

NEW TOPOGRAPHICS AND THE
REINVENTION OF AMERICAN LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY, 1975

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This dissertation by Emilia Mickevicius is accepted in its present form
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CURRICULUM VITAE

Emilia Rae Mickevicius was born in Wausau, Wisconsin in 1989. She received her Bachelor's degree in Art History with a minor in Visual Art from the University of Chicago in 2011. Research for this project was supported by grants and fellowships from Brown University, the Center for Creative Photography, the Getty Research Institute, and the Henry Luce Foundation/American Council of Learned Societies. Emilia presented this research at numerous conferences and symposia, including the annual meeting for the College Art Association (2016, 2017), the Southwest Art History Conference (2016), and the NYU IFA-Frick Symposium in the History of Art (2017). She has held curatorial positions at the Art Institute of Chicago and the RISD Museum, as well as cataloging roles in special collections and visual resources at the University of Chicago library and art history department.

For my parents

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Introduction

Any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads.

-D.W. Meinig¹

In her 1966 collection of essays *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag wrote: “All works of art are founded on a certain distance from the reality which is represented.”² She continued, connecting this notion of distance to style:

This “distance” is, by definition, inhuman or impersonal to a certain degree; for in order to appear to us as art, the work must restrict sentimental intervention and emotional participation, which are functions of “closeness.” It is the degree and manipulating of this distance, the conventions of distance, which constitute the style of the work...

But the notion of distance... is misleading, unless one adds that the movement is not just away from but toward the world. The overcoming or transcending of the world in art is also a way of encountering the world, and of training or educating the will to be in the world.³

Sontag’s book was a call for a mode of art criticism that expands, rather than limits our perceptions of the visual, and does not privilege analysis of content at the expense of considering the visceral ways in which form works upon viewers. She also expressed how the cultivated absence of style is still a posture – still the presence of style.

A decade later, an exhibition at the International Museum of Photography and Film at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York explored these “conventions

¹ D.W. Meinig, “The Beholding Eye,” in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, ed. D. W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 34.

² Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1961), 30.

³ Ibid.

of distance” in the context of landscape photography. Held from October 14, 1975 to February 2, 1976, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* sought to identify an approach that had not yet been conceptualized, but generally bore the appearance of “neutrality.”⁴ The ten photographers in the show were Robert Adams (b. 1938), Bernd (1931-2007) and Hilla (1934-2015) Becher, Lewis Baltz (1945-2014), Joe Deal (1947-2010), Frank Gohlke (b. 1942), Nicholas Nixon (b. 1947), John Schott (b. 1944), Stephen Shore (b. 1947), and Henry Wessel Jr. (1942-2018). All were Americans, except for the Bechers, who were from Germany.

Redefining the subject of landscape as the built environment, by and large they trained their lenses on the postwar terrain of the western United States, with its ubiquitous tract homes, industrial parks, gas stations, and freeways.⁵ Seemingly evacuating their images of authorial expression, the photographers furthermore cultivated an approach that was distinguished by what the exhibition’s curator, William Jenkins, termed a “minimum of inflection.”⁶ Jenkins believed that a tendency to seek out banal

⁴ William Jenkins, “Introduction,” in *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* (Rochester: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975), 5. The “Eastman House” is how the museum was commonly called in 1975. The “George Eastman House” was chartered in 1947 and the museum opened in 1949. In October 2015, the institution was officially rebranded to the “George Eastman Museum.”

⁵ The exceptions to the otherwise dominant subject matter of the western United States were the photographs by Nicholas Nixon (who photographed Boston) and the Bechers (who photographed industrial and agricultural structures in Pennsylvania and Canada). Frank Gohlke made several of his photographs in Minnesota.

⁶ Jenkins 5. Jenkins’s title was assistant curator of twentieth-century photography, and his tenure at the Eastman House lasted from 1971-79. Robert Doherty was the director of the institution at the time (1972-79), preceded by Beaumont Newhall (retired 1971) and Van Deren Coke (1971-72). Other curatorial staff aside from Jenkins included Robert Sobieszek (1971-90), Thomas Barrow (curatorial assistant, then assistant director, 1964-72), and Harold Jones (associated curator, 1968-71). See Britt Salvesen, “New Topographics,” in *New Topographics*, ed. Alison Nordström and Britt Salvesen (Göttingen: Steidl; Tucson, AZ: Center for Creative Photography; Rochester, NY: George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, 2009), 11-67 (13).

