# Notes on Spiral Lands Chapter 2

by Barbara Clausen

*We are all to be held accountable.*

What is she thinking, we wonder, when masqueraded she stands firmly in the limelight, taking on the guise and shape of the battled norm, the cultural producer, an intellectual, a man of history, of knowledge and therefore power? This essay is about the mediation of experience in relation to history, media, and performance. It takes as its subject Andrea Geyer's *Spiral Lands Chapter 2*, which is a lecture performance, an installation and this publication. All three function as proscenium settings to give the physical, as well as intellectual, journey an embodiment to be experienced. The book is both a transcript of a performance and a script to be performed. It exists in the present moment and points in both directions of time: to the past and its former performances, and into the future and its potential to being re-performed.

*Spiral Lands / Chapter 2* raises questions, such as how does the relationship between knowledge and experience bear on our perception of a collective history and the agency of the individual? And what does the moment of "having been there" mean for cultural producers who actively engage and contribute to our sense of time and cultural memory? Geyer's art engages a series of parallels and opposites and their equally dependent nature: the relationship between performance art and conceptual art, the paradigmatic history between the original and its reproduction, as well as the correlation of the live and the mediated. As key issues in Geyer's artistic practice, they are reflective of her awareness as a political medium as well as mediator, an agent of personal and collective experiences.

When Geyer raises her hand , she points up and looks squarely into an audience darkened by the brightness of her spotlight, and calls out, "We are all to be held accountable!," she breaks through the silence of the fourth wall of her stage. The artist as a performer, as a political intellectual, starts speaking about the present, she is consciously speaking in an historical moment. Within those first moments, she has already marked the gap that is to hold tension between the words and the images, her female and male personae, her own words and those of others, and even more so, her own position of power and that of an audience who, as her listeners, has access to the same power. A person speaks to an audience, an audience listens. The performative act is witnessed by the audience which, by watching this self-conscious performance, is automatically implied as performing as well. The format and setting for *Spiral Lands / Chapter 2* started with, as Geyer says to her audience, "me speaking and you listening."

We are within the framework of an academic setting: that of the darkened auditorium, chairs found in classrooms, set up in rows one after the other. Unified by the rows of seats, the darkness is punctured by the projection of slides and the speaker's light. The listeners and viewers are confronted with an assemblage of cultural sources and references united by their critical stance toward authority. The correlation of the performative, the photographic, and the linguistic are staged to challenge the notion

of their own hegemonic traditions. Her choice of setting speaks for an authority inscribed into the architecture of the auditorium, of academia, the stage created for the performative act of knowledge, the frame of it. *Spiral Lands / Chapter 2* is, as the artist points out, "calling out the responsibility of academia, science, the anthropologist in the process of Colonization of America."[1]

> *... I speak to you as a scientist, anthropologist, ethnographer, archeologist, geographer, historian, journalist, adventurer, as an artist, researcher, traveler of known and unknown territories, as a man and as a woman, but foremost I speak to you from the place of knowledge. Speaking in different tongues.*

*Spiral Lands / Chapter 2* takes two of Modernism's most programmatic cultural trajectories, if not to call them myths, as its outset: the immediacy of photography and performance. Both remain chained to the stigma of representing a kind of truth that relies on presence, authorship, and immediacy. When we speak about a past performance event we are also speaking about the translation of an event, limited by temporal and spatial settings into a two-dimensional form. This transcription manifests itself at the interface of correlating terms such as singularity, authenticity, appropriation and reproduction.

A performance lecture is a public statement, which carries both dimensions of the public as well as the private. Speaking to the public is a revealing moment. The balance between the presence of the speaker and the message conveyed is fragile. The format carries a promise of truth, revelation and immediacy. What is shown — and what is — seen is not merely an account of difference, but proof of the other's existence. A series of images is projected onto a screen in the dark. The slides projected show images of Chaco Canyon as well as Bandelier Canyon, both National Historic Sites in what is now called New Mexico, photographed by the artist in February 2008. Her photographs of this specific landscape represent Geyer's contemplation on the visual strategy of the Western landscape. This specific region of discovery is a geopolitical force field, one specific to the collective yearning that is embedded in the myth and history of the United States. It was an epicenter of cultural life for peoples from across the American continent (North and South), between the years 800-1300 CE and still has important meaning for indigenous populations today. "Chaco Culture," as it is named by the National Park Service, is a National Historical Park and World Heritage Site. It is specific to the collective yearning that is embedded in the myth and history of the United States. For Geyer the aesthetic history of the Southwest serves as a referential tool for her critical practice. The aesthetic endeavor at hand is to both capture and create a visual history that breaks with the traditional typology inscribed into a land, a country, a nation, in which the centuries long and ongoing war on its own people, has become a monumental icon of American history.

