BLACK DIASPORA ART PRACTICES SINCE THE 1980S

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16

ARCHIVE AND DÉPAYSEMENT IN THE ART OF RENÉE GREEN

Returning again and again to books and to places . . . to find something previously missed. . . . Something that has a different meaning after different encounters, different inhabitations, and different journeys over the passage of time.

—Renée Green, from the film COME CLOSER (2008)

The constituent elements of Renée Green's conceptual practice exist in a condition of migrancy—constantly departing, arriving, and returning. Considering her work in various mediums over the past twenty years—installations, films, sound pieces, websites, and published writings—we begin to notice a distinctive pattern of circulatory "returns." In the sense that site specificity is a characteristic of any given archive that unifies a body of materials into *one* fixed place, there is always a dyadic relation between the singularity of the site and the journey required to get there. There is only one place in the world where you can visit the Uffizi Gallery, for example, and if you are not a Florentine resident then you must travel to see it. But the traveler's attitude is rarely neutral or indifferent: driven by expectation, the art tourist embarks on a secular version of a ritual pilgrimage—the goal is to experience a heightened state of consciousness once the destination has been reached (enlightenment or fulfillment, for instance). Even when the whole point is to get rid of a final destination, as in the bohemian romanticism of aimless wandering, there is still a corollary between how you experience the journey and what you hope to achieve when the traveling stops (ego loss or nirvana, perhaps). Charting a course that takes us "elsewhere," Renée Green's work invites a wholly different kind of journeying. It involves traveling toward the site-specific characteristics of an archive through a circulatory pattern of directed mobility that results in a condition of critical *dépaysement*. Connoting the estrangement that comes from leaving home and abandoning one's familiar surroundings or habitus, this verb also

suggests the affective state of in-betweenness that is felt upon arriving in a foreign territory or a new situation for the first time.

Looking at the manner in which Green's installations activate ambivalent tensions between site specificity and visitor mobility, one might think of her practice as that of a third-generation conceptualist who has chosen to return to avant-garde methods of institutional critique associated with first-generation conceptual art of the late 1960s and early 1970s. To the extent that such a "return" is mediated, however, by a range of interests in identity and difference associated with the broader turn toward theory that took place with second-generation conceptualism during the 1980s, one might add that Green's artistic positioning is distinguished by an intergenerational contract, as it were, that engages the agency of return to bring out fresh possibilities that were not apparent to either of the preceding generations.

Based at the Whitney Independent Study program in 1989 and 1990, Green began her career in a moment of transition. The paradigm shifts initiated by feminism, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and other interdisciplinary models of semiotics, psychoanalysis, and critical theory that had become academically institutionalized by this time precipitated a reaction on the part of the subsequent generation that was manifested as a revolt against the language of "theory." Acted out in the mocking irreverence of the abject art that arose as a reaction against identity politics, there was a drive to legitimate contemporary art as an absolute break with the image-text work of second-generation conceptualism of the 1980s by claiming a line of descent from avant-garde artists of an earlier era, such as Marcel Broodthaers, Robert Smithson, Bruce Nauman, or Gilbert and George. This version of returning to first-generation conceptualism paved the way for an attitude that heralded a neoconservative return to "beauty," but the alarm sounded by some second-generation actors was equally reactive. Following the 1994 *Bad Girls* exhibition at the New Museum in New York, the journal *October* asked whether the epistemological breakthroughs brought about by "theory" were being undermined by the naive appeal to performativity on the part of so-called postfeminist practitioners. Among the responses, art historian Lisa Tickner detected an underlying anxiety in the journal's all-or-nothing conception of intergenerational differences. Taking up her view that "the cultural field is a set of 'positions' that offers the artist a set of 'possibles.' *The avant-garde game is to change the field of the possibles*,"[1] one might say that what individuates Renée Green's mode of "return" are the ways in which her art *converts a potentiality into a possibility*. As Agamben puts it, possibilities are logically linked to the ontology of presence, whereas potentialities constitute a "not-yet-here" and a "not-yet-now" that calls something into being from the

