

Re-Simulating an Artificial View:
Contemporary Western American Landscape Photography

by

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ABSTRACT

Western landscape photography helped to create an imaginative perception of a new nation for Americans. Early nineteenth-century photographers captured a vision of uncharted terrain that metaphorically fulfilled a two-fold illusion: an untouched Eden and a land ready and waiting for white settlement. The sublime and picturesque experiences of the West provided artists a concept that could be capitalized upon by employing various forms of manipulation.

In the twentieth-century, the role of landscape photography evolved as did the advancement of the West. Images of wilderness became art and photographers chose to view the western landscape differently. Some focused more sharply and critically on the relationship between the land and the people who lived on it. The influential exhibition in 1975, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* presented work that showed a landscape altered, marked by power lines, houses, and fences. The West as Eden no longer existed.

Today, photographers continue to examine, image, and experience western land anew. In this thesis I examine the relationship of contemporary landscape photography and the role of the West, guided by an analysis that traces the history of American ideologies and attitudes toward natural land. The artists I have chosen recognize landscape not as scenery but as the spaces and systems people inhabit, and use manipulative strategies that emphasize an artificial character of the West. Their work elicits antecedent mythologies, pictorial models, and American ideologies that continue to perpetuate internationally.

DEDICATION

To John, my toughest advocate, and to Poncho, who helped me to smile.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The American landscape has captivated the imagination since people arrived on its shores. It became the symbol that bolstered the American spirit and created a national identity for its citizens in search of icons and history. Painter Thomas Cole described the significance of America's terrain during a lecture in 1835, when he proclaimed that the most distinctive, impressive characteristic of American scenery is its wilderness, "those scenes of solitude from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, affect the mind with a more deep toned emotion than aught which the hand of man has touched."¹ The landscape provided a young country an identity that became a prominent symbol of America. Writers and artists alike spoke passionately and exultingly about our nation's special endowment. Manifest Destiny, America's doctrine to develop and settle the new frontier, became a motivator for pioneers and created a momentum of national import.² In the early nineteenth-century, photography emerged from its infancy and the explorations of photographers documented the West to echo similarly held sentiments. Photography helped define Americans' perception of their new nation.

Author Ginger Strand suggests this strong sentiment toward landscape is not fervent in contemporary American culture. In fact, she suggests it is gone:

¹ Thomas Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," *American Monthly Magazine* 1 (January 1836): 10.

² The term Manifest Destiny was first used in 1839 in the journal *United States Magazine and Democratic*

² The term Manifest Destiny was first used in 1839 in the journal *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. It was a term that justified territorial annexation and settlement as a natural, God-given American right. It also defined what was now considered the American mission and responsibility to "civilize" the "other" purportedly backward peoples of different cultures, languages, and religions. Throughout the hemisphere, into Mexico and Cuba, but especially across the American West, these others were defined as peoples who needed to be taught the virtues of American democracy and American economic enterprise by American secular missionaries willing to undertake this cultural reformation. For further reading see Amy Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 20.

No one believes in landscape anymore. As a self-contained genre, pretty vistas and sublime scenes feel compromised. There's a shadow moving across those sylvan fields, the shadow of ideology. Sneaking into the Western tradition via religious iconography, landscape masqueraded for several centuries as objective, a window onto the natural world. That's all over now...its aesthetic is culturally constructed, its origins philosophically tainted, and its politics downright dodgy.³

Strand also believes that we don't talk about landscapes or scenery as much as we talk about environment in terms of ecological concerns, sustainable living, and global warming trends. As people move outward to the suburbs and beyond, the home and the surrounding "wilderness" or desert, is no longer the key landscape symbol. Author D.W. Meinig suggests "not only is there no obvious symbolic landscape of American community today, there is no clear image or even simple common terms for the kind of setting and society most Americans live in."⁴ While it is false to assume that no one believes in landscapes anymore, it is true that they don't hold the same majestic responsibility of uniting the Anglo-Saxon Protestants that settled this nation.

My thesis is that contemporary photographers continue to explore the possibilities and potential of the Western American landscape, expanding in ideas found in the nineteenth-century. Today, landscape is no longer the historical subject to symbolize nationalism. While photographers continue to explore nationalism in a multitude of ways they are also investigating concerns about land. Instead of focusing on the larger context of a national identity, immediate surroundings of an individual are considered.

Landscapes involve experience but images are not experiences in a direct sense.

Photographs of landscapes then are representations that engage personal narratives and

³ Ginger Strand, "At the Limits: Landschaft, Landscape and the Land," in *Badlands: New Horizons in Landscapes*, edited by Denise Markonish (North Adams: Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008), 81.

⁴ D.W. Meinig et al., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 183.

discourses. To include a word that connotes a region of specificity, such as West, then offers a context for viewers that conjure a culture-laden set of expectations, needs, and responses.

West(ness)

To westward-moving pioneers, the land beyond the hundredth meridian was bare, big, brown, and imposing. Sheltering forests of the East thinned out and then disappeared, revealing every crevice, bulge, and scar from the past. Prior to the 1860s, “West” referred to a compass direction, a general direction of movement, a fantasy land rather than a particular place with a specific history. This vague concept of the West as a compass direction lacked concreteness. After the Civil War, it took shape as a distinctive new region of the United States that lacked definitive boundaries. Donald Worster noted the western region emerged from the old clouds of myth and romance to become what it is and now seems (for the first time) honestly revealed:

Today it looks a little smaller than it once did, though it is still notable for its amplitude of space and light. Now and then it can stir up the old indeterminate hopefulness in newcomers, but generally what people want out of the region is more practical and limited – a job, a home, a vacation.⁵

Traditional western historians had objections to any identification of the West as a region. For them, the West did not have the coherence necessary to qualify as a real region because it had too many sub-regions especially in California and parts of the interior where the West had great differences in prosperity and poverty. Additionally, residents of the West did not have a consistent and coherent sense of themselves as westerners. What then, today, constitutes a North American region as “west”? However it is indisputable,

⁵ Patricia Nelson Limerick et al., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 6.

for all that exists between the hundredth meridian (a longitude line that runs from the Dakotas to western Texas) and the Pacific Coast, that much of the West shares common characteristics according to Patricia Limerick:

1. It is more prone to aridity and thereby more difficult to conquer;
2. It contains more Indian reservations and more visible, unvarnished Indian peoples;
3. It has more land still in federal control;
4. It shares a border with Mexico;
5. It is closer to the Pacific than the rest of the country;
6. It underwent Anglo-American conquest at a time when the United States was a fully formed nation, providing, thereby, a more focused and revealing case study of how the United States as a nation conducted conquest and especially how the federal government adopted a control role for itself;
7. As a result of all these factors, it is a region particularly prone to demonstrate the unsettled aspects of conquest, to show in the late twentieth century more than its share of evidence that the conquest of North America came to no clear, smooth end.⁶

Because western boundaries remain ambiguous, New Western Historians define “the West” primarily as a place – such as the trans-Mississippi region in the broadest terms, or perhaps the region west of the hundredth meridian.⁷ For the purposes of this thesis, the West will refer to what is in between the Pacific Coast and the hundredth meridian.

Over time, landscape has maintained a prominent position in American ideology and art; as the nation continued to mature, so evolved our relationship to landscape. Western landscape photography has continued to trace artistic responses to the relationship of place and the photographic medium. In the past fifty years, artists photographed the West to investigate the current fascination with revisiting it, attempting to revise and reframe its legacy. For example, Erika Osborne re-visits the process of mapping a region and observing topography in her photograph *Rites of Passage*. Here,

⁶ Ibid., 70-71.

⁷ Ibid., 85.

the model's back serves as paper for a continued drawing of the mountainous terrain that is obscured from the viewer. The drawing offers viewers the ability to mentally piece together what the model blocks; at the same time the superimposed drawing references historical surveys, and superiority of humanity over nature, visualized by the ability to effortlessly substitute for the majority of a scenic view.

This thesis is not a comprehensive history of photography in the West, and many of the region's most productive, talented, and influential photographers get short shrift. Instead, this is a social history of a practice in the West that is married with emerging ideas informed uses of photography, and how these pictorial representations evolved, in turn, to shape popular thinking. Finally, I will discuss the progression of the photo in modernity, specifically examining the monumental shift that was recognized as a result of the 1975 exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*. It is equally important to glean insight on the aesthetic of American landscape painting as these images informed the landscape photographs.

There is no shortfall of images being made today that depict terrain. Photographic approaches vary as greatly as the formal and conceptual concerns do, and these are discussed in detail in Chapter Two. My thesis will hone in on one small, burgeoning trend underrepresented in recent research and contribute to academic study and scholarly research of contemporary photographers who use manipulative strategies that ultimately emphasize the artificial character of the Western American landscape. While it is not a new technique (photographers have long changed the qualities of a captured image)⁸, the

⁸ The daguerreotype was superseded by the wet-plate (collodion) process of the 1860s and 1870s that often depicted flat skies, white expanses, and water appearing still. Some photographers would add a second negative of clouds or retouch with paint.

purpose that drives today's artists is not for pure finesse to make an image aesthetically pleasing.⁹ Instead, they refer more in a general sense to landscape clichés and ideologies that guide and filter our twenty-first century view of a scenic nature. Many of the works are not based on specific location, or if it is, identification is not provided.

In the work I have selected to examine in this thesis, antecedent mythologies, pictorial models, and American ideologies continue to perpetuate. I examine the relationship of the photograph as document, archive, identity, and a philosophical non-place, guided by an analysis that traces the history of western landscape photography. Fundamental ideologies that shaped American attitudes toward the natural landscape are discussed throughout my thesis. In this construction of a dialogue between past and present depictions and understandings of the western landscape, the manipulative trend is framed as a rich discourse that has carried conflicting meanings throughout time.

It is equally important to glean insight of the aesthetic of American landscape painting through formal and subject considerations, as these paintings informed that the landscape photographs and artists previously rested in the European tradition of landscape painting. I highlight several mid-nineteenth century photographers whose work exemplifies key cultural attitudes and agendas, but whose work also presents an undeniable connection and influence to artists discussed in Chapter Two. Finally, I discuss the natural progression of the photo in modernity, specifically examining the

⁹ As early as 1847 landscapes were concocted for daguerreotypes that depicted portraits of Indians to appeal to tourists and eastern vendors. Painted backdrops and studio props, often elaborately constructed of papier-mâché, were used to create natural settings. Susan Hegeman, "Landscapes, Indians, and Photography in the Age of Scientific Exploration," in *The Big Empty: Essays on Western Landscapes as Narrative*, edited by Leonard Engel (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 59.

monumental shift that was recognized as a result of the exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*.

My chapters progress chronologically from the ideological underpinnings that gave early Americans meaning and mythology in landscape to the role of photography through western American history, and finally, the contemporary artists whose pictures present visual embodiments of revisionist history that explores various approaches to altered landscapes. In addition to an examination of notions of site, space, place, and environment, the artists that are discussed in Chapter Three investigate history through various channels: nationhood, cultural, and historical meanings of landscape, and the enduring legacies of photographers discussed in Chapter Two.

My methodology largely draws on the field of revisionist, New Western history. These historians wrote comprehensively and did not ignore untold events or diminish the legitimacy of underrepresented stories.¹⁰ Contemporary photographers similarly examine, image, experience, and share western land anew with their viewers. This study incorporates critical examinations and histories of definitions pertaining to “landscape” and draws on the work of geographers such as John Brinckerhoff Jackson (J.B. Jackson) who defines landscape as a necessary component of vernacular culture, not a pristine

¹⁰ New Western History was founded by historian Patricia Limerick on the premise of unfolding a new history of the American West, providing a range of views that clarify the changes in western history. For example, it entails emphasis on ethnic and racial diversity in the past, logical extension of notions of social and cultural pluralism, humanity’s historic interaction with the physical environment and thus the concern for ecological fragility and environmental exploitation, and growth of work in western women’s history. For further reading see Limerick, *Trails*. In this text, the New Western History provides a more balanced view of the western past and includes failure as well as success; defeat as well as victory; sympathy, grace as well as danger; women as well as men; ethnic groups as well as white Anglo-Saxon Protestants; an environment that is limiting, interactive, and sometimes ruined as well as mastered and made to bloom. *Ibid.*, xi.

entity separate from humanity.¹¹ For D.W. Meinig, the word provides “a scaffold upon which humans construct history.”¹²

Photographs of landscape are composed of both place and space. They provide a framework in which identifiable elements are organized and then interpreted through transaction. Application of this process requires a visual analysis of the photographs, and second, interpretation and significance that are intertwined. Analysis is the most basic element of looking at the image: consideration of every form, shape, and color, and of where it is located in the composition: what it is behind or in front of it, how large it is, how natural or unnatural we perceive it. Nothing inside a photograph is too small, too ordinary, or too natural to be examined and then questioned. The contemporary photographs presented in Chapter Three confirm that even though the western American land has already been re-manipulated, re-altered, and re-explored time and time again, landscape remains a tremendously important foundation of today’s American culture.

¹¹ J. B. Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

¹² D.W. Meinig, “The Beholding Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene” in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, edited by D.W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 43.

Chapter 2

THE WESTERN AMERICAN LAND FIRST SEEN THROUGH THE LENS

In this chapter I discuss the history of American sentiment towards the new frontier. First, I examine the social and political context of nineteenth-century America because the development of landscape photography coincided with the understanding of the medium itself. This set the stage for me to investigate how America valued the medium of photography and the role of western land within as photography gained momentum and appreciation in the art world and in society at large. This paved the way for different needs and desires of Americans for the medium. As in other forms of art creation, deviations occurred, and modernists shape how we look at land and their images with an avant-garde representation of space.

Though many other landscape traditions would arise after the 1930s, a conceptual shift ultimately took place in the 1960s with the start of the earthworks movement.¹³ The photography depicted in the 1975 exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* exemplifies one such shift. The relevance of this exhibition is immeasurable and will serve as the foundation for the contemporary analysis.

Rebecca Solnit, a scholar of topics that include the environment, politics, and place, suggests that through the mid-1980s, photographers explored cultural interrogations and relationships between gender and landscape ideology. Female photographers, such as Linda Connor, sought more intimate and enclosed scenes rather than the sweeping, evasive landscape at large that included a foreground, middle ground,

¹³ Artists like Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt, Walter DeMaria, and Michael Heizer favored decay and deterioration. They created works that were of and in the environment, with the acknowledgment that the Earth will always have the last word.

background, plus a horizon. Meridel Rubenstein combined portraiture with landscape to suggest a symbiosis – photographs of still life objects and environment – between inhabitants and terrain. Solnit recognizes that this work posed more questions than resolved interpretations, creating a switch in artistic medium from photography to multimedia work:

In many ways, this work opened up the largest questions about the relationship between the viewer and the view, the art object and its environment, the nature of perception, and the legitimacy of existing categories (including landscape). The responses to these questions since the mid-1980s have increasingly led away from photography as an adequate medium and from landscape as an adequate category toward installation, video, and conceptual work. There is, thus virtually no younger generation of landscape art photographers making significant art in the West. Instead, there are a number of impressive young installation artists who began as photographers.¹⁴

Artists today continue to explore similar issues that stem from *New Topographics*: gloomy relationships between humanity and land by either direct reference to humanity or lack of human presence.

Western American photography has played a crucial role in shaping a national identity, pride, and sensationalism since its existence. The West was assumed as a place of fantastic, exotic topography that was not readily available for the average nineteenth-century American to visit and observe in person. Nor was it a place that colonial Americans wanted to embrace. They feared the arid lands of the desert would dramatically change the national character they desired. Emptiness, silence, solitude, a forbidding climate, the scale of land, and a slender margin for survival were not seen as lucrative qualities. Easterners were used to a crowded, lush world.

¹⁴ Rebecca Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 97-98.

The camera was instrumental in revealing uncharted territory destined for American expansion and ownership. It was more powerful than a mere recording device as photographs influenced how people *perceived* the West during the second half of the nineteenth-century. Decades after Louis-Jacques Mandé Daguerre introduced his invention in 1839, Americans took pictures of a western land outside official United States boundaries. The images inscribed on small metal plates were astonishing, capturing a vivid likeness of place whose:

natural wonders and astounding resources seemed to beckon Americans westward and to ensure the success of their national enterprise... They pictured the West's native peoples, largely to show that they would soon fade before the superior culture of the expanding United States, and they documented the region's highest peaks and deepest canyons to capture visual evidence of the divine blessings bestowed upon the American nation. In such photographs, Americans found persuasive evidence of what they had, who they were, and what they could become; and in the West, nineteenth-century American photography found its most distinctive subject.¹⁵

Wilderness was revered as a source of spiritual and moral inspiration, an idea that became a powerful theme in American art and literature. There was an immediate need to establish a new identity distinguished by the wild nature of the land when European colonists arrived on the American shore. The colonists believed that in untouched nature God made his presence in the world known and that it was Americans' God-given right to live within it.

