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Portraits of Places: Gabriele Basilico and the Slowness of the Gaze

DAVIDE DERIU

Gabriele Basilico's slow-paced photography is a form of visual urbanism. His way of representing cities was deeply influenced by his architectural studies. He developed his own artistic research, which he called *fotografia di ricerca* (research photography).

Die von Langsamkeit geprägte Fotografie Gabriele Basilicos ist eine Form des visuellen Urbanismus. Seine Herangehensweise an die Darstellung von Städten wurde stark von seinem Architekturstudium beeinflusst. Er entwickelte eine eigene künstlerische Forschung, die er *fotografia di ricerca* (Forschungsfotografie) nannte.

Biography

Davide Deriu is Reader in the School of Architecture and Cities at the University of Westminster, London. His research on architectural and urban representations has been published in books and journals such as *Architecture and Culture*, *Architectural Theory Review*, and *The Journal of Architecture*. Edited works include *Emerging Landscapes* (Ashgate, 2014) and themed issues of *Architectural Histories*, *The London Journal*, and *Emotion, Space and Society*. He was a Mellon Fellow on the research program “Architecture and/or Photography” at the CCA, where he previously curated the *Modernism in Miniature* exhibition. From 2019 to 2020, he held a British Academy Fellowship for his “Architecture and Vertigo” project.

*Why has the pleasure of slowness disappeared?*¹

If photography can be considered to be a form of visual urbanism, the Italian photographer Gabriele Basilico (1944–2013) was arguably one of its main practitioners. Basilico took up a camera while studying architecture at Milan's Polytechnic in the 1960s and opened his photographic studio in 1973, the year he graduated. He established a professional career by alternating social reportage with commercial assignments for architects and the design industry. In parallel, he developed a personal artistic research that would lead him to depict a number of cities around the world over four decades.² This large body of work has been written about by several critics and historians, as well as by architects including Aldo Rossi and Álvaro Siza. Moreover, Basilico's own reflections have been published in a number of interviews and essays—most comprehensively in the book *Architetture, città, visioni* (2007).³

Basilico's approach to the representation of cities was deeply influenced by his architectural studies; the distinct sense of space emanating from his photographs was the result of an analytical observation that germinated in his university years. Architecture schools were at the forefront of the student movement that swept over Italy in the late 1960s, bringing about a new consciousness of the architect's responsibilities within modern society. Basilico breathed in that wind of change.

His deep interest in the built environment made him popular among architects, some of whom claimed him as one of their own. Siza, for instance, expressed as much admiration for the photographer's work as the latter did for the architect's buildings: "Surely Basilico is a practising architect?" Siza asked rhetorically. "He is an architect of vision who transcends pessimism. He knows how to see and learn and he teaches us to see."⁴

The dialogue between architects and photographers has long been a source of productive collaboration, in particular since the mid-twentieth century.⁵ In 1949, Le Corbusier, upon receiving his first photographs of the Unité d'habitation in Marseille, famously wrote to Lucien Hervé, "You have the soul of an architect."⁶ By validating the photographer's ability to capture the elusive qualities of architecture, these words sealed a process of recognition that has underpinned a number of professional alliances besides that felicitous one. Basilico's case was different, for he belonged to the rank of twentieth-century photographers who received a formal education in architecture—a trajectory whose illustrious precursors included Eric de Maré, Ezra Stoller, and George E. Kidder Smith.

Basilico's early sources of inspiration, however, were not professional architectural photographers but others who embraced the social role of the artist, such as Bill Brandt and Walker Evans. The documentary work of Lewis Baltz and that of Bernd and Hilla Becher had a further influence on the vision that Basilico developed between the late 1970s and early 1980s, based on what he called the "slowness of the gaze." That

1. Kundera 1997 [1995]: 4.
2. Gabriele Basilico's work and legacy were the subject of the interdisciplinary seminar "A Photographer's Sense of Space," organized by the author and Alexandra Tommasini, and hosted by the Department of Architecture at the University of Westminster in May 2016. This event led to the publication of a special 2019 issue of *The Journal of Architecture* 24 (8), edited by Dr Tommasini.
3. Basilico 2007.