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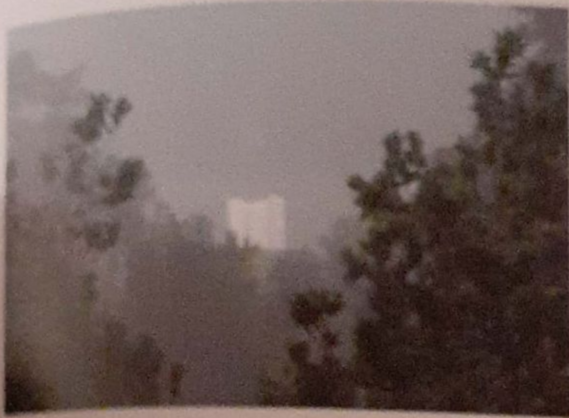
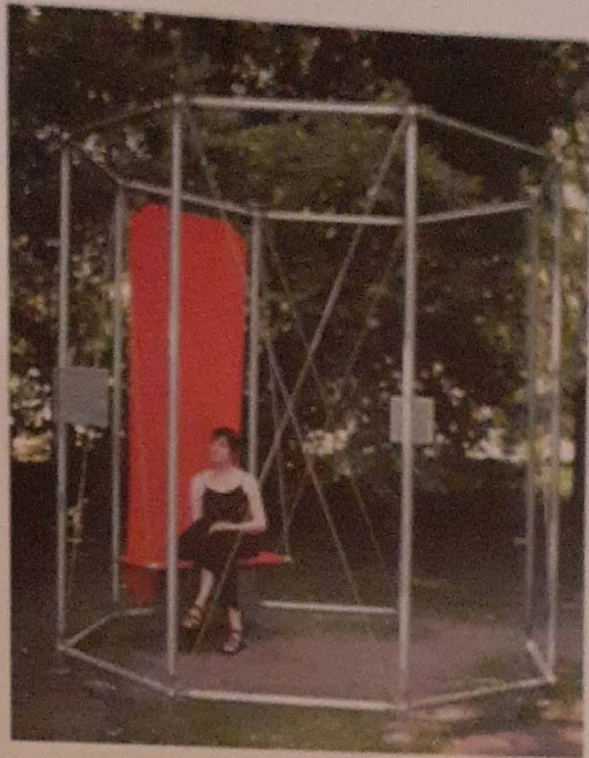
future rather than pointing to something that is simply missing or lacking or absent as such.[2] Green's writings frequently reflect upon her own relationship to Broodthaers and Smithson, among many others. Establishing an intergenerational dialogue that translates site specificity toward contemporary ends, she neither "adds on" issues of race or gender or ethnicity that were absent in an earlier era nor merely "updates" an artistic procedure with present-day "content" such as globalization or diaspora or migration; rather, her work activates fresh possibilities out of hitherto dormant potentialities. Far from nostalgic hero worship, the agency of "return" exercised in her work reveals something about the resourcefulness of conceptual art itself, along the lines suggested by Hal Foster's (1996) account of the neo-avant-garde. Giving equal weight to the investigative voice that features in Renée Green's writings alongside the poetic voice that also features in her installations, we find that the experiential passage of such "returns" generates moments of dépaysement across multiple levels.

Green's contribution to Documenta 11, the *Standardized Octagonal Units for Imagined and Existing Systems (S.O.U.S)* (2002) (figs. 16.1 and 16.2), prompts a memory of such a moment that remains especially vivid for me. Feeling a bit exhausted from my itinerary around the sculpture park, I heard the sound of Alice Coltrane's music, which drew me toward one of the octagonal pavilion-like structures, where I took a seat. Facing a screen that sprouted out of the ground, I experienced the film *Elsewhere?* (2002) (fig. 16.3) as a multisensory data stream that induced a daydream state of mind. The words, sounds, and images demanded heightened concentration, yet the associative wandering they encouraged also led to a kind of ambient drift. Actuality images of the preparatory work of installing the *S.O.U.*s in the Staatspark Karlsaue called attention to the geography of the site, which could be viewed through the pavilion's panels, even as the film documented the coincidence whereby the first Documenta was held alongside the annual Bundesgartenschau (Federal Garden Show) that also took place Kassel in 1955. Bringing these two "facts" out of the archive and into imaginative contact, the film maximized the contemplative space of the installation. Offering me pause from my purposive activity of walking around the sculpture park, the *S.O.U.* altered the way I could inhabit, and therefore understand, the archival dimension of the site I was moving through by inviting me to reflect on my own passage through Documenta's public garden spaces.

