

Regina Virserius, *The Folds of the Earth*

In an interview Robert Smithson once likened his creative process to "a kind of mental volcano¹." Regina Virserius's lush, almost pictorial photographs of volcanoes seem a world apart from Smithson's cool, abstract postminimalist works. However, for her just as for the American artist the volcano stands as a powerful emblem of an artistic process that attempts to explore the paradox of mind and matter: highlighting the material nature of the mind; sculpting matter with the mind to form mental landscapes.

The series of views of the Piton de la Fournaise and the Cirque de Mafate on the island of Réunion is contemporaneous with the photographs of nudes and fabrics that Regina Virserius grouped under the title *Inflection*. At the same time that she was working with the soft folds of flesh and cloth, she became interested in the creases of the earth's crust. The connection between the two themes is not merely formal. It has its roots in philosophy and was suggested to the artist by Gilles Deleuze's reading of Leibniz. Using as the vector of his study the image of the fold, Deleuze explicates Leibniz's vision of the correspondence between body and soul. This problem, crucial to the history of philosophy, is reformulated by Deleuze as that of the "unfolding" of mind and matter². The philosopher resolves by the same token the question of the passage from exterior to interior, darkness to light, fluidity to rigidity.

¹ Robert Smithson, interview with Dennis Wheeler, Vancouver, 1969-1970. Published in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1996, p. 219.

² Gilles Deleuze thus establishes a parallel between the "folds of matter" and the "folds of the mind", "*les replis de la matière*" and "*les plis de l'âme*", Gilles Deleuze, *le Pli, Leibniz et le Baroque*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1988, p. 6.

Regina Virserius's tightly cropped images translate this universal grammar of folds in a tangible way. The surface of her photographs appear at times to rise and fall, showing the curves of actual three-dimensional relief maps. Tight framings are usually associated with the abstract experimental style of photography's historical avant-garde. If Regina Virserius's shots of volcanoes can be said to be abstract it is in the sense that one might speak of a material abstraction. The photographs seem opaque and grainy as if dusted with some mineral powder. All the sources of light are hidden. The atmosphere is nocturnal and the landscape painted in muted tones: dull grays, dark greens and browns verging on black. The sky itself feels dense and heavy, filled with compact masses of clouds that create an impression of airlessness.

Evoking an apotheosis in a Baroque painting, these clouds simultaneously induce a sense of vertigo. This is the dizziness experienced by the photographer faced with a hostile environment, whose every detail cancels out the presence of man. Following several series of cityscapes, the volcano pictures constitute Regina Virserius's first work on the natural landscape. But in leaving the city behind, the photographer did not opt for a naive return to nature. The setting she selected is properly sublime. It is both measureless and timeless, or rather, shaped by a time that exists outside of us. From this geological and truly inhuman time, inscribed in the infinitely expanding folds of the earth, Regina Virserius has snatched moments of eternity.

Larisa Dryansky