



HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE

Contemporaneity

Vol 4, No 1 (2015) | ISSN 2155-1162 (online) | DOI 10.5195/contemp.2015.142
<http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu>

Exhibition Review: Regina Mamou *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*

Chicago, IL, City Gallery in the Historic Water Tower
October 2013 - January 19, 2014

John Murphy

Abstract

A review of Regina Mamou's solo exhibition, *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*, held at the City Gallery in the Historic Water Tower (Chicago, IL) from October 11, 2013 to January 19, 2014.

About the Author

John Murphy is a PhD candidate in Art History at Northwestern University. His dissertation investigates the socialist-utopian dimensions of early 20th century American Arts & Crafts communities. He was a dissertation fellow at Winterthur Museum in Delaware and is a 2014-2015 ACLS/Luce Fellow in American art. He co-curated The Left Front: Radical Art in the "Red Decade," 1929-1940 (Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL), which travelled to New York University's Grey Gallery in January 2015.

Exhibition Review: Regina Mamou *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*

October 2013 - January 19, 2014

John Murphy

Mist shrouds an open field; the softness suffocates. In *Fieldwork (Blue)* Regina Mamou stages the paradox of immanence and imminence—God always and everywhere on the verge of appearing: a stifling remoteness, an intimate distance (Fig 1).

Unfortunately, It Was Paradise, exhibited late 2013 to early 2014 at Chicago's City Gallery in the Historic Water Tower, is a haunting series of photographs by Mamou of utopian colonies in the United States. The Historic Water Tower, with its saw-toothed spires and ecclesiastical gothic

atmosphere, proved a congenial setting for photographs of now-defunct utopian experiments. These heterodox communities, founded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, stood fenced-off from the fallen world as safe harbors for refugees from sin-glutted cities and Old World religious persecution. Established largely by pietist sects (Shakers, Quakers, Harmonists, etc.) splintered from Protestantism, they drew controversy for their dissident belief systems (a kind of ascetic Christian socialism) that included in some cases equality of the sexes, and the abolition of both private property and the traditional family unit.



Figure 1

Regina Mamou, *Fieldwork (Blue)*, 2012. Digital C-Print, 40 x 50 in. (photo: courtesy of the artist).

Realizing "utopia" is, of course, epistemologically impossible; the word itself means "nowhere." This contradiction puts a particular pressure on visual representations of utopian spaces. How can one represent sites that ontologically should not exist? The communities photographed by Mamou share a curious afterlife as historical landmarks, tourist attractions, and perhaps, ironic evidence of utopia's inevitable failure. They have been consigned to capitalism's only guaranteed salvation: roadside meccas, monetized monasticism, Utopia, Inc. They are displayed, in all their abject failure to realize heaven-on-earth. But Mamou is not out to "expose," with a documentarian's gaze, the hollowness at the heart of the utopian project, revealed by the fallow fields and kitschy gift shops. Utopian desire indicates the insufficiency of current conditions, an estrangement from the historical present. The future is the substantive result of things hoped-for, always (in the present) in the process of becoming.

When moving around the octagonal interior of the Water Tower, encountering Mamou's large though unassuming photographs (all 40 x 50 or 40 x 32 in.) mounted handsomely against the chalky limestone, one hardly detects a tone of irony. There seems instead an apparitional shivering in the images, a disquieting sense that something lurks beneath the surface; what George Eliot called that "roar which lies on the other side of silence." Residual aura clings. But can a photograph act as a "medium" to reveal the supernatural? Shooting with a large format monorail camera, Mamou's photographs suggest spiritual exercises—experiments in contemplative looking. They have their own asceticism, a sort of reticence or wariness about breaching the insistent seclusion of these spaces. Her photographs haunt utopia's outside margins; there are no figures and no interiors. Only the buildings, fences, green swards, and graveyards index the community's ultimate goal of finding divinity in the everyday. The fog-shrouded fields, frostbitten gardens, overgrown vineyards, and severe houses of worship should be familiar, but they seem to occupy some uncanny horizon line where memory, imagination, spirits and specters all cohabit. In *Harmonist Cemetery* (2012, Digital C-Print) a profusion of green and brown leaves blanket the ground, evoking Whitman's haunting analogy: "the uncut hair of graves."

Philip Johnson's Vision of God (2012, Digital C-Print) invites meditations on theophany, how the divine assumes material form. The non-denominational "roofless church" Johnson designed in 1960, an open park girdled by a brick wall, evokes the Harmonists' spartan spirituality, but also the revival of heterodox sects in the 1960s (Fig. 2). The austere symmetrical composition focuses on Johnson's cedar-shingled dome, lifting and dipping like a parachute, highlighting the tension between self-contained utopias and the infinite dome of sky. Utopia is not open. The first was an island.