Geyer, as a chronicler, not only documents what she has seen in the Southwest in a style of ethnographic photography, but also plays with our aesthetic expectancy of what a visual report of the Southwest should look like. She is not just using photography as part of her experience as an artist, but as a conscious staging of a certain tradition of a documentary gaze that has been used to produce a particular ethnographic piece of evidence. Her presence is deeply ingrained in the images. Her frame is the awareness of the aesthetic knowledge and ideological process that is imprinted within each of the images. Her voice as the producer of these images is not only to be heard, it is actually to be witnessed, as part of her presence behind the camera. The staging of temporal endurance, a key element of empirical and objective photography and academia, is made visible in the formal aesthetic and variety of the images. In their multitude - of distance and close up or color and black and white -

they reference a literal way of thinking about immediate perception. Her use of both black and white film as well as color is a mode of distancing. It is an operative choice in term of making visible what is seen, what is represented, and what is pictured. The photographs perform themselves as equally authentic and fictitious.

Geyer's lecture consists of fragments varying greatly in intent, source and style: some are questions, some are historical quotes, some are commands, some are notes taken by the artist herself on one of her numerous trips to the Southwest. These spoken, personal notes are, according to Geyer, fictionalized authentic notes. They are written to seem like ethnographic field diary entries. Her notes on experiences are also quotes of sorts, fictionalized quotes that are presented in context with the images.

Clearly overstepping the boundaries of scientific observation, she engages her viewers in the maze of her contemplation, and asks us to look at our own desires and projections that are entrenched in the image we have of the Southwest. The awareness of the claim, failure and fortune that is bestowed upon this specific site is often represented as a given, a story of naturalized and objectified events. History is continuously re-written to veil and hide the politics that have decided Chaco Canyon's fate. The purpose of this history is based on the affirmation of an absence. Erasing the presence of experience of all those who did not comply with the ideal of this new land and a "-scape" to be conquered and settled. This silence is a significant key of entry to the piece. As the silence stands for the silence experienced by non-indigenous people, because there is no silence for indigenous people. For Geyer, it is "as if I speak these silent texts that anthropology produces, give them a voice, a sound and let them echo back on themselves to make them visible in different ways. I take them out of a silence and the silence they produce in history."[2]

Geyer, as the protagonist of her own work, does not simply read the text but oscillates between the imperative and the persuasive, smoothly slipping into a variety of cultural roles that ensure cultural authority. Dressed in a tweed suit, a tie, a pair of thick-rimmed glasses, the artist counter-writes and thereby interrogates the process of the subject's assimilation into a country. As a white, male, middle-aged intellectual, she in her performance embraces her appropriated subject in the conceptual endeavor of her analysis. She is the ethnographer, the historian, the poet, the performer, or the artist, who, as she remarks, "like the protagonist in fiction, holds center stage."[3] She seamlessly performs a variety of statements, observations, poems and appeals, bound together by a constructed body of text, overlapping different forms, styles and authorships. The androgynous body of her presence acts as a filter. Her gestures of reading, of knowing and of speaking, lay bare the process that lies at the core of each of her appropriated agents. It is through different voices that she asks us about the desire and the feeling of a right of passage. Her voice and gestures flow from one state into another. Leaning closely into the microphone one moment, she shifts her attention to her audience in another, looking up at the light and then at her audience. She addresses them directly, only to physically draw back from the confrontation of the speaker's spot an instant later. She enacts, giving a body to the words of her authors. Authorship is addressed within the framework of the public lecture. A cultural construction of the Self whose "I" becomes the filter and catalyst for a history of irreducible voices and views.

Geyer speaks from a point of awareness of the knowledge we project onto the artist's presence. It is a presence that – just by being acknowledged – takes on a position of power, as it speaks of a moment where authority and authenticity collide. Her authority also illuminates where a line becomes a signature, a phrase, a gesture of personal presence and responsibility. Geyer replaces and transcribes the authorships of others. She collages them as one in her performance, artistic gesture,

and artistic expression. The process of knowledge production is ideologically tied to the authorial position of the speaker.