subject matter and render it with an economy of expression had been initiated in the prior decade, with the photographic books of artist Ed Ruscha. He contended that like Ruscha, the *New Topographics* photographers rigorously suppressed their emotional relationships to what they photographed, crafting an appearance of authorlessness. Jenkins explained of Ruscha's images in his concise introduction to the *New Topographics* catalog: "The pictures [are] stripped of any artistic frills and reduced to an essentially topographic state, conveying substantial amounts of visual information but eschewing entirely the aspects of beauty, emotion, and opinion."⁷ Later in his essay, in a gesture that itself expressed a desire for neutral clarity, he cited a dictionary definition of *topography*: "the detailed and accurate description of a particular place, city, town, district, state, parish, or tract of land."⁸ In the press release for the exhibition, Jenkins clarified that it was not the connotation of *topography* with maps and map-making, but rather the idea of description, that drew him to the term.⁹ He and Joe Deal (who was then the museum's exhibitions manager, and was instrumental in conceptualizing the show) also nodded to Eastman House curator Robert Sobieszek's recent use of the term to label a case of nineteenth-century stereo views.¹⁰

With "New Topographics," then, Jenkins and Deal sought to characterize this neutral posture as deployed in the particular context of photographing the postwar

⁷ Jenkins 5

⁸ Jenkins 6

⁹ Press release, exhibition file, George Eastman Museum.

¹⁰ Deal recounted these circumstances in 1997: "It's a long time ago, but my recollection is that there was a small display case in Eastman House in the hall which had stereo cards and postcards from the nineteenth century. The label for the case was called "topographics." I went to Bill [Jenkins] and said, "How about New Topographics or Contemporary Topographics?" That's how I remember it." Quoted in Annie Gilbert, "New Topographics: the Trajectory from Creative Intention to Critical Response," unpublished essay, 1997. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG229:1/19.

American landscape. Both Ruscha and the *New Topographics* photographers – for Ruscha was not actually included in the exhibition – formulated the terrain before them in a way that was unconventional by generic standards, trading editorialized transcendence for an approach suggestive of cool observation. Jenkins included a disclaimer that “the actual photographs are far richer in meaning and scope than the simple making of an aesthetic point,” but nevertheless emphasized: “The stylistic context within which all of the work in the exhibition has been made is so coherent and so apparent that it appears to be the most significant aspect of the photographs.”¹¹ With this pronouncement, the curator set into motion the phenomenon of the phrase “New Topographics” coming to connote not only the exhibition and the group of photographers it featured, but also a *style* – and an apparently cohesive one, at that.

Coming to the Eastman House with expectations shaped by the experience of looking at conventionally sublime views of the American landscape, such as the heroic, sentimentalizing photographs of Ansel Adams, the audience that attended *New Topographics* in 1975 generally found the 168 prints baffling.¹² The banality of the subject matter, coupled with the photographs’ style, posed an interpretive challenge. “They obviously didn’t take it from an artistic point of view,” one visitor commented, standing in front of prints by Schott and Shore.¹³ Implicitly likening the photographs to

¹¹ Jenkins 5

¹² Each photographer with the exception of Wessel and the Bechers showed 20 modestly sized prints. The Bechers presented seven of their “typologies” presented in grids, and Wessel showed 21 prints. Joe Deal and Frank Gohlke printed in square format. See “Checklist of the 1975 exhibition,” in Salvesen and Nordström, eds. *New Topographics*, 262-288. The Eastman House acquired only a portion of the show at the time.

¹³ Tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4. Shore’s color prints and Schott’s views of Route 66 motels were installed in the same corner of the exhibition, as indicated by installation photographs. See *New Topographics* exhibition file,

commercial imagery, another said: “I assume they were just paid to photograph something.”¹⁴ Yet others perceived an acute pessimism about the encroachment of commercial development onto the western American landscape. Perfectly encapsulating what Sontag had written about the potential of distance to serve as a way of better knowing the world, one person commented: “At first it’s stark nothing. But then you really look at it, and it’s just about the way things are.”¹⁵

After receiving a limited press response in Rochester, *New Topographics* traveled in abbreviated form to the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles and the Princeton University Art Museum.¹⁶ It garnered mixed reviews throughout, although notably, William Wilson positively reviewed the exhibition for the *Los Angeles Times*.¹⁷ By contrast, in a piece where he distinguished between the ten photographers’ approaches, critic Charles Desmarais wrote: “As a curatorial exegesis of what is seen as an important contemporary direction... the show falls flat on its face.”¹⁸ From the photographers’ standpoint, as Lewis Baltz put it in retrospect, it felt like dealing with “backlash” to an exhibition that

George Eastman Museum.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Eighty of the prints were on view at Otis (March 3 – April 4, 1976), where the show was installed in two rooms, and the same number of photographs appeared at Princeton (June 22 – September 3, 1976).

