

Vali Mahlouji

Heterotopian  
Spaces of  
Kiarostami

*“The work of an artist resembles his sentiments, contradictory or not. In fact, either we resemble our work or not at all. Even if I belong to the second category, it is apparent that my photographs are made of the same substance as my dreams”.*<sup>i</sup>

—Abbas Kiarostami

By introducing the notion of dreams, Abbas Kiarostami dissociates his photographic gaze from its relationship to reality and from the camera’s mechanical function of capturing actuality. The freeing up of this relationship dissociates the image from the mere event depicted ad infinitum in the frame, aiming to expand the perception of the viewer beyond a relationship to any actuality frozen in time towards a more abstracted field of perception, an area of existential enquiry. This intentional divorce frees up the artist’s camera from its prescribed primary responsibility: to reproduce reality at a given moment in time, now past forever.

The impulse that guides Kiarostami’s gaze, in his own words, is ‘to capture the disparate beauty of nature’.<sup>ii</sup> Elaborating on his experience, the artist says, “Nature captivates suddenly, occasionally, unexpectedly, powerfully, such that a familiar landscape can suddenly attract us, captivate us”,<sup>iii</sup> but that the moments that produce “these ideal photographs are sometimes very hard to access”.<sup>iv</sup>

Kiarostami articulates his desire to contemplate the essence of nature in all its awe-inspiring archetypal truths, in its epic *presence*, in the magic of its workings, in the cycles of its eternal creativity and in its eternal regenerative negotiation of real and ethereal. He aims to extend the potential of the



Abbas Kiarostami  
Untitled  
2002

photograph beyond what philosopher and critic Roland Barthes famously described as: “What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially”.<sup>v</sup> Kiarostami’s nature photographs aim to preserve to infinity not merely the reality that is caught within the confines of the camera’s frame, but the inherent essence of that reality. This connection with the essence of the object, which by definition is inherently eternal, seeks to bypass the Barthesian notion of the occurrence that has already died by the time the shutter has mechanically closed.

He believes not only that photography is a ‘necessity for a filmmaker’,<sup>vi</sup> but also that he uses his camera as a facilitating tool of observation. In his observations, he travels long expanses of uninterrupted nature, where he may only activate his shutter a mere ten times across a three-thousand-kilometre journey.<sup>vii</sup> These long, solitary escapes become a form of therapy away from the urban brawl. Through the gaze of his camera, Kiarostami shares with the viewer his own escapist or transcendent contemplation beyond the confined associations of the everyday, the actual and, specifically, the urban realities of life. Nature here stands as a sort of ‘heterotopia’—a space divorced from those actualities. Leaving the city serves as ‘an invitation to contemplate nature’.<sup>viii</sup> This contemplative observation acts as a ‘sedative’ and a form of therapeutic relief and restoration for the artist. Having originally trained as a painter, Kiarostami says, “My discovery of the camera has perhaps replaced the therapy of painting”.<sup>ix</sup> For him, the act of photography is primarily a form of existential introversion, a restorative reflection and connection with *himself*. This is articulated in his explicit wish

to connect the objects of his photographs ‘with the substance of his dreams’. His photographic gaze not only aims to contemplate the object—nature in its beauty, as it is seen—but also desires proximity with the essence of the object as it may be perceived. Philosophically, transcending the physical parameters of the pictographic representation, Kiarostami’s photographic fragments of nature aim to jettison the viewer beyond witnessing nature into *contemplating the presence* of nature (and, by extension, himself). They highlight the core question of the very nature of witnessing, central to the function of photography itself and its relationship to reality. Here, tension between the subject and its (hidden) essential character becomes central to deciphering the meaning of the photograph.

The belief that the plastic image has the capacity of rendering the true spirit or the hidden essence of an object—the tao of things—in a work of art exists in the genre of Chinese painting as well as the world of Iranian miniature painting. In Chinese painting, whilst the painted image depicts an actual landscape, a solitary tree at the sheer edge of a mountainside, for example, it is not merely the thing-ness of the tree and the mountain that is being represented but also the magical essence of the landscape beyond the captured illusion of visible reality. In a somewhat different dimension, in Iranian miniature painting, a visual depiction of a tree symbolically represents the idealised vision of the tree through the eye of the Creator. It is a similar notion of abstraction towards the essence, distinguishing between the figurative and the conceptual, that is intended across the photographic expressions of Kiarostami.