Neither fully architectural nor sculptural as such, the installation acted as a time-travel machine. Stating that its octagonal shape "initially grew out of an interest in the hut . . . as a place of rest" in early European garden design, Green undertook research that tracked the commemorative and ritualistic uses of such geometry to Islamic gar-





16.1 Renée Green, *Standardized Octagonal Units for Imagined and Existing Systems* (s.o.u.s), 2002. Mixed-media installation: eight octagonal units, seven with sound (*Imaginary Places A to Z*), one with monitor and looped film with sound (*Elsewhere?*). Installation view, Documenta 11, Kassel, 2002. Photo: Werner Maschmann.
16.2 Renée Green, *Standardized Octagonal Units for Imagined and Existing Systems* (s.o.u.s), 2002. Installation view, Documenta 11, Kassel, 2002. Photo: Werner Maschmann.

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den settings.[3] Noticing how it migrated through cross-cultural contexts (including the nineteenth-century fad for octagonal houses in America), she also retrieved from Documenta's more recent history some of the sculptures previously exhibited on the site that had taken a phenomenological interest in "the perceiver suspended in the act of perceiving."[4] Folding each of these archival layers into her conception of the S.O.U. as a "place of rest amidst external stimuli," in which "perceivers can . . . sink into their own reveries more easily because the number of external distractions is reduced while the translucence and spaces between the panels allow a view of other units in the system," it is only in retrospect that I can understand how the strange sense of dépaysement I went through is perfectly explained by the artist's statement that "*part of what occurs is that the perceiver's attention is used as a medium*."[5]

With their concern for embodied inhabitations of place, Green's early works also produce a similar quality of intimate unsettlement, although the formal ingenuity of such pieces as *Seen* (1990) often took second place, at the time, to the focus on manifest subject matter. Examining representations of black female bodies in Western art history—Saartje Bartmann or the so-called Hottentot Venus in the case of *Seen*, and Josephine Baker in *Revue* (1990)—this was one of several installations linked to Green's concurrent usage of museological conventions, such as the vitrines of *Terra Incognita* (1990), although the dyadic interface between site specificity and viewer mobility had already featured in *Sites of Genealogy* (1990).

Stepping up onto a wooden platform raised a few feet above the gallery floor, the viewer experiences *Seen* (figs. 16.4 and 16.5) as a stage or scaffold upon which one is compelled to bend or stoop in order to read inscriptions on the planks from which the structure is composed. In undertaking this action, one is immediately "seen" by an eye that appears on a video monitor placed beneath a hole at the center of the platform, which itself is placed in a corner of the exhibition space between a spotlight on one wall and a portable projection screen on the other. In the phenomenological aspect of walking up onto the platform and moving through the installation to get a view of what is hidden (the monitor) and what is shown (the text), the perceiver becomes the perceived. Being momentarily caught upon the platform as though one were a performer or an exhibit oneself, the viewer undergoes a passage from "looking" to "being looked at" in such a way that unsettles any clear-cut Kantian separation between object and subject of knowledge. Moreover, going through such an experience is hardly a purely intellectual event: there is bodily discomfort that one feels, and that one witnesses in others, during this momentary switch in subject-object positions—all of which profoundly alters the way one might understand Saartje Bartmann's "place" in the visually entangled archives of colonialism and modernity.

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16.3 Renée Green, *Elsewhere?*, film still, 2002. Digital film, color, sound, 53 min. DVD. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.

