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Needles (CA)—2003, Marie-José Jongerius.

WILLIAM L. FOX

On the Edge

Photographs by Marie-José Jongerius

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liminal |ˈlimənl| adjective technical. 1 of or relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process. 2 occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold. DERIVATIVES: **liminality** |ˌliməˈnalətē| noun. ORIGIN late 19th cent.: from Latin ***limen***, ***limin- 'threshold'*** + **-al**.

To understand why the Dutch photographer Marie-José Jongerius wanted to photograph in the American Far West—in particular that part of it that runs from Los Angeles inland to Las Vegas, south to Tijuana, and north up through the Central Valley of California—it helps to know something about boundaries and contrast. To know why it's important to behold her work, it's critical to know about how that dividing line of sight is not a two-dimensional geometrical figure, but a four-dimensional zone we label the liminal.

Eighty percent of everything we know about the world comes through our eyes, such a vast amount of information (100 million bits per second) that the brain is forced to throw away 90 percent of what hits the surface of the eye, transmitting only 10 percent to the brain for processing. That one-tenth of the world is what we see, the light triaged into about two dozen basic shapes. Circles, ovals, rectilinear shapes such as squares, polygons such as triangles, and then more ambiguously, right angles and arcs. Everything we see in the world is assembled from those shapes, which are made by lines that create the inside and the outside, the left and right, the top and bottom. We are upright bilaterally symmetrical animals, and we organize the information received accordingly. What the lines define around vertical and horizontal axes is boundary contrast, perhaps the second oldest visual notion we own after undifferentiated light and dark. It's a recognition of line that separates us from the cognition of plants.

Boundaries in the environment are what we tend to move along, as they are rich with information, food, and consequently danger. The edge of the forest where it

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becomes a meadow is where we find the small animals that are natural human prey. They hide in the safety of the forest, but when they creep and hop and run out into the meadow for food, they become visible and vulnerable. We aren't so different from the raptors that fly overhead, seeking the same visual information and food source. It's along the borders and boundaries of the world where photographers can often be found shooting, as well.

The human eye roves about a landscape in staccato movements called saccades. A saccade is a very quick sampling several times a second of what is in front of us; it allows us to identify where we are and what's around us. Saccades follow general priorities in a rough order: What fits in, what's anomalous, what displays the bilateral symmetry that can mean friend or foe, what's in motion and in what direction. When we look at a photograph of a landscape, our eyes tend to follow that same prioritized pattern.

The landscape in which we are most secure while scoping out what's in our environment is one where we can see and not be seen, and you can see how artists throughout history have intuited that scheme and used it. Claude Lorrain framed his landscapes in the 1600s with dark foliage in the forefront, the view of the artist and viewer alike peering out across the boundary of sanctuary and into the sunlit meadows and ponds beyond. American landscape artists three hundred years later were still using the same format, whether it was Thomas Cole along the Hudson River, Frederic Church in the Andes, or Albert Bierstadt in the Rocky Mountains. Anthropologists call this a conceal-and-reveal, or a refuge-and-prospect landscape. It's our ancestral home, as well as the design of a contemporary living room, the drapes forming a natural screen from around which we peer onto the street.

The human gaze, whether in the landscape or looking at a picture of a landscape, follows rules shaped by our physical relation to the world, and when an artist takes us out to the edge of where our human neurophysiology is comfortable—out from behind the trees or curtains and into places where boundaries become ambiguous—both our unease and levels of alertness are heightened. When we enter the in-between place, where a line assumes three spatial and dimensions and time as a boundary zone—the liminal—we're aware that we, too, could become prey, if not to actual threat, then to unnamed fears.

The edge of the shade cast by a tree is seldom a sharp edge, but instead a blurred line caused by the fractal arrangement of leaves overhead, the dappling of sunlight through a permeable crown of foliage, and limbs moving in the breeze. Daylight does not terminate in sudden darkness, even in the tropics where the sun seems to drop like a stone into the ocean; there is always a series of twilights—a civil twilight, a nautical twilight, an astronomical twilight. During the civil stage, the first planets and brightest stars appear. The second stage sees the horizon disappear from view to the navigator. The third is that time of the faintest reflected light high in the atmosphere when we think it's dark, but it isn't quite yet.