This chapter explores how Euro-Americans esteemed their newly acquired landscape and the ideals they placed upon landscape constructs. Formations such as Yosemite Valley became admired as national icons and early photographs rendered them as prehistoric. Yosemite, in particular, was irresistible to Americans because of its

¹⁵ Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 2.

meadows and spreading oak trees that resembled English landscape parks. It also comprised all around-extraordinary rock faces and waterfalls, elements that fulfilled ideals of Manifest Destiny and pleased Victorians who were preoccupied with geology.¹⁶

The European landscape had been given meaning by the long history that could be read in its names, ruins, and monuments; however, the American landscape lacked all of those for its newcomers. It also had an arid climate that was not hospitable to European cultural and agricultural traditions. The early nineteenth-century American explorer, John Wesley Powell, described his difficulty coming to terms with the desert and wrote in his account:

The plains and valleys are low, arid, hot, and naked, and the volcanic mountains scattered here and there are lone and desolate. During the long months the sun pours its heat upon the rocks and sands, untempered by clouds above or forest shades beneath. The springs are so few in number that their names are household words in every Indian rancheria and every settler's home; and there are no brooks, no creeks, and no rivers but the trunk of the Colorado and the Gila. The few plants are strangers to the dwellers in the temperate zone. On the mountains a few junipers and pinons are found, and cactuses, agave, and yuccas, low, fleshy plants with bayonets and thorns. The landscape of vegetal life is weird – no forests, no meadows, no green hills, no foliage, but clublike stems of plants armed with stilettos... Hooded rattlesnakes, horned toads, and lizards crawl in the dust and among the rocks. One of these lizards, the 'Gila monster,' is poisonous. Huge rattlesnakes are common, and the rattlesnake god is one of the deities of the tribes.¹⁷

Colonial American Attitudes Toward the Natural Landscape

The foreign land of America appeared to represent the Biblical garden of Eden on the first morning of creation when humans had not yet tended to it. European settlers viewed it as one of promise but also as one that needed to be tamed. Notions of nature were deeply grounded in biblical constructs central to the colonial outlook:

¹⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Hidden Wars of the American West* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994), 257.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

The book of Exodus in the Christian Old Testament is one of the most significant sources for these preconceptions. A foundational narrative of the Western imagination, the biblical story of ancient Israel's exodus from Egypt exerted an especially strong influence on Puritan consciousness and behavior. For the early Puritan settlers, the biblical Israelites' experience of the desert landscape as a wilderness, the site of trial and struggle, served as a metaphor for their own encounter with North American nature as a wilderness against which to struggle and through which to pass.¹⁸

The belief that Europeans were the first people to tread on the North American land, coupled with an obsession of a virgin wilderness presents a deeply problematic idea. It speculates about the possibility of the utterly new, of an experience without predecessors. However, this ideal completely disregarded the presence of indigenous people. Similarly, the virgin forest was not what European immigrants found in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but what late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Americans created in the landscape and in their imagination.

Forest fires occurred approximately every decade before European settlement in 1701. Alston Chase, author of *Playing God in Yellowstone: The Destruction of America's First National Park*, states that at least one hundred tribes used fire for at least fifteen purposes and to modify their environment and nearly all of them dramatically affected the landscape. Fire promoted greater diversity in plants and animals, released nutrients into the soil, kept forests clear of underbrush that hindered large animals, and halted forest re-growth.¹⁹ The expulsion of Native Americans from parks also led to the

¹⁸ Peter John Brownlee, *Manifest Destiny / Manifest Responsibility: Environmentalism and the Art of the American Landscape* (Chicago: Loyola University Museum of Art, 2008), 12.

¹⁹ The halted growth of sequoia trees in Yosemite Valley is a great example of forest succession. During the 1960s foresters wondered why they were not regenerating. It turned out that even these huge, serene trees need to be disturbed to renew themselves: Sequoia cones hang closed on the trees until the heat of fire causes them to fall and burst, and release their seeds on a recent burn that creates rich mineral earth, where they best germinate and establish themselves.

banishment of healthy and sustainable burning and although white settlers believed they were trying to uphold this virgin wilderness, they were, in fact, doing the reverse.

Yosemite Valley

The Yosemite Valley is the iconic embodiment for the American landscape, and it does not lack in publications, literature, or academic scholarship. Beginning in the early 1860s, it was one of the most photographed places in the American West and central to images of the American landscape. This centrality is also a key for modernist pictures discussed in the next chapter. Charles L. Weed photographed the Yosemite Valley in the 1850s just as photographic technology made this endeavor possible. The advancement of wet-plate negative technologies provided Carleton E. Watkins the opportunity to establish landscape photography as an artistic discipline with his mammoth-plate photos of Yosemite taken in 1860 and 1861.²⁰ He quickly realized, along with his peer photographers and patrons, the potential of this medium that enabled a production of multiple prints from a single negative. The western landscape became a compelling subject for photographers in the 1860s and 1870s and was subsequently embraced within broader currents of American popular thought. The photographs became a rich part of prevailing myths about the West as a blank slate, one without indigenous predecessors:

In focusing on the most dramatic features of the western landscape, in minimizing the presence of people with earlier claims to the land, in illustrating what Americans could accomplish through focused use of the West's resources, the photographers and their patrons turned their backs to the history of human conflict in the West and set their eyes squarely on the region's future.²¹

²⁰ For technical history of photography see Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984).

²¹ Sandweiss, *Print the Legend*, 206.

In other words, contemporary artists preserved the western land to indicate and suggest a national identity. Such preservation was not limited to the physicality and location of the land. Above all, this carefully framed depiction encompassed the American perception of progress and movement, nationalism, patriotism, optimism, and it became a symbolic light for the dark and congested eastern coast.

William Kent's philosophy that all nature was a garden-variety heavily influenced Easterners' perception on how to fuse land with patriotism. The landscape garden began with Kent, who during the early-eighteenth century theorized that they, formal or natural, were small models of paradise. He believed that a plot of ground cultivated with ornamental vegetation compensated for what the real world didn't, or couldn't provide.

English aristocracy learned to appreciate elements in landscape gardens first within paintings and eventually on their own land. This taste for nature came from Romantic optimism that creation was good, as opposed to chaotic, selfish and corrupt. Texts about landscape appreciation were immensely popular. Some described specific places and some taught what to appreciate and how to categorize earth's surface as picturesque, beautiful, or sublime. There was landscape poetry and more landscape painting: "Travellers looked at the natural world as though it were a work of art, critiquing composition, color, and lighting."²² For many, the taste for landscape was genteel, but for the Romantics, it seemed to be much stronger. And for Victorians in the United States, Rebecca Solnit suggests that nature became a religion:

The sublime was no longer a passion for violent energies and fearful displays but evidence of the might of God. In the landscape, they mixed their taste for scenery with piety and sought hard for traces of a God who was becoming increasingly hard to find anywhere else. And with this, art, nature, and religion become

²² Solnit, *Savage Dreams*, 255.

interchangeable experiences, and the vocabularies with which they are described overflow and mingle.²³

It is not surprising then that Yosemite was often compared to a cathedral.²⁴ Solnit offers three distinguishing factors that made Yosemite irresistible to the Americans schooled in this landscape tradition:

Its meadows and spreading oak trees bore an extraordinary resemblance to an English landscape park, and Yosemite was considered a great miracle of nature imitating the art of the garden. Then, all around this gentle park were the extraordinary rock faces and waterfalls, elements of the sublime and evidence of the Creator. Finally, the Victorians were preoccupied with geology. ... Geology was a practical science in this era of great mineral discoveries and the mapping of the American West, but it was also a kind of spiritual quest.²⁵

But beyond the American interest of expansion and Manifest Destiny that lured habitation of the West, cultural and philosophical ideologies of landscape were embedded in thought and action, fueling admiration. Watkins' *Cathedral Rock, 2,000 Feet, Yosemite, No. 21*, captures this ideological aura and essence of Manifest Destiny in unprecedented fashion. With his view-finder shifted slightly upward, the extraordinary height of the rock formation suggests a West without boundaries, and the entire formation barely fits in the composition. This picturesque photo offered a brilliant observation and conjured memories of the esteemed but heightened criticism towards painted landscapes.

Seeking the natural atmosphere but with an unusual viewpoint to that of Watkins, Eadweard Muybridge was drawn to water and a straight eye view of the landscape. Rather than looking upward the image of *Tutocanula, Valley of the Yosemite. (The Great Chief) "El Capitan. Reflected in the Merced. No. 11* is at eye level, while the pool of water in the foreground encompasses more than half of the composition to reflect the

²³ Ibid., 256.

²⁴ One of its rock formations is named Cathedral Spires.

²⁵ Solnit, *Savage Dreams*, 257-258.

immensity of the towering formation that has been cropped. He also distinguished his personal style from that of Watkins with sensitivity to the requirements of artistic landscape style and at times, he added clouds from separate negatives to reduce the degree of contrast between foreground and sky.²⁶ Although Muybridge's work tended to offer more daring and dramatic views of the landscape compared to Watkins, both encapsulated the nation's desire to see and experience the promised land of the West.

We would imagine, like these pictures suggest, few visitors enjoyed the scenery and toured the land, and that was true; there were hardly any people and buildings that obstructed the visibility necessary for a sweeping, expansive photograph. It is interesting, to me, that the composition of most photographs that made Yosemite one of the most famous landscapes in the world, contain no people.

Many people immediately identify pictures of this Valley with Ansel Adams, whose career became inseparable from the images he took there. Unlike his predecessors, Adams' photographs did not mirror what viewers would see if they visited Yosemite. While Adams photographed the scenery, his wife's family ran a tourist concession just behind him. Yosemite Valley swarmed with tourists, artifacts, souvenirs, and constructed objects that Adams intentionally excluded. Wilderness was in short supply, but his photographs like *Monolith – The Face of Half Dome* tell another story. He believed the world was still as beautiful as it ever was. The spectacular subject matter harks back to the sublime scenery of nineteenth-century landscape painting by Albert Bierstadt and Frederic Church, as well as photographers such as Carleton E. Watkins and Eadweard Muybridge. This picture suggests the idea of wilderness was very much alive, ingrained

²⁶ For further reading on Muybridge's methodology see Marta Braun, *Eadweard Muybridge* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010).

with American culture and close to civilization. For Adams, the mark of human life and its footprint in the landscape need not be documented.

This romantic and ideological attitude extended into many facets of mid-century painting and literature. Gary Metz, in his essay “The Sense of Place,” suggests that the depiction of sheer wilderness in painting was an American phenomenon:

The extreme, and thereby ideal, topographic presentation of a landscape as the primary subject of a picture, a landscape with no evidence of human habitation, occurs as a collective concern in Western art for the first time in North America c. 1830-1860. The American artists of this period who encountered the interior of a raw continent, many of whom did manage to view European painting at some point in their careers, were faced with a unique problem: how could the European landscape tradition, the model for the perception of scenery, relate to their native American situation?²⁷

Much of the European countryside had been cultivated and groomed for almost 1,500 years, whereas the dense land of America resembled primeval chaos. Colonial painters were the first to make this extraordinary character of the American wilderness visible to an urban population. The country’s first nativist art movement, the Hudson River School is identified by the paintings of Thomas Cole (1801-1848), Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900), and Asher B. Durand (1796-1886) who “suggest the nation’s great promise and the progress of its civilization, and occasionally hint at the perils that accompanied exploitation of the land.”²⁸ These artists favored large canvases with horizontal expansive scenes and large natural formations in nature that embraced a dramatic and grandiose atmosphere. Exaggerated light and clouds often complimented the narrative of the scene, and this resulted in the awesome or sublime by means of a shocking color palette and the exotic nature, which itself was derived from God.

²⁷ Gary Metz, “The Sense of Place” in *The Great West: Real/Ideal*, edited by Sandy Hume et al. (Boulder: Department of Fine Arts, University of Colorado, 1977), 42.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

It didn't take long for Easterners to desire evidence of who, what, and where the West was. The tension between the search for Europe in America and the desire for cultural independence provided the context for westward exploration. Painters and photographers ventured into unknown regions and brought back images of a new unimaginable world. The visual foundation for a composite of a fictionalized West rested in the artist's hand who interpreted the land, her/his individual ability, and personal style.

Progressive Popularity of the West

Photography became an important tool in the 1860s as railroad companies and the government actively utilized images from survey teams to document the unknown land of the West. The purpose of four, government sponsored geological and geographical surveys from 1867-1879 was not to discover uncharted territory but to measure it with the hope to demystify and plot its future settlement.²⁹ Photographers were hired to record both the topography and Native Americans they encountered as aids to determine areas for mineral exploitation and civilian settlements.³⁰ The completion of the Lincoln Highway, the first cross-country highway to California, allured a thriving metropolis, photographers included, to San Francisco during the late-nineteenth – early-twentieth century.³¹ Artists sought to capitalize on popular American panorama painting with themes that reflected the national interest in the westward movement: Mississippi River

²⁹ Emily Ballew Neff, *The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890-1950* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 2006), 14.

³⁰ Weston J. Naef and James N. Wood, *Era of Exploration: The Rise Of Landscape Photography in the American West, 1860-1885* (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery; distributed by Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975).

³¹ San Francisco was the only big city west of St. Louis, Missouri at this time.

travel, exploration, and growth of San Francisco.³² Early documentation tended to gravitate towards the scenery in California and, in particular, Yosemite Valley. Watkins and Muybridge quickly became recognized for establishing this medium to illustrate the grandeur of the western land and emphasize a symbolic idealism of the American dream achieved by landscape painters.³³ The work of both of these photographers exemplified early historical approaches to Western American imagery as it related to the social and physical context of land.

Toward a Modern Sensibility: Pictorialism and Straight Photography

A dramatic growth in the number of photographers (owed to the introduction of dry film and hand cameras) allowed wide dissemination of images during the 1890s. They became viewed as visual records for science, daily events, social conditions, as well as pastime mementos. The interest of photography grew fervently as journals emphasized its craft and amateur friendliness. In an effort to distinguish their own work from the mass of utilitarian photographs, pictorialists advocated that the medium could provide a record while also provoking thought and feeling. Rosenblum states, “Photographs, they held, should be regarded as ‘pictures’ in the same sense as images made entirely by hand; that is, they should be judged for their artistry and ability to evoke feeling rather than for their powers of description.”³⁴

³² In addition to these photographers, there was likewise a group of artists who pursued both photography and painting: either producing unrelated panoramic paintings and photographs or working first as panorama painters before pursuing a photographic career.

³³ Though these photographers became well-esteemed for the scenes they captured, the survey photographs were never meant to stand as independent works of art. Martha A. Sandweiss, in *Print the Legend* (p.184) states that most of the images were issued with printed texts, illustrating stories about America’s western landscape and future.

³⁴ Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography*, 296-297.

Pictorialism was an international style that dominated the first two decades of the twentieth-century. Individuality of style expressed through a unique print was key to serve the artistic needs of the photographer and to satisfy collectors who desired singular artifacts. Alteration to the print was done through various methods: controlling tonalities, introducing highlights, obscuring or removing details that seemed too descriptive. Many of these effects were created by using stumps, fingers, brushes, and etching tools to alter the forms in the soft gum, oil, and pigment before they dried.³⁵ Its purpose was to present objects with haze and gauze to intentionally blur the image for a soft focus effect. Similarly, dramatic contrasts of shadows and highlights enhanced a feeling of nostalgia. All of these qualities are visible in *The Bubble* by Anne W. Brigman in 1907.³⁶ In the early 1940s, modernist photographers such as Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and Frederick Sommer, started to apply clear aesthetic aims uniformly to varied subject matters as pictorialism's popularity declined. Ansel Adams' early photographs of Yosemite were greatly influenced by this Impressionistic aim and emphasized elements such as energy, noise, foam, and crashing water. His pictures expressed the magnificence of nature and personified the then-dominant philosophy of fine art photography.

West coast artists championed the use of natural environments, land formations, and clarity of detail resulting in extremely descriptive images. Known as straight photography, pictures no longer imitated fine art painting and photography developed as its own body of art. Photographers sought a realistic depiction that suggested clarity without manipulation on the paper. They worked with large-format view cameras and

³⁵ Ibid., 298.

³⁶ Brigman's photographs are also distinctly symbolist in which subject matter is evoked rather than understood. Here, a nude woman gently reaching for a bubble is reminiscent of a nymph born from water inside a dreamy landscape.

were interested in arranging elements of the landscape to create compelling, crowded compositions within a frame that presented a complex space, receding and rising at the same time. Edward Weston's approach is defined by this movement and identified by careful framing of the image to fill the composition but concentrating attention on shape, light, and surface, exemplified in *Artichoke, halved*. His pictures conjured intellectual and spiritual contemplation quite different from pictorialism.³⁷ It was a novel modern concept at the time, a radical approach from pictorialism's intentional manipulation as a means of "creating" an image rather than simply recording it.³⁸ Landscape and its scenery was now meaningful art.

Ansel Adams enjoyed a fame and influence unprecedented in the field of photography. He published three photographic portfolios during the 1970s, several books, and developed a retrospective exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. He was considered one of the artists most responsible for elevating the status of photography to fine art; however, at the same time art critic Robert Hughes noted that the world Adams' photographs tell us about is exceedingly remote from ordinary experience.³⁹ By 1979, pristine wilderness in the Western United States was almost nonexistent. His photos for

³⁷ David Acton, *Photography at the Worcester Art Museum: Keeping Shadows* (Worcester, MA: Snoeck Publishers, 2004), 145.