4. Siza 1999: 6.
5. Elwall 2004.
6. Sbriglio 2011.



Fig. 1.

Gabriele Basilico. Milano, Viale Isonzo, 1978-80.
© Archivio Gabriele Basilico, Milano.

approach came into being through a series of projects that marked an evolution of Basilico's photographic subjects: from buildings to landscapes to cities and their outskirts.

From Building to Landscape

Basilico had a deep attachment to his native city, Milan, where he lived all his life. Playing as a child amid the rubble in the aftermath of the Second World War was his first instinctive way of "inhabiting the city."⁷ By that he meant not only the condition of living in a specific place but a deeper, even metaphysical sense of belonging. Such an intimate connection with cities became manifest in his first major project, a survey of abandoned factories in the Milanese outskirts undertaken for the National Institute of Planning (INU) between 1978 and 1980. The ensuing publication, *Ritratti di fabbriche* (Portraits of factories), inaugurated a long series of explorations in what soon became Basilico's favorite genre: the photobook.⁸ His "portraits" brought an aura of monumentality out of anonymous industrial structures that revealed themselves in the crisp light of spring (Fig. 1). At the time, his poetic interpretation of Milan's neglected factories was regarded as "anti-reportage."⁹ Each subject was depicted from a different angle, and the images were captioned with the names of streets rather than buildings, so as to emphasize the urban dimension of the project.¹⁰

This early photobook displays Basilico's fascination for the products of human labor that would resurface throughout his career. The impulse to survey the material traces of the post-industrial age was inspired

by the Bechers' work, which he admired as "an enormous document of collective identity."¹¹ But while the idea of a potentially non-finite sequence was indebted to the systematic approach developed by the Bechers at the Düsseldorf School, Basilico engaged with his urban subjects in a far more empathic way that somehow humanized them. He later reflected on this attitude: "I think for me to photograph architecture is a bit like to take someone's portrait: it is often more important what is hidden than what is seen."¹²

The turning point in Basilico's photographic research was marked by his participation in the DATAR mission in the early 1980s. This was a major campaign funded by the French government with the aim of surveying the mutation of landscapes throughout the country.¹³ Rapid deindustrialization had thrown the French town-planning system into a state of crisis, and the postwar model centered on regional metropolises had shown its limits. Landscapes were deemed to register the signs of profound change in the social as well as spatial fabrics of the country, hence the Ministry of Land Development invested in their documentation through a large public undertaking. The DATAR mission revived the state patronage of photography that was pioneered in the mid-nineteenth-century by the French Commission for Historic Monuments, which had sent five photographers across the country to document sites in need of preservation or restoration. With a different focus,

7. Basilico 2013; 2014.

8. Basilico 1981.

9. Bertelli 1981: 7–8.

10. The locations were marked on a map folded into the book's jacket.

11. Basilico 2007: 17. All translations from this and other works are by the author.

12. Ibid.: 137–38.

13. DATAR was a department working for the French Ministry of Land Development. In its early iteration, the acronym stood for *Délégation à l'Aménagement du Territoire et à l'Action Régionale* (Land development and regional action delegation).



Fig. 2.

Giovanna Calvenzi. Gabriele Basilico.
Northern France, 1984.
© Archivio Gabriele Basilico, Milano.

Fig. 3.

Bernardo Bellotto. Dresden from the Right Bank
of the Elbe, above the Augustusbrücke, 1747.
© bpk / Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden / Elke
Estel / Hans-Peter Klut.



DATAR far surpassed those *Missions héliographiques* in scope and scale: it involved twenty-nine photographers who yielded around sixteen thousand pictures over seven years—an endeavor without equal in history.

