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“New Topographics”: Locating Epistemological Concerns in the American Landscape

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New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape. Organized by the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, and the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film. George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, June 13–September 27, 2009; Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), October 25, 2009–January 3, 2010; Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, February 19–May 16, 2010; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, July 17–October 3, 2010; Landesgalerie Linz, Austria, November 10, 2010–January 8, 2011; Die Photographische Sammlung/SK, Stiftung Kultur, Cologne, January 27–April 3, 2011; Netherlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam, June 25–September 11, 2011; Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, Spain, October 17, 2011–January 8, 2012. Exhibition at LACMA curated by Edward Robinson. Also curated by Alison Nordstrom and Britt Salvesen.

Locating Landscape: New Strategies, New Technologies. Sam Lee Gallery, Los Angeles. October 30–December 5, 2009.

In 1975, a show opened at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, that would cause a significant stir in the established art world. The ten young photographers whose work was featured described themselves as landscape photographers, but they rejected the picturesque, romanticizing, and purportedly human-free landscapes of their immediate forebears, epitomized by the work of Ansel Adams. Instead they photographed everything that had previously been cropped out of American landscape photographs: the “spaces in between,” such as parking lots, industrial buildings, grain elevators, tract developments, shopping malls, freeway underpasses, and the like. Curator William Jenkins named the show “New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape,” and the group of photographers became known, too, as the New Topographics.

Thirty-four years later, the George Eastman House and the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, have re-created the historic show, which opened at the George Eastman House in the summer of 2009 and moved to LACMA in the fall, before continuing on to Tucson, San Francisco, and several venues in Europe. The show at LACMA, curated by Edward Robinson, consisted of five large rooms filled with photographs and a sixth room that housed a video projection and a selection of books related to the exhibition. Two-thirds of the photographs from the original exhibition were displayed; as in the original show, they were matted and framed simply and at a modest scale, most of the images not more than eight by ten inches in dimension. All but one (Stephen Shore) of the ten photographers' work was in black and white, and most of the images were hung individually, on roughly the same horizontal plane.

The simple presentation—combined with the photographers' deliberately evenhanded treatment of their apparently mundane subject matter—was so unassuming as to be confounding and even offensive to some of the show's first visitors in the 1970s: "Look at this picture, I just . . . why? What is he trying to show?" one visitor complained, who further castigated the pictures as "dull and flat," and stated that "I just don't like this at all."¹

Despite—or perhaps because of—the deeply mixed reactions to the 1975 show, the New Topographics has since served as a distinctive influence in landscape art, photography, urban studies, and geography. In 1985, critic Deborah Bright, while critiquing the overwhelmingly male makeup of the New Topographics show, asserted that perhaps no exhibition and catalog were more influential on the course of landscape photography.² In Eastman House curator Allison Nordstrom's assessment:

New Topographics appeared on the cusp of the great late-twentieth-century paradigm shift that saw photography turn from an isolated specialist practice to a widely accepted and highly desirable art world phenomenon. The exhibition, however important, should not be understood as an initiator of this great change but as a symptom of it. Its ideas, as those who were present are quick to remind us, were in the air, and the community of people who would engage with those ideas was flourishing. Perceptively identified and assembled, creatively named, and fortuitously shared, New Topographics became not only what it was in 1975, but what it has been since.³

Schools of thought that could claim the New Topographics as contemporaries include J. B. Jackson's cultural landscape studies (influential to cultural geography), and urban studies scholarship inspired by Denise Scott and Robert Venturi's influential 1972 book *Learning from Las Vegas*. Descendants in the art

world include photographers as diverse as Cathy Opie, Andreas Gursky, and Edward Burtynsky; organizations such as the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) in Los Angeles; and, albeit more obliquely, a burgeoning group of artist-scholars working at the intersections of art and geography through critical practices of mapping and photography.⁴

From an American studies standpoint, a consideration of the New Topographics offers generative insights into “American” ideas of landscape and emergent intersections between critical geography and American studies. Since the “spatial turn” of the 1990s in the social sciences and the humanities,⁵ geography, topography, and cartography have emerged as central themes in American studies and, to an uneven extent, ethnic studies.⁶ In the recent *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*,⁷ maps charting power relations and global economic flows are paired with critical essays by artists, geographers, and American studies scholars. In a way this confluence was to be expected: a critical analysis of space, after all, is essential to the questions of empire; local, national, and global flows; and power relations that ground contemporary iterations of American, cultural, and ethnic studies. The question of *landscape*, however, is a more particular one, returning us to some of the foundational questions of American studies as a discipline: its participation in, as well as its later critiques of, the myths that undergird and produce U.S. nationhood. A close viewing of the New Topographics forces one to contemplate the centrality of particular landscapes, especially western landscapes, in the myth and imaginative currency of American nationhood.

