

# Norsk Landskap 1987

## A Trip through the Ordinary Norwegian Landscape<sup>1</sup>

In 1987 the four photographers Johan Sandborg, Siggen Stinessen, Per Berntsen, and Jens Hauge took a trip around Norway in a Volkswagen bus in search of the ordinary Norwegian landscape. Every time one of them called out "Stop!" they halted the bus, got out, and came to consensus about motif and angle of vision before a picture was taken. On this 18-day trip they drove more than 7,000 kilometers and took altogether 134 exposures with an old-fashioned Japanese large-format camera. The result was *Norsk Landskap 1987* [Norwegian Landscape 1987], hereafter called *NL1987*, which consisted of 44 framed color photographs, a montage of postcards sent home from the trip and a map of Norway on which the route and the sites of exposures were drawn in. The project was shown in an exhibition at the Henie Onstad Art Centre in 1987.

The purpose of this particular trip was nothing less than to redefine the Norwegian landscape. Or as Per Berntsen put it, to "present images that can participate in updating the very concept of landscape photography, -- create a more contemporary form of expression."<sup>2</sup> In the description of the project that accompanied the exhibition, the quartet formulated the project this way:

*We knew that there existed a Norway **between** the waterfalls, the fjords and the midnight sun – a Norway which will never be found on postcards or calendars [...] These landscapes might seem meaningless and anonymous, but they also have their beauty.*<sup>3</sup>

The series would thus attempt to present an alternative Norway, landscapes which for example revealed clear indications of development and civilization. In an interview in connection with the exhibition they said:

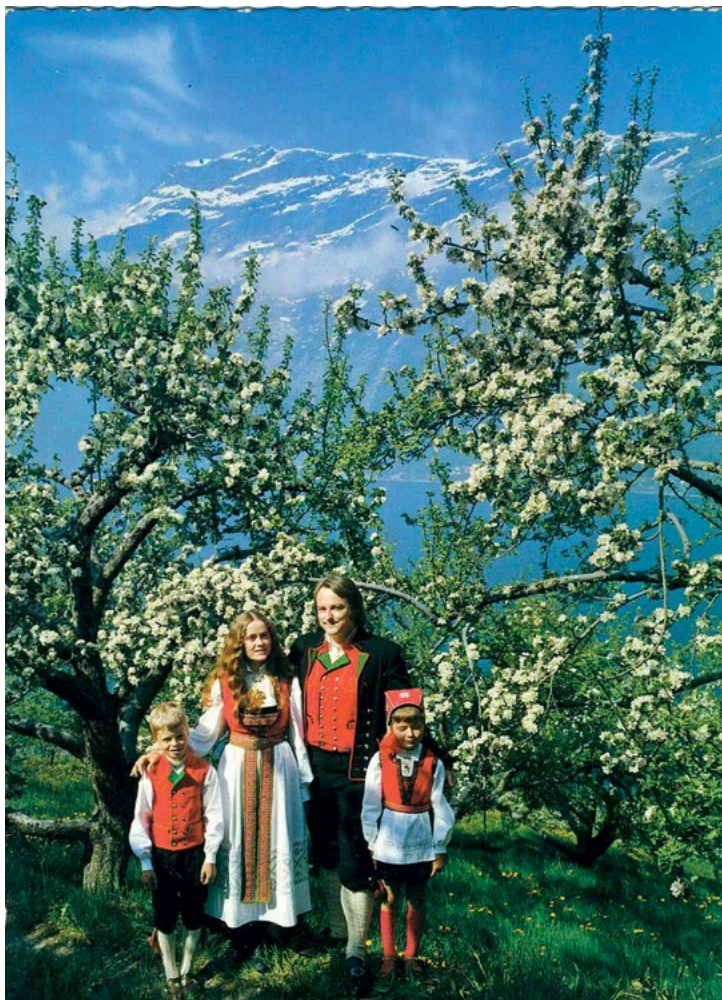
*We want to include these alterations in the images: roads that cut into the natural world or power lines that run through the landscape, without this becoming the main motif, but part of the whole. We want to get away from the dramatic and the cliché-ridden.*<sup>4</sup>

If we look more closely at *NL1987* the series consists of sharply detailed renderings of ordinary landscapes. The images reveal but

to a small degree the contrasts one associates with Norway, such as high mountains, fjords, and waterfalls. The landscapes include a series of modern phenomena like light poles, power lines, roads, and construction work. In *Norsk Landskap nr. 96, Folldal Verk, Hedmark*, (p. 48) for example, the landscape consists of soil, piles of gravel, and some scattered vegetation showing remaining indications of mining activity. Both title and motif indicate that an industrial area is in front of us. The sky is overcast, and the light is flat and cold. *NL1987* contains many images of open territory. An example is *Norsk Landskap nr. 25, Kunes, Finnmark* (p. 25), in which we are confronted by a flat landscape. The foreground is clearly accentuated with the help of a low camera angle, and we can see far into the detailed presentation in the image space consisting of birches, heather, and moss. In the background we can make out distant mountains. In *Norsk Landskap nr. 121, Bore, Jæren* (p. 57) we are again confronted with an open territory. We are looking into an endless meadow; just a few fence posts and scattered buildings break the monochromatic surface. The cultivated landscape and the buildings give us a hint of the human activity taking place here. All of the pictures in *NL1987* are taken along the road, resulting in the road itself frequently becoming part of the motif. In *Norsk Landskap nr. 16, Birkestrand, Finnmark* (p. 23), for example, the gravel-covered traffic circle with some struggling birch trees is the main motif. The snow-covered mountains in the distance form a remote backdrop for this almost absurd roadway.