The driving force behind the mission was Bernard Latarjet, an agronomist and rural engineer who believed that town planning “needed to build a true landscape culture.”¹⁴ In his view, photography could provide new aesthetic responses to the impoverishment of symbols that affected modern society. Latarjet was convinced that photographers had a greater power of freely interpreting the visible world since the advent of television had liberated their medium of its “social function of representation.”¹⁵ He and François Hers, the Belgian photographer who acted as DATAR’s artistic director, oversaw the work of an international group that included Lewis Baltz, Robert Doisneau, Josef Koudelka, Richard Pare, and Sophie Ristelhueber. The photographers were given carte blanche to interpret their subjects and engaged in regular conversations with philosophers, planners, and policy makers to discuss the transformation of the collective symbols embedded in landscapes.¹⁶ Basilico was among the first to be invited, as his approach suited Latarjet’s intention to explore “the experience of a new relationship with landscape” through individual and common reflections.¹⁷

A New Perception

The assignment on the northern shores of France, from 1984 to 1985,

prompted Basilico to undertake a patient contemplation of places. He described this shift in *Bord de mer* (1990), a photobook based on his DATAR work.¹⁸ The short essay, “For a Slowness of the Gaze,” was effectively the manifesto of a new approach that Basilico named *fotografia di ricerca* (research photography); that is, “the free interpretation of facts, places, and people” which had hitherto remained in the shadow of his professional activity. The unprecedented freedom Basilico relished over six months along the French coast expanded his photographic vision: “a distant gaze and a ‘slowed’ time had allowed me to discover the things I observed almost beyond their appearance.”¹⁹ A large-format camera (ten by twelve) let the photographer frame the landscape “at a leisurely pace” by composing views, upside down, on the ground-glass viewfinder. This apparatus, complete with tripod and hood, was instrumental in broadening Basilico’s perceptual capacity and became his inseparable working tool: “Progressively, I chose to substitute to the ‘decisive moment,’ which I had grown used to after learning from reportage, the ‘slowness of the gaze,’ as though I wanted to seize upon each detail until I reached the complexity of things which the landscape could yield to a meticulous observation.”²⁰ (Fig. 2)

At the heart of this contemplative attitude lay the desire to establish a deep bond with every subject. Basilico’s empathy allowed him to grasp the harmony of landscapes and to bring them in contact with his inner self. Contemplation for him was not a mode

14. Bocquet 2014: 88.

15. Latarjet 1990: 15–18.

16. A first selection of photographs was exhibited at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, in 1985, and later toured Europe.

17. Latarjet 1990: 18.

18. Basilico 1990a.

19. Ibid.: 9.

20. Ibid.: 10.

of aesthetic detachment but, on the contrary, a process of grounding that sought out the deeper essence of each place—in other words, its molecular structure that revealed the complexity of human environments. The subject of the photograph was then no longer the individual building but “the strong relationship between man-made works and space.”²¹ This relational approach was to become central to his subsequent photography of cities.

Remarkably, for a quintessentially *urban* photographer, Basilico had to leave his familiar terrain in order to hone his vision. The seaside project marked a discovery of the landscape not only as a subject but also as a visual category, a mode of observation in which both space and time were “dilated,” as he often said, within the picture frame. While in his earlier architectural photography the view was constructed from the borders inward, the new consciousness of landscape led him to proceed from inside out. A slow and meditative gaze was the engine of this centrifugal movement. It gave the photographer a license to “transgress the conventions of the borders” by exploring a more fluid type of representation in which space was pushed through the edges and thus “liberated.” He likened the result of this process to the eighteenth-century *vedute* painted by Bernardo Bellotto, also known as Canaletto the Younger, and notably to his Dresden cycle in which “the represented world existed beyond the frame.”²² (Fig. 3)

Something similar happens in Basilico’s views of Normandy landscapes, as evidenced by an image taken in 1985 at Le Tréport, in the Seine-Maritime department

(Fig. 4). This majestic view, which harks back to the pictorial tradition of *vedutismo*, encapsulates the “process of complete synthesis” derived from the newly acquired perception. The intention to measure up space through the camera was achieved through a carefully controlled relation between the picture planes. Indeed, the whole composition was framed in such a way as to draw out the spatial features of the place—an ad hoc attitude that Basilico would later apply to cityscapes.