³⁸ While it is difficult to provide a standard definition of pictorialism, it originated as a response to claims that photography was nothing more than a simple, mechanic record of reality, and it eventually transformed at the turn of the century into an international movement to advance the status of all photography as a true art form. Images of this aesthetic movement are usually identified by having one or more of the following qualities: an exaggerated loss of focus, printed in one or more colors other than black-and-white, and an additive texture to heighten manipulation.

³⁹ In addition to Ansel Adams' pictures, a less popular but influential champion of American creative photography at the turn of the century was Alfred Stieglitz. In 1902, Stieglitz mounted a landmark exhibition of American pictorialist photography and eventually brought the art of European avant-garde to America to his gallery "291" years before the Armory Show of 1913. While not unique, his efforts to improve the way photographs were presented at exhibitions and reproduced in periodicals were notably effective in the campaign for the recognition of the photograph as an art object, and his openness to new sensibilities enabled him to introduce Americans to European modernism and to the avant-garde styles. Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography*, 336.

some, unintentionally generated despair and alienation and this void, along with his close association and support of the Sierra Club, encouraged lobbyists for preservationist causes. The reality in the West was telltale signs of human intervention everywhere: paved roads, outhouses, souvenir shops and campgrounds. Yet the popularity of Adams' imagery suggested the *idea* of wilderness was still very much alive and deeply ingrained within American culture. Americans wanted the wilderness to be alive, and the photographs helped them engage in this delusion.

New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape

At the same time that Adams' photography reached mass appeal, a group of younger photographers was moving beyond the romantic vision of an ideal landscape toward one more suited to capturing the lived landscape. Parking lots with trees and foliage, such as Robert Adams' *Fort Collins, Colorado* were intentionally placed within the frame of the picture, to depict what was actually present: an environment resulting from a human-altered landscape. The "nature" that most Americans experienced in the mid and late 1900s became populated with strip malls, telephone wires, office parks, mobile homes and suburban housing developments.⁴⁰ Whereas Ansel Adams deliberately chose to exclude evidence of modernity far removed from everyday experience, Robert Adams reconnected people and the landscape. In *Jefferson County, Colorado* the human footprint is clearly present to fill this void. Though Robert Adams' imagery doesn't hark directly back to the sublime scenery of early-century painting, it certainly suggests that nature prevails and will always reassert itself.

⁴⁰ Although rare, when Ansel Adams did photograph human settlement he did so from a distance such that it suggested abstraction.

In a similar fashion, Lewis Baltz's *Prospector Park, Subdivision Phase III, Lot 55, looking West* references both humanity and the landscape. A subdivision development nestled in the valley of Utah's Wasatch Mountains exposes American urbanization. Traces of its construction are evident in the strewn materials across the soon-to-be green manicured lawns. Both Robert Adams and Baltz steered away from arousing sentiments of nostalgia or an escape into the past; instead, their work references reality and initiates dialogue on what the future holds. They avoid the beautiful and dramatic and instead utilize the banal and ugly.

In 1975, examples of this new approach to landscape were in the seminal exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*, at the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film in Rochester, New York.⁴¹ Nature and industry appeared to be intertwined in photographs that recorded the commonplace and often less picturesque elements of nature in modern America. These images prevented an escape into the past instead of pleasant remembrances. Viewers were forced to reminisce in the present and think about the future.

The revelation presented in *New Topographics* may seem miniscule because we may have become desensitized. It's likely we are accustomed to snapshots that often include footprints of human existence. The conceptual transition from the holy glories of Yosemite to a cement parking lot nestled in a mountainous valley is commanding. Yet, at the same time, this progression doesn't seem unnatural. If the desire to photograph nature and place remained, what was the alternative? The work featured in *New Topographics*

⁴¹ Ten artists, each pursuing individual art projects and careers, were featured in *New Topographics*: Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, and Henry Wessel, Jr.

presented a conceptual ideology that continues to interest contemporary artists and culture with respect to the western landscape and photography. Consideration of the impact of human construction on the land continues today. In 1975, the curator and audience alike recognized the seemingly easy connection of life and art, a definite cultural significance that was visually and mentally palpable.

In his book *The Photographer's Eye* (1966), photographer and curator John Szarkowski established a set of five modernist criteria unique to photography, transforming previously held notions. He distinguished these phenomena: The Thing itself, The Detail, The Frame, Time, and Vantage Point – and this list is not meant to be exhaustive.⁴² He also differentiated a document from a documentary style. A police snapshot of a murder scene is a literal document; there is an absolute use, whereas the art can be more ambiguous. An artwork may not necessarily document but has the potential to adopt that style. The *New Topographics* photos also exclude any traces of personal judgment or opinion, thus fostering a sense of ambiguity. What does the image present about the world? What is the artist's relationship to this office building?

Another instrumental writer, J.B. Jackson, defined cultural landscape studies. Founder of the journal *Landscape* in 1951, he sought to encompass all facets of the subject and insisted on its relevance for everyone regardless of their identity:

Wherever we go, whatever the nature of our work, we adorn the face of the earth with a living design which changes and is eventually replaced by that of a future generation. How can one tire of looking at this variety, or of marveling at the forces within man and nature that brought it about?⁴³

⁴² Hilde Van Gelder and Helen Westgeest, *Photography Theory in Historical Perspective: Case Studies from Contemporary Art* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 29.

⁴³ J.B. Jackson "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," *Landscape*, no. 1 (Spring 1951): 1.

He urged his readers to stake out previously ignored kinds of landscapes, to look at their current surroundings more closely, recognize its utility and find appeal in everyday features such as motels, billboards and gas stations. He argued that it was too easy to dismiss them as beneath scholarly notice. To examine the cultural landscape is to gain a deeper knowledge of culture and history. In retrospect, the exhibit might appear to capture the essence of environmentalism that was a seemingly incessant topic during the 1960s and 1970s, but it was not read at the time as representative of conservation aims or viability. Among the participants in *New Topographics*, Adams was arguably the closest in capturing concerns and contradictions associated with environmentalism, but even his photos present a sense of acceptance of the situation.

Though many other landscape traditions would be born after the 1930s, a shift would take place during the 1960s and onward. It is with this trajectory that the contemporary photographers discussed in Chapter Two are deeply aware of the lineage of the art historic landscape and use the past to both develop and reinterpret these traditional genres of landscape depiction, emerging with a new take on an enduring tradition.

Chapter 3

LANDSCAPE THEORY AND CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES OF WESTERN AMERICAN LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY

“We go forth all to seek America. And in the seeking we create her. In the quality of our search shall be the nature of the America that we create.” Waldo Frank⁴⁴

In this chapter I examine how society’s value and interpretation of western landscape as nature, habitat and problem has evolved, specifically as an altered or manipulated entity. Setting the foundation for this exploration is an overview of lasting influences of *New Topographics*. Drawing from the 2010 text, *Reframing the New Topographics*, I situate a historical lineage in today’s photography while also expanding conceptually upon obvious contemporaneous tenets. To provide a contextual grounding for the select artists whose work concern a manipulative aesthetic intrinsic of the twenty-first century, an expansive spectrum of western land photographers are introduced. Unlike the artists featured in *New Topographics*, these artists present a deliberate alteration to their photographs. The nineteenth-century poet Gerard Manley Hopkins coined the term “Inscape” in reference to the worlds of interior and personal experience that are generated by the soul’s interaction with the worlds of exterior and natural form.⁴⁵ The process of viewing and interpreting a photograph is just as paramount to this thesis as is the dependency of the subject matter depicted and artists’ intent.

Kim Keever’s large-scale photographs are created by first constructing miniature topographies in a fish tank. The fictitious environments are then colored with lights and

⁴⁴ Waldo Frank, *Our America* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919), 10.

⁴⁵ Gary Metz, “The Landscape as an Image” in *The Great West: Real/Ideal*, edited by Sandy Hume et al. (Boulder: Department of Fine Arts, University of Colorado, 1977), 96.

pigment, producing ephemeral atmospheres that he captures with his camera. Despite its strong reference to America's history of landscape painting (i.e., the Hudson River School and Luminism) *River Keeper* is quite imaginary.⁴⁶ This chapter will also explore how landscape reflects incongruity, pollution, and sprawl, as well as manifestations of American interpretations of individualism, power, expansion, and progress. It will finally transition into a larger conversation on how landscape represents a translation of philosophy into tangible features.

Toward a Conceptual Framework

By drawing attention to the contemporary landscape, the *New Topographics* exhibition broke substantially from the outlook of Ansel Adams that had dominated landscape practice. Where Adams had defined landscape as separate from humanity, to these younger photographers nature and humanity were interwoven; they contrasted prevailing conceptions of contemporary American life with disjunctions of modern urban life. Like Paul Strand's 1915 photographs of New York City, Walker Evans's *American Photographs* (1915), and Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1959), *New Topographics* counter-pointed prevailing beliefs by rejecting the dominant wilderness-defined landscape aesthetic. John Rohrbach, co-editor of *Reframing the New Topographics*, reexamined the exhibition in the context of its times, as he believed the photographers were strongly influenced by the social, political, and cultural currents of the 1960s and early 1970s. They had discarded uplifting notions and celebration within the photographs to favor reflection and examination of societal disjunctions. The artists recognized that

⁴⁶ "Kim Keever," on David B. Smith Gallery's official website, accessed January 2, 2013, <http://www.davidbsmithgallery.com/exhibit/show/kim-keever>.

broad economic shifts were changing the face of the land and they were interested in drawing visual attention to the bland, repetitive appearance of the resulting land. He elaborates further:

The exhibition visually summarized the beginnings of America's shift from an urban-industrial culture to a service-oriented economy defined by suburban warehouses and standardized tract house neighborhoods spreading out, especially across the West. This new America was marked by repetition and isolation, a place increasingly dominated by quickly constructed buildings and a culture defined more by corporate commerce than community, where people lived with a modicum of comfort but in an atmosphere of vacant alienation. This vision was so convincing that it instantly reshaped landscape photography with its celebration of directness, emotional remove, and attentiveness to humanity's shaping of the land. Its perspective was so powerful that it still dominates landscape photography practice today.⁴⁷

This is where one can see the influence of conceptual art in photography. For many artists of the 1960s, photography remained too comfortably rooted in modernism – it kept a distance from the intellectual drama of avant-gardism. In the 1960s conceptual art provided new opportunities to address problems with documentary photography.⁴⁸

Conceptual photographers referenced previous subject matter, such as nature, and drew on existing imagery as source material to use the medium in a critical manner. In this line of thought, *New Topographics* photographers attempted to produce what William Jenkins called an “objective” style of imagery, but as a tool for the infancy of exploring how to critique with a lens. In fact, there have been a variety of legacies in the development of landscape representation since 1975.

⁴⁷ Influential currents included, but were not limited to, the following: upheavals of the civil rights movement, the women's right movement, American involvement in Vietnam, and more broadly, the breakdown of Americans' trust in authority (Watergate and the subsequent impeachment of President Richard Nixon). Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach, *Reframing the New Topographics* (Chicago: The Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2010), xiv.

⁴⁸ Some methods included appropriation of photography (Barbara Kruger, Andy Warhol), and using photography to document events and happenings.

Critic Leo Steinberg noted that the debate during the 1970s art scene was between literalness and illusion – when the maker’s point of view drops out, meaning becomes open-ended. He suggested the debate was really about artists’ embrace of accurate depiction and the inherent immediacy of ascertaining what was captured. Some historians maintain the view that the *New Topographics* works were detached and without emotion while others argue that they reflect overt moral stances and the true subject was society. The photographs could also be read as artifacts of contemporary commercial culture that served as symbols of pollution or as representations of the political power of affluence.

Today, photographers approach the West through the eyes of a seasoned artist and also a frequent visitor or active tourist. Many continue to engage concerns of population explosion, pollution, water shortage and military culture. Their likeness is overly repetitious, predictable, void of extraordinary and peculiar traits. Avoiding clichés seems to be difficult and it leaves one feeling that landscape photography could be stuck in a rut. A unique vision bestowed upon the western land with an identity and history, complex as that of any other nation, is hard to find. But it can be found.

As this chapter illustrates, the ideological underpinnings and cultural contexts of the *New Topographics* photographs remain influential, provocative, and undeniably charged. The landscapes audiences encountered in *New Topographics* were familiar: the altered environment had become everyday experiences for the average, late-twentieth century American. Yet these images were paradoxically strange because of the speed and pervasiveness of this land modification. Today, the whole new generation of artists represented in this chapter continue to merge together magnificent vistas, a concentration of a scarred and altered earth, and images that invoke topics of sustainability,

environmentalism, ecosystems and politics. Power is embedded in landscape because land is never un-ideological and not before long, even natural. Cicero called it “second nature” nature transformed by the human hand. Some believe that in our age, second nature is all there is.

In this thesis I argue that there is yet another layer, a third nature, which artists are transcending to via creative manipulation. The work by these established and emerging artists serves as an extension of an art-historical lineage, but it also documents the current ecological and sociological crisis and how, as a culture, we are dealing with the state of our environment. I will highlight *New Topographics*’ ongoing influence on Western American landscape photography rather than solely focusing on the elasticity of our relationship to the past; and its effect on manipulation strategies that engage the changed terrain of postmodern culture. I will also unravel the artists’ latent, utopic tendencies.

Contemporary Trends: The Altered Landscape in Western American Landscape Photography

My research for this thesis presented a myriad of photographers who not only push the boundaries of landscape photography but whose work addressed and engaged a range of issues related to western land use and the changing landscape. The scope of this work is large and very rich, a testament to how relevant the West remains in both discourse and experience. The artists I selected are by no means an exhaustive list of contemporary Western American landscape photographers, nor do these artists solely engage this subject matter. These techniques, visual styles, subjects, and ideological positions of these wide ranging artists, help contextualize the larger impact and exploration of the western landscape in photography.

Together, these artists take various approaches to offer a panoramic sweep of contentious social and political debates that have shaped contemporary discourse on the changing environment. Today's photographers frame physical impressions of our times just as the *New Topographics* photographers made works that framed structures such as industries and suburban developments. Mark Ruwedel's images of railroad cuts, for example, made visible the immense movement of earth needed to construct transportation systems in the late nineteenth-century. Others scrutinized scars left by large-scale industries that profited from earth's natural resources: Emmet Gowin's overhead views of pivot agriculture and Frank Gohlke's and Eirik Johnson's deforested and heavily logged mountainsides, and aerial photographs of mining-industry exploits taken by Edward Burtynsky, William Lesch, David Maisel, and Michael Light. Matthew Moore negotiated his family's farming history with inevitable change as the farm's fate becomes urbanized. The altered terrains they documented – often from an aerial view – are symbolic of a landscape that has been completely transformed by the world's consumptive needs and habits in just under fifty years.

Different types of traces can be read as a result of military occupation and the nuclear testing that has occurred on western land. Photographers Terry Evans, Paul Shambroom, and Trevor Paglen reveal that locations deemed most appropriate for military bombing ranges and minefields are often located in the most fragile natural settings. The seemingly empty deserts of the American West were first identified by the United States Department of Energy as ideal sites for highly classified research that included aboveground and belowground detonations of nuclear devices in the 1940s. Many photographers, including Michael Light, Sharon Stewart, and Yang Yongliang,

have undertaken projects that investigate the visual spectacle of atmospheric testing and the environmental politics of nuclear experimentation. Peter Goin was one of the few artists to gain access to classified nuclear sites for the purpose of making photographs. Patrick Nagatani also spent many years making photographs that addressed nuclear testing, particularly in his state of New Mexico.

Some artists have sought to depict alterations that tell narratives about human interaction with places and the deep connections cultures have to their environments, similar to twentieth-century land artists who developed their own land art of their time in the 1960s and 1970s. Robert Smithson and James Turrell, for example, are known for excavating and moving tons of earth to create earthwork sculptures – now icons of the twentieth-century. A few decades later, Andy Goldsworthy made sculptures on the land from objects found in nature and photographed their ephemeral presence. Arno Rafael Minkinen photographs parts of the human body, at a close range, as it interacts with land that appears to be miniature and at the mercy of the human. Scott Baxter’s recent project, “100 Years 100 Ranchers,” portrays families that have been in the business since 1912 or earlier to record an exploration of Arizona’s ranching history. Judy Dater and Laura Aguilar photograph their nude self-portraits in the desert, positioned to interact with the physical land.

Access to water has defined the ways in which humans have developed societies and their environments. Photographers continue to engage in dialogues and debates that surround water issues by making images that show irrigation and distribution systems and the catastrophes to which they sometimes lead. Robert Dawson, who cofounded a group called Water in the West in the early 1990s, makes works that reveal the contradictions

inherent to water use in the desert. Mark Klett, Joan Myers, Kim Stringfellow, and Pipo Nguyen-duy create images that reveal devastating aftereffects of poorly planned water projects and unexpected floods. The ruined landscapes these artists depict remind us that mass distribution of water, and the luxury of water consumption, comes at a high price to natural environments.