¹⁷ This review is William Wilson, “Camera Artists: Truth in Focus,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 1976, E10. Other contemporaneous press included: an announcement in *Afterimage*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (October 1975): 19; Charles Desmarais, “Topographical Error,” *Afterimage* Vol. 3, No. 5 (November 1975): 10-11; Carter Ratcliffe, “Route 66 Revisited: The New Landscape Photography,” *Art in America* Vol. 64, No. 1 (January-February 1976): 86-91; and Robert W. Woolard, “Man-Shaped Landscapes,” *Artweek* Vol. 7, No. 13 (March 27, 1976): 12. Later commentaries include Max Kozloff, “Ghastly News from Epic Landscapes,” *American Art* Vol. 5, Nos. 1-2 (Winter-Spring 1991): 108-131; and Deborah Bright, “Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography,” *Exposure* Vol. 23, No. 4 (Winter 1985): 5-18, reprinted in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 125-142.

¹⁸ Desmarais 10

hadn't even experienced "frontlash."¹⁹ In 2009, Gohlke likewise reflected: "I think it wouldn't be too strong to say that it was a vigorously hated show. Some people found it unutterably boring. Some people couldn't believe we were serious, taking pictures of this stuff. And, actually, that attitude is still very alive and well."²⁰

Despite the interpretive difficulty the show posed to its initial audience, however, as well as its modest attendance, forty-four years later *New Topographics* is widely regarded as one of the most important photography exhibitions of the twentieth century. It began with the catalog circulating among photography students.²¹ In 1982, Jenkins's catalog essay was republished in an anthology titled *Reading into Photography* alongside texts by John Szarkowski, Nathan Lyons, and Andy Grundberg.²² By 1983, *New Topographics* was being heralded as a "turning point" in American landscape photography.²³ And in 1985, Deborah Bright published her now well-known essay "Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men," where she argued that "perhaps no exhibition and catalog were more influential on the course of landscape photography," while noting that nearly all of the exhibition's artists were male, and taking Jenkins to task for what she

¹⁹ Oral History Interview with Lewis Baltz conducted by Matthew Witkovsky, 2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

²⁰ Quoted in Leah Ollman, "LACMA traces photography's New Topographics movement," *Los Angeles Times*, November 15, 2009.

²¹ Alison Nordström notes that photography students at the Visual Studies Workshop, such as Mark Klett, were familiar with *New Topographics* if not because they were able to see the show, then because of its catalog. Alison Nordström, "After New: Thinking about New Topographics from 1975 to the Present," in Salvesen and Nordström, eds. *New Topographics*, 69-79 (72).

²² See Thomas F. Barrow, Shelley Armitage, and William E. Tydeman, eds. *Reading into Photography: Selected Essays, 1959-1980* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982).

²³ "Deal and Baltz's photographs of man-altered environments represent a 'turning point,' according to Ted Hartwell, curator of photography for The Minneapolis Institute of Arts. The typical photograph of a landscape tries to 'celebrate' and 'monumentalize' its panoramic natural beauty. But Deal's and Baltz's more skeptical look at the land is a new vision..." See "New Look Landscapes from Guggenheim Photographer," *The Arts*, Sunday, July 31, 1983, C2; C8 (C2).

perceived as the lack of attention to social context implied by the show's premise.²⁴

Catalogs and surveys produced into the 1990s, such as Jonathan Green's *American Photography: A Critical History, 1945 to the Present* (1984) and Merry Foresta's *Between Home and Heaven* (1992), continued to reinforce the status of *New Topographics* as a watershed moment.²⁵ In 1997, an exhibition at Gallery Luisotti in Santa Monica titled *Rethinking Topographics* showed work by Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Henry Wessel, and the Bechers alongside other photographers who were not included in the original 1975 show, such as John Divola, Candida Höfer, and Ed Ruscha.²⁶

This attention is a phenomenon that Jenkins and the photographers themselves never anticipated – a circumstance that is reflected in the sparseness of the exhibition file in the Eastman Museum's archives, which contains only an exhibition checklist, handwritten lists of the prints that were acquired, and installation views.²⁷ In retrospect Jenkins has characterized his curatorial identity at the time as “more of a responder than an inventor,” and remains almost flabbergasted at the exhibition's canonical status.²⁸ The

²⁴ See Bright.

²⁵ See Jonathan Green, *American Photography: A Critical History, 1945 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1984), 166 and Merry A. Foresta, “Between Home and Heaven,” in *Between Home and Heaven: Contemporary American Landscape Photography*, ed. Merry A. Foresta (Washington, D.C. and Albuquerque: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution and University of New Mexico Press, 1992), 42-43.

²⁶ Indeed, the gallery represents Baltz and Gohlke, and specializes in contemporary landscape work in the spirit of *New Topographics*. Theresa Luisotti founded the gallery in 1996.

²⁷ The files for thematically-oriented exhibitions that occurred prior to *New Topographics* like Nathan Lyons's *Toward a Social Landscape* (1966) and Jenkins's *The Extended Document* (on view from February 1 – April 30, 1975), by contrast, contain far more correspondence and documentation.