For Mamou, using contemporary architects like Philip Johnson as points-of-entry highlights the accreted quality of the communities—sedimentary layers of human activity built up over centuries; a would-be "static" vision of earthly paradise vulnerable to the vagaries of time, the laws of entropy. Mamou draws attention to how famous architects (invisible yet omnipresent) reinterpret sacred space through their roles as secular gods who shape our experience of the phenomenal world. Richard Meier's Atheneum in New Harmony, Indiana, is visible in *Chartres Cathedral* (2012, Digital C-Print), a tripartite photograph cut horizontally by the bending, rain-slicked road and the median-grid of a fence (Fig. 3). Meier's visitors' center looms in the background as white and distant as a cloud. Gray chokes the upper atmosphere, dissolving the tops of branches and casting a hazy pall. Mamou fence-cuts the composition again in one of the series' most evocative images, *Richard Meier's Vision for Athene, Night #2* (2012, Digital C-Print). Eerie lights artificially illuminate a rectangular slab of grass and a white fence cuts the composition in half, the upper portion swallowed in black. The fences bar access, prevent the crossing of thresholds. Does time find its spatial corollary in these totems of inaccessibility, of sites marked off and enclosed? The past is a foreign land and we have no passport (Fig. 4).

Mamou often shoots at dusk and dawn, an aesthetic choice especially evident in the series of "Fieldwork" photographs in which the atmosphere—fog, clouds, rain—overwhelm

the earth and sky, blurring both into an indistinct zone of ethereality, recalling theophany's recurring theme of "God in the mist" dematerializing the world. When the mist dissolves, hard edges and straight lines reinforce the communities' asceticism. *Ascetic Living* (2012, Digital C-Print) is broken into clean horizontals: the grass, the road, the lawn, a two-story house, a bank of trees and blue sky. The white building is window blind. The lawn is freshly mowed. The road hints at travelers, passersby, the curious or indifferent. But the building holds the center, inward-turning, defensive, the purity of its windowless white confrontational. The vertical slash of a shadowed door is a riddle of non-invitation, austere hostility, and promise. As William Blake scrawled in the margins of a book: "I am hid."