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Whereas the viewer undergoes dépaysement in respect to *Seen*, in *Sites of Genealogy* (fig. 16.6) the artist herself enacted such a process across three sites of the P.S. 1 building in New York—the boiler room, stairwell, and attic—over a ten-month duration. Elaborating mnemonic associations from literary sources, Green visited the attic as the "loophole of retreat" described by Linda Brent, the narrator of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). In such a place of confinement the protagonist of this slave narrative literally wrote her way to freedom—hiding in an attic over the period in which her text was shaped. Touching on intertextual references—from Emily Brontë and Virginia Woolf to Marcel Duchamp and Ralph Ellison—suggested by the site-specific conditions of her durational performance, Green described the dyadic process of repeatedly returning to the same place to perform a series of actions: "After returning to the attic several times a week to wrap the area which surrounds the desk, chair, lamp, typewriter and ladder . . . with string." In the diary in which she wrote on a daily basis, she added, "While traveling around and around in the attic (like the often mentioned 'madwoman' thereof) I will try to catch hold of my thoughts, which will begin my hour or more of writing to be done in the 'strung' space ('a room of one's own.'). . . . The traces of my movements . . . will accumulate in this space during the course of the year inside and outside the 'room.'"[6]

Extending her archival sites across slavery and colonialism, Green's early to mid-1990s work received attention on account of the representational forms of race and ethnicity laid out at the level of content, but her relationship to institutional critique was often overlooked. *VistaVision* (1991) explored the trophy hunt collection in the American Museum of Natural History, and her examination of the Indonesian materials gathered by Dutch collector A. C. van Bokhoven in *After the Ten Thousand Things* (1994) also lent itself to the artist-as-ethnographer paradigm which has played an influential, and highly productive, role in our critical understanding of site specificity in contemporary art. But is Green's conceptualism really "ethnographic" as such? In what sense does her practice add to the "fieldwork" tradition in conceptual art, and to what extent does the diasporic dimension of her journeying open up a translative dépaysement of this artistic procedure?

Having included Green in his 1993 exhibition *What Happened to the Institutional Critique?*, art historian James Meyer offers a useful distinction between "lyrical" and "critical" nomadism to account for third-generation conceptualist practices that employ strategies of travel to different ends. Describing the former as a "dramatization of the artist's peripatetic existence" in an age of globalization, often taking the transitory form of chance encounters thrown up by the hypermobility of the international bien-

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16.4 Renée Green, *Seen*, 1990. Mixed-media installation: wooden platform, rubber-stamped ink, screen, motorized winking glasses, magnifying glass, spotlight, sound. 81.5 × 81.5 × 53.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.
16.5 Renée Green, *Seen*, 1990. Installation detail.

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nale circuit (Rikrit Taravanija is his example), Meyer's account of *Import/Export Funk Office* (1993) draws attention to Green's handling of the circulatory elements that are exchanged in cross-cultural traffic. Her quasi-museological display of African American music and literature in the collection of German critic Diedrich Diederichsen is directed by an understanding of the historical trajectories in which "the importation of a foreign culture requires a translation of the knowledge of the other" (Meyer, 2000, 22). One part of the installation calls attention to the journeys through which Angela Davis traveled to Germany to study with Theodor Adorno (prior to her defense of the Black Panthers in the late 1960s), thereby retracing the Atlantic crossing in which Adorno and other Frankfurt school members traveled to California as exiles in the 1940s. Themes of dépaysement arise here when Meyer notes that "each has left home to acquire a knowledge apparently only attainable elsewhere" (22). But far from being mutually exclusive, the critically "nomadic" drive precludes neither Green's phenomenological interests in the embodied experience of the journey that moves toward a site nor her interest in diaristic, autographic, and epistolary modes of writing that introduce a poetic or lyrical voice to her works. Indeed, the light touch of motility heard in Green's distinctive tone enhances the analytical impetus of her installations—instead of taking Diederichsen's library as an ethnographic "object," her starting point was to observe its similarities with her own collection at home.