Transportation and telecommunication needs in the West have also altered landscapes. The car and monumental concrete freeway overpasses have been the subject of photography for artists such as Catherine Opie, Rebecca Norris Webb, John Humble, Jeff Brouws, and Lee Friedlander. Artists became drawn to the constructed experiences of travel and the built environments as increased traffic and tourism led to changes in roadside attractions and architecture. Ted Orland and Terry Falke have undertaken surveys of curious buildings and structures seen when traveling by car. One of these roadside monuments, located just off California's Interstate 5, is a larger-than-life pile of discarded rubber automobile tires that has been photographed by Burtynsky. Robert Voit frames mobile phone masts in the guise of artificial palm trees and cacti erected in real space. To visually compensate for the dangers of electro-smog, these masts are given costumes that simulate nature to appear as idealized forms of vegetation in the landscape. Emily Shur has photographed these as well; but instead of a zoom-in view, hers are hidden in panoramic views of the landscape to become embedded in our land.

Drawing from all of these notions are those whose work shows remains of a one time settled West: the new old West. Out in the West are signs of familiar habitation scattered across the landscape: unkempt, run-down and dusty, blending into the desert waste. Michael P. Berman, David Emitt Adams, J. Bennett Fitts, and Jay Dusard

photograph the curious presence of such objects. Deserted, underground, dry pools with graffiti are nestled by displaced palm trees. Isolated motels and their concrete pools-turned to a lush green grass are no longer the desired locations for a get-away. Romantic views of the past no longer determine the spotlight of western history, but instead bygone remnants of domestic existence and its environment are the focus.

Photographers show us what they see, knowing that there may be several divergent “truths” in each image. At the same time, they can be contemporary agents of, and/or witnesses to, a still thriving sense of Manifest Destiny, currently driven by patriotism, consumerism, and a desire of transportation to another mythical West not yet depicted. This chapter will first present a variety of theories that shape critical analysis of landscape and will be drawn upon in the context of the selected contemporary photographs. The artists and the respective work discussed in the remainder of this chapter have been selected based on certain criteria, namely that of manipulation. While its definition can be broad and ambiguous, the work will be explored in two categories: (1) fictitious redesign of a western landscape through digital or handmade models, and (2) staging of the land through various channels such as intentional adjustment of photographic mechanics (i.e., dramatic lighting of the subject and transportation of place). Both highly manipulated avenues of landscape perpetuate an ever-present mythological relation and understanding of the western land. Yet they are aesthetically and conceptually stylized as a product of the twenty-first century.

Fictitious redesign of landscape has an inventive yet problematic possibility of presenting itself like an authentic form one could encounter in the desert. Many of Ansel Adams’ photographic approaches are mimicked in Joan Fontcuberta’s daring black and

white landscapes. Emphasis is placed on a transparent quality of air, crisp detail, and towering height of cliffs. Unlike the Yosemite photographer, Fontcuberta did not visit the non-existent foreboding land mass to create an image. Rather, his computer-generated pictures are created from software that produces three-dimensional images based on visual data he provides it that often comes from landforms in famous paintings and pictures. Kim Keever and Keith Stanton fabricate everyday, ordinary materials to miniaturize monumental nature and our culture. Similar to early American landscape painters Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, the images of Keever and Stanton are imbued with a sense of mystery while they also closely imitate a natural scene; they are fantastically realistic. These artists are interested in exploring how humans continue to define, understand, and see western land rather than the presentation of authentic images: as a fleeting experience, no longer “true wilderness,” or non-existent.

On the contrary, I argue that the manipulation the following artists use incorporates elements of the physical western land. Artists’ duo Andrea Robbins and Max Becher document people, events and locations. They offer critical reflections on geographical and cultural “transportation” of things not in their “original” location, such as the Old Tucson Studios (once an outdoor film set and now a theme park) or the New York New York Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada. In their work, the western landscape is often seen in the background, behind the cultural adaptation of what society assumes and wants to belong in the West. Las Vegas is also the subject of Olivo Barbieri’s work. Even though his compositions appear to be filled with miniature stills they are actual landscapes, simulated by shallow depth of field through a tilt-shift lens. Unlike Robbins and Becher, Barbieri’s pictures resemble models rather than the actual

landscape or city. Amelia Bauer and Jim Sanborn focus strictly on the isolated desert to theatrically illuminate mountainous forms during twilight when the silent land becomes the sole subject, canvas, and actor for the photographer. The dramatic lighting of these photographs lends to expectations of a coming act – a speech, applause, or even the exciting possibility of the land itself performing for the camera.

Landscape

The term *landscape*, dates back to its early European definitions and refers to a picture of the land, both in composition and in symbolism. The act of framing land within an image is and always has been controlling, whatever the medium; landscape images highlight a particular area or point of view. The camera viewfinder is moved to find the desired view of the photographer while the elements compose themselves into landscapes. But as Ginger Strand poetically asks: “What of the moment when it’s (the camera) traveling? And what if you take it away? Is what’s outside the viewfinder incipient landscape, waiting to be revealed by art, like Michelangelo’s figures lying dormant in their marble blocks?”⁴⁹ The photograph has bounced back and forth between referencing a real place and a representation of it, and the camera has been a central player in this discourse since an image was first captured in 1839. This inherent fluctuation is what the following artists emphasize and why photography is the ideal medium for their conceptualization.

Definitions of landscape have evolved throughout time to parallel dominions of cultural ideologies, fads and timely approaches to how land is treated and appreciated. Today we typically use the word to define a genre, such as landscape photography. But

⁴⁹ Ginger Strand, “At the Limits,” in Markonish, *Badlands*, 83.

we also use it while driving through it on the freeway – *What an amazing landscape!* – to refer to a specific piece of the world we see. We use it to describe news – *The landscape of politics has changed* – to mean a conceptual space. Both constrict the immense volume or expanse of landscape, and sadly, it always comes to an end.

But this constitutes only part of how we understand and use the word on a daily basis. In the twenty-first century the other half is mostly subliminal and unconscious; that is our historical and prevalent attachment for land. And although the notion of place has existed since the beginning of mankind at different scales, deep respect for land has always been present. Philosopher and geographer Yi-Fu Tuan predicates that this attachment was just as profound for hunter-gatherers, sedentary farmers, as it is for city-dwellers: “The city or land is viewed as mother, and it nourishes; place is an archive of fond memories and splendid achievements that inspire the present; place is permanent and hence reassuring to man, who sees frailty in himself and chance and flux everywhere.”⁵⁰

Contemporary society has its nomads, closely associated with living “closer” to land, such as hoboes and migrant workers. However to expand its definition, there are middle class and affluent “nomads” who Tuan would attest have just as strong an attachment to their “homeland”: Wall Street brokers, politicians, factory workers and dog walkers are just a few. For these folk “sentiment for nature, inhabited only by spirits, is...weaker. A people may, however, become strongly attached to a natural feature because more than one tie yoke them to it.”⁵¹ It is here that we can understand America’s

⁵⁰ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 154.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 158.

continued zeal and appetite for Western images, whether they are fabricated, real or somewhere in between.

Place and Space

These words are used interchangeably today without acknowledgment or understanding of their individual nuances. Space is what we live in at large. Tuan states that place is security while space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other.⁵² Enclosed and humanized space is place. When space feels thoroughly familiar to us, containing memory, it becomes place. A few intimate sites can mean more to someone than all the glorious panoramas that exist. In intimacy there is a sense of comfort. A distinct comparison allows for an accurate analysis of spatial composition in the following photographs. It can also benefit our approach in the transaction of experiencing nature in person. Vague nouns have a purpose, but landscape is personal, and more often than not, mistakenly interpreted in a panoptic fashion.

A common understanding of what creates a sense of place derives from just such composed landscapes: from “our own response to features which are *already* there – either a beautiful natural setting or well designed architecture.”⁵³ Audrey Goodman believes that Anglos have made a habit of creating a sense of Southwestern places in the beginning of the twenty-first century, and these have become firmly established through repetitive viewing of scenes already known to be there. She asserts the dominant “Anglo iconography of the Southwest will probably continue to resist any challenge to the

⁵² Tuan, *Space and Place*, 3.

⁵³ John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 151.

familiar categories of desert wilderness, Indians, and vanishing Indians.”⁵⁴ Jackson proposes “that a sense of place is something that we ourselves create in the course of time. It is the result of habit or custom.”⁵⁵ He explains “a sense of place” not so much in terms of the place itself but rather the guardian divinity of that place. Though we have replaced the belief in divinity with “a certain indefinable sense of well-being,” it can still retain the “original notion of ritual, of repeated celebration or reverence.”⁵⁶ A location that implies intimacy is place. It can be a lived-in landscape, or it can be home. In turn, home can be a homestead, neighborhood, hometown, or motherland.

Cultural Commentary on Land Depiction

To understand the intersection between cameras and land depiction, one must begin with an approach to defining landscape: is it human-made or natural? Photographers of the *New Topographics* era focused on the human-made landscape. They utilized the writings of the eminent founder of landscape studies, J.B. Jackson, to foster the notion that landscapes are never natural: “since the beginning of history,” Jackson observed, “humanity has modified and scarred the environment to convey some message.”⁵⁷ He believed all land on Earth had been altered by human hands – by physical means and political acts. Photographers also turned for guidance to geographer D.W. Meinig, who proposed all landscapes were “related to, but not identical with, nature.” Precisely, they are “symbolic, expressive of cultural values, social behavior,” and reveal

⁵⁴ Audrey Goodman, *Translating Southwest Landscapes: The Making of an Anglo Literary Region* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 100.

⁵⁵ Jackson, *A Sense of Place*, 151.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁵⁷ Jackson, *A Sense of Place*, vii.

actions on one place over time to represent accumulations rather than pure entities.⁵⁸ Most landscape photographers carry this view one step further as a cultural commentary on the human-made nature of landscape.

In 1973, two years before the *New Topographics* exhibition, French Semiotician Louis Marin published *Utopique: Jeux d'espaces* to present a broad theoretical umbrella based on signs and images in ordinary environments and everyday life, including land use to view the contradictions of the utopian imagination.⁵⁹ In other words, a deconstruction of utopia's conventional idealism occurs, in order for everyday scenes to reveal their utopian impulses and destiny. This unfolding occurs in the same familiar spaces covered by *New Topographics*: industrial parks, commercial strips, housing developments, freeways, etc. Marin stressed that imaginary spaces of utopia would mimic the word play of "utopia" itself. Always the "eu-topia," or good place, coexists with the "u-topia" of nowhere, no time. Similarly, these landscapes reflect deep-seated myths of American landscape. In the following contemporary photographs, the significance of imaginary spaces cannot be overstated; it is this type of space that is created by the artists to be presented for and engaged by viewers.

Art has always been a response both to its environment and to the issues central to its times, and this has just as often led to political pressures exerted against this art. As such, artists are activists who seek to create critical awareness in their viewers to promote change. While today's artists continue to document the passing of time and humanity's imprint on the land with picturesque shots of nature, my research lies in images that avoid pictorial clichés often associated in these categories such as the following items: gas

⁵⁸ D.W. Meinig, *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 2-4.

⁵⁹ Louis Marin, *Utopiques: Jeux d'espaces* (Paris: Minuit, 1973).

stations, store fronts, motels, golf courses or sunsets. Neon signs and graffiti are also not included. This visual territory has been richly described by a variety of artists including Walker Evans and Lee Friedlander.

Joel Sternfeld is an excellent example of an artist well established in the historical precedents of early twentieth-century pictures who explored conceptual notions. Like his predecessors Evans and Friedlander, he found beauty in atypical places. Rather than photographing extraordinary natural wonders such as geysers, towering peaks, or vast salt lakes favored by many photographers, he took images of inhabited, “ordinary” places and aspects of life. He asked his audiences to pay attention to scenes and details habitually unnoticed. His work is often characterized as careful documentation of regional characteristics that simultaneously reveal the increasingly homogenized American life by the media, nationally distributed products and services, and the importation of whole environments. Amusement parks provided ocean-size waves while green lawns decorated the arid desert, courtesy of water diverted from hundreds of miles away. He also documented updated versions of traditional rituals: bikers traveling in convoys, like wagon trains; modern methods of collecting maple syrup; and beauty contests held around pools of singles bars. The one theme Sternfeld returned to during his career was the suburban home. It symbolized a basic human need as well as an idealism. These themes are manifest in Sternfeld’s *American Prospects*, which suggest an overall optimism potentially found in a home. In many ways these images present to us a specific moment in history when progress lost its sense of inevitability. They portray women and men seeking to accommodate their primal needs to the imperatives of technological society.

Between 1870 and 1940s photography objectified natural sites and native peoples to represent the Southwest as both a qualitative space for consumption and an abstract regional ideal. As western photography offered native places as counter-spaces or sites for leisurely Anglo contemplation, it also introduced habits of looking at and consuming landscape. In addition to considering the photograph's dual ability to show both reality and its representation, the history of photography asks us to consider the relations among consumption, reproduction, and contemporary experience. It also challenges us to think about how images have become a primary language for the private and public means of mediating the difficulty of new places and cultures. Jackson suggests the late nineteenth-century school of photography was a "timeless photography that flourished at a period when all of New Mexico was described by outsiders, even admiringly, in terms of a particular notion of time."⁶⁰ The state became a promised land as colonists settled within the Rio Grande Valley and the mountains containing it. Life was pleasing: mild climate, abundance of water, fertile soil, and forests. Given the degree of repetition within conventional categories of western images, can a place-centered photography such as the settlement of New Mexico produced for nonnative viewers work only through irony? Rather than deciphering these categories as displays of aura, luring as advertisement or propaganda might, Jackson prefers to interpret the contemporary iconography in western images.

Twentieth and twenty-first centuries western photographs depicted few humans and instead revealed an abundance of abandoned buildings and artifacts. An image like Michael Berman's *Pool and Palms* reveals desertion that in Jackson's terms is "less a

⁶⁰ Jackson, *A Sense of Place*, 18.

reflection of reality than a way of expressing a nostalgic version of history: a desperate, last-minute recording of old and once cherished values, the New Mexico chapter in that once popular chronicling of ‘vanishing America,’ the old America of small farms and villages and small hillside fields.”⁶¹ With all the people gone, the emptiness of the modern West may have a renewed significance: it reveals social relations existed only among Anglo photographers and viewers and provides evidence of the familiar Western crime of a place sold as an idea. The still landscapes of Fontcuberta, full of the aura of western space, epitomize another invented tradition of perpetuating a modernist mirage of purity.

Joan Fontcuberta

Joan Fontcuberta once said: “Look out – it’s photography, so it’s probably false...photography’s the truest thing there is: the pure imprint of reality.”⁶² And it has been this medium that has guided his art making practice in a forward-thinking and critical fashion. Fontcuberta continues the tradition of Spanish surrealism to create elaborate photographic hoaxes that challenge and provoke to force the viewer to re-examine the relationship between photography and reality. The only reliable information a photograph can tell us, Fontcuberta believes, is that it is just that – a photograph. His images present pictures that delight, perplex and amaze to make viewers uncomfortable with commonly held perceptions of photography and its supposed ability to communicate an ‘objective’ vision of the reality around us. He is interested both in questioning the nature of photography and in exploring our faith in the powers of a technology that has attempted to substitute itself for direct experience of the real world.

⁶¹ Ibid., 23.

⁶² Christian Caujolle, *Joan Fontcuberta 55* (New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2001), 3.

Photography is the visual medium of the modern world. It pervades our lives and shapes our perceptions as a means of recording and as an art form. A photograph is unique in that for it to exist, something ‘real’, a ‘thing’ (which could be no more than a shadow) that once had material reality in space, must have previously existed. The assumption that photography bears witness to the real world and proves its material existence is true in this sense. Similarly, because it is usually considered mechanical, photography is believed to be truly objective, but with the advancement of computer software programs such as Photoshop, this belief has a strong opponent. This doubt of authentic imagery calls to mind false representation of models’ physiques, exaggerated proportions or contortions for shock value and even billboard dentistry ads depicting before and after photos of miraculous teeth whitening, straightening, and infection-free gums. Strange that we don’t tend to question the authenticity of photographed landscape.

In the mid-1990s Fontcuberta took part in an artists’ residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts, located in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. It was here that he began to question the unity of nature:

The majesty of forests, lakes, glaciers, and mountains, under clean skies with dramatic clouds, induces a special state of mind that undoubtedly promotes – as Walden did for Thoreau – both spiritual centeredness and creative inspiration. But, paradoxically, for people like me, coming from an urban environment of crowds, noise, and exhaust fumes, all that peace and purity seemed less like a nature reserve than like an artificial set, with all the clichés you might expect to find in calendar illustrations. A nature so perfect could not be true. Or, at any rate, it was a truth that the contemporary world no longer deserves.⁶³

Poignantly, while Fontcuberta experienced the virgin nature reserve in Banff firsthand, he also discovered a 3-D landscape-simulation program called VistaPro that used math and a

⁶³ Joan Fontcuberta, “Landscapes of Landscapes, or Art as Map,” in *Joan Fontcuberta: Landscapes Without Memory*, Geoffrey Batchen, Lesley Martin and Joan Fontcuberta (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2005), 4.

user-definable set of values to accurately re-create real world landscape in vivid detail. It does this by interpreting Digital Elevation Model (DEM) files made available by the U.S. Geological Survey. Since the copyright of this program by John Hinkley in 1987, others that are similar have evolved: Genesis, Leveller and Vue d'Espirit. Among these, Terragen, was the program Fontcuberta preferred for its ease of handling and high-quality results.⁶⁴ It also was the channel through which his project "Orogenesis" was created. Natural nature became transmuted, symbolically, into artificial nature to also threaten the iconic status of the photograph as a literal transcription of reality.