In this photograph, the field of vision encompasses the signs of a multi-layered historical transformation. Several elements, ranging from a medieval church to an industrial port, coexist within the view of the fishing village bordered by cliffs.²³ The productive activity is indexed by a bellow of smoke that blends into the clouds. This *punctum* opens up another reading of the image: this fine-grained photograph may also be regarded as a synthesis between documentary and pictorialist aesthetics. In the foreground, the belvedere further reinforces the ideal character of the picture as landscape. The point of view is suspended above it, letting us gaze upon the scene as if in a state of suspension. As Basilico pointed out in the conclusion of the *Bord de mer* essay, the pursuit of an optimal vantage point was central to his new contemplative attitude: “It is no longer necessary to construct a photograph in a particular or studied manner because, given an ‘exceptional’ point of view, it is sufficient to look in a ‘normal’ way, giving away all optical perversions: by allowing nature and light to express and represent themselves,

21. Basilico 2007: 46.
22. Ibid.: 70.

23. The medieval church of St. Jacques, visible in the right middle ground (Fig. 4), was largely rebuilt in the sixteenth century and was classified as a historical monument in the nineteenth-century.



Fig. 4.

Gabriele Basilico. Tréport, 1985.
© Archivio Gabriele Basilico, Milano.



Fig. 5.

Gabriele Basilico. Calais, 1985.
© Archivio Gabriele Basilico, Milano.

photography becomes less loaded with interpretative signs.”²⁴

A painstaking effort was required, however, to rediscover that “normal” gaze. If we read Basilico’s words as a declaration of a new poetics, we can appreciate his urge to assert slowness as the condition for a “direct, conscious and pure vision without any acrobatics of interpretation.”²⁵ The journey to the north was therefore the occasion that turned his *fotografia di ricerca* toward a more primitive, spiritual connection with the world. Through a long immersion in the landscape, the quest for a decisive moment was replaced by an alternative method, one that was based on the quest for a defining point of view.

Le Tréport crystallizes the landscape vision that Basilico matured in the mid-1980s, in which space took on the role of protagonist within the picture frame. It is not surprising that he considered it “an ideal photograph”; in fact, it might be regarded as an idealized view of the landscape. Here lies a conundrum of Basilico’s work: the desire to seize upon the complexity of reality on camera, to reveal the tensions and contradictions inscribed in the built environment, was inseparable from a longing for beauty that led him to find harmony everywhere.

Cities and Beyond

In parallel with the DATAR mission, Basilico carried out his first systematic documentation of cityscapes. The survey of urban ports he conducted around Europe throughout the 1980s combined his newly found vision, inspired by coastal landscapes, with his prior interest in industrial buildings. If Milan’s factories had catalyzed his attention toward spaces of production, this new

research focused on those other expressions of human labor that most vividly embodied the transition from the industrial age to a post-industrial one. A series of journeys, triggered by a public commission that Basilico realized in Naples in 1982, resulted in the photobook *Porti di mare* (1990), published the same year as *Bord de mer*.²⁶ The visual narrative followed a geographic line that started in Italy and spiraled out (clockwise) through Europe, winding up in Hamburg on the shore of the Elbe. Not only did this work seal Basilico’s status as a prominent urban photographer; it also asserted the generative force of travel in his artistic research.

Porti di mare can be regarded as the climax of Basilico’s first period, during which his approach to cities evolved from a focus on individual buildings to more expansive urban spaces observed at a slower pace. This trajectory defined a relentless exploration of the city as a complex reality in a state of flux, a multi-layered subject whose vital forces lay under the shadow of iconic buildings and historical landmarks. Not unlike the forlorn Milanese factories, the European waterfronts offered yet another means of approaching cities from their edges; this time, from those liminal zones shaped by human labor where space expands toward infinity (Fig. 5). In Basilico’s crisp, monochrome compositions, the port cities of the late 1980s became the monuments of an age in the throes of irreversible decline—yet also the witnesses of its survival. As his wife and editor Giovanna Calvenzi noted, harbors appealed to him because they revealed “the strong relationship between man-made works and space.”²⁷ They provided a virtually boundless repertoire of forms through which Basilico could explore the

24. Basilico 1990a: 10.
25. Ibid.

26. Basilico 1990b.
27. Giovanna Calvenzi, quoted in: Lanza 2017: n.p.

industrial aesthetic he had absorbed from the interwar avant-garde. (Fig. 6)