These are temporal zones of ambiguity that give us pause, and, along with the spatial ones, they have their parallels in everything from literature to architecture. Science fiction horror stories are rife with twilights when the world turns strange. Houses have anterooms, and cities have bridges and sidewalks, places where passage is made but people seldom live. Those people who inhabit such domains are referred to as the homeless. Purgatory is another shaded place of indeterminacy, a rite of passage. This is what is meant by the liminal, where the zone between states means to be both inside and outside, up and down, left and right—and yet none of those things. That is where Marie-José Jongerius searches for her images. The name of her project, *Edge of the Experiment*, was chosen for a reason.

When Joseph Campbell wrote *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he was working from the work done by the French

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98 to Calexico (CA)—2008, Marie-José Jongerius.

ethnographer Arnold van Gennep, who in his book *The Rites of Passage* (1909) described the process of *liminaire*, the deliberate dislocation of your normal senses into a liminal state of confusion and openness through which pretechnological peoples would pass during initiation rituals in order to gain adulthood or sacred knowledge. The anthropologist Victor Turner (1920–1983), who expanded Gennep's research, studied rituals and rites among the Ndembu tribe of Zambia. He noted how the experience of an ambiguous zone can lead to paradigm shifts for contemporary individuals as well as tribespeople and postulated that the theater was a liminal space too, suspension of reality during the performance enabling the audience to undergo a transformation.

Making art is a kind of ritual and never more so than for the photographer setting up a tripod and her 4×5 large-format Crown Graphic field camera, framing the view on the ground glass and bringing it into focus, selecting the moment to trip the shutter. Repeated over and over again, especially for those photographers who also do commercial work, such as Jongerius, it becomes an automatic yet hyper-alert, almost Zen-like discipline. To work as a writer with photographers in the field, when they are concentrating so hard they cannot talk, is to become yourself entranced with the landscape, to participate in a shared trance. To couple that mental discipline with a zone of visual ambiguity, a liminal space, is to risk taking your cognition where it hasn't been before. This is the terrain where Jongerius is happiest.

Perhaps to live and train in The Netherlands, as Jongerius has, is to be liminal by your very nature, as the name of the country hints. Twenty percent of its territory below sea level, and 50 percent less than a meter above the median sea; this is a geography of transition at the northern edge of

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Europe. Furthermore, much of the flat country is estuarial, formed by the outflows of three rivers. The history of its landscape art has as much to do with sketches of coastal profiles made by early navigators seeking landmarks along its undefined margins as by painters on land, seeking landmarks tall enough to distinguish towns from farmland. Rembrandt's early sketches of towns on the horizon seem as much attempts at cartography as art. To work in The Netherlands, where land was stolen temporarily from the sea, is splendid preparation for excursions into the liminal. Edges of the experiment, indeed.

Jongerius, born in 1970, studied photography first in Rome and then at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague from 1992 through 1996. She worked in portraiture and upon graduation went to work as a commercial magazine photographer. It's worth noting that, during an interview with the author in 2009, she admitted to posing her subjects outside in favorite locations, often locations unknown to the celebrities she was photographing. Dislocation was a technique to reveal something of her famous subjects that hadn't been seen before.

In 2000, she began graduate studies at the Post-St. Joost in Breda. Along the way she cultivated tastes in artworks as diverse as the seascapes of Gerhard Richter, the paintings of Ed Ruscha, and photographs by Carleton Watkins, Stephen Shore, and Bernd and Hilla Becher. In 2002, she began working with fellow photographer Stijn Ghijsen, and together they moved to Los Angeles, where she had previously visited for work. Intrigued by the American West, she wondered what she could discover as an outsider looking at the margins where nature and culture collided. She lived on the edge of the Pacific Ocean, the terminus of that European-American experiment in colonization labeled Manifest Destiny, which held that nature existed for the purpose of being converted into living space.

