



St. Francis of Assisi #2, 2012.  
Digital C-Print. 40 x 50 in.

## Vision, However Uncertain

There is a matter-of-fact quality to Regina Mamou's photographs of long-gone utopian communities at locations throughout the Midwest and mid-Atlantic, selections of which are exhibited in *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*. The series resembles a straightforward historical study at first, but it whittles away at its own self-assurances, giving way to a more open-ended investigation, an inquisitive tangle of ruminative questions. The photographs employ observational methods and an unembellished style like we've come to associate with documentary photography, but their primary aim isn't to convey historical information. If it's history we're after, the past appears unexplained, unannotated, in need of deciphering. Mamou approaches her subjects obliquely, interested more in the ambiguous overlay of past and present in these places, the aesthetics of the communities coded into the landscape, and the ways visual evidence requires interpretation. Her photographs are amalgams of what took place at these sites in the mid-19th century, what she found when she visited recently, and her subjective choices of what to record. At the heart of her work—serving as a key perhaps—is the matter of *vision*, uniquely here encompassing the word's multiple definitions. A vision can be a mental image of what the future could be like; it can be the experience of seeing a supernatural apparition, as if in a dream; it can be someone's ambitious idea; not least of all, it can refer to the basic state of being able to see—which is to say, the not-so-simple faculty of seeing.

The eight photographs hung on the inner ring of the gallery were taken in New Harmony, Indiana, the former site of two utopian communities: the first was founded in 1814 by separatists from the German Lutheran church; after their departure in 1825, the followers of a Welsh social reformer moved in for a brief two years. Mamou's photographs on the outer ring of the gallery were taken at other utopian communities, reflecting the eventual geographic scope of her research and travels. At risk of generalization, one might describe utopian thinking here as a vision in translation—society reconceived and then put into practice, however tenuously, invested in an image of what the future could be. In many cases, the towns' communal areas are shaped in response to their ideology or spiritual beliefs; as Mamou observes in her project description, "the aesthetics of a community is etched into the natural and artificial aspects of a particular space." This could be as explicit as a garden designed after the Book of Revelation, or as understated as a cemetery without a single headstone, a grassy lawn with nearly imperceptible hills.

The unmarked cemetery, which is in New Harmony, points to the group's desire to dissolve social hierarchies, but it also reflects a particular way of thinking about the past: it allows it to fade from view—a process slowed, perhaps, only by the memories of the living. In New Harmony today, in contrast, the town's utopian history is celebrated and memorialized, most noticeably in the form of two architectural monuments built in the 1960s and 1970s. Philip Johnson's Roofless Church, a towering acorn-like husk, and Richard Meier's pristine white visitor center, the Atheneum, are beautiful and memorable modernist buildings. Demanding to be noticed, they are arguably monuments to their eminent designers as



Chartres Cathedral, 2012.  
Digital C-Print. 40 x 50 in.



Frederick's Wing Urriti Death, 2012.  
Digital C-Print. 40 x 50 in.

well. Mamou titles two photographs of their buildings *Philip Johnson's Vision of God* and *Richard Meier's Vision for Athene*, suggesting that the two men responded to the visionaries of yore with architectural visions of their own.

In another photograph, however, Meier's Atheneum appears into the background, partially hidden by the landscaping. A morning haze, following a rainstorm, turns the stark white building into an apparition. It's as if the artist, her attention elsewhere, had looked up and found it hovering in the distance. Gradually, from one image to the next in the series, a mysterious atmosphere develops, a mood emanating in gray skies, encroaching rain, an almost palpable hush. All the towns appear empty, as if the current residents had also vanished. There is something ghostly to all this, but Mamou maintains a documentarian's careful detachment. Is it the skeptics who harbor the deepest hope of seeing an apparition, longing to see a ghost while doubting they ever will?

I hesitate to speak for Mamou, but in many serial photographic projects, the photographer implicitly becomes the protagonist. Here, too, we follow her peregrinations, joining the artist in her search. Fittingly, the architecture of the exhibition space is a passageway, circling away from the entrance and back, turning the viewing experience into a journey itself. You can imagine Mamou going from one town to the next, looking for something in places that are otherwise fairly unremarkable. In certain photographs we find her looking away from the main historical sites entirely in favor of gravel piles on the edge of town or the graying corner of a vine-covered house, as if something weird might rise out of the ground.



Site (Community Vineyard), 2012.  
Digital C-Print, 40 x 50 in.

In three images in the series, the landscape is hidden almost entirely by fog. There's nothing to see except the uncertainty of vision itself, the photographs signaling the triumph of opacity and disappearance. History recedes altogether, overwritten by a humid aura, autumn fields barely visible through the fog. Mamou said to me at one point that she wants to find the essence of these places. I take that less to mean some arcane spirit, than the way these sites reflect a deeper human impulse we might still recognize today. The three fog images are each titled *Fieldwork*, which could refer to the artist's forays "into the field" for research. For physicists, however, the word *field* can refer to something else as well: my reference dictionary describes this kind of field as "the region in which a particular condition prevails, especially one in which a force or influence is effective, regardless of the presence of a material medium." Metaphorically at least, this offers another way of thinking about Mamou's fieldwork. Perhaps there is nothing much to see in these places aside from old buildings, gravel piles, new monuments, and manicured gardens. Even so, Mamou is in search of a more nebulous field—whether real or chimerical, observed or imagined—seeking out areas in which certain conditions prevail: the force and influence of bygone utopian visions, now filtered through the present moment and the not-so-simple facts of seeing, not fully confined to the material remnants where we first think to look.

—Karsten Lund

**Regina Mamou** is a Chicago-based visual artist working at the intersection of photography, installation, and research practices. In 2009 she received a 15-month Fulbright Fellowship to Jordan to explore navigational methods and memory in Amman. She has exhibited her work nationally and internationally. Selected exhibitions include Makan Art Space in Amman, Jordan (2010); Action Field Kodra's 11th Exhibition of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, Greece (2011); and The Chicago Project online at Catherine Edelman Gallery (2012). Mamou holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design.

Please visit [reginamamou.com](http://reginamamou.com) for more information.

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Lusgarten, 2012.  
Digital C-Print, 40 x 32 in.

# Regina Mamou *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*