The grandeur of these cityscapes did not go unnoticed at the time. In his foreword to *Porti di mare*, Aldo Rossi praised Basilico's ability to capture a "new beauty" in his images: "they offer the beauty of what we thought we knew and are now gazing at again in wonder."²⁸ In the same book, the historian of photography Roberta Valtorta remarked on the aesthetics of the project and suggested that Basilico had set out on a quest for the "mystique" of places. The survey of European ports was significantly different from his early cataloguing projects in that it showed the photographer's intent "to work out a global, highly symbolic, monumental representation of a whole civilization that is dying."²⁹ The signs of life in the pictures—smoking chimneys, cranes in operation, ferries on the move, and even the occasional presence of human beings—only reinforce the sense of impending doom. The consolatory beauty of architecture, admired by Rossi and others, was couched in an aura of irremediable melancholy.

Rossi himself was an influential teacher at Milan's Polytechnic in the late 1960s, and his theory of the city as a locus of collective memory left a mark on Basilico.³⁰ The idea that urban structures acquire monumental value through their permanence went on to inform his subsequent project, carried out in Beirut soon after the end of the Lebanese Civil

War (1975–90). Basilico was one of the six photographers invited by the writer Dominique Eddé to document the ravaged center of the capital in 1991.³¹ He resisted the temptation of aestheticizing the ruins and searched instead for the original form of the city that survived the war's devastation. As a result, the extant structures testified to the *longue durée* of Beirut's history, evoking a dilated time span that extended into the city's future as well as its past. Basilico's aim was not to deny the dramatic state of ruination but rather to consider Beirut a living organism like any other city. He regarded destruction as a disease of the city's skin while recognizing that the skeleton underneath had remained intact.³² With Rossi's idea of permanence in mind, the photographer attempted to reveal the signs of a deeper structure awaiting a new lease of life. (Fig. 7)

The method of slow and meticulous contemplation was further tested in the urban peripheries of the Italian peninsula, which became the focus of Basilico's research over the 1990s. *Italy: Cross Sections of a Country* was the title of the project he did in collaboration with the architect Stefano Boeri for the 1996 Venice Biennale of Architecture, published two years later as a photobook.³³ Basilico and Boeri looked at six "analogous portions of territory" across the country, each covering a surface of fifty by twelve kilometers. Moving from the peripheries of cities out into these "critical areas," they mapped the increasingly homogenous constructions that dotted the Italian landscapes with

28. Rossi 1990: 5.

29. Valtorta 1990: 9.

30. Rossi 1982 [1966].

31. The campaign was conducted under the aegis of the Hariri Foundation and also involved the photographers Robert Frank, Fouad Elkoury, René Burri, Raymond Depardon, and Josef Koudelka. A selection of photographs was exhibited at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, in 1993. See *Beirut City Centre* (Paris, 1993).

32. See Tommasini (2017) on the double meaning of "patient" in relation to Basilico's photography. (It is also used, as a noun, with regard to his approach to the city as a body to be healed.)

33. Basilico and Boeri 1998.



Fig. 6.

Gabriele Basilico.
Trieste, 1985.
© Archivio Gabriele
Basilico, Milano.



Fig. 7.

Gabriele Basilico.
Beirut, 1991.
© Archivio Gabriele
Basilico, Milano.

few apparent signs of local or regional differences. The relentless urbanization of the land was associated with the loss of a coherent architectural identity and widely regarded as a symptom of social dis-integration.

Fig. 8.

Gabriele Basilico. Between Florence and Pistoia, 1996.
© Archivio Gabriele Basilico, Milano.



Boeri maintained that photography could offer new insights to redress “the cognitive weakness” shown by the academic discourse on urbanism over the prior two decades. Thus Basilico’s gaze was deemed to be particularly suited to revealing those “evolutionary mechanisms” that underpinned the mutation of Italian landscapes.³⁴ His images depicted the anonymous environments that were sprawling outward at the outskirts of historical towns and the landscapes that were formed by scattered housing developments, shopping centers, warehouses, freeways, and sundry peri-urban outgrowths. (Figs. 8 and 9)



Fig. 9.

Gabriele Basilico. Between Florence and Pistoia, 1996.
© Archivio Gabriele Basilico, Milano.

