

More than an Island

Mihai Nadin. *Mallorca – The Nature of Things* (photographs by Jörg Bräuer; text in Catalan, English, French, German). Munich: rupa publishing, 2009, 72 pages

There is a real island, with a precise geological identity, as there is an imaginary Mallorca, not to be ignored, of colors, odors, taste, and touch. This book is about both! Let me explain.

Geologists can tell us how Mallorca emerged. The flat-lying limestone and dolostones as well as the encrustation of red algae speak to them more than to us. The caves and the major geological formations—have you seen the reef corals?—are rich in testimony. But would the strict language of scientific description provided by geologists do justice to how we see and experience Mallorca today?



Paleontologists delivered many times their own assessment of early forms of life on the island. It is impressive, as is the entire archaeology of the Balears—on the major island (Majorca), as well as on the others. And so is the history, or better yet the many histories, because, as we know, history is always the story told by those who are in power. Are Mallorcans in power? Or the tourists? Or the entrepreneurs fast at work in making Mallorca the next best investment? Or is the artist whose images you see in this book exercising his power in order to tell you a different story than you know about the island?

Mallorca, as we know, went through many waves of occupiers: Carthaginians, Romans—who brought olives, vineyards, salt, and, one can say, the Jews—Vandals, Moors, Catalans. Here again, there is the real island and the imaginary Mallorca of the fantastic, of many stories, and of even more memories. During the Byzantine Empire, Mallorca was considered part of the political entity called Sardinia. The Sardic and the Mallorqui—both are beautifully sounding languages—share more than one would expect. Although Sardinia and Mallorca are not close to each other, still they feel like relatives. Is it because they are actually part of Africa, literally at the boundary between the tectonic plates of the two continents? Here again, the real and the imaginary wed in so many ways that sometimes it becomes difficult to distinguish between the

two. Look at the images in this book: they are a proof of how the real and the imaginary are fused in stones and landscapes, in buildings and atmosphere.

Mallorca experienced the Muslim raiders, the Almohavids and Almohads, until Christianity took over for good, and at times with less than a soft hand. Amazing successions, leaving behind layer after layer of customs and testimony to those power structures that fed history. The sequence ended relatively recently when the Spanish island became the vacation paradise of West Europeans, the majority coming from Germany. Russian—the *nouveau riches*—Arab, North and South American visitors (several movie stars have residences here) are too few to be counted, but they make Mallorca a very cosmopolitan place. Yes, one can easily identify the owners by the variety of styles encountered on the island. And, as usual, conflicts of power—the succession of conquerors is an expression of some triumphing over others—translate into the success of some styles to the detriment of others.

Is the expression of power in Mallorca a thing of the past? The aquifer explains the green of this corner of the earth—a beautiful green indeed. But it also brings to mind the fact that being surrounded by water does not automatically mean that there is enough water to satisfy all the extravagant uses devised as more visitors discover Mallorca. One can be on an island, but in today's integrated world the threat of terror is real, even in paradise. ETA bombings were a reminder that even promised paradises are not free of conflicts.

Mallorcans are neither more angel nor more villain than the rest of us on Earth. They work hard, cultivate their traditions, adopt new values, or remain captive to old ones. That a vast majority of Mallorcans will not let their children marry a *Xueta*, or are disinclined to live near one *Xueta* family, even after more than 500 years since their expulsion under Isabella and Ferdinand, is part of the same conflicting image of reality. Prejudices infiltrate even spaces of beauty and rich history. Indirectly, the images in this book are a testimony to this fascinating human characteristic.

Those few Mallorcans who have been, through their ancestors, on the island for centuries are used to all of this, and take history (as well as the visitors) in stride. What else can they do? They, like previous generations, have lived on the island, which was rarely theirs, a reality even more pregnant today when so many visitors want to make Mallorca, or at least part of it, their own. Do we need to possess everything we like? Take a look at the images in this book for a first answer. Did the artist “steal” the magnificent forms and colors, and made them his, or did he do something else? Is he a possessive artist—so many are—or rather one who proves to be very giving? To be less than honest in describing Mallorca as it is means to miss the source of its magic. Only boring places have a “politically correct” past. I am not willing to waste time on presenting Mallorca other than how it is. And I am happy that the artist who inspired my words understands this. Mallorca is not a place for conformity.