Despite the project's declared critical position regarding the postcard-esthetic, the exhibition at Høvikodden contained a montage of postcards the photographers had sent home during the trip around Norway. Not surprisingly these postcards confirm the national-romantic clichés: they show fjords, steep mountains, and waterfalls; Norwegians in national costumes surrounded by blossoming fruit trees; a Sami with reindeer silhouetted against the midnight sun, a Midsummer Eve celebration with accordion and bonfire.

Sandborg, Stinessen, Berntsen, and Hauge shared an interest in the everyday landscape. In the course of the 1980s they had also received some attention for having renewed the Norwegian landscape tradition.<sup>5</sup> Even though their individual works represented something



Postcard from Hardanger

new in this tradition *NL1987* was a much more radical project. The photographers returned from their excursion quite satisfied and rather quickly agreed on the selection of images. But although they themselves were satisfied with the result, the exhibition at Høvikodden was not well received. However, it created no scandal even though some

individuals were provoked. The images had inarguably been taken by skilled photographers: they were technically good. To acquire the stamp of the everyday they had chosen a low-contrast film, and the images were deliberately copied to give them a rather light character and a cold tone. Some who saw the exhibition were critical of how the pictures were copied and thought it had been done incorrectly. Furthermore, the photographers had announced that their goal was to present new images of Norway, and many viewers were disappointed over this "new Norway." Since the Norwegian landscape is known first and foremost for its spectacular character, spectators probably supposed it would be reflected in the series in one way or another.

In some of the interviews published in connection with the exhibition the photographers stated that they tried to formulate an alternative aesthetic. At one point they say esthetic qualities can be found in the ordinary and that that may be what the pictures are primarily dealing with.<sup>6</sup> In the same article they wonder if they are demanding too much of the spectators since the motifs they (the photographers) are showing are neither "ugly" nor "beautiful."

Even though it should be said that some valued this ambivalence, *NL1987* was regarded by most as uninteresting. The exhibition provoked more yawns than enthusiasm. Many people also had problems with understanding why it was necessary to photograph these ugly places when Norway had so many beautiful ones to offer. One of the comments heard at the opening of the exhibition was: "If the point was to take so many boring pictures of Norway as possible, they've really achieved their goal." Many saw the collective aspect of the project as quite problematic, the direct reason that it was so tedious.<sup>7</sup> Stinessen has recently commented on this:

*It turned out afterwards, when we finally opened the show, that nobody understood anything. No one was willing to accept that there actually were four artists behind the pictures. Many people were very disappointed and thought automatically that it would be an unsuccessful project. They refused to see that it was possible to make this kind of artwork.<sup>8</sup>*

When the public was told that there were four photographers back of each picture, it led to indifference toward the project. Some believed

the whole thing was a joke. Extending this, the exhibition was criticized for lacking artistic nerve. Aftenposten critic Robert Meyer, for example, made the following assertion: "The exhibition lacks the intense engagement and the visual strength which often is given expression in personal, experienced, and formulated photography."<sup>9</sup> In a review in Drammens Tidende Åsmund Thorkildsen described the photographers' way of proceeding as follows:

They have stopped along the road and captured the first and best motif they could find. By selecting subjects that are not particularly picturesque or beautiful and by using the same camera and type of film, they have managed to produce homogenous pictures of the ordinary, the desolate and the scarcely spectacular.<sup>10</sup>

Thorkildsen concludes by saying that the method has not produced anything important. One detects a kind of resigned fatigue on the part of the reviewer in relation to the whole project: "We are dealing here with an alternative esthetic, with the attempt to find something interesting in what most of us do not find particularly interesting."

*NL1987* was created in a decade when Norwegian artists began using the medium of photography to a greater and greater degree. Simultaneously the institutional framework for photography remained weak. Artistic education for photographers did not exist, nor did a national museum of photography. This had a conspicuous effect in determining which artists were active at the time. Most photographers were self-taught or had been educated abroad (mainly in England). This was the case with Stinessen, Hauge, Berntsen, and Sandborg. Only Berntsen had a photographic education (from England); Stinessen was educated with a concentration in interior architecture at Statens håndverks- og kunstindustriskole in Oslo in Oslo (The National College of Craft and Industrial Arts), while Hauge and Sandborg were autodidacts. The distinctions between amateurs and professionals in the field were often unclear.<sup>11</sup>

I am attempting to point out that there can be a series of reasons why a project like *NL1987* fell on rocky ground when it was shown in 1987. The weak institutional framework was likely an important cause. Many outside the various milieus of photography had continuing difficulties accepting that photography could be art. Thus it may

not be so odd that a collective project that downplayed the artist's role and focused on the quotidian and the ostensibly uninteresting received a lukewarm reception.

