

Terra Incognita

Sarah Fuller

02 MAY – 31 JULY 2020

PLATFORM



Terra Incognita A Response by Laura Levin

A quiet and ancient rock face, the colour of ash, stands tall and silent. It is unmoving, unyielding, waiting. Suddenly, a flicker of movement. Something rustles at the centre of the scene. It moves stealthily across the base of the crag; its form, undulating gently like mountain moss, is lifted and lowered by the wavering natural light. An arm, then a leg, tentatively peek out from behind the mottled background—a cloak designed to blend seamlessly into the stony setting. Flickering in and out of view, and enveloped by a simulation of the space, the camouflaged figure reaches out awkwardly again and again to find a toehold on the rock. It propels itself across the bluff with tenacious purpose and resolve: a tangle of limbs and textures, natural and constructed surfaces, a dance of mimicry, balance, and touch.

This performative video entitled, *Camouflage No. 1 (Rock)*, 2014, is part of *Terra Incognita*, an exhibition by artist Sarah Fuller presented at Winnipeg's PLATFORM centre for photographic + digital arts (01 May – 31 July 2020). The exhibit is comprised of three videos: *Camouflage No. 1 (Rock)*, 2014, *Camouflage No. 2 (Water)*, 2018, and *Camouflage No. 3 (Boulder/Iceland)*, 2016. Each piece contributes to a vibrant genealogy of camouflage art: a body of work in which artist-performers engage site-specifically with a range of physical and constructed environments.¹ In dialogue with earlier camouflage works by women artists like Francesca Woodman, Ana Mendieta, and Desiree Palmen, Fuller's attempts to blend seamlessly into her material surroundings call attention to ideological constructions of place, with a specific focus on gendered depictions of wilderness and nature. At the same time, the work invites a kinaesthetic response, prompting the viewer to reflect on the daily choreographies and perceptual habits that bind self to world.

In *Camouflage No. 1 (Rock)*, 2014, Fuller's (dis)appearance act plays on a loop, the viewer *zooms in and out and around the scene*, scanning the environment to anticipate the artist's next move. Initially, we take in the landscape at a distance—Sunshine Slabs in Banff. Soon we are pulled in by a subtle, stirring detail; we shift again to perceive a body moving upwards, downwards, and across a rocky surface. In effect, our witnessing mirrors the choreography enacted by the

¹. See e.g. Laura Levin, *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage, and the Art of Blending In* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014); Hannah Rose Shell, *Hide or Seek: Photography, and the Media of Reconnaissance* (MIT Press, 2012); Boy Behrens, *False Colors: Art, Design and Modern Camouflage* (Bobolink Books, 2002).

climber pulling our vision towards the performer's tactile apprehension of space, a view from inside the landscape.

Zoom in... We encounter the particularity of a woman's camouflaged body, as she attempts to climb the bluff, to *be* the bluff, and, in a twinned act of visual deception and punning, to simply bluff. Echoing feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray's observation that "woman has not yet taken (a) place—woman is still the place, the whole of the place in which she cannot take possession of herself as such,"² Fuller's layered actions point to historical perceptions of women as ground—as being synonymous with place itself. As scholars Kelly Dennis and Deborah Bright contend, these associations are especially pronounced in "the largely masculine landscape photography tradition," which, "like the 18th-century painted landscapes after which the genre is so often modeled ... became firmly established in the aesthetics of mastery associated with territorial exploration, expansion, and imperialist conquest."³ Fuller's use of camouflage speaks back to those male artists, from Ansel Adams to Edward Weston, who performed their mastery of space through image after image of "terra incognita"—the unknown landscape referenced in the show's title. Within these landscape photographs, nature is framed as feminine, conquerable, and available for voyeuristic pleasure and gaze. "To think of the American wilderness," muses critic Mary Abbe, "is to see it through Ansel Adams' eyes: vast panoramas of snow-capped mountains mirrored in still water, full moons suspended in starless skies, white water cascading down rocky cliffs into valleys bristling with conifers. Adams' landscapes are as unspoiled and virginal as the Garden of Eden, but more heroic, noble and masculine."⁴ The language of heroic mastery described here is not only tied to colonial misconceptions of land as being empty or uninhabited (which rationalized Canada's seizing of Indigenous territory), but also to the romantic quest for "the sublime": feelings of overwhelming awe and terror that Elizabeth Fay defines as "a male achievement gained *through* women as female objects or through female Nature."⁵

Much like Irigaray, who mimicked the sexist projections of philosophers like Plato, Descartes, and Freud—ventriloquizing their pronouncements about "Woman" to the point of explosive excess—, Fuller "bluffs" in a parodic mimicry of space, literalizing masculinist conventions in landscape photography to highlight their absurdity. Fuller covers her body in a replica of the rock face, a photograph reproduced on inkjet-printed linen and worn like a cloak. The use of this textile is deliberate, she says, as it references not only the history of "painting, but also scirms in theatres" and the making of "illusions."⁶ In the process, she *knits* together two meanings present in the show's title, *Terra Incognita*: "unknown landscape" and "woman in disguise."⁷

² Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, translated by Gillian C. Gill (Cornell UP, 1985), p. 227.

