

**Massimo Vitali**

*Natural Habitats*

To be published by Steidl

Essay published in *1000 Words Photography*, no. 8, Summer 2010

[www.1000wordsmag.com](http://www.1000wordsmag.com)

---

The universally held conception of the photographer as voyeur is confronted explicitly in the photographic tableaux of Italian photographer, Massimo Vitali. His camera typically surveys from an elevated position over the places where large groups of people gather: at discos; raves and concerts; mass New Year's celebrations; and, most notably and perhaps controversially, beaches and public swimming pools.

In keeping with the vogue for large, colour photographic prints, and to get the most out of his 10" x 8" and 11" x 14" negatives, Vitali produces prints which allow the viewer to thoroughly scrutinise the scene before them. Vitali has described how important scale and detail is to his work, comparing the image of each figure with his frame as a single portrait. A viewer – or perhaps more appropriately a 'spectator' – of his prints is certainly afforded this pleasure as they can enjoy the image as a whole, as well as explore the minutiae of the scene; its players and their interactions and narratives. However, Vitali has been keen to convey this sense of the scrutiny of the image (à la Antonion's *Blowup*) in other media as well: in his monographs, such as *Beach & Disco* (2000), reproductions of his images are followed by enlargements of portions of the frame. The choice of which bit of the scene, or which individuals to present to the viewer, is of course Vitali's, however, on some web pages the viewer can drag and scroll around a magnified view of his images and dwell on whichever parts they please.

The high position from which Vitali works – which is somewhat typical of contemporary large format landscape photography – creates the sense of the spectacle of each of the photographer's scenes, and heightens the sense of the

© Jesse Alexander, 2010

[www.jessealexander.co.uk](http://www.jessealexander.co.uk)

flâneur's gaze and of superiority over those photographed. Conversely, some critics [James Lingwood] argues against this reaction to Vitali's images, pointing out that because of the volume of individuals in each scene, he cannot be in control of them; where they place themselves and how they choose to behave; the photographer is at the mercy of the crowd. There is nothing decisive about Vitali's exposures.

The place on which Vitali has chosen to focus most of his work – the public beach – complicates reading these images as purely voyeuristic: Whilst it may be where people go to relax and escape daily life, it is also where people go to display themselves and take pleasure in looking at others. This is also the case in Vitali's disco and rave images that depict the social and sexual rituals of youth. Vitali's camera can therefore be seen as an extension of the scopophilic gaze of the other revellers and visitors of the beach.

It is also important to bear in mind the means by which Vitali makes his images. The photographer is hardly inconspicuous working from a custom-built podium with a large format camera with the help of one or two assistants; he could hardly be compared to either a 'peeping Tom' or a discrete surveillance camera. In fact, it is surprising how few figures seem to take any notice of the photographer and his paraphernalia, so engrossed they must be in their own little universes.

We might be forgiven for asking the question: what is the contribution of these particular works? Ever since the medium was invented and passenger locomotives made tourism affordable and practical to the masses, beaches, resorts and their occupants have been rigorously explored by documentary photographers. Notable bodies of work range from Max Dupain's reverent images of beaches and their users in Australia to Martin Parr's controversial study of the New Brighton resort in England. The sorts of locations Vitali has typically visited are fairly generic and familiar Mediterranean resorts. He hasn't highlighted the kitsch aesthetics of the seaside, but he has shown us the blandness of these places and the vulgarity of Western flesh en masse. However, there is a marked difference between his earlier images and the new work that makes up *Natural Habitats*: He has explored more exotic and

luxurious locations that actually look inviting as places to visit and furthermore, unlike most practitioners who steadily hone their gaze upon their subject, Vitali has distanced himself slightly from the scenes so there isn't quite so much on display.

Vitali, who only began working with large format photography in his fifties, has remarked that he began his beach series out of a critical view of Italian culture at a time of political change across the continent. He has also joked that his work will only be fully appreciated fifty years from now, by sociologists. It wouldn't be unreasonable, therefore, to interpret his works as an attempt to order and rationalise an aspect of contemporary culture, perhaps made with a faint sentiment of nostalgia. If the current social hysteria surrounding photography in public places and of children continues to mount, who knows how a future generation of guarded, anxious and prudish viewers will look upon Vitali's work.