When one looks at this project today it is difficult to share this lack of enthusiasm. My sense is that *NL1987* is an important work in the Norwegian history of photography, and this essay will attempt to show why renewed attention to this project is worthwhile. *NL1987* is complex in its relations both to Norwegian art and to international tendencies. It has clear conceptual traits, such as a muted esthetic and an emphasis on the collective. That the project contains "ready-made" elements such as postcards also underscores its conceptual character. The works are nevertheless not "anti-esthetic." Many of the images are very beautiful. Take for example a picture like *Norsk Landskap nr. 122, Orre, Jæren* (p. 58). We are confronted with the Orre beach at Jæren. The image is divided slightly below the middle of the North Sea horizon. We look directly at an undulating and grass-covered area that forms a kind of boundary against the beach. One immediately becomes absorbed in the exquisite photographic rendering of the place: the small hollows in the landscape, the paths forming a vague star, and the uneven edging along the water. The detailed foreground creates a striking contrast with the apparently endless background of sky and sea. Another example is the picture *Norsk Landskap nr. 103, Fanaråken, Jotunheimen*. (p. 51) We look into a landscape consisting of soft white snow, patches of vegetation, and unforested mountains in blue and brown tones. The sky is covered by light clouds that delicately filter the light. To the right we can make out two small cross-country skiers gliding through the landscape. The entire scene radiates calm, in spite of the great contrast between human beings and their surroundings.

*NL1987* seems on the one hand to be led by a conceptual idea that downplays the intentional. On the other hand the project displays an interest in the visual and in photographic craft: the photographs have a distinctive style. That these two characteristics are found in a single work makes it difficult to place it in art-historical terms: an interest for the media-specific and the visual are most often associated with modernism, whereas the conceptual is associated with postmodern works that break with or stand in opposition to modernism.



## Photography and postmodernism

The broad acceptance of photography as an artistic medium did not come before the 1980s in the USA. This occurred against a backdrop of a series of changes. It had become relatively normal for art museums to purchase photography. Furthermore, educational institutions now existed for art photographers, and not least it became more and more common that non-photographically-educated artists used photography in their artistic productions. It is worth noting that it was particularly among the last group that photography stepped onto the artistic stage in earnest.<sup>12</sup> This led simultaneously to a series of researchers and theoreticians beginning to interest themselves in questions connected with photography and the role it played in contemporary art. On the same level as directions such as minimalism, conceptualism, and site-specific art, the postmodern photograph became chiefly understood within a narrative that dealt with a persistent and accelerating opposition to modernist painting. For theoreticians such as Rosalind Krauss and Douglas Crimp the photographic medium was a welcome route away from painting infested with intention. In their works photography became discussed chiefly as an anti-esthetic medium.<sup>13</sup> The concept that photography was an indexical medium, something which came to have central standing in postmodern theory of photography, originates in the sign theory of the American philosopher of language Charles Sanders Peirce and his distinction between index, icon, and symbol.<sup>14</sup> Indexical signs, in the discussion of which Peirce uses photography as an example, are signs which result from, and are thus directly connected with, the action or the object to which they point back. Rosalind Krauss argues that photography avoids the intentional by having a causal relationship to what it presents. In this she sees photography's revolutionary power, a possibility of breaking with tradition. Something of the background of photography's strong blossoming during postmodernism was also that the medium in itself seems to thematize questions which were under debate in postmodernist theory. These were questions which involved the relation between original and copy, the problematizing of subjectivity, representation, and mass media.<sup>15</sup>

For many of us postmodernism has gone by into history, and one may ask why we should discuss it again. I believe, however, that it is important



*Postcard sent from Miland in Tinn on the last day of the trip*

to go back to this point in history with a critical outlook to understand our relation to photography today. It is well-known that postmodern photography in the 1980s led to an acceptance of photography on a level with other media. Many of the postmodern theorists took for a starting point the 1960s as a time when photography began to acquire a meaning, for example among conceptual and performance artists. The medium often was used by such people in its most trivial form to document works bound by time and place. It is worth noting that these theoreticians were little interested in photographic modernism and discussions that took place before the 1960s. By taking this decade as a starting point they drew a line through the medium's history from 1839 forward. I believe this has partly to do with photography's weakened position today in the field of art.<sup>16</sup> A one-sided focus on photography as an indexical and transparent medium in contemporary art has to a great degree made it invisible today. This is especially clear when the theoretical landscape is now otherwise and no longer legitimates photography's meaning in the same way as it did earlier.