What she thought she would find was "the magnificence of nature," as she wrote in a statement about her project in 2009, an "authentic landscape experience" not framed by the berms and canals of her homeland, but places where humans were "powerless in the face of nature." But once in the car and searching for such sites, she realized that "the image of the American West is not much in the shape of its original state." What she discovered on her long car trips radiating outward from Los Angeles were freeways that led east through the hottest and driest desert in North America, the Mojave, to that ultimate North American fantasy of an oasis, Las Vegas. Freeways that ran north through the dense urbanity of the San Fernando Valley and over the mountains into the Great Central Valley of California with its immense waterworks and some of the flattest land on the planet groomed into rows of every improbable crop she could imagine. Freeways that ran south to Tijuana and one of the world's most profound no-man's landscapes, the US-Mexican border, a zone of highly ritualized and criminalized crossings. All three were a photographer's dream of a dystopia, and all have attracted sustained attention from American artists. Robert Dawson has worked the Central Valley backward and forward; Peter Goin and David Taylor have prowled the border fences; and Jeff Brouws has driven the entire perimeter of Las Vegas, as well as walked the empty lots next to the resorts.

These photographers have all been schooled by that deadpan mastery of the artifactual world developed by the group whom curator and photo-historian Will Jenkins defined as the New Topographers in his 1975 exhibition of their work. The original photographers from whom Jenkins derived his title were those accompanying the explorations of the US Topographical Engineers during the nineteenth century, such as Timothy O'Sullivan, and the aesthetic shared by the two groups was determinedly documentarian. But, whereas the nineteenth-century photographers photographed mostly the natural world, the latter specialized in the built environment that was quickly turning the mid-twentieth century world into an artifactual world. Dawson, Brouws, and the others had studied the blank facades of the industrial parks in Irvine just south of Los Angeles photographed by Lewis Baltz, the Front Range suburbs in Colorado photographed by Robert Adams, and the typologies of Germany's blast furnaces assembled by the Bechers. So had Jongerius.

But the work of the contemporary photographers, done mostly in black-and-white, was ultimately too factual for the Dutch photographer. She had glimpsed a bit of the sublime, a hint of mystery that lay beyond the frontal aspect of the American West—and that is, ultimately, the attraction of the liminal, that space through which, if you are able to make passage, makes possible something more than the straight ahead document that can slide all too easily into irony. Jongerius located something just a little different from what her stateside colleagues had seen. She found herself often

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Malibu (CA)—2007, Marie-José Jongerius.

photographing what was in between the obvious topics, interstices in the American experiment, leftover spaces not exactly inhabited even as they were adjunct to habitat. Empty cul-de-sacs and inscrutable recreational landscapes, palm trees stranded in parking lots, acres of hotel rooftops, the infrastructure corridors that are their own netherlands. Sometimes these were adjacencies cropped out of the view by other photographers. Or, when facing a subject, she would turn and photograph what was behind her, the opposite view of those taken by others. She began to look for "ruptured edges of the cultivated landscape," seeking to photograph analogs for what she was experiencing, not just what she was seeing.

She found such analogs in the shade and shadows, the space between the back of a warehouse and the woven wire fence behind it. If she photographed a walled conglomeration of massed solar panels, it wasn't the structure that caught your attention as much as the bare ground between the compound and the front edge of the picture, where you would assume her feet were and, by extension, yours. Jongerius doesn't just picture the liminal, she puts herself into it and frames her pictures so that the viewer is dragged there, too. This does not always make for comfortable picture viewing. Often there is a figure in the center foreground of the composition—a lone tree, a spillway, the sand trap of a golf course, which is itself in the middle of the desert, either a natural or paved one. These solitary objects and unique circumstances naturally draw the eye, but are so often incongruous that we don't quite know what to do with them. Our eye slides off to one side, seeking a way to contextualize them with their surroundings, an often futile attempt.