The act of taking on the authority of the male speaker is a transcription of an unreflected concept of identity onto a geopolitical site. Closely written into the identities of its explorers, Chaco Canyon and Bandalier Canyon are site and source of discourse, evolving events. Their presence supplies the collective with an articulation of what has not been within their realm of immediate experience. She uses her own agenda as a screen on which the projection of the site becomes visible; she unveils the political and ontological value that is inscribed into the American Southwest. Geyer tries to understand the operations of the complex and changing discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced.

The amnesia of the continuing active and passive violence and marginalization against indigenous people in the United States is the canvas on which Geyer draws her vision of the cultural perception of the original American landscape and the Western frontier. Geyer critically appropriates the politics of visuality of key texts by anthropologists, writers, and photographers, some of whom have gone to the lands (THE PLAINS ARE ACCOCIATED WITH THE DEKOTAS...) of the Southwest. The images they have captured project an agenda of their own: the collective imaginary of a landscape that traditionally stands for unlimited freedom and an understanding of nature that relies on its domestication through “man." The landscape paintings of the 19th century by Albert Bierstadt, or the photographs of Ansel Adams, are visions of power. In this art tradition the classification and visualization of the American grid as a translucent, yet tear-proof net, is laid over an uneven terrain to be conquered and mastered by discourse. The persistence of this image, Scott MacDonald argues, has led to a continuing tradition of obsessive depictions “of ‘wilderness’ and the pastoral ‘middle state.’"[4] When the visual trajectory of the Southwest landscape is charted, "earlier fascinations do not simply disappear; often they are taken so much for granted that, in effect, our consciousness of them becomes repressed: their obviousness tends to render them invisible."[5]

In *Spiral Lands / Chapter 2* we are confronted with the violence and loss that is hidden behind an aesthetic, an image tradition that academia, the sciences and society have installed. The Southwest, as a landscape, continuously performs a symbolic split. On one hand, it remains a land that in its sublime stays out of reach for the individual, and on the other, it is the concrete bedrock of American philosophy, its pioneering conquest and greed. Geyer is a gatherer, a collector, and because of the nonlinear nature of her work an unraveler of tradition. She rediscovers the site-specificity of a land lost within its coordinates.

The artist’s methodology goes beyond the reproduction and transmission of knowledge, it centers on the political impact of what it means to articulate, reflecting on how anthropology constructs a fictitious narrative around people, that does not correspond with reality. The proclaimed authority of an individual experience is de-constructed and conveyed not as a singular, but as a collective imaginary and therefore unifying experience. Tied into re-readings and projections, the cultural value and remembrance of this instance as an event is determined by the balance between the projection of a singular experience and its collective reflection. To speak of a history means to speak within a historical moment. Geyer takes the analysis of the production of knowledge itself as an experience. Her approach neither reproduces naturalized categories nor does it guarantee any kind of historical neutrality. The juxtaposition of her immediate experience with the ideology device of visualization confuses the linear focus of the historical canon. The evidence of her personal experience of the Southwest is not linear; it is fractured and fragmented as a mediated experience that is tightly

embedded in the relationship between the perception of history, aesthetics, and its reflection in media. By staging an experience, she de-constructs any notion of a natural experience, exposing its discursive nature.

In contrast, historians and anthropologist need a linear narrative that determines the evidence as much as the evidence determines the narrative.[6] According to Joan Scott, "the evidence of experience becomes evidence for the fact of difference, of the author over his/her subject of observation."[7] Experience, according to Scott, serves as a way of talking about what happened, but at the same time it can do a lot more: "It establishes difference and similarity, which in turn constitute different claims of knowledge. These are to be interpreted and thus always contested; always ideological, and thus political. The evidence of experience reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems. History is a chronology that makes experience visible, but in which categories such as desire, sexuality, gender appear as fixed entities as nonetheless a-historical."[8]

Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative evidence that grounds what is known, but rather what we seek to explain, about what knowledge is produced. To think about experience in this way is to historicize it or contextualized in history, as well as the identities it produces. Geyer explores how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes the myth and the agency of those who mediate, see and act in the world. The evidence of experience becomes an atmospheric texture. One that, like a screen in a cinema, marks the experience itself in its memory and iteration. Questions mount up to the process of writing about a work that continuously is in the process of re-writing itself. According to Joan Scott, "'the properties of the medium through which the visible appears'...make any claim to un-mediated transparency impossible."[9] As Geyer permits a vision beyond the visible, a projection of an exchange between the presence of the self and the political site of the other, both are the basis for political identification. Geyer's visual and performative enactment of the classic ethno-cultural slide lecture on the Southwest becomes a process of recognition of difference and awareness, one governed by desire through its critical appropriation. Geyer clearly puts into action how appropriation is not about taking what does not belong and making it your own, but rather demonstrates how one can only appropriate what is already part of oneself. Appropriation becomes an activity that continuously changes the source as well as the subject.