It is also important to understand that modernist photography and modernist painting were very different. American high-modernist

painting was artist-focused and expressionist. Pictures were produced in large format, were abstract, and were often surrounded by a quasi-philosophical baggage of ideas. Modernist photography was modest in format in the USA, Russia (my mistake!), and Germany.<sup>17</sup> The images were closely connected to daily life, and many of the works dealt with seeing everyday, often overlooked things from a new angle of vision. In this tradition there were often fluent boundaries between documentary photography and art. Thus one may say that there is a greater kinship between modernist photography and the new directions in art in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these artists focused precisely on the trivial, the overlooked, and what *NL1987*'s critic Åsmund Thorkildsen described as "what most of us don't find particularly interesting."<sup>18</sup>

Today one notes that many of the most interesting photography projects building on the modernist photographic tradition can be found in books and magazines and among photojournalists—that is, partially outside contemporary art. Perhaps this is now photography's greatest strength, namely that it finds itself in this area between art, the everyday, the commercial, and the experience of common people. Photography has a long tradition of this which I believe we will value to a greater degree.

To understand a project like *NL1987* one must include both of these histories: that is, one must not see photographic history as one thing in itself, and the history of contemporary art as another, entirely separate entity. *NL1987* demonstrates that art itself often does not fit into rigid narratives created by theoreticians and historians. The photographs involved in the project stood with one foot in each tradition. *NL1987* breaks with modernist photography because of the collective aspect and the inclusion of several media (postcards and maps). At the same time, the emphasis on the ordinary in the photographs and a predilection for the deeply detailed image are clearly drawn from the modernist tradition in photography. The conception has been broadly held that postmodern photography implied a decisive break with modernist photography. *NL1987* shows us that this was not always the case. It is precisely this juxtaposition of varied kinds of inspiration from several apparently opposed sources that makes *NL1987* such an exciting project.

## A special collaboration

A collaborative project in which four photographers together take each individual photograph is rather unique in both a Norwegian and an international context. The idea arose quite by chance at an exhibition in Oslo that was showing photographs taken with a large-format Polaroid camera requiring operation by a technician from Polaroid. Polaroid Norway refused to support the quartet's idea of using the camera for a landscape project, so instead they chose to carry out the collaboration with an 8 x 10" large-format camera. They also felt it would be possible to accomplish this because of their shared interest in the ordinary landscape. There is a series of resemblances between the photographs taken individually by Sandborg, Stinessen, Berntsen, and Hauge and what they produced collaboratively in *NL1987*. I would particularly like to emphasize the focus on sharply detailed renderings and a frontal camera angle of vision. As in the group project, typical elements such as fjords, mountains, and waterfalls are completely absent in the individual works. There are also differences: *NL1987* was photographed in color, whereas the individual works are largely done in black-and-white. The collaborative project is more idea-based, but the individual works have a greater focus on the particular image. Furthermore the camera's point-of-view in *NL1987* is experienced as extremely repetitive, and there is a striking focus on open landscapes.

It is interesting to note how they themselves describe the collaboration. If *NL1987* had been a typical postmodern project it might have been natural to interpret the collaboration as a radical attempt to remove the artist from the work. However, there is little indication that the photographers were concerned with postmodern ideas of "the death of the artist." They describe the collaboration in more practical terms. Sandborg says they hadn't decided on an esthetic program beforehand. Instead he emphasizes all the compromises they had to make in the presentation of each individual image. That they used a large and unwieldy camera was also important: it had to be placed on a tripod, which restricted mobility. Having to drive a car also constrained the result. During the three weeks of the trip they sat in the car and looked out the window unless they were taking photographs, eating, or sleeping, as Sandborg describes:

*We discovered in some instances when we wanted to take a picture that it wasn't possible to stop the car. This meant we had to drive on to find a place we could park and get out. And this was not necessarily the same place where one of us had seen something. This was very much the way it happened: We were driving down the road, then someone called out Stop!, and we all looked around and said "What made us say stop now?" And then it turned out we said, "Maybe there is something here." We started to discuss it, and it was perhaps something quite different than we had originally seen that ended up being photographed.<sup>19</sup>*

The quotation underscores that the places they stopped could be discussed and were not necessarily defined when one of them called out. Practical circumstances such as whether it was possible to park also played a role. In addition they also kept a log during the trip of all the shots, and one can read there that sometimes they let chance determine the outcome. On 21 June there is the following log entry: "At 20:23 it was decided to carry out an experiment: in 17 minutes from 20:23 we will stop and take a picture."