In their photographs, many of the New Topographics photographers offer a specific interpretation of “landscape” similar to J. B. Jackson’s ideas, which undergirded the field of cultural landscape studies: there is a primary interest in sites of the everyday, what Jackson called “vernacular landscapes.” The landscape is considered to be a document, with the idea that one can “read the landscape,” and extrapolate meanings from what one sees. Within this stance lies the double premise that one can portray landscapes in an objective manner, and read the landscape for meanings; as a document, the landscape is viewed as a repository of cultural, human truths.⁸ As William Jenkins, the original show’s curator, put it:

It must be made clear that “New Topographics” is not an attempt to validate one category of pictures to the exclusion of others. *As individuals the photographers take great pains to prevent the slightest trace of judgment of opinion from entering their work . . .* This viewpoint, which extends throughout the exhibition, is anthropological rather than critical, scientific rather than artistic. *The exhibition, as an entity separate from the photographers, will hopefully carry the same non-judgmental connotation as the pictures which comprise it. If “New Topographics”*

*has a central purpose it is simply to postulate, at least for the time being, what it means to make a documentary photograph.*⁹

This claim of objectivity and emotional neutrality strikes an odd note between unassuming and problematic, with complexities particular to the medium of photography, as Nicholas Nixon, one of the photographers included in the original show, noted: “The fictional properties of even the most utilitarian photograph suggest the difficulty of coming to a genuine understanding of the medium’s paradoxes, let alone its power. As it is somewhere on a cloudy continuum between the literary and the painterly, so likewise does it hover between fact and point of view.”¹⁰

In fact, many of the New Topographics photographers had ambivalent feelings regarding Jenkins’s claims of “objectivism” and “neutrality” in their work and sought to distance themselves from this discourse. Robert Adams, who also took issue with Jenkins’s positioning of the show as critical toward the iconic landscapes of Ansel Adams, would later assert that autobiography and metaphor were key elements of a good landscape photograph, believing that neither the photographer’s personal engagement with the place nor the responsive chord it might strike in the viewer could (or should) be excised.¹¹ However, Nixon’s impassioned statement that “the world is infinitely more interesting than any of my opinions concerning it. This is not a description of a style or an artistic posture, but my profound conviction,”¹² was certainly shared by most, if not all, of the artists in the show, and serves as a fitting entrance salvo into considering the significance and effects of the images themselves.

In later essays and statements about photography, Robert Adams’s photographic credo included a vow to include human-made elements or traces in all of his photographs. His fourteen images in the show—photographs of suburban development in the Denver area from 1973 and 1974—can be characterized by this determination, coupled with a romantic visual sensibility. For instance, many of Robert Adams’s photographs bear undeniable compositional resemblances to Ansel Adams’s work: dramatic contrast between dark and light, expansive western horizons, and dramatic skies.¹³ These elements feature prominently in *Tract Housing, North Glenn and Thornton, Colorado*, 1973 (fig. 1). However, unlike the rarefied, pristine plains, forests, and mountains of Ansel Adams’s work, the iconic western plain depicted in the younger Adams’s work is densely filled with boxy tract homes, glaring in their newness, for as far as the eye can see, to the degree that one cannot say for sure that any part of the plain we see has not been touched by human habitation.



Figure 1.
 Robert Adams (United States, b. 1937)
Tract Housing, North Glenn and Thornton, Colorado, 1973
 Gelatin silver print
 8 x 10 in.
 George Eastman House collections
 © Robert Adams, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco,
 and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Aesthetically, Frank Gohlke's work shares a great deal of affinity with Adams's, in its unremitting attempts to find lyricism in the mundane: the delicate tracing of more than a dozen telephone lines running

parallel across the sky like the strings of a musical instrument over a nondescript white utilities building (*White Building, Los Angeles, 1974*); worn, painted arrows zigzagging gently through a deserted parking lot in Burbank, California (*Landscape, Los Angeles, 1974, fig. 2*); the luminosity of water and sky and a gentle rise of concrete banks in a shallow, litter-strewn irrigation canal (*Irrigation Canal, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1974*). Gohlke's later work, particularly *Measure of Emptiness*, in which grain elevators link and complicate the flat expanses of land and sky in middle America, and a project tracing the utter devastation and gradual regrowth of mountain landscapes after the eruption of Mount St. Helens would continue these concerns with infrastructures



Figure 2.
Frank Gohlke (United States, b. 1942)
Landscape, Los Angeles, 1974, printed 1975
Gelatin silver print
9 ½ x 9 ½ in.
Gift of the photographer. George Eastman House
collections
© Frank Gohlke

of the everyday and, as he once put it himself (describing the work of Robert Adams), the ways in which “damage and grace are inextricably intertwined.”