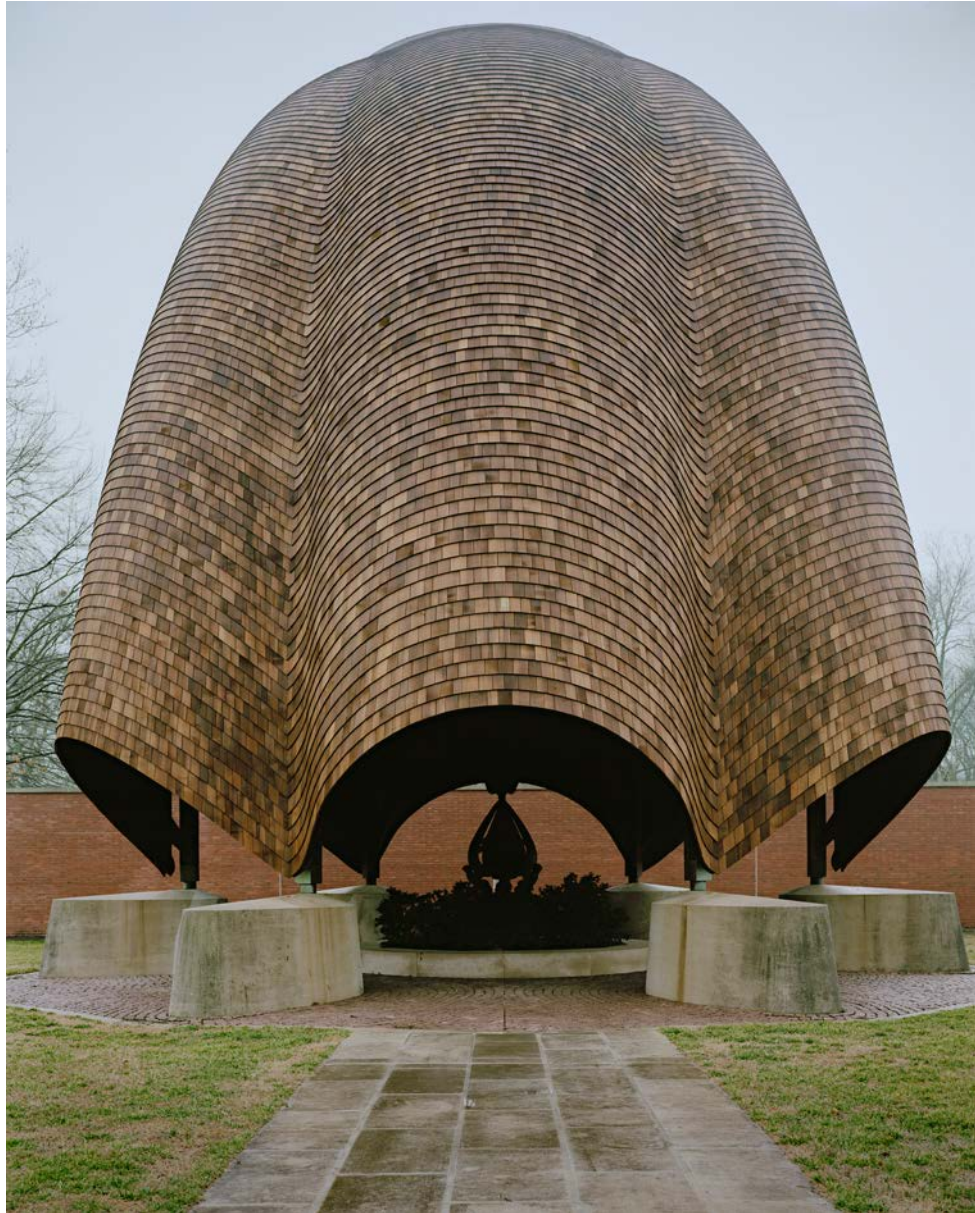


Figure 2

Regina Mamou, *Phillip Johnson's Vision of God*, 2012. Digital C-Print, 40 x 52 in. (photo: courtesy of the artist).

Throughout the series Mamou's position is ambiguous. Is she a tourist? An archaeologist excavating ruins? A naturalist studying an extinct species? Or a pilgrim seeking refuge from the fallen world? Mamou suggests the slippage between those preassigned roles. The religious scruples of the communities would have forbidden photography, in their own time, as a worldly vanity. Yet there is a piety in her photographs, a sense that even the borrowed or secondhand sacred demands an invitational orientation, a willingness to receive "visitations," as the Shakers called them. The title of the series comes from a collection of poems by Mahmoud Darwish, who wrote: "Of our home we see only the unseen: our mystery."



Figure 3

Regina Mamou, *Chartres Cathedral*, 2012. Digital C-Print, 40 x 50 in. (photo: courtesy of the artist).

Seeing the unseen, the mystery—this comes close to the heart of Mamou's project, I think. It is a project that involves admitting photography's insistence on the visible, the seen, the material. *Unfortunately, It was Paradise* finds Mamou resigning herself to what she sees as photography's clay-footed inability to capture the ineffable, the incorporeal, while straining the medium to suggest the spiritual beyond the mundane. To this end, I suspect, she has added installation elements to her most recent work—rocks, altars, blue lights, spiritualist paraphernalia. These elements are intended, perhaps, to tease out of photographs more than the surface can manage, as if the photograph itself was the surface of a mirror pool over which Mamou stands like a wizard hoping to conjure spirits from invisible depths, or like a paranormal investigator with a battery of detectors, sensors, and UV lights, hoping against hope that a contraption as clunky and mechanical as a camera could be sensitive to the immateriality of memory or spirituality.

Mamou's latest project, *Psychometrics* (2015), monumentalizes the E-meter, a Scientologist machine for detecting and determining the spiritual state of a subject. In a bright, seductive Digital C-print (75 x 60 in.) Mamou lovingly enlarges and fetishizes an E-meter against a yellow as luminous as any medieval gold ground, its reflection shimmering in the polished surface. The E-meter is like Mamou's camera: a clunky machine poignantly trying to attune to the unseen spiritual realm.



Figure 4

Regina Mamou, *Richard Meier's Vision for Athene, Night #2*, 2012. Digital C-Print, 40 x 32 in. (photo: courtesy of the artist).

Mamou is currently LA-based. Are Scientologists the new Shakers? Is LA the closest thing we have to a utopian experiment? Perhaps on the West Coast she'll discover the New Age iteration of the radical Shaker faith that discovered the devil in dust, and produced streamlined, lightweight Shaker furniture—high-priced collectibles now (as sleek as the E-meter)—that could be hung on wall pegs the easier to sweep the dirty, demon-ridden floorboards. What is certain is that Mamou will continue to put pressure on a mechanical apparatus to perform alchemical feats of transmutation. *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise* finds in utopian communities the ideal conditions for this kind of experiment. The communities are haunted by collective memories, untransmittable and inaccessible (another line from Darwish: "There is no place on earth where we haven't pitched our tent of exile.") There is belatedness in Mamou's work as in the communities themselves; a sense of coming after, of waiting, watching, not so much in anticipation as in delayed rapture. The Second Coming has happened, we are saved, and yet somehow, unfortunately, we are still here.



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is operated by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is co-sponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).