

Eugène Atget: Documenting "The Zone"

It was not simple to find words for the rags, the scraps, the garbage that began to arrive in the modern picture around 1912. Apollinaire, looking at the pasted papers of his friends Picasso and Braque, told the reader of his new book on Cubism that "mosaicists paint with marble or colored wood. There is mention of an Italian artist who painted with excrement; during the French Revolution blood served somebody as paint. You may paint with whatever material you please, with pipes, postage stamps, postcards or playing cards, candelabra, pieces of oil cloth, collars, painted paper, newspapers," It was all of it "less sweetness than plainness," he explained, for in modern art one does not choose. But someone else has chosen. Walter Benjamin, looking over much the same material in the pictures of Schwitters, saw the choice to be radical, politically speaking. And Atget? Atget did not take the scraps so literally into his pictures; rather, he chose to photograph them. His way of photographing involved the pursuit of something that initially might be called clarity.

Atget was always and only a photographer of what he called documents, the most objective picture of all, a technical picture designed to help someone else study a subject better. This meant that his picture were conceived as aids, as work that was going to be buried in a file or adsorbed into someone else's labor process, becoming a step on the way to a scholarly article, or a reproduction of a Louis XIV door knocker, or a cartoon, or a painting, or perhaps a theatre set. This produced the lines of work for which he is now best known, the *Vieux* of Paris. But at the same time Atget developed exceptions, and the work on the zone militaire was begun with an exception in mind. It belonged to a series devoted to modern life and resulted in the production of a set of albums for the Bibliothèque Nationale. He ended up cutting the subject into a polemical perspective, giving the series a focus on the ways of the working class. He would see Paris from the bottom up, radically.

Mostly Atget was not seeing modern life as a matter of people. In the zone militaire however he took some of his scenes as group portraits, showing the people who camped there in wagons or thin shacks. These people, the *zonières*, were a mixed group of gypsies and social refugees; as often as not they were presumed to be the sub-proletarian in nature, a kind of fierce, independent group that lived off an economy without entering happily into society. They were mostly its ragpickers. Earlier, Marx had seen the ragpicker to be the supreme example of the degradation possible under capitalism, "prostitution of the non-owning class in all its forms." Others, like Baudelaire, had turned this condition into the figure of a supreme, dark freedom. And Atget? He showed the ragpickers at home, which was also at work, living with the things they had gathered and were sorting down, preparing the saleable materials for the cycles of resale, or weaving baskets on the side. His pictures did not move to close. The ragpickers had been physically pushed to the limit of the city, to the flats of the old fortifications that encircled Paris then. Out of sight, beneath mind, the ragpickers lived beyond the rhythms of the city's modern life, eking a living from its waste and taking their distance. Atget let that distance expand in his pictures. He showed he approved it. Theirs was a life and a labor that could not be summarized, triumphantly or synthetically, by a form. It had to be shown as open and closed, surface and substance, the gist of the substance unknowable finally, always revolting, running away.

Fifty years later John Cage extracted something of the rhythm of everyday life from the scrap around him in New York. He saw the distance beyond its edge, the slip beyond the limits too. He gave a lecture on nothing. He replaced formality with discretion. Later Cage took lines from his lecture on nothing and added them to his Julliard Lecture. "A vacant lot," he paused, "a piece of string and a sunset," he paused again, "possessing neither," his pause grew long, "each acts." He could not have been clearer. And Atget? Atget, with his focus on a porcelaine nymph, a cloth wall, a broken chair and a light that flooded down the horizon, had already let a chaos have its points. He had let each act too. Nothing was in the process of being seen as something free.