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Color has a great deal to do with how Jongerius hands us over into the liminal. Black-and-white photographs appear to us as documents of that which has happened, is finished, is immutable because it is in the past. We see in color, of course, and color photographs are processed by the brain more as snapshots of the continuous present, as evidence of that which is becoming. Stephen Shore, working with color film in a large-format camera in the 1970s, overlayed the aesthetic of the New Topographers with the palette of Elliot Porter, the latter having moved landscape photography past the black-and-white monumentality of Ansel Adams into color compositions of land, often with no horizon line included. There is an affinity between Porter and Shore that has to do with linking foreground and background in dense assemblages of information, almost overwhelming with presence, and Shore used this method to create portraits of an America so familiar they seemed hyper real. When the works of photorealist painters such as William Estes were encountered around the same period—painters working from color photographs of mostly urban environments—it seemed that this topographical work had backed itself into a corner. What was left to be portrayed?

The Jongerius photograph of a burnt-out automobile in a Malibu parking lot made in 2007, *Malibu (CA)—2007*, gives us a rich example of how a boundary, instead of stopping your view, can take you somewhere. A catastrophic fire struck the seaside community in 2007; three separate large conflagrations in January, October, and late November destroyed parks, businesses, and homes. Fire is a natural hazard in the Mediterranean-like climate and chaparral brushlands of Southern California, and it is necessary for the continual regeneration of its landscape. The combination of low humidity, high temperatures, and concentrated oils in the chaparral can cause the region to burst spontaneously into flame. What's unfortunate is that humans insist on continually building what are supposedly permanent structures within such a pyrophoric realm. In the photograph, the car rests on its charred rims, the parking lot surrounded by temporary plastic fencing above, which loom the burned hills. The photograph thus marks not only a place where pavement meets dirt and town meets country, but also the boundary of the fire, an event in time. Despite the fencing, it is clear that the fire had jumped the line of the curbing, creating an indeterminate, and indiscriminate, zone of destruction. The liminal can be spatial—parking lots being prime examples—or temporal, events in time that define a zone of transition. The photograph is not ironic, but heartfelt and mysterious. It opens a door into a new view of our environment, versus closing one.

A counterpoint Jongerius photographed the same year is *Lake Mead (NV)—2007*, a portrait of the reservoir formed by Hoover Dam. The reservoir is the largest in the United States and one of the several immense ponds backed up behind dams on the Colorado River. The river was once a natural watercourse, but during the twentieth century was transformed into an industrial artifact almost from its headwaters in Wyoming all the way down to where the river used to empty into the Gulf of California. All along the rim of Lake Mead and visible from the top of the dam is a white line almost two hundred feet tall, the result of falling lake levels caused by drought during the first decade of the new century. The low flow rate of the Colorado River is a disaster for Las Vegas and much of Arizona and Southern California, which depend upon it as a primary course of water, as do the natural species that live in and along the watercourse. Again, it's the incursion of humans into a natural landscape that creates a problem, which becomes a boundary between the consequences of climate and what is humanly possible.

There is a relationship between the Low Countries of Northern Europe and the low elevation deserts of the American West. The Netherlands are a landscape constructed around the control of water, just as is the West, and a linear geometry has been imposed upon both. The American Southwest is a collection of arid and semiarid subregions defined by water or the absence thereof. Its modern colonization was made possible only through the massive

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Lake Mead (NV)—2007, Marie-José Jongerius.

importation from distant watersheds of the water needed for both agriculture and drinking, as well as the squandering of this precious resource through making snow at ski resorts, trying to keep golf courses verdant, and maintaining suburban lawns. These are states of landscape engineered to distance people from reality, to make it seem as if they do not live in a desert. To photograph in the region overall is to be confronted constantly with evidence of the effort it takes to maintain this fiction. Jongerius was stopped in her tracks not only by the shrinkage of Lake Mead, and by fairways bordering the Mojave sands, but by the vast network of reservoirs within, and the long concrete canals crisscrossing, the Central Valley of California.