The ninth-century A.D. Chinese painter Wen Tong was said, “to lose self-consciousness when painting bamboo, to identify with bamboo”, thus enabling his painting to live the life of the trees”.<sup>x</sup> According to philosopher Ion Banu, “in this way the pictorial image fulfils its function of comprehending essence to such a degree that it enables the painter to experience it or to identify with it, in a magical way”. Banu cites the idea of N. Vendier Nicolas, an historian of Chinese art, that “the intuitive act mentioned above, though originating from a mystic impulse, as a consequence acquires a rational character; the magical experience is an instrument meant to stimulate the effort of reason. The result of this same effort is the cognition of the thing’s essence”.<sup>xi</sup>

*“I am moved by fancies that are curled  
Around these images, and cling:  
The notion of some infinitely gentle  
Infinitely suffering thing”.*<sup>xii</sup>  
—T. S. Eliot

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Abbas Kiarostami, from an interview with the artist; first published in: *Abbas Kiarostami, Photo Collection*, Tehran, 2000 (not paginated); cited in *Kiarostami: Stille und bewegte Bilder (Notes on Photography)*, edited by Silke von Berswordt-Wallrabe, Alexander Klar and Ingrid Mössinger (Kunstsammlungen der Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Museum Wiesbaden, Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz, Hatje Cantz Verlag: Ostfildern), 17.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>iii</sup> Abbas Kiarostami, *op. cit.*, 15–16.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>v</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections of Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 4.

<sup>vi</sup> Abbas Kiarostami, *op. cit.*, 15.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>x</sup> Ion Banu, ‘The Graphic Figure and the Philosophical Abstraction’, *Contemporary East European Philosophy*, Vol. III, edited by Edward D’Angelo, David H. DeGrood, Dale Riepe (Bridgeport: Spartacus Books, 1971), 254.

<sup>xi</sup> N. Vendier Nicolas, ‘L’homme et le monde dans la peinture chinoise’ (*Revue philosophique de la France et de l’étranger*, No. 3, 1964), 318.

<sup>xii</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, ‘Preludes’, in *Prufrock and Other Observations*, From Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920).

Vali Mahlouji is a London-based independent curator, art advisor, writer and translator, who trained first in archaeology and philology and later as a psychoanalyst. He is currently independent curatorial advisor to the British Museum on its modern/contemporary Iranian collections and educational programme, guest editor of Yale University's journal *Theatre* (2012–13), and curator and producer of the upcoming project Perspectives on the Shiraz Arts Festival at Yale University. In 2008, he was curator and associate producer of *Iran: New Voices* at the Barbican.

Mahlouji has collaborated with Asia Society Museum, New York (2013); Abraaj Group Art Prize, Dubai (2013); Darat al Funun, Amman (2013); Sharjah Biennial (2011), National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens (2009); Musée du Quai Branly (2012); Delfina Foundation (2011/10); Galerie Krinzinger (2011); Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac (2011/10/09); Sprovieri Gallery (2011); Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde (2012/11/10); Galerie Nathalie Obadia (2012); Kalfayan Galleries (2011); Saatchi Gallery (2010); the London Middle East Institute; *Canvas Magazine*; City University of New York; British Film Institute; London Film School; Institut Français; Channel 4; BBC; and *The Guardian*. His theatrical playscript translations have been staged by the Royal Court Theatre, the Barbican Centre, Théâtre de la Bastille, La Colline, Paris, and Dublin Theatre Festival, and broadcast by the BBC. As an opera designer, he was recently resident designer with Bregenzer Festspiele (2011) and Grange Park Opera (2008–10), and his work has appeared at Sadler's Wells (Mosaics), ICA, Arcola Theatre.

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