By playing a role clearly separated from herself, Geyer, in a Brechtian tradition of the "alienation effect," not only unveils the illusion of authorship but also that of the objective camera. She gives image to the process of experiencing history. She displays not a result, but a series of effects by juxtaposing the construction of a visual tradition with that of her physical presence. She mediates the present in the past.

The century-long debate over the "loss of aura" inherent to photography is countered by the equally strong idea of reproduction enhancing the aura of the original. The cultural function of these "still" and "moving" images is sustained in a state of evolvement and re-reading. Looking at the relationship between performance art and its mediatization raises the question how the economy of image reproduction is connected to the archive of images constituting our collective and imaginary memory.

Geyer responds to the often-voiced question if an image can let us take part in a political experience. How can the surrogates of an experience fulfill this quest without merely affecting its viewers, how can one's own imaginary be broken? Experience as a process is a central aspect in the politics of reproduction. The images that shape our vision of the reality of politics have been increasingly

structured through fiction. A sort of spectacle that is firmly anchored in an economy of experience, a tightly woven fabric.[10] The images become performative - they tell not just of the instance that they where taken in and its physical features, but equally of the technological circumstances that permitted the author to take them. Within artistic authorship, they claim a scientific objectivity. The speaker's insights and impressions are clear markings of her presence and beliefs, beliefs that to a certain extent need to still believe in the power of truth nestled and nurtured by the craft of documentary photography as well as historical experience. As otherwise the illusion of it could not be ideologically questioned. Through her appropriation she investigates and strips down the power structures that have given photography its status and role of constituting art history and ethnography as an academic discipline.

Despite all the maneuvers of distraction, de-contextualization and media-reflective analysis, *Spiral Lands / Chapter 2* is about Geyer's reflections on "thinking and living within and between two languages is not a condition, but an event that happens again and again, with each thought, with each utterance, with each word written."[11] Telling something about oneself by acting as someone different is a masquerade and an emancipatory strategy. It is perhaps a moment of translational displacement between the subject and the individual; finding distance from the present and its feeling of stasis. She stands beside herself, takes a step back, makes a clear gesture, all in order to mark the continuous flux of history. She speaks of an awareness of her experience, one that is at the basis of her own authority as an author. Tapping into the knowledge of an unconscious, repressed political memory of both her own country, Germany, and her adopted home, the United States, the artist resorts to a third country, taken over by the latter. By dealing with the land of the Native Americans she explores her position towards her home country, her own historically trauma-shaken origin. For Geyer it all stands "in relation to living in a different country. And through that process a myth was broken, I had no choice but to take account for a memory that had become my own. It was about how memory is the key of human experience. Memory provides the context for the current moment. It is a connection that we build for ourselves in relation to a history, family, identity, and it conditions our immediate experience in this present moment."[12]

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1 e-mail correspondence with the artist.
2 e-mail correspondence with the artist.
3 Andrea Geyer, from text *Spiral Lands / Chapter 2*
4 Scott MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films About Place* (Berkeley: University of California, 2001), 3.
5 Ibid.
6 Joan Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” in *Critical Inquiry* 17, No.4. (Summer 1991): 776, Citing Dominick LaCapra, "Rhetoric and History," *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 15-44.
7 Ibid., 777.
8 Ibid., 779.
9 Joan Scott, “Experience,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Judith Butler and Joan Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 34-5. Citing Karen Swann.
10 Hito Steyerl, *Die Farbe der Wahrheit* (Vienna: Turia & Kant, 2008), 75.
11 Now, Then and Love: Questions of Agency in Contemporary Practice, concept by Andrea Geyer. A conversation among Andrea Geyer, Ken Gonzales Day, Sharon Hayes, Andrià Julià, Juan Madiagan, Emily Roysdon (LTTR), Stephanie Taylor, Bruce Yonemoto and Dolores Zinny. In: *Now, Then and Love*, exhibition catalogue (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2007), 153.
12 lecture given at Vermont College of Fine Arts, July 27th, 2oo8