²⁸ Bill Jenkins interviewed by Britt Salvesen, June 30, 2006. Center for Creative Photography, Oral History Collection, VOP06:018. Jenkins speaks of wishing he were asked more about the previous group show he curated at the Eastman House, *The Extended Document*, which featured the work of John Baldessari, Thomas Barrow, Michael Bishop, Marcia Resnick, Richard Schaeffler, and William Wegman.

title of the show has become synonymous with a certain approach to photographing landscape, which only underscores the urgency of parsing what that shorthand means, given that when people invoke it, it is in reference to what remains a nebulous and under-theorized combination of subject matter and style – at once suggesting deceptively simple notions like *movement* at the same time as more overtly abstract ones, like *temperament*, *attitude*, *sensibility*, and *idiom*.

In 2009, the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, Arizona staged a reprise of *New Topographics*, renewing scholarly and collecting interest in the show.²⁹ Curator Britt Salvesen’s groundbreaking historiographic essay for the exhibition catalog was the first major scholarly analysis of the exhibition, tracing the social, cultural, intellectual, and artistic forces that informed the work in the mid-1970s from the perspective of several decades’ hindsight. As Salvesen observes, paraphrasing a remark by Lewis Baltz, the 1970s were “bracketed... photographically by Diane Arbus and Cindy Sherman,” and marked both the rise of the modern environmental movement and the explosion of the photography market – positioning *New Topographics* to be analyzed in terms of how it crystallized not only aesthetic, but broader cultural shifts.³⁰ Concurrently and in the wake of the Center for Creative Photography iteration, a number of satellite exhibitions have endeavored to take stock of *New Topographics*’s influence on recent photographic practice, illuminating the show’s status as a touchstone for younger generations of

²⁹ A panel at CAA in 2008 resulted in the 2010 anthology *Reframing the New Topographics*, and the CCP exhibition, which also traveled to the George Eastman Museum, SFMoMA, and LACMA, also stimulated collecting interest. See *Reframing the New Topographics*, eds. Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach (Chicago: The Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2010).

³⁰ Salvesen 11. See also Lewis Baltz, “American Photography in the 1970s: Too Old to Rock, Too Young to Die,” in *American Images: Photography 1945-1980*, ed. Peter Turner (New York: Penguin, 1985).

photographers.³¹ Many contemporary photographers, particularly those working with landscape, cite *New Topographics* as an influence upon their practice and self-consciously position themselves as working in the same vein in their artist's statements.³² Gallery wall texts, press releases, and exhibition reviews reinforce the association.³³

The persistently generative character of *New Topographics*, particularly as of late, manifests in a place outside the typical purview of art historical inquiry. On Instagram, the image-sharing social media application launched in 2011, “#newtopographics” has become a popular hashtag, attesting to the exhibition's familiarity among a certain subset of image-makers, both professional and amateur. The feed for the hashtag serves as a visual manifestation of collective thought on what the phrase means, in the form of an aggregate of hundreds of thousands of self-cataloged images, the number of which increases daily. To critically examine this collection of images – to take seriously the gesture of employing the hashtag to declare the exhibition's influence on one's picture,

³¹ For example, *Locating Landscape: New Strategies, New Technologies*, curated by scholar Kate Palmer Albers for Lee Gallery in 2009, responded to the CCP iteration of *New Topographics*. It was intended to “lin[k] a new generation of photographers with the New Topographics movement that so greatly influenced them.” Press release, CCP, April 13, 2010. See also curator Colin Westerbeck's 2011 exhibitions *Seismic Shift* and *Aftershocks* at the California Museum of Photography (part of the programming for Pacific Standard Time / LA), which examined the 1975 exhibition's influence specifically on California photography.

³² For example, the author has had conversations with a photographer on the faculty at the Rhode Island School of Design, Thad Russell, who cites *New Topographics* as an influence upon his work. Russell characterizes “New Topographics” as a “sensibility.” He also notes how undergraduate students at RISD often don't “get” the work from the 1975 show at first, but then become fascinated by it and want to emulate it. Interview with Thad Russell, Providence, RI, July 12, 2016.

³³ Speaking about *Locating Landscape*, Kate Palmer Albers commented: “New Topographics was a watershed moment in the history of landscape photography... It's been a major undercurrent in photographic practice for more than forty years, and now – especially with the rapid growth and ready availability of networked mapping and locational technologies – we're seeing an explosion of new work that's taking landscape in a new direction.” The press release for the show also contended that “if both beauty and politics were slightly submerged in the landscapes of the 1970s, today, the lyric and poetic comfortably coexist with cultural and political concern.” Press release, CCP, April 13, 2010.

and render it findable by others – presents the opportunity to glimpse the meaning of “New Topographics” at a colloquial level, to perform a kind of art historical crowdsourcing. Scrolling through the images illuminates several consistencies: they picture the built environment, both commercial and residential architecture. They are largely devoid of people, yet brim with traces of human activity and intention. Often in tension with these structures are trees and landscaping that display varying degrees of resilience, as if they resist being tamed by the development that surrounds them. The pictures evidence their makers’ interest in the way light falls across vacant surfaces like garage doors and expanses of concrete and asphalt. And most significantly, as it relates to the concerns of this project, they project a certain bluntness of address.