Dislocation of the Real

Orogenesis, in the field of physical geography, refers to the process of mountain formation, especially by a folding and faulting of the earth's crust. However, in Fontcuberta's project, the dislocation of the real environment is that of codes of representation rather than that of Mother Nature. In the simplest of terms, Terragen interprets maps: the user inputs codified abstractions that provide cartographic information such as contour curves and topographical data. Fontcuberta shares the following about his practice:

My strategy in "Orogenesis" has consisted of "cheating" the expectations of the program by forcing it to interpret images that are not maps, but other landscapes. As these programs are of course specialized (even stupidly so) – they have a limited vocabulary that allows them to generate only the forms of valleys, lakes, or clouds – any input (the source image that serves as a "map") will be transformed within the parameters of the program's given repertoire of graphic outputs. Therefore, these romantic landscapes, which meet all the requirements of

⁶⁴ This program was launched by Matt P. Fairclough in 1999 with a development for the Mac platform by Jo Meder and now has thousands of users, who link up with one another on various Internet forums in a kind of worldwide graphics guild. Fontcuberta appreciates two important characteristics: "Terragen's proponents seem to observe two principal commandments: to reproduce the beauty of nature and to obtain the maximum possible degree of realism. Interestingly, when most of these programs are run on their default settings, the result tends to come very close to the kitsch of picture postcards and tourist brochures." Ibid., 5.

the genre, are the products of a deception. I have tricked the computer program into performing transformations not envisaged in its design. In other words, it has been forced into a “travestism” of signs that ask to be understood, and are likely to be read, as an illuminating gesture of subversion.⁶⁵

While the final photographs are not a specific location in physicality, they reference landscape in two ways: by sharing similar characteristics with its scanned photograph that acted as the starting point of creation, and secondly by strongly, though generically, resembling geographic aspects of “familiar” landscapes to replicate what viewers may remember from travels or other visual consumption. Reproductions of Western American landscape photographs produced in the late 1800s were the direct, scanned source for several of Fontcuberta’s landscape photographs. Surprisingly, however, many of the photographs that employed famous abstract, genre, or figurative paintings for the original inspiration resemble Western American landscape just as closely.

At first sight, *Orogenesis: Watkins, 2004* looks untouched, almost archaic. The rugged mountains, rocky hillocks recede into the distance, and the steep, foreboding cliff in the foreground hardly entices the viewer to visit on location. Instead, the uninhabited vistas of dangerous and desolate cliffs induce terror and a reminiscent sublimity harking back to the conception of Manifest Destiny. There are curious problems associated with sublime and/or beautiful photographs. Photography historians Estelle Jussim and Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock articulate, and rightfully so, that perceiving an object as sublime or beautiful is a relative deduction:

When the increasing urbanization of Americans, for example, began to separate the natural landscape from the cities, “nature” was transformed into “country,” something reserved for weekends and often painfully difficult to reach from the heart of congested inner cities... For inner-city minorities, trapped by poverty, the segregation of spectacular scenery into national parks beloved by landscape

⁶⁵ Fontcuberta, *Joan Fontcuberta: Landscapes*, 6.

photographers is a gesture unrelated to their desperation. To live in the South Bronx or in Harlem is to experience “nature” in the form of an occasional sumac tree – what New Yorkers called “railroad trees” because they grew along the tracks into the city – and mammoth legions of roaches, rats, pigeons, sparrows, and the tough grass which even cement pavements cannot entirely squelch.

How does seeing a stunning color photograph by, say, Eliot Porter, assist these slum dwellers in their daily lives? For some, if they can afford the Sierra Club calendars, pictures of golden aspens and snowy pines may refresh the spirit, reminding them of the nature of which we are all a part. On the other hand, for others, such pictures only widen the gulf between their status as social outcasts and economic pariahs and that of the very rich, who can afford to travel to spas, national parks, and their own more private nature enclaves whenever they like....To ghetto dwellers, then, a beautiful photograph of nature may provide either refreshment or increased resentment.⁶⁶

Orogenesis: Watkins, 2004 becomes a recycled copy from an ideal model of a nineteenth-century photographed landscape, recalling similar conceptions derivative of the time period by linking the origins of this image to Carleton E. Watkins, *Yosemite Valley*, from “Best General View,” ca. 1865. Watkins’ photographs were conceived as documentation while projecting a surpassing spirit, a sense of buoyant wonder at the grandeur of the wilderness. They embodied the romanticism of mid-century painting and literature, an ideological attitude that held nature, specifically mountains, as tangible evidence of the creation God incarnate. Confidence was reflected in the promise of territorial expansion, but as historian Naomi Rosenblum states, Watkins’ images of Yosemite had become especially recognized “in photographic circles for establishing the mountain landscape as a symbol of transcendent idealism. Impelled perhaps by the then-current controversies among naturalists...regarding the relationships among religion, geology, and evolution,

⁶⁶ Estelle Jussim and Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock, *Landscape as Photograph* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 140.

Watkins's images of rocks seem to emphasize the animate qualities in these formations."⁶⁷

In *Orogenesis: Watkins, 2004* nature seems like a distant memory, and while it does not so much posit the history of painting as the origin of nature as Watkins' photos do, it makes visible an impossible convolution of nature (reality) and landscape (representation) definitions. The photograph exists as a simulacrum of art and nature and offers a complicated pictorial experience. Reality, the very thing photography is meant to confirm, is here left out of the representation. The visual information asks more questions than it answers, and a machine is allowed creative sway over landscape. One might equally ask, what is the value of a representation that has no attachment to life? What enjoyment can be gained from the imagination of a mere machine?

Kim Keever

Similar to Fontcuberta's conception of an unnatural pictured landscape, Kim Keever's photographs present an imaginary scape but without the considerable dependence of a computer program. An engineer-turned-artist, he rose to prominence in the mid-1980s with the popularity of his figural paintings situated in geometric, surrealist environments. In the early 1990s he began to focus on large format photography, mostly inspired by the work of Cindy Sherman, and he likewise constructed his own fabrications of reality.

The setting for Keever's pictures was created by constructing miniature, topographical sculptures that he painted and placed in a 200-gallon fish tank and filled

⁶⁷ Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981), 132. The term Naturalist, or Naturalism, refers to an American attitude that celebrated the ordinary and unspectacular both in landscape and social activity.

with water. The paint is ephemeral and dissipates in the water along with the disintegration of the plaster-mountains over time. To create a weathered atmosphere to “place” the land formations, Keever attached pillow stuffing to plastic sheets on the back and sometimes the front of the tank to suggest cloud formations. For color variances that resembled sunrises or the darkening of a thunderstorm he added colored gels over the lights and also added paint to the water inside of the tank using a system he called paint-filled plant misters. By pumping a mister, Keever sent paint through flexible tubing into the tank. At times he dropped the paint from the open top to form a mass of cumulonimbus clouds, or he released paint horizontally to suggest wispy cirrus clouds.⁶⁸ More recent works have included additional props such as colored mountains and model railroad greenery. Photoshop is used sparingly on the digital image to make adjustments such as brightness and contrast but never to delete the algae and accumulation of material visible on the glass walls that add to the mysterious aura of their sublimity. The filth adds grunginess but also serves as a marker for the passing of time, of survival.

West 104k was constructed in a slightly different manner with the foreground of trees and rocks placed on a table in front of the fish tank that comprised the rest of the image. Its pastel color palette is representative of Keever’s use of color; his multicolored photographs are generally appealing and bright as opposed to Fontcuberta’s tense and uneasy monochromatic landscapes.⁶⁹ From the earliest days of photography the absence of color was almost universally deplored, with the result that daguerreotypes were tinted

⁶⁸ To watch Kim Keever’s process visit the following video interview: <http://www.newarttv.com/Kim+Keever>. This link can also be navigated to via Kinz + Tillou Fine Art Gallery’s official website, accessed February 17, 2013, found on the very bottom of Keever’s profile page: http://www.ktfineart.com/artists/kim_keeve/?show=home.

⁶⁹ It should be noted that we tend to segregate photography into two camps: black-and-white and color, even though black-and-white may actually include a wide range of monotonies from sepia to blue-gray.

with dry pigments and calotypes were painted with watercolors. While efforts to improve color processes throughout the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries continued, aesthetic pursuits had changed perceptibly. Most photographers who favored straight images of objective reality found the opulent colors of the dyes used in film unsuitable either for the depiction of reality, the evocation of subjective feelings, or the documentation of social conditions.⁷⁰ The result was that in its early period, color film was left to amateurs and advertising photographers, who became its greatest users.

However, while most documentarians ignored color photography and snapshot amateurs seemed content with the cheery colors during the 1940s and 1950s, the advertising community was determined to explore the potentialities of color for “making the implausible plausible.”⁷¹ Color film arrived on the scene during the severe economic depression of the 1930s and was regarded as a way to glamorize images of products and people. It seemed too seductive to express stark realities of poverty or war, but with the advent of abstraction in American visual art in the immediate postwar period, it is not surprising that several noncommercial photographers were intrigued by the formal possibilities of color film.

The natural landscape provided Eliot Porter with opportunities to formally explore both concept and a wondrous range of colors.⁷² Known to the twentieth-century

⁷⁰ The large body of landscape photographs in black-and-white were constituted as translations from nature. No one argued that they were abstractions, no matter how illusionistic the perspective or how well society understood and accepted the convention of black-and-white standing for nature.

⁷¹ Aline B. Louchheim, introduction to *The Art and Technique of Color Photography*, ed. Alexander Liberman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), xiv.

⁷² After his successful exhibition at Alfred Stieglitz’s gallery in 1938, Porter began working with Kodachrome, a new color transparency film from which he made prints in wash-off, later marketed under the “dye-transfer” label. Working with a color transparency, he made three black-and-white separation negatives. From these, three positives were made, one for each of the three secondary colors – cyan, magenta, and yellow – that were superimposed to realize the final dye-transfer print. In the three-color,

generation as the Ansel Adams of color photography, Porter devoted his life to documenting the natural world in color to draw public attention to the distinctive and endangered beauty of natural environments. Although Porter eventually gained notoriety for his colored pictures, fine art photographers generally remained reluctant to embrace color. There was a misguided sense that it was too literal and not artistic enough, that it didn't reveal the artist's creative potential. In color photography one was simply copying nature, whereas in black and white the hues of the subject could be rendered in almost any desired tone of gray, thus allowing a wide range of personal interpretation. Ansel Adams felt that color methods restricted interpretive freedom by greatly increasing the literal quality of the finished product. As late as 1997, the Oxford History of Art volume on the photograph still claimed, "Color photographs remain problematic. They are central to the snapshot, but are still invariably rejected by the professional and art photographer...."⁷³ As one of the pioneers of color photography, Porter helped shape public awareness of not only a popular imagination but of the natural world. His aesthetic grew into a genre – "nature photography" – that many professionals and amateurs now explore.⁷⁴ While modern and contemporary photographers are embedded in their historical ideologies each continue to explore both color options.

dye-transfer process, he found color could be controlled, just as one manipulated tonal values in a black-and-white print to enhance the photographer's interpretation. For the next three decades he struggled against the notion that color photography was unsuitable for artists because it was "too literal." In the early 1960s Porter began making photographic books with the Sierra Club, which played an important role in the conservation movement of the 1960s. The first book, *In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World* (1962), earned the Sierra Club an international reputation as a publisher of fine books. Porter was elected to the board of directors of the Sierra Club in 1965 and served until 1971. Judith Bell, *Capturing Nature's Palette* (World & I, June 2003) Vol. 18, Issue 6 page 94. Also, "Eliot Porter: In the Realm of Nature," The J. Paul Getty Museum's official website, accessed February 9, 2013, <http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/porter/>.

⁷³ Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 24.

⁷⁴ Porter's success with both color and subject matter generated great imitations that we continue to see today in advertisements, calendars, and posters. We, the viewers, experience his aesthetic as nature itself rather than as art. When we take pictures in nature, it is Porter's aesthetic that we try to embody in ours.

Keever's adjustment of color contrast mirrors Porter's early color and contrast manipulation done by hand. Realistic formal considerations in *West 104k* suggest a plausible environment as warm colors advance and cool colors recede. The atmospheric perspective is a perfect representation of the West: the less saturated, background vista appears to be far from the crisp tree and rock formations in the foreground, suggesting a deep chasm between. Scattered patches of glimmering roses and ambers provide an overall luminance in an uncertain time of day. The light, which exists because of the color, is the actual subject; the essence of the photograph is light. The perceived world and its colors are described, delineated, and designated by the action of light. A lack of framing devices presents a completely open and infinite composition. In addition to the exaggerated colors, another obviously deceptive element is the rolling bellows of gray steam at the very top of the picture. The bellows repeat just below in the center of the image and seem to want to be defined as clouds. The density and pervasiveness of the thunderhead above the mountains suggest that the illusion is not believable.

Although the craft and clever construction of these photographs is impressive in their own right, what makes them so intriguing is the sense of sublime that overwhelms and fascinates the viewer, evocative of American Romantic landscape painting during the nineteenth-century. Critic Jeffrey Cyphers Wright proposes that Keever's practice of reframing the concept of the natural world has restored a sense of wonder to it: "His depictions of environments ring with the exalted pitch of a full on symphony. Here, the artificial engages reality through a hyper-contextuality. Time and space are conflated."⁷⁵

While time and space may appear conflated, *West 104k* embodies desire. The West is

⁷⁵ Jeffrey Cyphers Wright, "More Romantic Than a Blue Rose: Nature Calls in Kim Keever's Landscape Photos of Submerged Dioramas," *Chelsea Now* (October 2008): 1.

depicted exceedingly over the top – lovely, idyllic, and sensual. And while Keever did not intentionally make direct reference to the majestic paintings of the Hudson River School (the pioneering photography of the American West) or the landscapes of the Romanticists, it is difficult to ignore the formal and conceptual similarities. Additionally, curator Lena Vigna suggests that “another reference is appropriate to the earthworks artists of the 1960s and 1970s who went out into nature and made their mark...whose projects often only exist today in photograph. Recent discussions of work relating to the landscape, such as these examples, draw on notions of sublime and the picturesque.”⁷⁶

Sublime and Picturesque

One of the first to define the beautiful and the sublime in nature was Edmund Burke who in 1757 predicated that any natural object or scene that inspired awe and a thrilling sensation of fear could be described as sublime. One had this experience when the idea of pain and danger was at the forefront in thought, without actually being in such circumstances; “Whatever excites this delight, I call sublime.”⁷⁷ Great size, power, solitude, noise, or silence could evoke the sublime. Desolate spaces have long been defined as sublime due to the loneliness they evoke. As parts of Europe and Britain once considered terrifying wastes became popular (i.e., peaks of the Alps) among romantic travelers, wild, barren, and harsh landscapes suddenly had aesthetic value. This was a realm in which Americans could compete; the United States had more wild scenery than its people knew what to do with. The American wilderness boasted huge mountains,

⁷⁶ Lena Vigna, *Kim Keever: Suspended States* (Sheboygan, WI: John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2005), 1.

⁷⁷ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Menston, England 1979), 51.

tremendous rocks and trees in solitude – all of the elements that thrilled romantic writers and travelers.

Once Americans felt confident enough in their wilderness so that its dangers were only possibilities rather than probabilities, they extolled the virtues of the sublime. Although a certain religious element had always been inherent in European definitions of the sublime, Americans emphasized this quality. Objects such as great mountains could now be revered as expressions of God's will. By the mid-nineteenth century, Americans also discovered that answers to their cultural concerns lay in nature; nature could replace culture. It now mattered less that the United States had no ancient ruins and picturesque human artifice in the landscape. The new celebration of the wild and the sublime in nature carried with it the full weight of nineteenth-century philosophy and aesthetics. In depicting the glories of the natural world, artists delineated national history and national ideologies. Comparatively, there were also critical Americans who did not find satisfaction in the aesthetic values of the wilderness. To them, it did not measure up to European standards of beauty: the Catskills and Adirondacks of New York simply could not be compared to the Alps in height, ruggedness, or sublimity.⁷⁸ The West offered both a truly American version of Europe and a challenge to the cultural framework Americans had developed to describe their landscape. Full of impressive natural phenomena, it became the place to go if you wanted to encounter the sublime.

