

## A flâneur in a globalized world and some solitary flowers

*Roberta Valtorta*

Jiehao Su, a young Chinese artist, commits himself to a narrative of the city of Beijing as it is changing profoundly. The character of his work is wavering. This is the term with which I feel I can start my discussion: but not on the surface of the sea and the waves, as the etymology of the word might suggest. Su's sensitive gaze wavers, but over that changing and varied city and its inhabitants engaged in everyday matters in public spaces. Significantly, the title of his delicate research is Beijing: sites, structures, and illusions. An icon of globalization, an emblem of rapid, resounding economic and urban development, Beijing reveals astonishing contrasts between tradition and modernity, shadows of socialism and signs of powerful capitalism. The artist seeks to investigate it in a socio-environmental and at the same time strongly poetic way. So he allows himself be carried by his gaze, by his heart, into a sort of wandering that brings out memories, small fantasies nestling in places and thoughts about the future.

This urban wandering, so dense with existential meaning, was typical of the European flâneur, a figure who made his appearance in the mid-19th century. An idler who wandered, strolling about the streets of the city (think in particular of Paris) without any precise aim, observing places, allowing himself to be guided by whatever he saw, inhabiting the city like a home, perhaps searching for a home. In modern literary tradition, the flâneur, is the figure who goes wherever the street takes him, feeling within himself that the city, which the capitalist economy is shaping, requires him to rethink himself in relation to this new dimension. Precisely for this reason, the flâneur who wanders and the child capable of being astonished, according to Charles Baudelaire<sup>1</sup> and the subsequent 20th century reflections of Walter Benjamin,<sup>2</sup> were components in the figure of the modern artist. The city has become, in fact, a novelty and the artist wanders through it, listens to it, reads it in its nascent identity, which he feels he has to discover.

With a historical and even a psychological leap, let's now try to suppose that it is still possible today to be a flâneur in the globalized metropolis bearing evident signs of radical change. Jiehao Su therefore chooses a documentary-poetic register (but the two elements are not separate, nor have they ever been, in fact, in the history of photography), modeling his narrative of the experience accumulated, step by step, as he moves through the streets of Beijing. Su was born in southern China and only encountered the great capital in 2011. In previous works, he traveled through the Chinese landscape, which he experienced as a home to be found after his mother's sudden death, when he was only eighteen. His youthful language was therefore built up by experiencing places: an expression, this, which here seems appropriate to use both to understand the characteristics of his research and to recall Gabriele Basilico, who made this idea, the experience of places, the central motif of his long work on

the industrialized and de-industrialized areas of Italy, Europe and then other countries around the world.<sup>3</sup>

An idea, that of the experience of places and no longer the representation of them, to which I have myself often resorted in trying to understand the outlook of the many photographers who have devoted themselves to investigating the complex relation between humanity and the contemporary landscape in transformation between the eighties, nineties and the new millennium: what the philosopher Eleonora Fiorani in the nineties termed a “world without qualities”.<sup>4</sup>

To develop a profound experience of landscape, Su connects thought to the concept of Ge-Wu, which in Chinese philosophy means examining things, investigating them, in order to obtain a knowledge that is authentic and can remove us from a vision that is too immediate and imperfect. A knowledge of the things of the world and of human things, concerning the present but also the past. In fact, only in the distance of history, in the search for the origins and the distant reasons of things, can we hope to also discover the significance of the present. For this reason Su rethinks Shan Shui Hua (mountain and water painting), the traditional Chinese landscape art that enables the viewer to perceive the greatness of the natural world and the smallness of humanity while endowing the landscape with a spiritual content.<sup>5</sup> Then he shifts this discourse from nature to the metropolis, guided by a reflection on the grandiose, superhuman, we might say, process of urbanization in progress. And his response to the sense of disorientation is poetry. Su is a delicate artist, a light storyteller, capable of combining an objective yet wavering observation of places in the intimate search for himself, seeking to supersede reality through photography.<sup>6</sup> Here and there in his photographic work, we seem to perceive a sense of disquiet and existential questioning rather like what we feel, for instance, in the cinema of Jia Zhang-Ke, at the moments when the director explores the relationships between individuals overwhelmed by economic change, poetically using the broad spaces offered by landscape to signify disorientation and the desire to find a place in which to feel at home.