A second challenge in *NL1987* was the collaboration of the photographers on each individual picture. Although *NL1987* was a once-only phenomenon, the project is a highly radical manipulation of the artist's subjectivity. Interestingly enough the quartet did not look upon the collaboration as something that devalued the artistic distinctiveness of the series. As noted earlier the project was based on friendship and common interests, and they established *Stiftelsen Norsk Landskap* (The Norwegian Landscape Foundation) so that they could more easily manage the financial transactions connected with the project. The photographers considered the work as an artistic expression created in common, thus requiring a series of compromises. Jens Hauge, for example, explains that the trip provided the possibility of seeing things with fresh eyes, and he had as a goal that there would be as little of him in the pictures as possible. He explains this as follows: "When you play an instrument you do other things as a solo artist. When you play in a band you have to play in a different way. The band has to have a nice ring to it."<sup>20</sup> Stinessen has similar thoughts about the collaboration:

*Since I am a musician I was familiar with working with others. That means being able to create something in common; one expression based on several individuals. For me this wasn't a foreign thought at all. Johan [Sandborg] had also played a bit so it wasn't foreign to him either.<sup>21</sup>*

Thus both Hauge and Stinessen had an idea that what they were doing could be compared with playing in a band. One may, of course, say that such an analogy breaks down when one realizes that the members of a band play different instruments, whereas in this group everyone played the same instrument. But it is worth noting that they felt that the project was directed by a common team spirit, so they were sharply critical of those who felt that the series lacked artistic nerve. As Sandborg says: "We accomplished something we couldn't have achieved separately."<sup>22</sup>

It should be said that collaboration in art is far from new. Thomas Crow's research on French Neoclassical painting, for example, places a question mark after Jacques-Louis David's status as genius by showing that his paintings could be products of many hands and even many styles.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly enough, the best-known painting from Norwegian national romanticism, *Brudeferd i Hardanger* (1848), is a collaboration between two individually recognized artists: Adolph Tidemand and Hans Gude. Tidemand was an expert in the painting of folk life, Gude in the landscape genre. Although across time many examples of collaboration among writers and painters can be found, the Australian art historian Charles Green asserts that such collaboration played a new and important role in art during the transition from modernist to postmodernist art.<sup>24</sup> What was important in these collaborative projects was a manipulation of the artist's personality and even personal style. The spread of collaborative artistic projects happened simultaneously with the occurrence of a radical reformulation of the art of the 1960s and later. This art rejected conventional definitions of the art object to the advantage of explorations of the very concept of art, artistic identity, and artistic work. Artistic work was now normally called "field work," and could take place far from the studio.<sup>25</sup>

Between the 1960s and the 1980s major changes took place in artistic discourse. The period ended with the acceptance and dominance of

postmodern art and theory. Looking back one sees that a large portion of the art of the 1960s and 1970s has been described in terms of theory from the next decade. Green believes that this theory is inadequate for an understanding of art before the 1980s.

Green's insights are also highly relevant to the art scene in Norway. Postmodernism did not acquire a dominant meaning in Norway before the mid-1990s. Vibeke Tandberg's photographs from the 1990s, for instance, constitute characteristic postmodern art that takes up concerns such as the critique of representation and originality, and questions artistic subjectivity. *NL1987* also raises questions about artistic subjectivity but in a different way. As was true with many artists described in Green's book, collaboration and conceptual methods were often combined with craft and a belief in the power of the image.<sup>26</sup>

As we have seen, the photographers wished to develop an alternative esthetic, a different form of beauty. At the same time, the pictures came into existence with the aid of discussion and democracy. Again as has been shown, Berntsen, Sandborg, Stinessen, and Hauge looked upon shared authorship in a different way than many postmodernists. That they did the work in common, in fellowship, was not seen as a devaluation of the subjective. They believed they retained artistic integrity. That they announced that they would take new pictures of Norway also makes this clear. In other words, they had not lost the belief that photography could represent reality in new ways.

But although Stinessen, Sandborg, Hauge, and Berntsen asserted that they retained their artistic integrity, one may see their work as a group in a larger context. As Charles Green claims, the question of the artist's subjectivity became more and more complex in the last half of the 1900s. From the 1960s on, artists began to think more and more about how they could encode themselves into their works of art. Green nevertheless warns against believing that the artist disappears completely. In many works from the 1960s onward the problematizing of the subjective is made into a question in itself. Even if the artists behind *NL1987* insisted that they did not abandon their artistic integrity, it can nevertheless be argued that their work is part of an international context in which questioning of subjectivity became steadily more controversial.

## An altered vision of landscape

An important goal for *NL1987* was to renew the landscape tradition. When one examines this intention more closely, it appears that the photographers were far more occupied with American landscape photography than the Norwegian landscape tradition.<sup>27</sup> They were especially critical of the American photographer Ansel Adams (1902-1984). Adams was seen as an exponent of the sublimely untouched landscape that was the model for innumerable postcards and calendars. "They [Adams' works] are very advanced postcards, in black and white. A little 'arty'"<sup>28</sup>, said Per Berntsen some years ago. However, Adams was an important photographer for Siggen Stinessen and Per Berntsen early in their careers. They began to work in this tradition, but in the 1980s their work took a different direction. An important backdrop for this change was an altered relation to the human-made landscape that began to grow in the 1960s and 1970s. This resulted in Ansel Adams' photographs being considered naive and problematic among artists working in photography.