For Gohlke, the practice of photographing the landscape was an exercise with explicitly philosophical concerns from the outset. In an interview in 1978, he stated, regarding the New Topographics, “I think all of us were and are primarily concerned with understanding the things we photograph in their largest relationships to land and culture, and the particularities of social existence.” For Gohlke, the show’s name was a bit of a misnomer: these concerns, he believed, were “more the province of *geography*, not topography.”¹⁴

In contrast, photographers Nicholas Nixon and Joe Deal took a more overtly topographical approach, adopting systematic approaches toward cataloging surface elements of particular localities. Nixon's large-format camera, "bird's-eye" views of Boston and Deal's elevated, downward-tilted square views of new tract-home developments in Albuquerque, in their consistency of composition and framing, could both pass for the work of municipal surveyors. Yet, in juxtapositions such as the sleek reflective sheath of the Hancock Tower dwarfing an old church (Nixon, *View of Copley Square, Boston*, 1974), or the order of mowed lawns and rectilinear homes awkwardly carved from scrubby plains of chaparral (Deal, *Untitled View [Albuquerque]*, 1974), Nixon and Deal also participate in the disorienting impulses of Adams and Gohlke, forcing a fresh contemplation of social processes in and on the landscape.

In their contributions to both the original and the current shows, Bernd and Hilla Becher, and Lewis Baltz engage typologies rather than topographies: the Bechers, the detritus of coal and salt mines in Canada and Pennsylvania; and Baltz, then-newly constructed industrial parks in 1970s Irvine. The Bechers, important figures in the Dusseldorf school of photography (which, by the late 1990s, would spawn blockbuster art photographer Andreas Gursky), in addition to being the only non-Americans (and Hilla Becher the only woman) are the only artists in the show who truly span the distance between photography and conceptual art. In an audio clip that visitors can access while viewing the LACMA show, Hilla Becher explains how the two developed what would become their signature "typological" approach, in which multiple photographs of the same object are displayed in grids: when they put the photos on the ground in a grouping, "they started to dance." To Becher, the element of comparison was key: "To be able to compare photographs they have to be free from moods. They have to be as neutral as possible. That makes it possible to compare them. And then you can compare anything that's taken from a similar angle." Baltz, whose work, along with the Bechers, comprised the only photographs to be displayed in a grid rather than as single images, was also interested in neutrality or objectivity, or at least the appearance of such. His photos, he said, were "deliberately uninformative," to reflect the opacity of the "new industrial parks" themselves: "You don't know whether they're manufacturing panty hose or megadeath" (fig. 3).

The philosophical concerns of the remaining three photographers, John Schott, Henry Wessel Jr., and Stephen Shore, are more difficult to encapsulate within the overall terms of the show. Schott's photographs of motels along Route 66, while at times provocative on an individual level, as a whole do not transcend their limiting conceit, and may be too easily read (at least from



Figure 3.
Lewis Baltz (United States, b. 1945)
*South Corner, Riccar America Company, 3184 Pullman, Costa
Mesa.* From the series *New Industrial Parks*, 1974
Gelatin silver print
6 x 9 in.
Gift of the photographer, George Eastman House collections
© Lewis Baltz, courtesy Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica

the vantage point of the early twenty-first century) as an overly simplistic romanticization of the eccentric road culture of the American West. Wessel's photographs bring a snapshot aesthetic to bear on

everyday landscapes of 1970s Los Angeles, while Stephen Shore's work—alleys and in-between spaces as well as Main Streets of towns from New England to the Southwest, and the only color photographs—seems to signal the heterogeneity of place and experience in the United States rather than the more universalistic concerns expressed by Gohlke and others.