If “New Topographics” represents a “style” as Jenkins framed it, then these Instagram users have invoked it (whether consciously or unconsciously) not just in terms of form or subject matter, but also a particular kind of *response* – that is to say, a subjective cognitive event – their images prompt for the viewer. These are pictures that take up a presentational mode that provokes a reaction akin to that of the noncommittal utterance, “Huh.” In their departure from conventions of romantic landscape representation – by striving for an even, rather than hierarchical presentation of their subject matter, for example – they place a greater degree of interpretive work on the viewer, making the landscape look “not beautiful, but important,” to recall how curator John Szarkowski described Robert Adams’s treatment of suburban Denver in his 1974 book, *The New West*.³⁴ Adams’s pictures from that project (which composed the bulk of his contribution to *New Topographics* a year later) did not set up the pleasurable response

³⁴ John Szarkowski, “Foreword,” in Robert Adams, *The New West: Landscapes along the Colorado Front Range* (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1974), v-ix.

associated with the romantic aesthetic category “the beautiful,” nor were they legible in those terms. They crafted a new model: one that, in its choice of subject matter and refusal to strongly narrate for the viewer, pointed towards the very expectations we project onto landscape photographs when we interpret them.

This dissertation re-analyzes *New Topographics* from the standpoint of its reception: how the photographs in the show set themselves up to be read by their audience in 1975. It contends that the phrase “New Topographics” names a style, but only if we redefine “style” as a combination of form *and the response* sought by that form. It encompasses a viewership that operates in a rhetorical fashion – set up by the photographer and fulfilled by the viewer’s interpretive activity – one that held things in common with models cultivated in other contemporary art, such as minimalist sculpture, and has had a lasting impact on contemporary photographic practice. In approaching *New Topographics* in this way, this analysis frames the exhibition as a nexus for issues of photographic style and viewing psychology in the mid-1970s, a period that marked a shift from the lyrical, inward-looking, or decisive-moment-seeking modernisms of practitioners like Ansel Adams and Robert Frank to the conceptual approaches of artists using photography in a more instrumental manner, like Ed Ruscha. By analyzing the photographs in *New Topographics* in terms of their reception, it becomes possible to chart the similarities and differences between its photographers’ approaches to forging a “neutral” style, and the extent to which the exhibition may have helped give rise to the current of authorial detachment that runs through certain strains of contemporary photographic practice.³⁵

³⁵ For an overview of many international photographers whose work can be considered in dialogue with both *New Topographics* and the Düsseldorf School of Photography as initiated by

The Viewer in the Photograph: Method and Terminology

Entering the Brackett Clark Gallery at the Eastman House, the visitors to *New Topographics* faced a series of temporarily constructed walls that displayed each photographer's contribution as a grouping (see author's reconstruction of the exhibition layout from installation views, **fig. 0.1**).³⁶ Jenkins and Joe Deal had sequenced the photographs with some input from the photographers. With the exception of Bernd and Hilla Becher's work, which was installed in seven grids, the photographs were hung at eye level in horizontal rows, occasionally traveling around corners. They were framed in metal sectional frames with white mats. Deal, who designed the exhibition, decided to paint the walls gray.³⁷ An introductory wall text sandwiched between two 48 by 48-inch pieces of Plexiglas greeted people when they entered the gallery (**fig. 0.2**). It presented the photographers in *New Topographics* as being concerned with the "information-carrying capacity" of photographs, and quoted a statement by Nicholas Nixon to express the exhibition's conceptual premise: "The world is infinitely more interesting than any of my opinions regarding it."³⁸ The final paragraph of the panel echoed Jenkins's

Bernd and Hilla Becher, see Charlotte Cotton, "Deadpan," in *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 81-113.

³⁶ The structure of the museum has changed since the time of the exhibition. According to museum staff, the 3,500-square-foot Brackett Clark gallery space was carved out of the mansion's original garage around 1950, but has been subject to structural interventions; the gallery as it is named today likely looks slightly different than it did in 1975. The Eastman is composed of the historical mansion known as the George Eastman House, the 1950s-60s addition, and a large wing added in 1989, which contributed two additional gallery spaces and houses the Richard and Ronay Menschel Library, curatorial offices, photography study center, and conservation and preservation labs. For a history of the institution, see *A Collective Endeavor: The First Fifty Years of Eastman House* (Rochester: George Eastman House, 1999).