³ Kelly Dennis, "Eclipsing Aestheticism: Western Landscape Photography After Ansel Adams," *Miranda*, Vol. 11, 2015, para. 20. <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.6920>

⁴ Mary Abbe, "Revisiting Ansel Adams' America," *Star Tribune*, February 27, 2010. <https://www.startribune.com/art-review-revisiting-ansel-adams-america/85360197/?refresh=true>

⁵ Elizabeth Fay, *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism* (Blackwell, 1998), p. 14.

⁶ Sarah Fuller, "Artist Talk (Terra Incognita)," *Vimeo*, May 2020. vimeo.com/424505779?utm_campaign=2470763

⁷ *Ibid*

By mimicking the landscape with her costume, Fuller de-naturalizes images of “nature” embedded in conventional landscape photography, revealing the feminine presence that is often assumed to structure those spaces. This is playfully apparent in *Camouflage No. 2 (Water)*, 2018, where we see Fuller lying on her back in the rushing water of Banff’s Healy Creek, veiling her body with a photo of the surrounding stream. Unlike in the previous video, where the artist successfully disappears into the background, here her failure to blend is fully on display. Fuller’s artist’s arms and feet are visible throughout, the watery photo covering her body is the wrong shade of blue, and she labours to stay balanced and in place so she doesn’t get swept away by the current.

In both videos, the performance of camouflage is thus as much about fitting in as standing out. It presents an awkward tension that has the effect of unsettling the emplacement of women within the iconic vistas of the Canadian Rockies. Most unsettling is the incongruous appearance of woman-as-crag-scaling-crag: *the landscape climbing itself*. This embodied paradox intimates some of the challenges women have experienced when integrating into the historically male-dominated practice of mountaineering. As Simon Bainbridge and Julie Rak argue, starting in the late 18th-century, and coinciding with both colonial exploration and the romantic movement, mountaineering became connected with a rugged masculine individualism, and a romantic quest to conquer and ascend. This rhetoric linking manliness to braving the dangers of the climb continued well into the 20th-century (indeed, it is still present today), as seen in the press release for James Oliver Curwood’s book *The Valley of Silent Men*, 1922: “Away up in the Canadian Rockies, amid the mighty forces of Nature, a man must be a man even to survive.”⁸

The appearance of Fuller bouldering while hidden in the garb of landscape, is a brazen nod to those women who, according to Rak and others, have been “climbing mountains at least since 1808”⁹ despite their absence from mountaineering histories. So too it challenges historical conceptions of women mountaineers as “unnatural,” “Amazonian,” and “a wider menace to the social and political order.”¹⁰ “For several male climbers and writers,” Bainbridge argues, “the presence of women on the mountain was challenging because it potentially undermined their own sense of achievement, which they frequently registered in gendered terms.”¹¹ Rather than re-enacting repertoires of mountainous manhood—re-performing the heroism of summitting or histrionic suffering of vertical ascent—the climber in *Camouflage No. 1* remains largely still. She holds and is held by the rock. After what seems like an eternity, she pulls away from the surface, shifts sideways, and quietly descends.

⁸ Press release as quoted in Deborah Bright, “Of Mother Nature and Malboro Men: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography,” *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, edited by Richard Bolton (MIT Press, 1989), p. 128.

⁹ Julie Rak, “Social Climbing on Annapurna: Gender in High-altitude Mountaineering Narratives,” *English Studies in Canada* Vol. 33.1-2, March/June 2007, p. 112.

¹⁰ Simon Bainbridge, *Mountaineering and British Romanticism: The Literary Cultures of Climbing, 1770-1836* (Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 221.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

Zoom out... Fuller proceeds to walk out of the scene, only to show up moments later (courtesy of video editing) as a disappeared detail within the landscape. In this loop of exiting and returning, of separating and then again melding into the picture, Fuller rejects distanced mastery as a way of relating to the larger environment—refusing to separate from the natural world as a response to her inescapable enmeshment within it. Climbing requires a kinaesthetic attentiveness to the topography of one's material surroundings: to balance and solve the "puzzles" of a rock wall you must develop a sequence of moves. You must dance harmoniously *with* the rock.¹² As Fuller explains, when you are in the "zone or the flow" of climbing, you experience physical and temporal continuity with the adjacent space, a sense of being integrated into it.¹³ This perspective is closer to that of a tiny, imperceptible insect feeling its way along the wall's surface; it is an embodied experience of landscape that is different from "how it looked from the outside."¹⁴ Climbing then reverses the prioritization of vision in traditional landscape art, edging closer to philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's haptic definition of landscape as "the 'coiling over of the visible upon the visible,' a 'flesh' between living things that is in constant modulation and which intimately connects the subject's body to objects in the visual field."¹⁵ Landscape, like camouflage, is imagined in this passage as a chiasmic choreography, a visceral fusing of seer and seen, toucher and touched, looping endlessly like the videos on display in Fuller's exhibit.