Adams is known for his exquisitely studied black-and-white photographs of undisturbed landscapes. A great many of the best



Ansel Adams: *Moon and Half Dome*, Yosemite National Park, 1960  
Collection of Preus museum

known of his photographs are from Yosemite National Park, where he worked for many years. The photograph *Moon and Half Dome* (1960) is a good example. Here the majestic and eventually iconic Half Dome in Yosemite towers in an ethereal light under an almost full moon. The idea behind the national parks was that they would be places where people could seek out unspoiled nature far from increasingly industrialized society. Adams believed strongly in the healing powers of nature, and his photographs are closely

bound to his engaged conservationism. The picture of the national parks as a piece of untouched nature gradually became problematic, however, when tourism threatened to overpopulate the parks.<sup>29</sup> In the beginning Adams' works were a critique of modernism, and his battle for the national parks must be seen in this light. At the beginning of the 1970s the ideal of the totally untouched landscape became thought of as an anachronism since it was unrealistic to go back to a civilization without encroachment.

Someone who became important in connection with a new interest in the human-created landscape was the American writer John Brinckerhoff Jackson. In a little magazine called *Landscape* he began in the 1950s to write about commonplace subjects like parking lots, motels, campers, and gas stations. He saw an increasing opposition between nature and culture. At the same time awareness was lacking among most people about changes in their surroundings that were occurring because of the landscape's increasing urbanization. He proclaimed that there was no such thing as a boring landscape: every landscape could tell a story. This new interest in the human-created landscape broadened in the 1970s and 1980s. The study *Learning from Las Vegas*, in which commercialized and popular architecture was thematized, came out in 1972 by the architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in cooperation with Steven Izenour. The study was directly inspired by the works of J.B. Jackson.<sup>30</sup> For the Norwegian photographers important inspiration came particularly from the *New Topographics* exhibition shown at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, with American landscape photographers. This 1975 exhibition, which last year was shown anew at the Preus Museum, was also inspired by this fresh interest in the "unimportant" landscape. The exhibition consisted of photographs from suburbs, developments, parking lots, and shopping centers. Further connecting *NL1987* and *New Topographics* is the spare, sober photographic vision of the surroundings. In the introduction to the catalog for the exhibition Nicholas Nixon, one of the photographers, said this: "The world is infinitely more interesting than any of my opinions concerning it. This is not a description of a style or an artistic posture, but a profound conviction."<sup>31</sup> Robert Adams, another of the photographers, said that he would avoid taking pictures of mountains, and that he

was critical of the passion in earlier times for mountaintops. The New Topographics photographers wanted to distance themselves from the sentimentality in American popular photography, and their works were also a reaction against sublime and expressionistic photographers such as Minor White and Ansel Adams. Even though Robert Adams admitted that Ansel Adams had influenced him early in his career, he emphasized that his works were different. The other photographers were also critical of Adams' works. Joe Deal, for example, said, "[w]hen I actually went to Yosemite [where Adams took many of his photographs] it was like seeing everything in quotation marks."<sup>32</sup> In other words, the experience of these photographers was that the untouched "national-park landscape," Ansel Adams' trademark, had become a worn-out cliché empty of critical potential. That these ideas could be transferred to the Norwegian landscape is not so surprising, given all the spectacular tourist pictures of fjords, mountain tops, and waterfalls found in Norway.

It is important to mention that *NL1987* was formed a decade after the New Topographics exhibition. Stinessen says that what fascinated him about New Topographics, beyond that the photographers' style was objective per se, was the soberly spare element and the distance they had from the landscapes. He says:

*That they [New Topographics] did not have a point of view has been the main explanation. But I am of the opinion that it is exactly the opposite, it is so obvious what they do. They have just had another formal method, another strategy as to how they depicted the landscape.*<sup>33</sup>

Stinessen explains that the New Topographics photographers' way of proceeding was a different artistic method, and explains that an artist never can avoid having a point of view, an agenda or method. So even though there are obvious similarities between New Topographics and *NL1987* in terms of toning down the photograph, it is once again interesting to note the conception that *NL1987* had a distinct form of artistic expression.