Basilico’s systematic observation of places—and, indeed, non-places³⁵—resulted in a sequence of views that manifested his pursuit of a “theoretically infinite research upon a specific theme.”³⁶ While the Bechers had recorded industrial relics as “anonymous sculptures” (*Anonyme Skulpturen*), Basilico’s repetitive subjects were equally nondescript, but never shown isolation. Instead, architecture was always situated within its context and framed as landscape. Everywhere he relished the challenge of finding a way in, always placing the utmost importance on the position of the camera as a means of measuring distances and gauging his relation with space. Later on this process was likened to acupuncture, a metaphor

34. Boeri 1998: 18.

35. Marc Augé’s seminal book *Non-Lieux* (*Non-Places*, 1992) appeared in Italian for the first time in 1996.

36. Basilico and Valtorta 2011: 29.

that in the meantime had made inroads in urban design.³⁷ Setting the tripod in a carefully chosen spot after restless wandering was the preparatory gesture that anchored Basilico to a specific place. His gaze upon the scene was a needle inserted in the skin of the city: a means of liberating the power of consciousness and provoking new and unexpected visions.

Basilico sought out a sense of harmony in the peripheries of Italian towns as well. His ability to dignify the most humdrum of subjects had the implicit effect of validating a built environment that was often dismissed as the product of unregulated sprawl. His work was driven by a relentless search for clues of the complex reality that lay beyond the surface, even where that reality seemed to have lost any legible form. As Boeri noted, the photographic sequences managed to capture the variations of building types that could be detected through the “dust cloud” of homogeneous construction. Basilico’s empathic gaze brought out “the many microcosms” that constituted each of the peripheries he looked at, rather than merely observing the features that recurred across different places.³⁸

Boeri considered the photographic series as “eclectic atlases” that offered alternative viewpoints on their neglected subjects: “Montages of representations capable of compelling these sites, which are physically static but unstable in meaning, to liberate their capacity to hold several different codes of communication.”³⁹ The cross sections manifested Basilico’s ability to visualize spatial

configurations in an analytical way, revealing a designing attitude of the gaze which, in Italian, has been called “progettualità dello sguardo.”⁴⁰ A slow, meditative gaze was the driving force behind this approach.

Time for Slowness

The slowness of the gaze is a key concept that informed Basilico’s photography of cities throughout his life. This approach did not originate in a vacuum; it emerged at a moment when the return to a slower pace of life was advocated in different quarters. In 1986 a group of Italian activists led by Carlo Petrini set up the “slow food” movement in reaction to the opening of a McDonald’s near the Spanish Steps in Rome. More broadly, the longing for slowness signaled a widespread reaction against the increasing acceleration of social life that came with the neoliberal globalization of the world economy.⁴¹ A decade later, the writer Milan Kundera pronounced in his philosophical novel *Slowness* (1995): “Speed is the form of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on man.”⁴² Aligning slowness with memory, and speed with oblivion, Kundera wondered where “the flâneurs of yesteryear” had all gone. Basilico was undoubtedly one of them, and he was going around the world armed with camera and tripod.

From the mid-1980s onward, Basilico’s research was driven by the pursuit of “a calm, collective vision where everything slows down.”⁴³ This strategy was dictated by a deep-seated desire to understand the urbanized world, to establish a bond with places and instigate a critical appraisal of

37. The term “urban acupuncture,” originally attributed to the urbanist Manuel de Solà-Morales, has been adopted by various architects and urban designers (Lerner 2014).
38. Ibid.: 16.
39. Boeri 1998: 24.

40. Madesani and Calvenzi 2016.
41. Rosa 2013.
42. Kundera 1997 [1995]: 4.
43. “Gabriele Basilico.” 2009.

their transformation through the lens of the camera. By the mid-1990s, Basilico's vision had reached its full maturity. Developing the premises of the DATAR mission, the Venice Biennale project showed that photography could offer new comparative insights into the mutation of landscapes and thereby inform the public debate on urban change. The success of this work brought Basilico invitations to document a number of cities worldwide—including Berlin, Moscow, Istanbul, Shanghai, and San Francisco.