The deep time of self-world entanglement is hauntingly staged in the final video in the series, *Camouflage No. 3 (Boulder/Iceland)*, 2016. Here Fuller performs ground in a lava field in the mountains of Iceland, tracing "a longer connection to land through ancestry" by embedding herself in the home of her maternal ancestors.¹⁶ Wrapped in a mottled grey cloak and moving against a powerful gale, she takes shelter next to one of the many boulders that punctuate the mountainside, nestling her body against it. She carefully pulls the mantle over her head of wild curls and disappears into the moody landscape.¹⁷ We are left to sit with the fierce roar of the wind and the indifference of the mossy countryside. Meanwhile, Fuller gains access to what she describes as "that quiet and that calm that you can get when you get really close to landscape." This feeling may approach something like the space-time consciousness of boulders—fragments of memory from much older highland or glacier formations that reveal the shallowness of human time. Through the crouching woman-boulder, time emerges as an infinite corridor of appearances and vanishings, of maternal echoes, of interspecies memory.

¹² C. Thi Nguyen, "The Aesthetics of Rock Climbing," *The Philosophers Magazine*, August 11, 2017. www.philosophersmag.com/essays/170-the-aesthetics-of-rock-climbing.

¹³ Fuller, "Artist Talk."

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 140.

¹⁶ Fuller, "Artist Talk."

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Fuller's performance *with* and *as* landscape is, in this respect, as much an ecological as a durational practice, and one with ethical consequences for the contemporary moment. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to reckon with the existential threat posed to life on this planet by the exercise of human dominance, whether that takes the form of fast capitalism and unrestrained consumption, or habitat destruction and the exploitation of animals. In order to stave off environmental collapse—the logical endgame of these destructive ways of living—*Terra Incognita* invites us to take a long pause, to notice who and what gives us ground, and to rehearse a different way of seeing oneself as part of a larger (global) landscape. It asks us to sense the world from the perspective of rocks, and moss, and water—matter that is both part of our flesh and that will outlive entire civilizations.

- Laura Levin, 2020

Sarah Fuller is a Canadian artist who works across the mediums of photography, video, and installation. She holds a MFA from the University of Ottawa and a BFA in Photography from Emily Carr University. Sarah has been an artist in residence at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, Laughing Waters in Nillumbick Shire, Australia, the Klondike Institute of Art and Culture, Yukon, Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Italy, and the Association of Visual Artists (SIM) in Reykjavik, Iceland. In 2015, she travelled to Australia supported by the Canada Council for the Arts International Residencies Program. Recent exhibitions include *Refugio* at the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery curated by Josephine Mills and *And perhaps in me someone very old still hears the living sound of wood* at the Ottawa Art Gallery. In 2017 she was commissioned by Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity to collaborate with Moment Factory on the site-specific installation *Illuminations: Human/Nature*. Sarah's work is in public and private collections including the Canada Council for the Arts Art Bank (Ottawa), the Alberta Foundation for the Arts (Edmonton), the Walter Phillips Gallery (Banff), the Indie Photobook Library (Washington), and Global Affairs Canada (Ottawa).

Laura Levin is Associate Dean, Research in the School of the Arts, Media, Performance and Design at York University and Director of the Canadian Consortium on Performance & Politics in the Americas. Her research focuses on contemporary theatre and performance art; performing gender and sexuality; site-specific and urban intervention; digital performance; and research-creation methodologies. Recent books include *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage, and the Art of Blending In* (winner of the Ann Saddlemyer Book Award), which explores the relationship between body and environment in contemporary performance, and *Performance Studies in Canada* (co-edited with Marlis Schweitzer, winner of the Patrick O'Neill Award for best edited collection). Laura has worked as a director and dramaturg on a number of performance works in North America and co-curated research-based art projects that investigate intersections of performance, geography, and digital technologies. She is Principal Investigator for Hemispheric Encounters, a SSHRC Partnership Grant that brings together artists, activists, and scholars across Canada, US, and Latin America to study how transborder performance can be used as an artistic methodology for addressing humanitarian and ecological challenges shared by multiple communities in the western hemisphere.

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