In the photographs taken by Jiehao Su in Beijing we find small scattered figures, little groups, pairs of people, the flows of cars and people in the streets, in a purposefully discontinuous narrative that comprises significantly recurrent images of flowers, gardens, solitary objects, trees, leaves, the facades of buildings densely lined with windows, modern structures and street furnishings, stones and views. Two delicate devices help condense and at the same time move forward the narrative rhythm: on the one hand, the presence of small temporal sequences, almost brief and sudden cinematic attempts, and on the other some images that recur and are repeated, as if the gaze in its wavering returned to the same places and the same figures, just as our thoughts never proceed in a linear fashion, but advance, linger, return and then move on. The tone of the images, though pensive and melancholy, enables us to glimpse a search for serenity and beauty, as if photography could console us and help us face the epochal changes in the city and the change in the life of the author in positive psychological terms.

Jiehao Su loves the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and has learned the lesson of many contemporary European and American artists, such as Gerhard Richter, Thomas Struth, Paul Graham, Rineke Dijkstra, Robert Adams, Joel Sternfeld, Stephen Shore and Elina Brotherus.<sup>7</sup> The artist speaks to us about the relation between person and landscape, an important step in closing the gap between the Oriental pictorial tradition and Western visual research of a documentary nature, following a path that weaves thought about the purity of nature with a reflection on the relationship between contemporary humanity and a landscape in the process of becoming progressively anthropized and made completely artificial. Even photography, we know, is globalized, and Su creates a new kind of poetic, rich in far from simple feelings about the human condition, indicated by the image of a chrysanthemum alone in a plastic vase, of a stem bent at an angle on itself, of a bright red rose isolated and lonely, of other roses seen against a blurred urban backdrop.

#### **Notes**

1. *Charles Baudelaire, The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, Phaidon, London, 1995.
2. *Walter Benjamin, Passages*, translated by Shierry Weber Nicholsen, MIT, Boston, 1995. Benjamin developed the idea of working on the Passages in 1927, when he read *Paris Peasant* by Louis Aragon, an exponent of French Surrealism.
3. *Gabriele Basilico, Alberto Bianda, Luca Patocchi, Roberta Valtorta (edited by)*, Gabriele Basilico. L'esperienza dei luoghi, *Fondazione Galleria Gottardo, Lugano/Udine, 1994/1995*. Also the theorists of the Mission photographique de la DATAR (Délégation interministérielle à l'aménagement du territoire et à l'attractivité régionale) wrote of the "experience of places": *François Hers, Bernard Latarjet*, *Paysages Photographiques. En France les années quatrevingt*, Editions Hazan, Paris, 1989.
4. *Roberta Valtorta (edited by)*, *Idea di metropoli*, Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo, 2002; *Eleonora Fiorani*, *Il mondo senza qualità*, Lupetti, Milan, 1995.
5. *Lowenna Waters*, "Jiehao Su – Borderland", in *British Journal of Photography*: [http://jiehaosu.com/documents/Jiehao\\_Su-Borderland-British\\_Journal\\_of\\_Photography.pdf](http://jiehaosu.com/documents/Jiehao_Su-Borderland-British_Journal_of_Photography.pdf)
6. *Jack Harries*, *Q&A with Jiehao Su*, in *The Heavy Collective*: [http://jiehaosu.com/documents/Jiehao\\_Su\\_Q%26A-The\\_Heavy\\_Collective.pdf](http://jiehaosu.com/documents/Jiehao_Su_Q%26A-The_Heavy_Collective.pdf)
7. *Steve Bisson*, "Phototalk with Jiehao Su", in *Urbanautica 2014*: [http://jiehaosu.com/documents/Phototalk\\_with\\_Jiehao\\_Su-Urbanautica.pdf](http://jiehaosu.com/documents/Phototalk_with_Jiehao_Su-Urbanautica.pdf).