There are useful frameworks for understanding both the sublime and picturesque. Literary and social theorist Susan Stewart suggests that the aesthetic experience of the sublime is “characterized by astonishment and surprise: the grandeur of scenery results in

⁷⁸ Anne Farrar Hyde, *An American Vision: Far Western Landscape and National Culture, 1820-1920* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 16-22.

a sudden expansion of the soul and the emotions.”⁷⁹ Picturesque, however, “is formed by the transformation of nature into art and thus the manipulation of flux into form, infinitely into frame.”⁸⁰ Unlike sublime, the term “picturesque” is more familiar especially since it’s often used to describe a landscape, a village or small town. From an etymological point of view, it means ‘like a picture.’ Author John Ruskin believed that picturesque beauty could be found in cities or towns when architectonic splendor distinguished itself from the real, classical beauty that is intended, planned, through its ‘coincidence.’ For Ruskin, a view is ‘like a picture’ when it is in a place far from that which was devised as a source or center of beauty. Orhan Pamuk provides a local context with visual examples of what Ruskin was relaying:

For Ruskin, picturesque beauty rises out of details that emerge only after a building has been standing for hundreds of years, from the ivy, herbs, and grassy meadows that surround it, from the rocks in the distance, the clouds in the sky, and the choppy sea. So there is nothing picturesque about a new building, which demands to be seen on its own terms; it only becomes picturesque after history has endowed it with accidental beauty and granted us a fortuitous new perspective.⁸¹

In other words, the essence is coincidental beauty and that does not manifest itself as long as we see the building as it was originally built, as we are intended to see it, but from a completely different angle, from new perspectives. The city can become picturesque when we view it as a landscape, or as Pamuk suggests, a landscape painting if we refer to the literal meaning of picturesque.⁸² The same way a built construction can only become

⁷⁹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: North Carolina Duke University Press, 1993), 74-75.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁸¹ Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, trans. Maureen Freely (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 254-255.

⁸² Steven Jacobs and Frank Maes, ed., *Beyond the Picturesque* (Ghent, Belgium: S.M.A.C.K., 2009), 9. The picturesque was also at the basis of the first forms of landscape tourism, where tourists were led by

picturesque, a landscape can only be picturesque when the natural scene has been stripped of human conventions of idealism and purity. A continual transaction and dialogue between nature and culture forms the foundation for picturesque aesthetics. Its sensibility allows observation with new eyes: to understand the differences, the contrasts, the mixtures, and the nuances, and to appreciate them which can be translated to the art object's edges, borders, lines of contrast, and superimposition of different worlds.

An example of an overlay of a familiar world is the depiction of the miniature, directly aligned to a sign from the physical world. Stewart states that it can be employed “in a gesture which makes the fictive sign both remarkable and realistic...it's fantastic qualities are related to what lies outside in such a way as to transform the total context.”⁸³ Keever's model is both real as an object itself and a fantastical landscape. The constant flux of “states of being” makes the artwork, the West as we desire to see it, infinitely compelling.

Keith Stanton

Seeing the world miniaturized presents to viewers a reduced physical dimension that only peripherally bears upon the meaning of the picture. The miniature calls attention to its prototype. As with any visual form of art, visual description must serve the function of the context. The locus of recognition and subsequent meaning and interpretation must be “filled in” for the viewer, who as Stewart suggests suffers from the exteriority of the presented object; “the distance between the situation of reading and the situation of the

illustrated guides and backed up by references to landscape paintings in their search for “painting-like” landscapes. *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 46.

depiction is bridged by description, the use of a field of familiar signs.”⁸⁴ Although Stewart is analyzing the miniature in terms of writing and the form of a book, the relationship is applicable to photography because what disappears in the art object, as with writing, is the human body and what the body knows – the visual, tactile, and aural knowledge of lived experience.

Viewing a photograph then can be understood as a transaction between a viewer and a photograph. More than an interaction, the action of separate and distinct entities on one another, transaction designates a two-way relationship, in which each shapes and is shaped by the other. This usage of the term derives from John Dewey in *Knowing and the Known* who, in the literary field, pointed out that a person selects out stimuli to which she/he responds, thus to some extent creating its own environment, taking on her/his character by virtue of that transaction.⁸⁵ A viewer has to actively make meaning out of any work of art, but the process of infusing meaning in a photograph differs from other media. Contemplation of a photograph has a long history of what literary theorist Louise Rosenblatt would call aesthetic reading. Formal elements such as size, color, shapes and subject matter are recognized, or read, by the observer. But as addressed earlier in this thesis, there is an efferent reading (from the Latin, *efferre*, “to carry away”) that runs parallel to the aesthetic reading in a transactional model. Efferent is fitting because the viewer’s attention is focused primarily on what is to be carried away, retained after the initial viewing.⁸⁶ In this context, there is a sense of duplicating which undermines the artistic authority of both the interpretation and source or center, or in the case of this

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁸⁵ Louise Rosenblatt, “On the Aesthetic as the Basic Model of the Reading Process,” *Bucknell Review*, 26:1 (1981), 18.

⁸⁶ Louise Rosenblatt, “What Facts does this Poem Teach You,” *Language Arts*, 57:4 (April 1980), 387-388.

thesis the location of photography: the viewer is not of either world, but rather moves between them.

While Keever's images are created using miniature objects to create a seemingly natural landscape, Keith Stanton's *Exemption From Occupation* series present the miniature materiality without any illusion. The fictive signs within the photographs align with a sign from the physical world in a gesture that makes the fictive both remarkable and realistic. Stanton sculpts hand-mixed media still-lives of everyday suburban occurrences situated within the western desert, and with a macro lens photographs the set to illustrate a critique of material wealth and the current, most popular emblem of achieving the "American Dream."⁸⁷ In *Location, location, location* the miniaturization refers to the physical world and continually points outside itself to what we, the viewers, can most closely associate with it from our personal experiences and memories from reality. The patio environment and three lounge chairs in the foreground are distinctly artificial. Although the hues seem plausible, the colors are hyper-realistic and the light source is not what would be naturally absorbed into the plastic blue cushions but rather reflects in a perfect rectangle atop the cushions edge. Stanton's use of an architect's scale to retain proportions aids in the picture's believability and the western desert scene to which the three chairs perfectly face is the sight of conviction for viewers.

It is exactly that which the chairs point towards that is the subject. Albeit blurry, the mountain consumes half of the composition. It is the main attraction, the site that is so desired not a single person relaxes on a chair to enjoy the view. For many who have the

⁸⁷ Macro photography refers to an extreme close-up photography in which the size of the subject in the photograph is greater than life size. The ratio of the subject size on the film plane (or sensor plane) to the actual subject size is known as the reproduction ratio. Likewise, a macro lens is classically a lens capable of reproduction ratios greater than 1:1.

luxury to live within suburbia and take advantage of poolside amenities, this picture replicates a familiar experience.

The lack of focus on the background is yet revelatory for another reason. Stanton's formal consideration is a metaphor for how suburbanites value and negotiate the western land. It is, undoubtedly, an important element of the west and the desert is one of the most iconic emblems of Western America but upon habitation, the western land is secondary. There is an attempt to incorporate views, such as in *Location, location, location* but often the view is barely visible over the cement walls dividing property lines within a development as another picture *Luxurious and affordable* depicts. Having immediate access to a fraction of the vista off in the horizon offers daily exposure to what many appreciate as an authentic experience of wilderness. Instead of city skyscrapers, one can enjoy natural terrain. Perhaps the natural terrain in Stanton's images feel more realistic than the objects placed in front of it because they are blurry and background noise, but it is necessary to remember that the entire image is a constructed setting. The specific site pictured in *Location, location, location* does not exist but in Stanton's studio. So while this image is reminiscent of many luxurious Arizonan backyards, it is also illusive. The natural land as presented is not real. Would interpretation of the image be that much different than if the focus of the lens had instead emphasized the mountains and blurred the forefront objects? What would be gained in seeing details of the land formation?

The lack of personality and spirit of human presence in Robert Adams's photographs spoke to concerns about the suburbs themselves and resurfaces in Stanton's work. Emphasis on housing and the home in photoconceptualism and in the *New*

Topographics exhibition refers, perhaps for differing reasons, to a much older, modernist concern: dwelling or, more accurately, the impossibility of dwelling in the proper sense during the twentieth-century. Similar to the subject of Adams's photograph *Colorado Springs, Colorado* – the tract house – reminds us of one reason why: a new form of vernacular architecture whose existence owes more to the needs of real estate developers and advertising executives (what political philosopher Theodor Adorno called the “totally administered society”)⁸⁸ than to the needs of the houses' future inhabitants. The image simultaneously exemplifies what home had come to mean in 1970s America and the limits of the (often self-imposed) restrictions that characterized *New Topographics* photographic practice. And while the suburbs have evolved, and while this development has been anarchic, the resulting buildings of today are still monotonous and the effect has been to freeze the lives of those living in the desert.

Almost thirty years ago cultural geographer Jackson admitted, “our dwellings are spiritually and culturally impoverished. Our almost uncontrollable love of making “environments” – never stronger than now – compels us to create in our houses as well as our cities environments that are good for nothing but health and recreation, environments almost entirely without content.”⁸⁹ It is this lack of content that Stanton is directly referencing in the façade of today's suburbia; *Location, location, location* is a mirror that reflects as well as frames a reflection.

⁸⁸ What Adorno came to call the “totally administered society,” was a form of critical theory. It consisted of grasping the logic, structure, and functioning of something in such a way that you can describe the process by which it transforms itself into something else. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 20.

⁸⁹ John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 86.

Familiarity of No Place

Neither Fontcuberta, Kever, nor Stanton present a specific location in the West, yet it is this absence that so clearly identifies our relationship to the Western landscape today. Their level of believability is strong despite their complete fabrication. Perhaps rather than believability, the better word choice is perception. *Location, location, location* appears, more readily, to be hand-crafted versus *Orogenesis: Watkins, 2004*, but both offer the viewer a twenty-first century platform of access into the West. In the photographs of these three artists, the western land is everything that it cannot be – literally and philosophically. On the surface, the pictures appear pure, neutral, non-judgmental and at the mercy of technological advancements. As the layers are stripped, the land we see has become negotiated, twisted, manipulated, fabricated, all funneling to the greater purpose of the work: what does this image, the process of its creation and its associations of a living terrain mean to the viewer? The studio practice and purpose of these artists, critic Christopher Burnett suggests, describe the West in a way that acknowledges yet rejects longstanding landscape paradigms of the picturesque, pastoral, and sublime. The *New Topographics* exhibition clarified that seeing is the first step toward acting on what sees; it showed how, by looking hard at our “degraded utopia,” we start to understand its contradictions and its possibilities.⁹⁰

Fontcuberta, Kever, and Stanton’s work presents a non-place. This space is often used in rhetoric when describing globalization, Internet connection and dependencies and a world moving very fast due to technology. I like to think of the lack of place, or essence of place, in broader terms. French anthropologist Marc Augé says, “if a place can be

⁹⁰ Foster-Rice, *Reframing the New Topographics*, xxv.

defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.”⁹¹ To stress these artists’ use technology as an overarching context to oppose place is to minimize its cultural infiltration. To expand its perceived technological and global perception, non-place can be likened with experiences that occur daily that don’t feel quite right. Details may seem fuzzy, lack clarity, or complete understanding of the situation is not comprehended. Yet the experience still contains a spirit of place. It can be tenuous and flexible. The sight can be stagnant or fast moving such as an airport terminal, a garbage landfill, the landscape observed from a train in motion, memories from a dream, and cracks in a sidewalk. The common denominator of all objects and experiences of non-place is the feeling of not belonging anywhere, even when connected directly to a physical space. There is a sense of displacement embedded in a sense of familiarity.

This seemingly out of body, out of conscious recognition (compared to the percentage of time we fully recognize objects and situate them within a determined time and space) mirrors displacement. But it also affords us an opportunity to create a new relationship with space, in which the place we inhabit is not always the same as the one we experience. Everyone experiences both place and non-place differently, but our personal experience is based on a direct relationship with a real place even if this place is constantly in flux due to an infrastructure determined by government or houses determined by private individuals. It makes sense then that contemporary artists confront these ambiguous relationships with the places they depict, make, and respond to. Digital construction and sculpted, hand-crafted models present for us a precarious balance

⁹¹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), 63.

between concepts of non-place and the spirit of place.⁹² For this to be fully grasped a tense negotiation is required between the idea of placelessness and the vague sense of belonging to a specific location. Fontcuberta, Kiever, and Stanton find a re-visioned mystical sense in the banality of unimportant urban places, seeking significance of a space that has lost its original meaning and remains adrift. Far from an ideal space, these contemporary landscapes are defined by their relationship between different spaces of meaning, past and present, nature and culture. It is their mirrored contradiction that is the most striking sign of life in our contemporary time.

Entrance into each of these photographs demands a self-reflexivity. Alone, one's thoughts wander freely over space. The isolation of the landscape allows viewers to insert themselves within the scene and to search for a reconnection to landscape by using the land as a stage for figurative and metaphoric exploration. With the presence of others inside or outside the picture, viewers are pulled back by an awareness of other personalities who project their own worlds into the same area. We are asked to reconsider the space as presented while at the same time a greater distance of space exists between the observer and observed. The focus moves from the observed to the observer and back again; reading an exterior-to-interior as a way to interpret the picture is yet another paradox.

Just as an individual enters and circulates through physical space, there may be pause for reflection as she/he moves through a landscape; similarly, the same is true

⁹² For the Romans, each place had its own divinity, which defined its character and aspirations. This deity was called the *genius loci*, which means the spirit of the place. The concept has been used by many historians seeking to relate the influence of site and landscape on the cultural production of each community. Thus, the art of Mediterranean Europe, for example, presents a brighter color palette and a more idealized beauty standard, while the art of northern Europe presents darker shades and a less idealized formal description. "Between Genius Loci and Nopaceness," Atlanta Art Now official website, accessed February 19, 2013, <http://www.atlantaartnow.com/newsarchive.php>.

when contemplating these photographs. It is here that the concept of non-place, as described by Augé, has significance. Augé illustrates the conditions for non-place within the context of super modernity, the position that defines contemporary experience as an excess of excess, mostly from an informational and spatial standpoint. This informational explosion, a surge harvested by an increase in our life expectancy, is one factor in the increase of technologies. In the end, while places must possess characteristics of identity, relations, and history, Augé argues that people desire to create places, even from non-places.⁹³ We subconsciously seek a simulacrum of reality.

This approach to experiencing representations is accompanied by a refusal, a turning away from the rationality of a captured image. For literary theorist Derrida, this process lies in the gaps, silences, and unforeseen events and sets an artificial staging of reality for the spectator. Furthermore, Baudrillard's concept of integral reality of an object is embedded in not only the idea of a physical western land but also in the mechanical process of capturing a specific view. The simulacrum then is a representation found in the domain of appearance and its meaning exceeds the picture without being contained by it, "so as to become untruthful, decried appearance."⁹⁴ Simulacra then gives more meanings than the thing originally has, and becomes a surplus-thing which we do not mind because, according to writer Jin, they appeal to the utopian ideals we cherish in our unconscious.⁹⁵

Dualities also occur within the larger realm of super modernity: the idea of expansion is dual in nature such as the shrinking of the globe through expansion of

⁹³ Ibid., 64.

⁹⁴ Huimin Jin, "Simulacrum: An Aesthetization or An-aesthetization," *Theory Culture & Society* 25:6 (October 2008), 146.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 146.

technologies. From both a communication and circulation standpoint, technologies have increased connectivity and, in turn, impacted our concept of distance. The minimization of global travel times and growing communication routes via mobile interconnectivity allow an individual to travel greater distances at higher speeds, physically and virtually.⁹⁶ As these photographs represent, areas of non-place can exist within our decoding of what we think we see but don't in actuality, a state of transition that Augé describes a non-place.⁹⁷

To articulate the cognitive with experience and the role of art, I reference Tuan:

Art makes images of feelings so that feeling is accessible to contemplation and thought. . . . The images of place, here sampled, are evoked by the imagination of perceptive writers. By the light of their art we are privileged to savor experiences that would have faded beyond recall. Here is a seeming paradox: thought creates distance and destroys the immediacy of direct experience, yet it is by thoughtful reflection that the elusive moments of the past draw near to us in present reality and gain a measure of permanence.⁹⁸

It is through art that artists continually attempt to capture fleeting experiences within the present. The temporal moments and thoughts that sporadically pervade an individual's everyday existence challenge artists to give ephemeral ideas form, to attempt at an illusion of permanence. Fontcuberta, Kever and Stanton, through their photos, understand the cognitive as it draws from a layering of diverse experiences, levels of

⁹⁶ John Urry, *Mobilities* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1997), 54.

⁹⁷ Augé's description here is a fairly direct link to Victor Turner's influential research in sites of ritual and the liminal, or the position of being in-between. Turner's writings on the rituals of the Ndembu tribe opened a door to consider the ambiguous or less identifiable areas that exist within most social structures. In his book, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Turner focused on customs, practices, and rituals associated with adolescence and adulthood. His investigations spurred an interest in spaces of transition within social hierarchies and other similar systems. He referred to these spaces as passages and liminal states or sites. These areas can be considered as a type of non-place in that they are experienced as transitional spaces, although non-place is not limited to transition. Understanding this as an important connection and its continued discourse in the study of such sites within populations, the non-place as a source for visual analysis is not far removed. Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1967), 93-111.