Describing post-1980s practices in which art is "sited" in networks of discourse as much as in the sociological "fields" explored by first-generation conceptualists, Hal Foster registers his concern with a "vogue for pseudo-ethnographic reports in art" when he asks: "Who in the academy or the art world has not witnessed . . . these *flâneries* of the new nomadic artist?" (1996, 180). *World Tour* (1994) is given as a countervailing example where "Renée Green performs this nomadism of the artist reflexively" (278), although it may be observed that reflexivity tends to act as the sole criterion for genuinely critical knowledge of the self-and-other relationship in contrast to discourses in which otherness is merely romanced in Foster's account of "art and theory in the age of anthropological studies." Notwithstanding the sheer scope of references, from the ethnographic surrealism of Georges Bataille in the 1940s to the traveling theory conceptualized by James Clifford in the 1980s, it is worth noting that Green herself points to some limitations of the artist-as-ethnographer model in her 1997 essay "Slippages." Having diagnosed problems that arise whenever the "other" is subject to a leftist over-identification that only inverts the disidentification of neoconservatives (a situation read through Walter Benjamin's notion of the author-as-producer as a response to the dangers of "ideological patronage" in earlier times), Foster makes a distinction be-

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16.6 Renée Green, *Sites of Genealogy*, 1991. Installation view, P.S. 1 Contemporary Arts Center, Long Island City. Photo: Tom Warren. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.

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tween identity and identification that Green agrees with. But when it is applied to the wholesale critique of such a range of artistic and theoretical positions, she points out that "the term 'other' becomes very confusing here" because "what is left out of this formulation are the instances in which someone occupies multiple positions." Quite reasonably Green muses: "At this point I wondered how 'ethnography' was being used and what this designation was being asked to perform."[7]

If we took another Walter Benjamin as a starting point—the Benjamin of the city portraits found in *One-Way Street* or the memoirs of *A Berlin Childhood*, for instance—one could view the archival sites that Green travels through not as ethnographic fields so much as "contact zones" where new possibilities arise out of dyadic exchanges between visitor mobility and site specificity. Moreover, taking gender into account as a mediating variable, we might add that, far from being straightforwardly "nomadic," she practices a circular mode of journeying that encourages us to consider cultural historian Janet Wolff's observation that "like the *flaneur*, the stranger and the wanderer may be able to pass in anonymity; women, however, cannot go into unfamiliar places without drawing attention to themselves."[8] Is "the female stranger" isomorphic with "the modern stranger" in the epistemology of the ethnographic tradition, or is she closer to the exilic upheaval of displacement? Following George Simmel's account of "the stranger" who gains objectivity as a result of his borderline position vis-à-vis a given community, the dyadic tension of nearness and distance was understood as essential to the knowledge produced by observer-participant methods.[9] But by the same token, without opportunities to "return" to one's place of origin or departure—as occurs in the cases of both exile and diaspora—such tension dissipates. As one scholar notes, after Benjamin went into exile in 1933, his city portraits ceased because "with the loss of one's homeland the notion of distance also disappears. If everything is foreign, then that tension between distance and nearness from which the city portraits draw their life cannot exist."[10]

By maintaining a circulatory pattern of "returns," Green's journeys are distinct both from the unidirectional mobility of exiles and refugees who cannot go back home for reasons beyond their control *and* from the globe-trotting itineraries of nomads, tourists, and bohemians who are blasé or indifferent toward the places they visit. Taking up Wolff's suggestion that it is precisely "her very identity as woman which enables a radical re-vision of home and exile," such that feminine migrations may take "the form of 're-writing' the self," we might add that as well as the condition of dépaysement evoked in the view that "for the woman who leaves home . . . displacement (deterritorialization) can be quite strikingly productive,"[11] Wolff's emphasis on micrological

rms of writing, such as the diary or the memoir, also resonates with Green's work to greater extent than the ethnographic.