Basilico's adherence to a contemplative gaze was in stark contrast with the trends in photography and visual arts that emerged in parallel. Speed and fragmentation became the hallmarks of a new paradigm that befitted the representation of fast-growing cities around the world. Emblematic of this was the itinerant *Cities on the Move* exhibition that was staged between 1997 and 1998 in response to the breakneck pace of Asian urbanization and related shifts in economic, political, and cultural life. The impetus of the project was expressed by the curators in the following terms: "The staggering frequency of displacement, speed, exchange and transgression of borderlines suggest a desire to go beyond the established notion of the city, and to imagine new possibilities of restructuring our living environment."⁴⁴

Basilico's slow-paced photography became all the more distinctive in comparison with these trends. After the turn of the century, as digital technologies and new media became pervasive, he continued to apply his method with patience until it became an obsessive ritual. In a 2002 conversation with Boeri and Hans Ulrich Obrist (coincidentally also a

curator of *Cities on the Move*), Basilico updated his poetics of the slow gaze for the new millennium: "My wish is to adapt a system of vision, a mechanism that helps you to find order and equilibrium in the multiple projections of the eye. Adopting slowness as an antidote to pollution and the over-representation of the world."⁴⁵ A decade later, in one of his last published interviews, he advocated for slowness as a means of resistance to the technological onslaught of the twenty-first century: "Photography created at a leisurely pace, which goes against the speed of the digital world ... helps me better understand. In this sense, contemplation simply refers to looking deeper, looking longer, attempting to digest or in essence, processing what you see."⁴⁶

For Basilico, photography was primarily a tool of personal research. Without ever claiming that images could have any direct impact on planning or politics, he considered the camera a tool of interpretation that could, at most, lend a new sensibility to those in charge of shaping the environment. At the same time, his desire to capture the complexity of things was inseparable from a longing for beauty that found a visual order even where chaos and contradictions reigned. His patient observation of places remained unperturbed by the advent of ever-faster processes of construction and representation. In the course of time, Basilico's gaze invested his subjects with an aura that made his work somewhat reminiscent of that of nineteenth-century urban photographers.

The analogy between photography and city offers a further key to reappraising Basilico's work. Much as for Rossi the

44. Hanru and Obrist 1997: n.p. (paragraph 7).

45. Basilico, in Basilico and Maggia 2002: 8.

46. Basilico and Valtorta 2011: 32–33.

urban fabric embodied the permanent traces of collective memory, for Basilico photography embodied the persistence of visual procedures that, amid all sorts of technical advances, could still reveal the undiminished power of patient observation. Indeed, if a sense of nostalgia pervades his work, that is not so much a yearning for architectures of the past but rather for an unhurried way of seeing that lies at the very roots of photography. Basilico's expansive body of work may well resonate in the future, when his research will face the test of history. Meanwhile, his images invite us to contemplate the urban landscape with an equal degree of slowness, and to interrogate photography's capacity to reveal what is hidden as well as what is seen.

Postscript

This essay develops some reflections on the work on Gabriele Basilico I presented to the 3rd Candide Conference on "Photography as Visual Urbanism," convened by Axel Sowa and Elâ Kaçel at RWTH Aachen University in January 2019. The events of 2020 have compelled me to add a brief coda. A major retrospective of Basilico's photography, curated by Giovanna Calvenzi and Filippo Maggia, took place at Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome in the early months of the year. While many of his projects have been exhibited before, *Gabriele Basilico / Metropoli* was the first comprehensive display that brought together the various strands of his urban photography, and it was accompanied by a rich program of talks, workshops, and film screenings. The exhibition, held in one of the chief art galleries in Italy, highlighted a number of aesthetic and thematic threads running through Basilico's oeuvre—a curatorial project that effectively consecrated the photographer as a major artist.

His formative experience of coastal landscapes in 1980s France was somewhat understated in the exhibition, perhaps because it did not fit in the "metropolis" category; and yet it can be argued, as I do in the essay, that it was decisive in the development of the photographer's urban vision. The far-reaching implications of this vision have partly been shown during the COVID-19 pandemic, as a number of photographers around the world have documented the eerie scenes of empty streets and squares, thereby revealing aspects of cities that are commonly unseen. This is not to suggest that Basilico's work was prophetic by any means, but merely to recognize his far-sighted capacity to approach built environments with a degree of slowness that we have lately been forced to rediscover by force majeure.

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