1947), p. 191.

<sup>2</sup> Joachim Ritter, *Fonction de l’esthétique dans la société moderne* (Besançon: Les éditions de l’imprimeur, 1997), p. 47. (our translation)

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 133.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Claude Rochefort, *Bifurcations*, DVD, 30 min., 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978). p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Gay, *Freud, A Life for Our Time* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), pp. 171–72.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Ontario: House of Anansi Press, 1991), p. 33.