For me, Mallorca was connected to that strange genius of the pre-computer age called Ramon Llull. (Just for those few who might not know it: born in Palma in 1232; died on the island in 1315.) I doubt that anyone goes to Mallorca because Llull gave humankind the *Ars generalis*

ultima, or, even more important, his *Ars combinatoria*. Yes, he knew Latin, and Arabic, and he contributed to shaping the Catalan language. It might surprise the reader to learn that without the art of combinations, which is a logical device, we could not even imagine computer images today. Moreover, Lull's genius was recognized by Leibniz, the ultimate spiritual father of the digital age. And I doubt even more that someone who takes photographs in Mallorca can claim to rediscover, in the images of this island, what eventually inspired Lull. Especially what made him conceive of a "knowledge machine" based on logical operations performed on what we perceive. The images in this book are perceptions, and I have no doubt that we could use Lull's rules in order to derive new insights about Mallorca. Isn't the art produced in the Balears a convincing example of simplicity resulting from very simple rules for permutations?

A road wending slowly into the fog, misty skies, dramatic rooftops, piers, lighthouses, bridges, seascapes, mountains, limestone everywhere. The visual language of this landscape has only a few "letters," but the visual "sentences"—if you will allow me to call them sentences—"written" by nature are very expressive. Even the places where we know that people eventually enter—to pray, to contemplate, to rest—are, in the images presented in this book, depopulated. There is no way to associate an image with our own memories of the place. The photographer does not merely document Mallorca. He makes it up as he discovers it for himself. A quiet inlet between two massive rocks—Was it really there, or did he stage the scene?—the tower atop the inner courtyard of a convent, the stormy sky, the cathedral roof. If you consider the entire world to be a stage, this is a corner where so much is inscribed on the surface of waters that seem metallic, on the stones, on the clouds, frozen like a piece of sculpture on a scale that no one can ever imagine mastering. Secluded bays are only an entry point to this world of calm and depth.

Jörg Bräuer is a photographer whose footsteps, some tentative, some more sure, are familiar to me. Sentimental *bis es geht nicht mehr*, as the Germans would say, enthusiastic, disorderly, but still disciplined—by which I mean the discipline of seeing: selection, framing, interpretation. He knows his *métier*, but in our day and age, who doesn't? Aren't we all photographers?

Photography used to be extremely demanding because the technology behind it was frail. The landscapes of an Ansel Adams are testimony to interpretation of nature through the lens of a camera inordinately complicated. This kind of heroic photography is now part of museum culture. Digital technology made photography simple and, at the same time, extremely complex. Everyone can take a picture; very few are able to see what is worth framing and, moreover, capturing. Photographs made on the mundane impulse to document everything are no longer collected; they are stored, indexed, and put on the Web. The billions of images captured on digital cameras are exactly what the qualifier of the new gadgets means: pixels. More and more of them (still in the megapixel domain) are made available. The illusion that everyone can be a photographer—that is, an artist—is seductive. But it is still an illusion. So many bad photographs of Mallorca are in circulation that some of those who visit the island think that they can photograph it at least as well.

The photographer who made this book is not in the dot or pixel business; he will not take cell-phone pictures—the newest craze in art collection—to show how beautiful an architectonic detail or a cloud formation is. His focus is not on making the news—where images are

consumed—rather on making what he selected as worth the attention of viewers. He invites them to think about what they see. His imagery affirms aesthetics, and thus permanence. The aesthetics of the slow moving, of sameness, of rich associations. It is influenced by architecture—itself meant to be stable—and suggests poetry. Among the many books on Mallorca, Jörg’s collection will stand out through one decisive characteristic. You, the reader—or better yet, the viewer—will not have the chance to say “I was there! I know this corner. I felt so tranquil in this courtyard!” None of this, because the collection of images your eyes are now taking in is not a visual diary; it is even less a documentary. In the age of trivialization of photography, Jörg Bräuer affirms: Photography can create new realities. Recall that photography was once *drawing with light*—which is what the word *photography* still means—drawing, as in drawing a face, a tree, a house, a landscape. And it went through many phases, including its total submission—prostitute like—to commercialism. What Jörg Bräuer, and few others whom I was blessed to have met and interacted with, does is to dedicate himself to photography as a medium for calmly *remaking* the world. His Mallorca is, after all is said and done, *his*. This is his farewell poem to the island. But only a tired soul (or an uninspired editor) would read sadness here. The images making up this visual poem can only incite to exploration.

There is no person to be seen in this newly created island that he shares with us. There are no sounds. This is a world waiting for a magical baton to signal a beginning. When that signal comes—and this is what you, the reader, have to contribute—the images you admire will be ready to welcome you, full of their odors, colors, and tones; full of their texture; full of their never-ending history. The life will come from your own life, as though sharing a fire in order to start a new one. This collection of photographs gives you something different from the typical memento of an island. Therefore, if you ever decide to experience Mallorca (which is not the same as visiting it), you will find out on your own how much more than an island it is.