³⁷ Salvesen 53

³⁸ Quoted on introductory wall text panel for *New Topographics*, 1975. Copy in Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, AG229:10.

introductory essay for the exhibition catalog by paraphrasing the dictionary definition of *topographic*.

Deal, who had studied graphic design in college, also designed the exhibition's modest, 48-page paperback catalog (**fig. 0.3**), which retailed for seven dollars and was mostly given away to Museum members.³⁹ It measured eight-and-a-half by ten inches and was printed in an edition of 2,500 by Pentacle Press. Employing the steadfastly legible and utilitarian Times New Roman as its chosen typeface, it contained Jenkins's three-page text, followed by four pages devoted to each of the artists in alphabetical order. Each photographer was represented by a one-page curriculum vitae and three full-page halftone reproductions of select photographs (with the exception of Shore, whose work was in color). A checklist appeared at the end of the catalog.

Over the course of the exhibition's run, the audience that attended was not large, but reflected what has historically been a particularly photo-conversant public of Rochester, New York. The city is home both to the Eastman Kodak Company and two photography-related institutes that were established in 1968: the Visual Studies Workshop (which William Jenkins attended for graduate school, and which was founded by Nathan Lyons, another curator and former director at the Eastman House), and the School of Photographic Arts and Sciences at the Rochester Institute of Technology.⁴⁰ Among the attendees of *New Topographics* were students from these institutions. A number of their reactions to the show were recorded in interviews that Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, conducted in the galleries on the weekend of December 13-14, 1975. Several visitors commented on the photographs' print quality, admiring

³⁹ Nordström 69

⁴⁰ Salvesen 13

their level of detail or noting their lack of grain: “The technique is tremendous. I wish I could do this. I mean, they did think about it a little,” one said.⁴¹ Their reaction alluded to a theme that marked many other responses to the exhibition: the level of thought or effort that the photographers exercised in creating the images, which was generally perceived as lacking. One RIT student said, in the context of remarking on the exhibitions at the Eastman as a whole: “It always seems like the pictures were done very quickly.”⁴²

“He couldn’t have been doing it for his enjoyment, because they are very dull pictures in my opinion,” another visitor named Chris commented. The lively exchange between Chris and her partner, Jack, touched upon multiple issues that fellow exhibition-goers fixated upon: the banality of the subject matter, the absence of people in the images, and the concern for the environment suggested by some of the photographs. In the conversation, Chris is hung up on what she perceives as a lack of elements to identify with as a viewer. Standing in front of John Schott’s work, which pictured motels along Route 66, she ventures: “Okay, you look at this and you can imagine somebody checking out of the hotel, but it’s gone, there’s nothing for you to identify with except, what, dirty sheets? I don’t like it, I’m sorry!” Jack, by contrast, understands the work to be making a statement about people by way of the things they build and leave behind: “You said there are no people here, but there are people, all over the place. Everywhere you look there’s people.” He then speaks to the critique of suburban architecture he perceives in Robert Adams’s photographs, adjacent to Schott’s: “This is what people have done... ‘This is it, kid – take it for its beauty and ugliness.’” Chris is more receptive to that reading, and

⁴¹ Tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

⁴² Ibid.

concludes: “I don’t like to think there are ugly streets in America... but when it’s shown to you, without beautification, maybe it tells you how much more we need here.”⁴³

Preserved within such exchanges are expectations that people held in that moment about the western American landscape and its representation, and how photographs in art museums were supposed to address them. The ability of the photographs in *New Topographics* to read as “neutral” was contingent upon the presence of a certain kind of viewer: one who possessed a culturally ingrained set of pictorial and generic expectations, and projected them in the act of viewing. In perceiving a lack of authorship in the images, viewers like Chris and Jack completed an interpretive circuit, enacting a response that was set up by the photographs in formal ways. By analyzing the photographs in the exhibition and the reactions they provoked in light of the historical possibilities for both making and interpreting photographs of the American landscape circa 1975, we can bring concreteness to the unruliness of a reaction like “Huh,” rendering it capable of being submitted to questions of continuity and rupture.

Here, it becomes necessary to distinguish between two terms that are central to this project: *reception* and *response*. The latter is a subjective, cognitive event experienced internally by an individual. Response is pre-conscious and unintentional, and emotions are the labels we give to responses as we become conscious of them. This analysis defines “reception,” meanwhile, not in the qualitative sense of how an art work is judged positively or negatively, but rather as the active process by which a period audience makes sense of a work of art and judges it conventional or accessible, versus unconventional or inaccessible, based on the interpretive equipment they have cultivated

⁴³ Ibid.

as a product of living in their particular culture and time period. The term “audience” refers to this historiated version of the figure denoted by the broader, ahistorical term, “viewer.” The challenge of writing a study of reception in the context of art history, of course, is that in composing a formal analysis and engaging in description, one is inevitably writing from the standpoint of a “viewer,” as opposed to the work’s initial audience. In the following chapters, I therefore use the term “viewer” when describing the immanently visible aspects of the photographs that become apparent to the beholder, and “audience” when I discuss these aspects in relation to how they were interpreted in 1975, often referring to the actual recorded responses we have to *New Topographics* or other contemporaneous exhibitions of its photographers’ work.