In the last of the six rooms that made up the LACMA show, visitors could browse books having to do with or inspired by the New Topographics (e.g., from J. B. Jackson's *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) to Brian Hayes's *Infrastructure: The Book of Everything for the Industrial Landscape* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), while viewing a large wall projection of a Center for Land Use Interpretation video installation commissioned by LACMA. The installation deals with landscapes of oil production in Houston's "petrochemical corridor" and in Kern County, California. On the two-screen projection, cameras move slowly over the two

regions with no sound but the continuous drone of plane engines. In one, the video camera's anonymous eye passes over the flat, dry land of Kern County, perforated with oil derricks pumping mechanically like so many worker ants, and interspersed with crop fields whose dense rows have been hewn with industrial precision. On the right, in Houston, refinery cylinders and smoking stacks coexist with lush trees, winding waterways, and cars moving deliberately among gleaming gray roads. In both frames, it is late afternoon or morning; in both, a warm, gold-tinged sunlight falls indifferently on these massive infrastructures of "black gold."

The CLUI piece enacts a "scaling-up" of the concerns of the New Topographics photographers: the scale is industrial, and the video cameras, presumably mounted in airplanes, move at a mechanically regulated pace over the landscape. Here the original show's claims of neutrality and objectivity are pushed to an extreme, to a point where there is a palpable sense of human absence; for instance, CLUI's "educational" cataloging of the workings of oil production in the American landscape omits any reference to the disproportionately distributed human costs involved in the worldwide harvesting and processing of oil. Indeed, CLUI describes itself as an "educational organization" rather than an artists' enterprise (although this claim has been consciously constructed, and is maintained with an ever-present though subtle air of artifice by artist and CLUI director Matthew Coolidge). In the scaling-up, however, the human-scale concerns and passions of the New Topographics photographers have arguably been lost, along with their preoccupation with photography itself as a tool for engagement with individual as well as collective philosophical concerns. To put it another way, for all of these photographers (with the possible exception of the Bechers), photography was not only the *means*, but also the *end*, of their inquiries into the landscape and the social processes that shape it.

Locating Landscape: New Strategies, New Technologies at the Sam Lee Gallery in Los Angeles and curated by Kate Palmer Abers, showcased nine artists "working at the edges of photography, landscape, technology, and geo-location," and was organized to coincide with the LACMA New Topographics show. Although including older and more recent work from original New Topographics artists Lewis Baltz and Frank Gohlke (respectively), as well as established landscape photographer Mark Klett (best known for his *Rephotographic Survey Project*, in which he rephotographed the sites of nineteenth-century landscape photographs from the same vantage point),¹⁵ the show focused on younger artists who could be conceived of as being inspired by as well as innovating their predecessors work.

Christiana Caro, in *10 Miles North, South, East, West and Points in Between* (2001–2002), used a GPS to locate and photograph, in 360-degree panoramas, these points extending from her apartment in Boston. The only piece on view depicts a series of square color images of spindly, wintertime New England woods photographed with large aperture settings and focused close in, as if to emphasize the limitations of the imposed arbitrariness of her exercise. Paho Mann's nine color photographs from his *Reinhabited Circle Ks* project depict—in uniform composition—vacated Circle K stores in Phoenix, Arizona, that have been repurposed for new commercial uses, from a Mexican market to a tuxedo shop to a check-cashing business. Similarly, Andrew Freeman's *[Manzanar] Architectural Double* tracks and photographs repurposed architectural structures, in this case barracks from the former “internment” camp at Manzanar, California, one of ten camps in which Japanese Americans were incarcerated during World War II, which were sold after the war and scattered throughout the state.

Mann and especially Freeman's works are exciting in their direct engagement with social and political content, Mann in showing the creative reappropriation of corporate homogeneity by locally based entrepreneurship, and Freeman by making visible the material history of racist state practices in the most mundane of landscapes (fig. 4). These works lift the veil of opacity—the self-professed claim of neutrality or objectivity—which characterized the earlier generation's work, and perhaps ultimately limited their reach to more muted strands of cultural and intellectual discourse.

The images from the original show itself remain valuable, however, not in spite of, but *because* of that very opacity (not to say “neutrality” or “objectivity”): a good number of them still resist easy categorization, and in so doing denaturalize still prevalent notions of which landscapes constitute proper objects of study and analysis, and which do not. They still push their viewers to reinvent their own notions of landscape and, if one looks closely, to accept the implicit challenge to engage the visual as a tool for critical inquiry. The curators' framing of their own restaging misses to a large degree this key epistemological impetus, adhering too closely to the letter of the original catalog, which many of the photographers themselves disavowed from the beginning.