⁹⁸ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 148.

representation as well as abstraction in order to communicate different modes of seeing. While Fontcuberta utilizes reproduction images of other artists' landscapes, the final photograph is a product of the computer. Kever's mode of seeing rests in a temporal set, relying on the production of atmosphere and light within a "natural" scene without man's presence. Similar to Kever, Stanton builds his sets but deliberately unveils his craft in the image; his mode visually presents miniature toy-like models as a metaphor for the grander façade of suburbia.

Because these art objects are photographs, it is important to recall that the nature of photography is that of the past tense becoming an audience's present-tense experience. Time can be a method, then, to free itself from a linear narrative. A great deal of contemporary artwork is interested in an experience through the creation of environments. Art critic Nicolas Bourriaud describes the concept of "relational aesthetics" in terms of how experiential artwork involving participation/interaction is a primary focus among many artists.⁹⁹ In this there resides a theatrical penchant. How then does photography distinguish itself as the best medium for these artists' representations?

The level of stimulation employed in these photographs is not too far removed so that the viewer cannot engage imaginatively in the perceived atmosphere. Kever and Fontcuberta suggest yet another mode of experience, that of mobility and travel. Observers are asked to explore, mentally, the boundless terrain, to imagine how she arrived seemingly haphazardly on a vista in Fontcuberta's photograph. The idea of travel carries with it an element of the unknown and the possibility of risk. Accidents, violence and reminders to be wary are embedded within our psyche. But there also exists an

⁹⁹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon, France: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 15.

opposing side to the romantic or precarious views of travel: mobility can be considerably mundane. The everyday commuter follows prescribed routes and methods of behavior. Regulation of traffic and population flow is dictated by those of power.¹⁰⁰

The western American land that exists in reality, and that which we construct in our mind, continually grows smaller through ever-expanding transit and information systems. Our perception of the world changes through continuous interaction with the non-place. How does this distinctive, contemporary representation of the West influence the observer's perception of the West? These photographs offer exciting approaches to answering this question. Frequenting the non-place as an observer, I have found the non-place to be an interesting space. I personally become more acutely aware of my own interior thoughts and feelings when I go through such spaces.

Stage as a Form of Manipulation

Another word that includes the root word land is homeland. It has landmarks that may be features of high visibility and public significance, such as monuments or shrines. These visible signs, according to Tuan:

serve to enhance a people's sense of identity; they encourage awareness of and loyalty to place. But a strong attachment to the homeland can emerge quite apart from any explicit concept of sacredness; it can form without the memory of heroic battles won and lost, and without the bond of fear or of superiority vis-à-vis other people. Attachment of a deep though subconscious sort may come simply with familiarity and ease, with the assurance of nurture and security, with the memory of sounds and smells, of communal activities and homely pleasures accumulated over time.¹⁰¹

At a local level, homeland refers to the city or state boundaries one lives in. At a national level, America's homeland is the West. And while Tuan suggests that one's attachment to

¹⁰⁰ Urry, *Mobilities*, 49.

¹⁰¹ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 159.

the homeland is a common human emotion, its strength varies and is not necessarily dependent on seeing or experiencing its terrain in reality (as the work the three previous artists demonstrates). The following artists have produced provocative photographs that investigate many of the same topics discussed earlier but with two distinctive attributes: the visible Western land includes representation of real land in the Western American desert, and the photograph, even if considerably digitalized, are not completely fabricated.

Olivo Barbieri

Visual codes such as symbols and icons are some of the ways a homeland is recognized. For many Americans, the Las Vegas strip in Nevada epitomizes the West. In its familiar, transported skyscrapers and neon signs, the city reflects Augé's super modernity in America. Growth and development in heavily populated regions often call for networked systems and large scale infrastructure, which are planned and implemented quickly with little regard for the visual blight that may result. For Las Vegas, what one may consider visual blight is actually what is so entrancing. While *New Topographics* photographers were drawn to built landscapes, their monotonous and repetitive landscapes had a lasting influence on Olivo Barbieri who has focused his artistic practice on larger metropolitan areas around the world, one being Las Vegas. And while there is an equally important story to be told of its underlying infrastructure, history, and identity, it is the monumental structures, factories, and industrial plants that power and provide for these highly populated places that are of interest to contemporary photographers.

Barbieri calls his urban portraits “the city as an avatar of itself”¹⁰² – a camouflaged surrogate acting out fantasies of self-replacement. From his Las Vegas site specific series from 2005, *site specific_LAS VEGAS 05 4/9* depicts such an abstraction. Eerily similar to Stanton’s use of a miniaturized scale and background noise filled with a blurry mountain, Barbieri’s tilt-shift techniques turn the Hoover Dam region, as we know it into a model of itself. Unlike the preceding photographers, he assists the machine that documents reality to tweak the truth. His image implies that perhaps the spatial dynamics of the landscape we’ve constructed are comprehensible only when we can shrink the whole thing. The world upon which everything we know that has been constructed finds a blurred shapelessness and extreme contrast in one view. While the vegetation and road in the foreground is overly contrasted, there is an abrupt transition into the fuzzy landscape. In this sense, the inherent movement in experiencing this image is circular as the viewer bounces back and forth to find ease and rest in a “complete” perspective. The landscape Barbieri presents as a photograph is far from a stagnant, still landscape; it is instead an active, theatrical object which demands the viewer bring to a focus. It is neither here nor there; it is not that or this. The viewer is neither in the world nor outside the world. The viewer is neither in the city nor outside the city. And because it is a photograph, an object that is an archive and truth of sorts, it forever maintains this transitory non-placeness. There is an unsettling ambiguity among the exaggerated bright colors and eternal lack of focus of a space that we know exists in real space.

Oscillation is heightened in *site specific_LAS VEGAS 05 5/9* as the city’s strip is so fuzzy that it, as its own entity, appears to be in motion by itself, separate from the

¹⁰² “Olivo Barbieri’s Model World,” by Andrew Blum, Metropolis Magazine’s official website, accessed March 24, 2013, <http://www.metropolismag.com/story/20060116/model-world>.

surrounding underdeveloped land. This intensity of motion is emphasized by the bird's eye perspective and visual disruption due to the high key tone in light. And unlike *site specific_LAS VEGAS 05 4/9* this image focuses on the mountainous vista rather than the ground nearest to the viewer. The centered portrait depicts the New York New York Hotel and Casino that opened in 1997, bringing a sanitized and reduced version of Manhattan to the desert. Although the re-creation is limited in scope and scale, the attempt is impressive: dozens of landmarks are reproduced, including the Brooklyn Bridge, Grant's Tomb, Grand Central Station, and the Guggenheim and Whitney museums. The casino's version of the Statue of Liberty is built at one-half scale, standing 150 feet instead of the actual height of 305 feet; its Empire State Building stands 47 stories tall instead of 102. Andrea Robbins and Max Becher's photograph *Skyline Medium View* from their New York, NY, Las Vegas, NV series allows us to see these details, with an unimposing glimpse of the vista on the left. Barbieri's technique of miniaturizing an already miniature version of New York within Nevada recalls the excess and consumption of super modernity. He also continues a tradition of presenting the western landscape in isolation, without reference to a single human silhouette.

The visual spectacle of theatricality experienced from afar in Barbieri's work is given a magnified prominence in the photographs of James Sanborn and Amelia Bauer. Awakened in the deep hours of twilight, vulnerable desert formations become intruded upon and exposed with artificial light for a monumental portrait. Their architectural soundness and composition becomes subject of interrogation like specimen for a scientist. Although the land is not investigated at a microscopic level, the theatricality of light, and its inherent opposition and darkness evoke purposes of spotlights, mapping or

transparencies. Oddly enough the silent terrain dramatic illumination elicit performance, not far from the glitz and glamor that is distinctive of the West, or rather, Las Vegas. For both artists, manipulation is enacted through the transference of artificial light on the natural western formation.

James Sanborn

With a generator, large format projector, and camera equipment in hand while traveling the American Southwest in the mid-1990s, James Sanborn sought formations upon which to project light patterns. As *Shiprock, New Mexico* exhibits, the defined projection appears timeless whereas the duration of time is explicit in the diagonal traces of light from stars as a result from a long camera exposure. With this specific pattern, the act of mathematical graphing is conjured but more interestingly so is the relationship between topography and geography.

Following the linear lines on the terrain is relatively easy for the eye: where the lines are bright, it stays consistently present. But as the projection falls on deep crevices the light diminishes, at times it vanishes completely. This depiction of Shiprock's surface offers viewers a fresh opportunity to imagine the texture and form of this specific object in nature. Yet because of both the ephemeral quality of light and human isolation, it simultaneously emphasizes "imagining" the texture rather than by a physical touch. In this sense *Shiprock, New Mexico* perpetuates the pristine view of nature that Ansel Adams pursued. In its majestic solid infrastructure the form is centered in the picture's frame, consuming three-quarters of the composition. The pattern conceptually strengthens this ideology by first presenting an optical illusion in the elongation of the structure as the peak reaches for the heavens: the horizontal lines suggest a continued

growth in both the top and bottom. Moreover the graph-like pattern suggests man's quest for knowledge, organizing, building. While this thought is highly suggestive, it is not quite solidified as it would be if Sanborn physically drew on the form itself and left an imprint, or taped the pattern on it. But because man's intentions are *projected* they are left to be determined.

There is a vulnerability associated with twilight and it, too, presents a transition of time and events. In addition to Sanborn's projected light, nature prepares Shiprock naturally for the camera as the moon and sun light it during the long exposure. Natural forces (sunlight) determine what we are privy to see and shadows diligently hide what is not to be seen quite yet. For in this specific moment, we can see this view only at this time. And while this is true for any experience in nature, we are acutely aware of it in *Shiprock, New Mexico* because of the fleeting ambient light that we can relate to a sunrise or sunset whose light changes seemingly fast. Its mystical aura is further embellished with the trace of star movement in the sky. Here, paradoxically, a compilation of time (transitory state) and stationary object are presented in one photograph.

Amelia Bauer

The phrase "extra terrestrial" arouses fictive and unsettling consciousness. Its Latin root word extra refers to "beyond," or "not of" and terrestrias, "of or belonging to Earth." Since the mid-twentieth century there has been an ongoing search for signs of extraterrestrial life, in particular, playing a preeminent role in works of science fiction. While the scope of research and literature of the extra terrestrial is broad and beyond the limitations of this thesis, it is important to impress its striking affiliation with land, landscape and homeland.

Central to depiction of space-time displacement employed in science fiction is the borrowing of travel and history narratives. While Bauer's series title *Extra Terrestrial* refers to a universal world of the unknown, she presents individual photographs that must certainly be specific locations in the west. They also, as seen in images *Extra Terrestrial (1, 2 and 4 of 7)* inherently include rhetorical devices that mark her presence in this space as well as address a specific audience. George Slusser and Danièle Chatelain suggest that apprehension must take place in science fiction.¹⁰³ For this to occur one engages in a duality of viewpoint: on the one hand there is a conscious awareness or understanding of something and, on the other, there exists fear, an uneasy anticipation.

At any given point, or for example any type of science fiction work such as a film, Slusser and Chatelain argue that the artist can introduce narratives of either minimal or maximum extrapolation:

Many of science fiction's most highly prized narratives use minimal extrapolation. Narrator and narrative audience are located in a near future that is only minimally transformed in terms of society, culture, and technology, and this gives the reader a sense of "realism." The effect is one of stretching, but only slightly, the thread of shared knowledge that traditionally binds narrative audience and reader. Such stretching may occur when the narrative describes a thing that functions in a way different from its function in the reader's world-yet the narrator does not, because addressing an audience intimately familiar with the device, explain how or why its function has changed from the reader's time to that of the story...[Narratives of maximal extrapolation produce] a maximum degree of bafflement in the reader...the reader is left to negotiate [the] landscape; as if living in a strange but coherent dream, the reader comes to accept such devices as refrigerator doors that require coins to open them.¹⁰⁴

Bauer's photographs are indicative of minimal extrapolation: the viewer is motivated to understand the narrative, the landscape, and the environment while drawing on her/his

¹⁰³ George Slusser and Danièle Chatelain, "Conveying Unknown Worlds: Patterns of Communication in Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* Vol. 29 (July 2002): 161-185.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 179-181.

knowledge of similar depictions. Bauer tests the limits of a viewer's cognitive adaptability: just as one engages in negotiation of non-placeness, in *Extra Terrestrial* images there is a similar function of energy transfer – these worlds are not dream places as they initially suggest but actual physical locations.

Yet these photographs offer more than what can be understood through the context of science fiction that encourages the *telling* of new possible worlds upon expanded discovery. Telling becomes an act of communication – a literal conveying of information – rather than a silently accepted convention.¹⁰⁵ While the subject of mountainous land as portrait harks back to the 1840s and 1850s when American photography explorers spread across the West to document the physical appearance of unfamiliar terrain, the pictures' stagecraft does not. Our close proximity to the land in *Extra Terrestrial (2 of 7)* and *(4 of 7)* offers an opportunity to be one in the landscape, lured by the realistic perception of the frames' position and perspective. In these images, the viewer is placed in a captured real space rather than a bird's eye or aerial view. Apprehension is lodged within the black velvet sky and the dramatic whitewashing effect of light. Unlike Sanborn who seeks to capture a curvilinear form in its entirety inside the composition, Bauer prefers to shoot, and emphasize with illumination, the unassuming and ordinary flat ground in *Extra Terrestrial (4 of 7)* and jagged tops of boulder-like formations bound to something else much larger in *Extra Terrestrial (2 of 7)*. The environments have a foreboding quality, hinting to possible danger – like one searching in the dark with a flashlight to find what made that noise.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 182.

Mark Klett

Mark Klett and collaborator Byron Wolfe's most recent completed project *Reconstructing the View* (2007-2011) explores the Grand Canyon anew. History and passing of time is entwined in three ways: through the chasm itself, the Grand Canyon which has been a frequent subject for artists since the middle of the nineteenth-century, approaching the Grand Canyon informed by historic images they located and photographed, and incorporating new pictures of the precise locations of the historic images. Klett and Wolfe's process of identifying the sites of historic photographs to make new images of these sites is referred to as rephotography.¹⁰⁶ It is a measurement of distance between this moment and that. By comparing a historic site with a present-day image, rephotographs can show change, but not necessarily explain history. They also cannot show what is excluded by the view on either side of the picture's frame. And, like the other artists discussed in this thesis, alone they cannot explain the context behind taking of the images, or details hidden from the camera.

Fundamental to their rephotographic framework is its subversive intent: rather than reflecting a nostalgic interest, the resulting picture challenges assumptions and established views of the past, ultimately causing one to question views of past, present, and future.¹⁰⁷ In *Arthur Wesley Dow, on the edge at Hopi Point, observed by 21st century tourists at a safe distance* these three moments of time are emphasized formally and

¹⁰⁶ This process in their Grand Canyon work originated in Klett's first rephotographic venture *Second View: The Rephotographic Survey Project* (1977-79) which then led to a rephotographic project with Wolfe, *Third Views, Seconds Sights* (1997-2000) and *Yosemite in Time* (2001-2003). The process of embedding historic photos into contemporary ones, and vice versa, has been made easier over the years with advancement of digital technology and improved software automatically matching points from overlapping frames and lining them up. Once the image is assembled, postproduction adjustments are made in Photoshop.

¹⁰⁷ Rebecca A. Senf and Stephen J. Pyne, *Reconstructing the View: The Grand Canyon Photographs of Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 15.

conceptually. On the right is a reproduction of Alvin Langdon Coburn's 1911 photograph *Arthur Wesley Dow at Grand Canyon* documenting Dow crouched low at the edge of a precipice over the canyon, trying to find a good angle for his camera. Guided by this source image, Klett and Wolfe rephotographed the same site in 2010, extending the view. Simultaneously the final image presents Coburn's image in its entirety while expanding its context. Past and present day time constitute the right and left frame of the photograph, composing one large panorama. The stark disparity of clarity, color, garb, and objects of both sides emphasize a comparison but equally fosters inquiry on what the final panorama would look like if one side continued its view and did not contain the other. A cognitive dissonance is embedded in this metaphorical measuring of time. Our minds fail to process accurately what we are seeing, or not seeing. *Arthur Wesley Dow, on the edge at Hopi Point, observed by 21st century tourists at a safe distance* offers two visual realities with which to compete with the illusion of a fictional yet complete sight.