The interest in new kinds of landscapes was not something that occupied the New Topographics photographers alone. The artist Robert Smithson, for example, introduced new and alternative sites for contemplation and solitude. In one of his texts he claimed:



*One need not improve Yosemite, all one needs is to provide access routes and accommodations. But this decreases the original definition of wilderness as a place that exists without human involvement. Today, Yosemite is more like an urbanized wilderness with its electrical outlets for campers, and its clothes lines hung between the pines. There is not so much room for contemplation in solitude....In many ways the more humble or even degraded sites left in the wake of mining operations offer more of a challenge to art, and a greater possibility for being in solitude.*<sup>34</sup>

The idea that the industrial landscape could be looked at as visually interesting is also expressed in Michelangelo Antonioni's film *The Red Desert* (1964). The story is set in an industrial area in Ravenna. In the film we are shown factories, machines, and a heavily polluted river—all photographed in pastel-colored smoke and fog. Despite the film's being understood by many as a critique of such places and thus an implied attack on the destructive impact they could have on people, the filmmaker claimed that the film also dealt with the beauty of such places. Antonioni also attempted to show how we humans adapt ourselves constantly to new surroundings.<sup>35</sup>

If one lifts a glance from the field of art one sees in the 1970s and 1980s a more general interest in the developed landscape in a series of projects found in the borderland between documentary and art. In the USA in 1977, for example, *The Rephotographic Survey Project* localized and rephotographed places which had been photographed by American expeditionary photographers in the 1800s. One goal of the project was to show changes that had happened in the landscape in the course of the last hundred years, something which became very visible since the motifs and excerpts were identical. In this connection it must be mentioned that Per Berntsen created a similar project in Vestfjordalen near Rjukan in Norway which resulted in the 2005 photo series and book *Forandringer* [Changes].<sup>36</sup> Some of the original photographs were taken by Norwegian "expedition photographers" like Anders Beer Wilse and Knud Knudsen.

In addition to *The Rephotographic Survey Project* there were several larger photo-documentary projects. At the beginning of the 1980s a comprehensive French project *DATAR* was begun. The project had a

pedagogical goal—it sought through visual documentation to inform and show the public how the landscape had changed because of increasing urbanization. At the end of the 1980s a similar Swedish project, *Ekodok-90*, was set in motion. In these two projects, photographers were asked to perform documentation with their individual style and way of proceeding. Thus they did not base their pictures on earlier photographic images as *The Rephotographic Survey* did.

Even though Ansel Adams was criticized for focusing on natural beauty in his pictures, I will argue that an element of "new sublimity" is present in projects like *New Topographics* and *NL1987*. In the latter this is clear in a predilection for open landscapes and those with developed areas and construction work. We can see that kind of construction in a photograph like *Norsk Landskap nr. 108, Aga, Hordaland*. (p. 52) The image is dominated by a mountainside and a fog-heavy sky hanging over us. At the base of the mountain a steam shovel is resting on an enormous pile of earth and rocks. Another example is *Norsk Landskap nr. 90, Røros, Sør-Trøndelag III* (p. 46), in which we are confronted with a large leveled area consisting of a gravel road, spots of vegetation, rocks, gravel, and sand. A brown wood fence divides the picture in two. In back of this we see a construction site, unfinished houses, a crane, slagheap, and the crest of a ridge in the distance. The entire scene has something unfinished and raw about it, a glimpse of chaos in the orderly. In this context it is worth mentioning that the sublime landscapes as early as the 1800s are supposed to have lost their effect on observers. There were innumerable stories about tourists for whom the experience of famous attractions had no effect.<sup>37</sup> The great number of poems, travel portrayals, paintings, and illustrations of these famous attractions had come between the spectators and their experience of what they saw. With this as a backdrop it is tempting to read the postcards that are included in *NL1987* as a warning about the hackneyed pictorial clichés that have made it difficult to see the "Norwegian landscape." This is especially striking if we compare the last-named picture with the postcard from Røros included in *NL1987*. On this card we are presented with the famous cliché of the city: a snow-covered picturesque main street at Røros. *Røros, Sør-Trøndelag III* presents the sublime opposite.



*Postcard from Røros*

*NL1987* was exhibited in the same year that the Alta power station was put into use. In retrospect one may perhaps say that the project thematizes some of the controversies in this conservation case in the 1980s. Nevertheless *NL1987* as a project is not explicitly critical of issues related to the environment. The photographers behind *NL1987* first and foremost had esthetic reasons for photographing changes in the landscape. Precisely this continues to make *NL1987* a provocative and radical project especially, perhaps, outside the field of art. Have we actually internalized the changes that have happened and are happening in the landscape? The controversies surrounding the installation of high-tension towers in Hardanger indicate that a great many people in Norway still believe the country looks as it did during the era of national romanticism. The development of Hardanger has been depicted as an attack on the undisturbed natural world of Hardanger, even though that region has been heavily industrialized since the beginning of the 1900s.<sup>38</sup> The national landscape for many still consists of fjords, mountains, and waterfalls. Very few people agree that “the Norwegian” landscape is gray, boring, and modest. *NL1987* shows us it is *that also*.