Work like Andrew Freeman's and that of the burgeoning number of artists and thinkers working at the intersections of art and critical geography, however, find intellectual and political passion and purpose in the desentimentalization of the American landscape. In doing so they participate in the New Topographics photographers' desire to affirm the importance of everyday landscapes as not merely sentiment or fetish, but as significant sites of intellectual and philo-



Figure 4.
 Andrew Freeman
 #3.4.04 Don Becker's garage and guesthouse, Independence,
 California,
 2004
 36°48.229 N, 118°11.620 W
 From the series, [Manzanar] Architecture Double
 Chromogenic print
 ©Andrew Freeman, courtesy Sam Lee Gallery, Los Angeles

sophical inquiry. For those who seek to denaturalize “common-sense” understandings of the everyday, toward a better understanding of the processes and social relations that shape the places in which we live and work, New

Topographics offers an ethos of visual engagement that moves carefully from the everyday to the more abstract. As Gohlke, speaking of the grain elevators he photographed in the late 1970s, put it,

I didn't really understand what a landscape was, what it meant . . . until I'd been photographing the grain elevators for awhile. . . . I guess what I learned to do was to . . . ask some productive questions that could lead me on. . . . it just became a logical consequence to begin asking how these things worked. Just in a mechanical way, and how they worked within the social and economic system, and where they came from. You know, you do something, whose sources you don't really understand, but it just seems so right or seems so compelling that you can't really do otherwise.¹⁶

Notes

1. Britt Salvesen and Allison Nordstrom, prologue to *New Topographics*, catalog (Gottingen, Germany: Steidl, 2009), 9.

2. Bright's 1985 essay, "Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meaning of Landscape Photographs," is quoted in Allison Nordstrom, "After New: Thinking about New Topographics from 1975 to the Present," in Salvesen and Nordstrom, *New Topographics*, 75.
3. *Ibid.*, 78.
4. For examples, see Lize Mogel and Alexis Bhagat, eds., *An Atlas of Radical Cartography* (Los Angeles: Journal of Aesthetics and Protest Press, 2008); Nato Thompson, ed., *Experimental Geography: Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography, and Urbanism* (New York: Melville House, 2009); Trevor Paglen, *Blank Spots on a Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World* (New York: Dutton, 2009); Kim Stringfellow, *Greetings from the Salton Sea: Folly and Intervention in the Southern California Landscape, 1905–2005* (Chicago: Center for American Places, 2005); and the work of the Counter-Cartographies Collective, accessible online at <http://www.counter-cartographies.org/> (accessed March 1, 2010).
5. See Barney Warf and Santa Arias, *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2008).
6. Leaving aside more broadly spatial metaphors such as "crossroads," "diaspora," and "borders," some recent examples of uses of spatial frameworks in American studies and ethnic studies include conference themes ("Groundwork: Space and Place in American Cultures"—American Studies Association Annual Conference, 2005; "Emergent Cartographies: Asian American Studies in the Twenty-First Century—Asian American Studies Annual Conference, 2010); edited volumes; José David Saldívar, ed., *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa, eds., *Orientations: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001); and Matt Garcia, Angharad Valdivia, and Marie Leger, eds., *Geographies of Latinidad: Mapping Latino Studies for the Twenty-First Century* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, forthcoming).
7. Mogel and Bhagat, *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*.
8. A few key introductory anthologies include J. B. Jackson, *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); J. B. Jackson, *Landscape in Sight: Looking at America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); and D. W. Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). For more contemporary interpretations of cultural landscape studies, see Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi, eds., *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), and Chris Wilson and Paul Groth, eds., *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies after J. B. Jackson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
9. Salvesen and Nordstrom, *New Topographics*, 250.
10. *Ibid.*, 250.
11. Robert Adams, "Truth and Landscape," in *Beauty in Photography: Essays in Defense of Traditional Values* (New York: Aperture, 1996), 11–20.
12. Salvesen and Nordstrom, *New Topographics*, 250.
13. Robert Adams would not deny the influence: Ansel Adams's work inspired the younger photographer's own devotion to landscape photography, and the first photographic print Robert Adams ever purchased was a print of Ansel Adams's famous *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*. See Salvesen and Nordstrom, *New Topographics*, 44.
14. "An Interview with Frank Gohlke," in Frank Gohlke, *Thoughts on Landscape* (Tucson, Ariz.: Hol Art Books, 2009), 48–49.
15. See Mark Klett et al., *Second View: The Rephotographic Survey Project* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984).
16. "Interview with Frank Gohlke," in Gohlke, *Thoughts on Landscape*, 45–46.