The presence of figures immediately situates the viewer as a bystander quietly looking at the observers taking snapshots of the view and Dow in the process of capturing an image for his artistic practice. Faces are not captured, heightening a universality of visitors. Containing a lineal descent of tourism and constructs of sublime and picturesque, the Grand Canyon remains a fertile breeding ground for their perpetual existence. On a typical summer day, 6,000 cars enter the Grand Canyon National Park to visit thirty miles of scenic rim roads. People see in controlled and static sequences of scenery and sights, fulfilling their desire to see the object of interest, or the "other." Dean MacCannell, scholar of tourism, postulates the other of tourism encompasses both the tourist subject's unconscious as well as the destination, another place. Place becomes an imaginative

symbolic shelter every tourist desires.¹⁰⁸ In Klett and Wolfe's photograph, the left group is sightseeing – “a form of connecting to someone or something other as represented by or embodied in an attraction.”¹⁰⁹ This act is always performed with the intention and hope that good will come from it, not harm. There is a sensuous desire to become intimate with the unfamiliar. But as all sightseers can attest, MacCannell states not all tourists make a strong effort in this experience and often fail to connect:

What often happens is a tourist's desire for the other lacks passion – like a man who makes a pass even though he has no real interest in his date, only because he believes he is expected to make a pass. There may be no specific desire to see the Mona Lisa beyond the fact that it is something one is supposed to, or expected to see when visiting the Louvre, which is someplace one is supposed to visit on a trip to Paris... Even failed tourists confess a desire to *really* experience and grasp someone or something “other,” especially the highlighted attractions everyone is supposed to see.¹¹⁰

A barrier in experiencing this connection may lie in the infinite reproductions of the Grand Canyon. A plethora of travel magazines, television shows, photography books, and postcards closes the gap between reality and photography; they become surrogates for travel. Lippard comments that “even when one is actually on the spot, the camera becomes a prosthetic for direct experience.”¹¹¹ Sightseeing the Grand Canyon recalls historical and contemporary manifestations of authority, mastery, and control – which also defines the site of ego according to MacCannell. Every attraction does this to some extent, but this chasm is distinctive as it conjures reflections about the Western historical, ego ideals and confirming them in an ego based self-satisfaction.¹¹² Conversely, it is not a

¹⁰⁸ Dean MacCannell, *The Ethics of Sight-Seeing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 11.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹¹¹ Lucy Lippard, *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art, and Place* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 136.

¹¹² Dean MacCannell, “The Ego Factor in Tourism,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29:1 (June 2002), 149.

new landscape. American fur traders probably first saw the canyon in the late 1820s, and in 1857 Army Lieutenant Joseph Christmas Ives led the first United States government exploring expedition to the Grand Canyon, also when the first geological studies were made. It has been explored, invaded, and occupied – in both a physical and non-physical sense.

The seven photographers presented in this chapter have simulated depictions of landscapes that are meant to be engaged with, not just to be seen. The photographs' motifs are such that the viewer is invited to engage with them imaginatively, unlike pictures taken during a tourist activity. The latter is a form of documentation, influenced from straight photography. With images that are of this nature, art critic Michael Fried observed that the viewer and photograph transaction is not meant to be imaginative and, therefore, it is completely up to the viewer to decide what to make of them – without more than a minimum of guidance by the works themselves.¹¹³

But for those that directly reference the Western landscape more definitively, such as Sanborn, Bauer, and Klett, the viewer becomes more aware of her/his responsibility in what she/he is looking at. There is an undeniable reality factor in the physicality portrayed. In photography there is an initial reference that lets the observer investigate what is depicted and contemplate it in silence without consideration for the photograph's significance.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 19.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

Chapter 4

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO LANDSCAPE AND RELEVANCE OF MANIPULATION

This chapter considers how recently developed artist residencies in the desert region and education programs devoted to interdisciplinary studies (including sustainability, geography, and fine art) have influenced the artistic sensibility. Run by an interdisciplinary artists' group, the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) in southern California is dedicated to "the increase and diffusion of information about how the world's lands are appropriated, utilized, and perceived."¹¹⁵ The Center is comprised of a land use database (a public resource on-line catalogue of over one thousand sites), land use museum (a network of institutions and exhibition sites) and the site extrapolation division (which conducts real and virtual tours of exemplary land use sites listed on the database). CLUI analytically dissects human-made landscapes that are urban, wild, and everything in between. Strictly an artist residency, High Desert Test Sites (HDTTS) started as an experimental platform to have emerging and established artists show new work that comments on the Western desert. Art installations are created in unexpected, obscure locations across California and can be visited daily. Finally, the Land Arts of the American West Program at the University of New Mexico is a studio-based field program that broadens the definition of land art through direct experience with it. The physical immersion in nature and mentorship of guest scholars in disciplines including art history, architecture, writing, criticism, archaeology, studio art, and ceramics, provides students a rich and unprecedented experience to investigate art and land. Essentially they

¹¹⁵ "About the Center," CLUI's official website, accessed September 23, 2013, <http://www.clui.org/section/about-center>.

construct, detail, and/or document a range of site-based interventions that place emphasis on processes of making, experiential forms of knowing, and interdisciplinary modes of approach.¹¹⁶ These organizations are reminders that landscape is a construct of the mind and memory, as much as a physical configuration of the natural and built environments.

In 2001, Rebecca Solnit believed there was virtually no one in the younger generation of landscape photographers making significant art in the West. Instead, she said, there were a number of impressive young installation artists who began as photographers. Responses to photography's relationship to gender and landscape ideology through the mid-1980s increasingly led away from photography as an adequate medium and from landscape as an adequate category toward installation, video, and conceptual work:

Installation itself insists on a more bodily, diffuse experience, on the possibility of ongoing creation and transformation, on unframed and unresolved contextuality. It may be that landscape has become environment, politically and phenomenologically. As politics, the environment leads us to corporate boardrooms, toxin-damaged people and animals, systems of control, and other unscenic arenas, and leads photographers to questions about the impact of their work; as phenomenology, the environment is about the relationship between belief, perception, and sensory reality.¹¹⁷

While the list of photographers I mentioned in the beginning of the third chapter clearly suggests that significant art is being made in and about the West, a trace of truth remains in Solnit's statement. Many additional young artists not mentioned in this chapter are exploring subjects of the West in their work, yet their work is not defined by this subject matter. Like most of the artists analyzed under the manipulation strategies, today's artists tend to explore a variety of subject matter, complementing their employment of various

¹¹⁶ "Program," Land Arts of the American West's official website, accessed September 23, 2013, <http://landarts.org/category/program/#.UVwyAXChDII>.

¹¹⁷ Solnit, *As Eve Said*, 97-98.

mediums. Perhaps not the sole impetus for this exploration, but one nonetheless, is the history of landscape theory and landscape tradition. According to Solnit, landscape has been considered the most pedestrian, unintellectual of the themes of visual art, a kind of mental picnic in both modernism and postmodernism:

The primary landscape tradition for Western civilization is that of the pastoral, in both literature and art: the pastoral as the antithesis of the city, a refuge from the politics and corruption of cities, a place of virtue, a place significantly outside history and ruled by cyclical rather than linear time. The pastoral at its most banal is the resort, vacationland, campsite.¹¹⁸

It is this tradition that has made it hard to re-envision the landscape as a complex place in which futures are being prepared, secret wars carried out, poisons dispersed, histories inscribed. It has been hard to conceive of original content primarily because of the history, both socially and theoretically, embedded in the western land.

Fledgling artist collectives, residencies, higher education interdisciplinary programs, and research organizations devoted to landscape have provided an exciting and landmark approach to reconsidering our relationship with the desert. The Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) is one such non-profit organization involved in exploring, examining, and understanding land and landscape issues. Founded in 1994 with artists' residencies in 1997, the CLUI embraces a multidisciplinary approach to understanding nature and the extent of human interaction. Although it blurs the lines between art and activism, the goal is to draw in diverse audiences and get them to collectively think about the ways in which the contemporary land is being used and abused, stressing the cultural implications of misuse. For example, Smudge Studio, a collaboration between New York-based Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jaime Kruse, spent their residency in 2009 exploring

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 79.

sites and moments in which the geologic and human converge. For their project they created the *Siting the Geologic* poster series using graphic design and photography to illustrate the connection between ancient lakes in the American West and contemporary land use.¹¹⁹

The Center functions similar to that of a museum: gathering, archiving, and presenting its catalog of human land use. Within CLUI, a residence program supports the development of new interpretive methodologies and is open to artists, researchers, theorists, or anyone who works with land and land use issues in an innovative and engaging manner. Residents primarily work out of the CLUI facilities at Wendover, Utah, however there are outposts all over the country, exploring and interpreting the landscape of that unique geographic region. In 2010, the Nevada Museum of Art's Center for Art + Environment (CA+E) announced its recent acquisition of the complete and ongoing records of this CLUI's residency program. Residency projects have included photography by artists such as Mark Ruwedel, architecture by artist collective Simparch, installations by Catherine Harris and Achim Mohne, publications by Mark Klett, and videos by Tori Arpad and Lucy Raven. The Wendover facility has also hosted numerous classes, such as the Land Arts of the American West programs from both the University of New Mexico and Texas Tech University.¹²⁰

With a mission exclusively supporting experimental art that engages with the local environment and community, High Desert Test Sites (HDTS) is an instrumental

¹¹⁹ "Siting the Geologic," Smudge Studio's official website, accessed March 20, 2013, <http://smudgestudio.org/smudge/with/lakes/lakes.html>.

¹²⁰ Most of this information was pulled from the CLUI's website: <http://clui.org/>. To view artist participants and their body of work made during their residency, navigate to "A List of Participants in Wendover Residence Program" on the bottom of the Residence Program page.

collective that challenges traditional approaches to western land and art making. HDTS generates physical and conceptual spaces for art exploring the intersections between contemporary art and life at large. Unlike the CLUI, the mission and “experiment” of HDTS seeks to challenge art ownership, property, and patronage in addition to the creation of art responding or engaging with the desert. Scattered along a stretch of diverse desert communities that include Joshua Tree, Pioneertown, Wonder Valley, 29 Palms, and Yucca Valley (all located in California), its sites provide a place for both fleeting and long-term experimental projects and at any location there are a variety of events occurring such as tours, workshops and artist residencies.¹²¹ Its name references the nearby Nevada nuclear-test sites.

Most projects developed from this residency belong to no one and are intended to melt back into the landscape as new ones emerge, such as live multimedia performances inspired by desert life and surroundings. A more permanent, elevated structure is *Yucca Crater*, a twenty-four foot rock climbing playground and swimming pool built by Ball-Nogues Studio in 2011. Made from by-product, it is an eco-friendly addition to the desert. Its aquatic basin, a strong reference to abandoned suburban swimming pools throughout the Mojave Desert, is heated with solar power and pumped through a wind powered turbine, also encouraging re-use and eliminating waste. Visitors are encouraged to climb and descend the walls of *Yucca Crater* for a moment of respite in the cool water.

¹²² Artist Chris Engman participated in the residency in 2012 and fenced a circuitous

¹²¹ Most of this information was pulled from HDTS’s website: <http://www.highdeserttestsites.com/hdts>. To view artist participants and images of their work made on site, navigate to “Projects” on the website’s home page.

¹²² “Yucca Crater,” HDTS’s official website, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://www.highdeserttestsites.com/projects/yucca-crater>.

shape of land in Joshua Tree in his project titled *The Claim*. On one level, the fence is his claim to a piece of property that he legally cannot claim. But the fence is also a metaphor for everything that Engman has claimed in his life, which in the end cannot truly be claimed since everything is temporary.¹²³

Finally, the Land Arts of the American West Program, a collaboration of the College of Fine Arts at the University of New Mexico and College of Architecture at the Texas Tech University, offers an additional aspect that neither of the previous collectives do: it provides students with direct, physical engagement with a full range of human interventions in the landscape while directing attention to specific aspects of land art, mentored by professors, artists and scholars. Each year the Land Arts program travels throughout the southwestern United States to live and work for over fifty days on the land. The students also participate in collaborative field-based projects with visiting artists and community organizations, followed by organizing a semester- end gallery exhibition of student works, field documents, and projects.¹²⁴ A selection of student work is posted on the Land Arts' website, such as Jennifer Garlick's photograph, *Mirrors*, from 2005 in which the photograph depicts a landscape mostly obstructed by two mirrors that are placed in front of it, reflecting what is behind the viewer. The edges of the mirrors frame a defined reflection that at first sight is a plausible, natural formation but with further examination, a disjunctive continuity appears between the reflections and the land behind the mirrors that the viewer sees as one panoramic scene.¹²⁵

¹²³ "The Claim," HDTS's official website, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://www.highdeserttestsites.com/projects/claim>.

¹²⁴ Most of this information was pulled from the Land Arts of the American West Program's website: <http://landarts.unm.edu/index.html>.

By chronicling and presenting human creations of the land and making art that directly confronts at times conflicting views of the land, and other times, art that responds to the land's condition, these organizations adeptly bring human activity into the foreground. Forcing human actions into the definition of nature produces a complicated framework that not only disrupts traditional "rules" of environmentalism, but also suppresses pre-existing associations and histories of making art in nature. Following in their predecessor's footsteps of touchstone early land art works that explored the relationship between the natural and the man-made (a geological past and an industrial future), these collectives investigate a current landscape and geological history with programs and departments of coordinated developments. These organizations and their physical sites offer spaces that provide a current, relevant, twenty-first century, grand phenomenological relationship with the land. They present another avenue of manipulating one's perception of the western land. As Matthew Coolidge, Founder and Director of the CLUI, states:

the landscape is fairly rich as it is and, in a way, you don't need to do too much to it other than change your perspective – shift your point of view a bit – and the familiar objects, which are often unseen because they're so familiar, become more interesting. I think the existing landscape is almost infinitely rich if you just change the way you look at it.¹²⁶

The *New Topographics* exhibition, in many ways similar to missions of current collectives and interdisciplinary programs, offered an alternative form of landscape consciousness that is still unfolding in today's society. Through the analysis of contemporary photographs in the preceding chapter, we can see there exists undeniable stylistic and conceptual threads. The influences extend beyond obvious concerns such as

¹²⁶ Max Andrews, ed., *Land, Art: A Cultural Ecology Handbook* (London: Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, 2006), 31.

temporal and physical presence of weather such as aridity, rain, dew and light of the sun, and lack of human presence. The artists confidently confront and grapple with a space that has misguided potential to foster human happiness or cultivate feelings of belonging to the land.¹²⁷ And just as work by Adams and Baltz may be read as visual objection of automobility, suburban sprawl, and commercial development, these contemporary images may be seen as ignoring environmental degradation and not contributing to a vision of ecological citizenship. But they also, just like their predecessors did, encourage a sense of appreciation and wonder in what may not be so familiar through experience as visual reproduction and marketing: vistas of the West. The artists' effort to imagine a complex presentation of a processed landscape encourages us to reexamine our convoluted interrelationship between simulacra and reality, making both seem meaningful through a sense of possibility. Landscape is a construct of the mind and memory as much as a physical configuration of the natural and built environments. We all create landscapes. All landscapes are personal.

Similarly, by carefully crafting their images, the photographers I discussed in the preceding chapter also are creating a new definition of beauty – “a language of possibility.” Fontcuberta, Keever, and Stanton call on people to stop, look, and think about what else could possibly be said of a pristine landscape. *New Topographics* artist Lewis Baltz's photographs included images of Park City stripped bare and scarred, with piles of dirt and debris that made it hard to distinguish construction from destruction. But unlike the work in *New Topographics*, the essence of these photographs lies in the artists'

¹²⁷ The one exception is *New Topographics* artist Stephen Shore whose only color photographs in the exhibition did not explicitly engage with environmental problems and similar to the contemporary artists, encouraged a sense of wonder, appreciation and possibility in the familiar. Foster-Rice, *Reframing the New Topographics*, 33-35.

embrace of the assumed, fictitious, fantasy as well as preconceived notions of our attachment to the West. It is a seemingly odd combination, but yet ironically contains a topographic rawness that resembles *New Topographics* in form of landscape play and an innocent vision of landscape beauty and feeling.

In the twenty-first century much photography associated with landscape focuses on victims of various sorts – natural disasters, accidents, war and poverty.¹²⁸ Visual records have shown viewers places they will never go, and maybe also don't want to; their images capture subjects – intentionally or not – for viewers to consume from a safe distance. With the rise in the availability of cameras, especially in cellular devices, the lens has increasingly focused on the vernacular – birthdays, graduations, weddings and pets. One of humankind's eternal quests is to know the unknowable – to explore. We are all explorers in our own way, whether it is braving new terrain or just discovering a different corner of our own backyards. The explorers' stories become our stories; we imagine what Carleton E. Watkins experienced on his U.S. Government photographic survey. Exploration is a huge part of knowing the world around us and a way of negotiating the landscape.

Art about the landscape presents a larger than life vision of the world, presenting vistas and aerials, complete with beauty and impending doom, literally freezing a moment in full panoramic sweep. And when this art is a photograph, it connotes facts of existence, which as revealed in this thesis can be very misguided. It is impossible for contemporary artists to continue photographing the Western American landscape without

¹²⁸ Martha Rosler, "In, Around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)," in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, edited by Richard Bolton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 303.

looking at the past, through art, film, and literature, as well as the current environmental crisis.

William Cronan observed, “Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural. As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires.”¹²⁹ The manipulation techniques that the photographers employ present an unnaturalness of the landscape, as well as civilization’s longing to be part of it, bringing with it the baggage of history embedded in it. Where does this art leave us, and what will the mirror we hold up to it tomorrow reveal? Molly, from Werner Herzog’s 1982 film *Fitzcarraldo* stated: “It is only dreamers that move mountains.” Dreaming is a complex term, and to many indigenous people, it is used to understand the consciousness of and interactions with the physical landscape.¹³⁰ These artists are the dreamers; they dream of a landscape that will survive, that will endure with all its beauty and complexity.

¹²⁹ William Cronan, *Uncommon Ground* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), 69-70.

¹³⁰ W.E.H. Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays, 1938-1973* (Canberra, ACT: Australian National University Press, 1979), 23-24.

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