A reception-oriented analysis like the present one is therefore conventionalist, primarily concerned with advancing arguments about historiated viewers and recovering this historical reception, which in turn elaborates a period’s “horizon of expectations” towards the art.⁴⁴ Proposed by the literary theorist Hans-Robert Jauss, this phrase refers to the continuously expanding set of conventions that impacts how audiences interpret a text over time, judging it to be either conventional or possessing “aesthetic distance” – the phrase Jauss uses to describe the quality of posing interpretive difficulty by period norms. The ongoing interpretation of the text – this active process engaged by historically specific readers – is what constitutes the text’s reception. This activity also advances the horizon over time, so that what was once perceived as novel and avant-garde becomes itself conventional. In the context of art history, the notion of a “horizon of expectations” is productive, for example, for tracking shifts in how expressivity is coded – something

⁴⁴ See Hans-Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetics of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

that is especially germane to the genre of landscape, since a landscape is a culturally coded picture of nature.

Literary theory also provides models by which to name and characterize the positions viewers occupy in relation to works of art. This analysis borrows the terms of the “implied author” and “implied viewer” from theorist Wayne Booth to characterize the entities that had to be reconciled in the galleries as the audience labored to interpret *New Topographics*.⁴⁵ Framing the literary as a form of communication, in his 1961 book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* Booth argued that when reading a text, the reader forms a sense of the author in her mind, but this fictive “implied author” differs from the actual, real-world person of the author. Likewise, the text implies an idealized version of its reader, and actual, real-world readers will not always live up to that ideal or reach a state of “agreement” with the text and inhabit that position.⁴⁶ A text where the author adopts a posture of estrangement, for example, places a greater degree of interpretive labor on the reader and makes it more difficult to attain that state of reciprocal understanding. This degree of “agreement” that arises through the dynamics of interpretation is therefore analogous to that of the spectrum of conventionality described by Jauss. It follows that the task of the scholar is to elucidate the tracks by which the work becomes intelligible to the reader.

The value of Booth’s scheme for reception-oriented art historical analysis lies in how its differentiation between actual versus implied readers can be transposed to a viewing context: that of individual members of an art work’s audience (including the

⁴⁵ See Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (University of Chicago Press, 1961), especially pp. 70-76.

⁴⁶ Booth in fact elaborates the concept of “agreement” in *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 14-19.

public and critics) versus the idealized, “implied” viewer whose position the art work intimates. It is not possible to access the internal responses of all the individuals who visited *New Topographics*, but by reconstructing the “horizon of expectations” for landscape photography circa 1975 and analyzing how the bodies of work in the show “implied” their makers and viewers through different formal means – and considering this alongside the written and recorded reactions to the show that we *do* have – we can better articulate the character of the interpretive work that the photographs placed on their 1975 audience. The character of this mental activity, this analysis argues, is at the heart of both the style that *New Topographics* sought to name, and what we mean when we say that a photograph exhibits the influence of “New Topographics” today.

As mobilized here, these concepts from literary theory enter into how this project defines *style*, a term that was being treated as outmoded even in 1979, when George Kubler declared: “Style is a word of which the everyday use has deteriorated in our time to the level of banality. It is now a word to avoid, along with déclassé words, words without nuance, words gray with fatigue.”⁴⁷ By treating reception and response as part of the equation, however, style can be reinvigorated as an art historical topic and tool. This analysis follows art historian Irene Winter in framing style as comprising a rhetorical function and the agency of viewers.⁴⁸ Makers of objects do not create form in a vacuum, Winter argues; they have a desired response in mind. Analysis of style therefore must go beyond visual properties of form and iconography alone and attend to the “range of

⁴⁷ George Kubler, “Toward a Reductive Theory of Visual Style” (1979), in Berel Lang, ed. *The Concept of Style*, revised and expanded edition (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987), 163.