Having begun life as part of *Tracing Lusitania* (1992), which was initiated in the uincentennial of Columbus's 1492 voyage to the Americas, *Walking in Lisbon* (1992) igs. 16.7–16.9) is a video diary of an African American *flâneuse* ambling through hopping precincts and tourist sites, yet it is also a city portrait of a particular locale which the artist has repeatedly returned as a result of encounters that arose durg the course of research. Part of Green's initial project entailed traveling by boat to Ceuta—Portugal's first site of colonial conquest in Africa in 1415—but Lisbon also became a locus of exchange after Green met archivists and academics with whom she ubsequently collaborated in later projects. The 1994 conference Green convened at he Drawing Center in New York, whose proceedings were published in a bilingual Portuguese-English edition as *Negotiations in the Contact Zone* (Green, 2003), documents transnational circuits of interdisciplinary cooperation that feature more prominently in her output than the genre of ethnographic reportage. Indeed, at a conference chaired by Homi Bhabha on the influence of Frantz Fanon upon the postcolonial and diaspora-based artists in *Mirage* (1995) at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, Green commented on the fault lines through which contemporary culture has compartmentalized the legacies of conceptual art by reproducing hierarchies between art and theory. Observing "a certain power dynamic that occurs in terms of how the artists are positioned in relation to the formulation of the theoretical ideas which disturbs me," she stated, "I would like to restructure this dynamic so that it doesn't feel like art is merely a decorative element—something that is tagged on to the 'heavier ideas'" (Green, 1996, 146). Writing reflexively about her own work as well as contributing to debates in art criticism and public culture at large—all of which places Renée Green in line with first-generation conceptual artists such as Adrian Piper and second-generation artist-theorists such as Victor Burgin or Mary Kelly—it is paradoxical that the use of fictional and novelistic voices in her films, writings, and installations has been somewhat ignored.

In the diary she kept of her participation in the 1993 Project Unité initiative in Firminy in France, where artists were invited to produce work in a mass housing estate designed by Le Corbusier, Green recorded her mixed feelings about the site, where, describing herself in the third person, "she pitched her tent inside what is now a modernist ruin."[12] Her frustrations fully confirm Meyer's point that far from being glamorous, migrancy today is also enforced by the demands of the global market, for "to be a working producer today is to be constantly on the move. Working conditions are hardly

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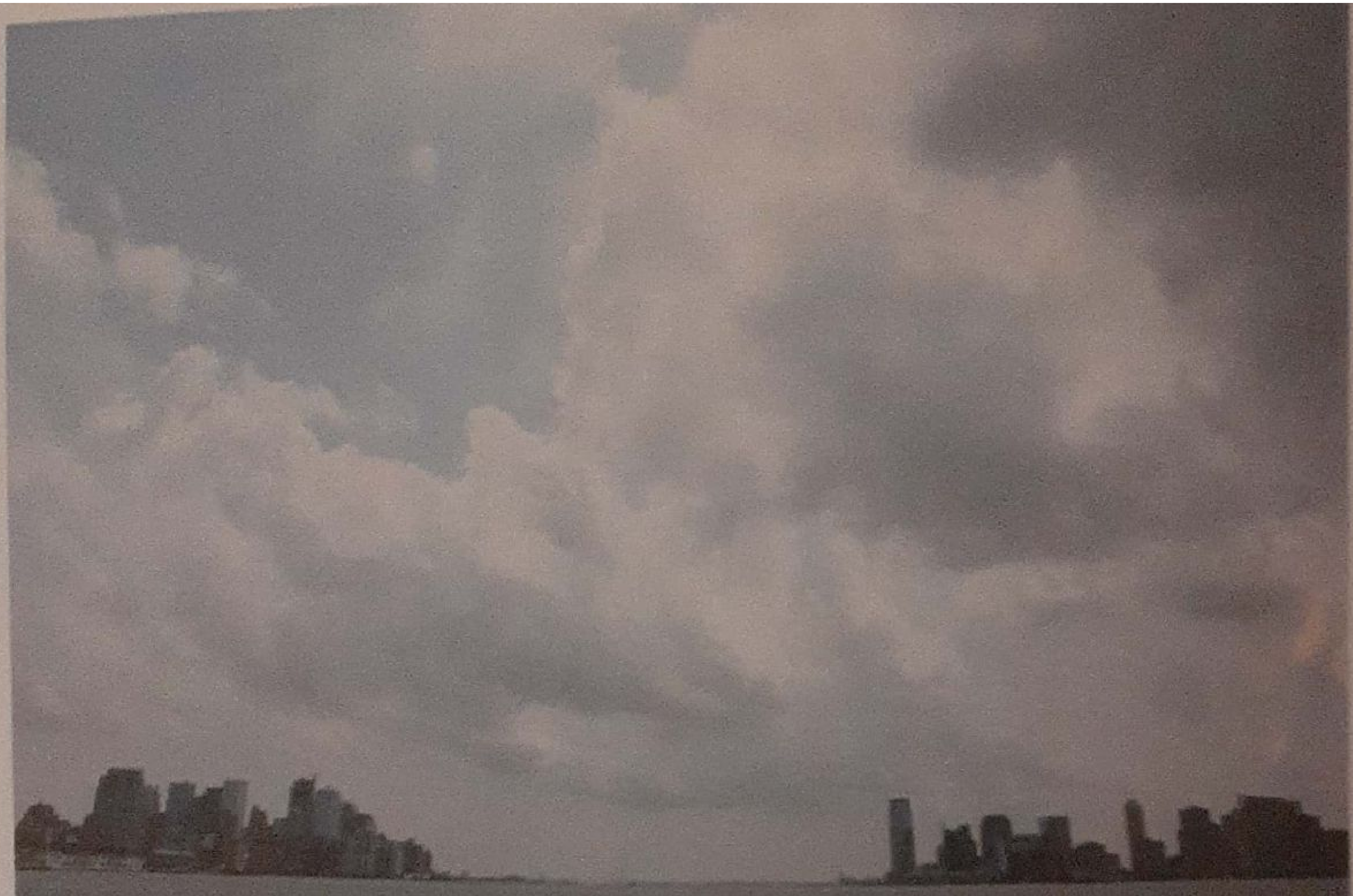
optimum. The artist-traveller must work within the confines of often unfocussed curatorial concepts" (Meyer, 2000, 23). By turns witty, episodic, but always insistently reflexive, Green narrated her encounters with the building's tenants as if she were playing a part in a work of fiction: "The character is visibly a female with brown skin and dreadlocks. She was born in the U.S. and thus speaks English. . . . She's been asked at various times and in various places whether she's from Martinique, Puerto Rico, Guyana, Jamaica, some island near Venezuela, Paris or New York."[13] While introducing a critical distance that sidesteps identitarian readings (by accepting the individuality and contingencies of her passage through the Firminy site), the autographic voice counteracts heavy-handed versions of institutional critique that aim to expose the ideological foundations of a given location in a programmatic or point-scoring manner.