Another part of what Jongerius realized along her car trips thousands of miles long is that the hyper-real American West built upon its disruptive transfers of water is dangerously infectious. It's not just the fastest growing region of the United States, but one based on creating simulacra of European cities and town—from the Paris and Bellagio resorts in Las Vegas to the red-roofed and white stucco suburbs of Orange County and Phoenix—and the idea is also taking hold in Europe. Just as cities in the arid West grow beyond their hydrological resources in quest of profit, so could those in Europe outstrip their own environmental limitations. An example that concerned her was the Spanish town of Los Monegros, where a development corporation planned to build a Las Vegas–themed megaresort with thirty-two casinos, seventy hotels, five theme parks, and a city of 100,000 people. Europe imitating Las Vegas imitating Europe. The project was postponed during the recession and has since been radically scaled down, but Jongerius was photographing in the American West what could happen in

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Europe and the world. She was doing so by working the margins, working the liminal, shooting in the zones where the seams showed.

The Los Angeles art critic Peter Frank, writing about work by Jongerius in 2006, observed that she "finds modern life verging on ancient wasteland in widely disparate places—here, a roadside picnic site, its tables unshaded against the relentless sun; there, a ski lift on a snowy rise; there, a golf course oasis; and yonder, several flat-topped bushes and a fiercely glowing streetlight in a parking lot." He also pointed out that, although her works are "not at all uniform in their composition, color, or even atmosphere," that "they convey a sense of hallucination, as if these banal interventions were acid flashbacks, and a deep sense of unease, as if these pretenses at civilization were only as stable as the next earthquake."

In the eyes of Jongerius, the liminal as a zone of photography is also a zone of decision making—of choosing to remake the American West as a fantasy rather than take it for what it is, a place where most of us perhaps shouldn't live. Her photographs are not a simple dialectic of culture versus nature, but rather the interface where we can see something that is neither. She tells the story of going out to El Mirage Dry Lake, one of those stunning and pure playas northeast of Los Angeles, and finding three commercials being filmed at once, the sublime landscape serving as a backdrop for commerce. The space is thus experienced as a construct in between what is real and not. She finds evidence in the long lines of palm trees brought in to signify that Southern California is a location of tropical leisure, and to demonstrate the amount of wealth available to transplant exotics at will. She is alert to the irony that the majority of those trees in cities such as Los Angeles were planted as a backdrop for the 1932 Olympics—and that the end of the average lifespan of the palms, between seventy and a hundred years, is at hand. She finds more subtle clues of our decisions in backyards, where a lone saguaro cactus pokes up behind a chain link fence amidst masses of evergreens and columnar cypress trees, the later themselves transplants from the Mediterranean. The allure of the fantasy is so compelling that botanical looters prowl the national parks of Arizona for baby saguaros to dig up and sell to landscapers, compelling rangers to embed the cacti with microchips. The reality becomes so mediated that it is, as Frank implies, surreal.

Marie-José Jongerius is one of many European artists who have photographed across the American West to good effect, the visual language of other Continentals such as Wim Wenders and Olivo Barbieri also finding ways to describe the region in ways we Westerners don't quite expect. It's always been the case with artists, traveling to foreign lands to capture the exotic, but often returning with something they didn't quite expect. Instead of an American West of a rock-solid nature beyond the control of humans, something she could rely upon as an objective correlative to the altered landscapes elsewhere in the world, Jongerius came away unsettled, displaced by a land of fiction surrounded by flickering edges of uncertainty. It's a double twist that this body of work is so informed by the importation of exotic species, and of European-derived notions about the control of nature, and that it takes a European looking at the American landscape—a photographer who is herself an exotic viewer—to foreground it for us. She accomplishes this not so much through any one photograph, but through a precisely calibrated assemblage of views that cannot be denied because they trace the edges of our dilemma—that gray zone of decision-making—over such long distances, and under so many circumstances. We should look at her images long and hard, and consider whether or not we really want to live in limbo. **B**

Note

This essay is adapted from Marie-José Jongerius, *Edges of the Experiment* (Fw: Books, 2015).

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Joshua Tree (CA)—2002, Marie-José Jongerius.

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Pacific Ocean—2004, Marie-José Jongerius.

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