***Christine Hansen***

*English translation by Richard Simpson*

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# Notes

- 1 This article is based on my doctoral dissertation *A Trip through the Ordinary Norwegian Landscape. Perspectives on Photography's role in Contemporary Art*, Universitetet i Bergen 2012. Parts have been published in "På veien. Refleksjoner omkring reiseaspektet i Norsk Landskap 1987" in: *Kunst og Kultur 04/2010*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, s. 224-235 and in: "Rent mekanisk uten kontroll. Fotografiet og dets vanskelige forhold til åndelighet" in *Talende Bilder*, (ed. Sigrid Lien and Caroline Serck-Hanssen) Oslo: Spartacus. Scandinavian Academic Press, pp. 201-214
- 2 Paul A. Jørgensen, *Norsk Landskap 1987. –Et annet land på mattskiven*, Prisma Nytt nr 20 1987, Henie Onstad Art Centre, p. 14.
- 3 Johan Sandborg, Siggen Stinessen, Jens Hauge and Per Berntsen, *Prosjektbeskrivelse, 1987*. Christine Hansen translation.
- 4 Jørgensen (1987), p. 14.
- 5 Øyvind Storm Bjerke, "Vannskiller og veiskiller 1970-1985" in: *Kunstfotografi i Norge. Forbundet Frie Fotografers 25 års jubileum*.(ed. Jorunn Veiteberg), Oslo: Bonytt Forlag, 1999, p. 40.
- 6 André Savik, 7000 km gjennom Norge: En reise i bilder, (article, source unknown)
- 7 Information about the exhibition has been obtained from artists and newspaper articles.
- 8 Interview with Siggen Stinessen, Horten, Norway, December 2006. Christine Hansen translation.
- 9 Robert Meyer, "Fotografisk Gruppearbeide", *Aftenposten* 7 September 1987
- 10 Åsmund Thorkildsen, "Den alternative turisme", in *Drammens Tidende*, 5 September 1987. Christine Hansen translation.
- 11 Øystein Ustvedt, "Fotografi som kunst og kunst som fotografi 1987- 1992", in: (ed.) Veiteberg (1999), p. 80.
- 12 For a more detailed discussion see Abigail Solomon-Godeau: "Photography after Art Photography", in: Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock, Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, Practices*, Minneapolis: Media & Society 4, University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- 13 Krauss, R. (1985): "Notes on the Index: Part 1" and "Notes on the Index: Part 2" in: Krauss: *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, London/Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 196-220 and Douglas Crimp "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism" in: *October*, Vol. 15. (Winter, 1980), pp. 91-101.
- 14 For discussion of Peirce's ideas see Peter Larsen: "Tegnet", in: Peter Larsen: *Album. Fotografiske motiver*, Oslo/København: Spartacus/Tidne Skifter, 2004.
- 15 Solomon-Godeau (1991), p. 115.
- 16 The two last Documenta-exhibitions in Kassel are examples of the fact that photography is missing almost entirely from contemporary art.
- 17 I am thinking here of photographers such as Walker Evans, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and August Sander.
- 18 For a discussion of NL1987 and Dag Alveng's *Vegger* in the light of minimalism and conceptual art see chapter 3 in Hansen (2012).
- 19 Interview with Johan Sandborg, Bergen, December 2006. Christine Hansen translation.
- 20 Interview with Jens Hauge, Lærdal, December 2006. Christine Hansen translation.
- 21 Interview with Stinessen (2006). Christine Hansen translation.
- 22 Interview with Sandborg (2006). Christine Hansen translation.
- 23 Thomas Crow, *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1995
- 24 Charles Green. *Third Hand: Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
- 25 Green (2001), p. xii.
- 26 Examples of this are Bernd and Hilla Becher, The Boyle Family, Anne og Patrick Poirier og Helen Mayer Harrison og Newton Harrison. For a more detailed discussion of these see Green (2001).
- 27 For a discussion of this see chapter 5 in Hansen (2012). For a discussion of NL1987 seen in the light of the Norwegian landscape tradition see chapter 4 in Hansen (2012).
- 28 Interview with Berntsen, Geilo, May 2007.
- 29 Jonathan Spaulding, *Ansel Adams and the American Landscape. A biography*. Los Angeles/London University of California Press, 1995, p. 233.
- 30 Britt Salvesen, "The New Topographics" i Adams, Robert, et al. *New Topographics*. Tucson/Rochester: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona and George Eastman House International Museum of Photography, (2009), p. 23
- 31 William Jenkins, "New Topographics" i Robert Adams et al. *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man Altered Landscape*, Rochester, NY: George Eastman House 1975.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Interview with Stinessen (2006). Christine Hansen translation.
- 34 Robert Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape", in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt. New York: New York University Press, 1979, pp. 124-125.
- 35 Michelangelo Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision: Writings and Interviews on Cinema*. Ed. C. Carlo, G. Tinazzi, and Marga Cottino-Jones. American edition by Marga Cottino-Jones. St. Paul, New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1996, p. 288.
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- 37 Rachel Ziady DeLue, "Elusive Landscapes and Shifting Grounds", in: ed. James Elkins and Rachel Ziady DeLue, *The Art Seminar. Landscape Theory*, Routledge, New York, 2008, p. 5.
- 38 For a discussion of this see my article "Hardangersaken og visualiseringen av et nasjonalt landskap" in *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift* 3/2012, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, pp. 248-258.