Hence, when Green revisits Smithson's site-specific works that are now so much a part of the canon, it is striking to observe how her *Partially Buried in Three Parts* (1996–97) also involved the artist returning to her formative years in Cleveland. Above all, the very circularity of the "return" journey, which presupposes a place called home in a way that is not available to exiles as such, underlines the diasporicity of a mode of travel in which imaginary and symbolic mobility plays a privileged role precisely because of the awareness that literally going back to the point of origin is blocked as an impossibility. If there can be no return to the real place from which ex-African identities were driven out involuntarily, then Black Atlantic recrossings take possession of the sites and spaces that were historical locations of dispossession by practicing repetition as a kind of eternal return that alters the very experience of modernity, as Paul Gilroy (1993) argues. In *Endless Dreams and Water Between* (2009) (fig. 16.10), the film's transitions across a trio of dispersed sites—California, Manhattan, Majorca—are held together by an epistolary exchange among four fictional (and all female) characters who think aloud about gathering together in one imaginary place called the September Institute. To the extent that the film highlights the lyricism of Green's use of fictional elements to use the perceiver's attention as a medium, the ambient drift brought to bear upon the aquatic realm of the Mediterranean—George Sands's *A Winter in Majorca* (1855) is the shared text the four voices comment on while a Chopin remix plays on the audio track—is not unlike the daydream state of mind induced by the *Elsewhere?* film in the octagonal units of the Staatspark Karlsaue. Considering the film's journeying between the Algonquin site of New York City (an island where the artist resides) and meditations on Majorca as an island site of crossing between European and Islamic worlds, one notices that George Kubler's view—"historical knowledge consists of transmissions in which the sender, the signal, and the receiver all are variable elements affecting the stability of the

16.7–16.9 Renée Green. *Walking in Lisbon*, 1992. Video, color, sound, 53 min. Video stills sequence. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.



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