⁴⁸ See Irene J. Winter, “The Affective Properties of Style: An Inquiry into Analytical Process and the Inscription of Meaning in Art History,” in *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, eds. Caroline Jones and Peter Galison (London: Routledge, 1998), 55-77.

associations” those elements provoke in viewers’ cognition, which is embedded in a cultural context.⁴⁹ Winter therefore elucidates a dynamic akin to Ernst Gombrich’s notion of the “beholder’s share,” but ascribes agency to both makers and viewers, emphasizing the relationship between them as one of reciprocal interaction.⁵⁰

Finally, this project also proposes a new term that expresses the way that all of these concepts (the horizon of expectations, implied and actual makers and viewers, and style) connect: *emotional temperature*. When critics who reviewed *New Topographics* described the work as “cool,” they enacted a long-established tendency that humans have to use temperature as an analogy for response, and as a metaphor to describe people. We might speak of an individual being “hot-headed” or “cold-hearted,” for example, because of the way we perceive that person as outwardly displaying their thoughts and emotions, versus suppressing them. It is not that a “cold” person does not have emotions; rather, those emotions are unavailable for others to read.

With the notion of “emotional temperature,” this study transposes this idea to the context of interpretive accessibility. When we say that a work of art reads as “warm” or “cool,” we are referring to position we feel along a spectrum of stability to instability, which is contingent upon the degree to which we can detect authorial presence. A “warm” work of art is conventionally accessible, activating formal knowledge that viewers have learned to link with a maker’s expressivity. Whereas “cool” works of art take up a presentational mode that activates the interpretive equipment we associate with

⁴⁹ Winter 72

⁵⁰ See Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 286. The notion of the beholder’s share is discussed across the entirety of Part III of *Art and Illusion*, spanning chapters VI to VIII. For a secondary perspective on the matter, see also *Gombrich on Art and Psychology*, ed. Richard Woodfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

non-art contexts: commercial or informational ones, for example. Instead of saying that “cool” works of art *lack* warmth or *fail* to perform the things that warm works of art do, it is more productive to understand them as shifting the character of response by virtue of the formal knowledge they conjure in the viewer. The “neutral” style that *New Topographics* sought to name, and which its ten photographers forged through different formal means, is an example of art with a “cool” emotional temperature. In addition to analyzing those means, the chapters of this dissertation cumulatively endeavor to illuminate why the exhibition’s curator, its photographers, or its audience members would value a landscape that looked authorless in 1975, situating this in relation to circumstances in the broader 1960s and 1970s art world where people made other art that fictionalized objectivity, took that up as a problem of style, or aspired to the look of information.

It is the hope that by connecting all of these concepts in this manner, this project models a productive way to talk about the dynamics of interpretation in a rigorously historical manner, both in the context of photographs and works of art in other media. On the one hand, with this approach, we do not have to choose between objects and theory – we can have it both ways. Where it concerns photography in particular, reception is an alternate path to pursuing questions that tend to otherwise be oriented in ontology. Rather than asking what a photograph *is*, for example, reception is interested in *how* it means – but not in the sense of something akin to a structuralist approach, which would bracket off a variety of vital kinds of context. As understood by this analysis, reception is emphatically tied to social and cultural contexts, because that impacts the character and range of interpretive equipment that audiences have.

For much of photography's history, there has been scholarship and criticism that has equated photographic representation to natural knowledge by locating objectivity in the photograph's "mechanical" origins. Even in the case of the polemical criticism of the 1970s and 1980s that examined the ideological operations of photography, its non-identities of photography were still premised upon an essential belief in the photograph's transparency. This dissertation advocates a different direction for this discussion: one motivated by questions of *why* viewers perceive the presence of authors behind certain photographs rather than others, or how the perception of something like transparency as opposed to subjectivity gets into photographs in the first place. Rather than positing the photographs in *New Topographics* as inherently "neutral," it frames neutrality as a quality that operates rhetorically, thereby foregrounding the viewer's role in the perception of authorship and the conditions out of which photographic meaning is constructed.

Chapter Model: "Significant Outliers"

New Topographics showed the work of ten photographers, and as such, provides a compelling case study of what happens when individual practitioners are appropriated to a thesis. The exhibition was an event that brought together an array of makers, some of whom have gone on to produce work that remains quite close to the kind of inquiry into the built environment that *New Topographics* represented, while others have departed from it to a greater extent, embracing new subject matter or even media other than photography.⁵¹ Each chapter of this dissertation considers the work of a figure (or

⁵¹ In addition to teaching, John Schott, for example, went on to work a great deal in film and television production.

multiple photographers) who serves as a “significant outlier” in the exhibition due to the idiosyncratic ways in which they craft their “neutral” style, and throw certain themes into relief: namely, environmentalism, conceptualism, and period attitudes toward architectural “vernaculars.” Cumulatively, the chapters theorize neutrality as a stylistic posture that operates at the level of response, and qualify *New Topographics* as a turning point in photographic history by virtue of its effort to codify it. While privileging matters of reception, the chapters nevertheless also consider circumstances of the photographs’ production, because photographers are their pictures’ first viewers and share their audience’s interpretive equipment.

Chapter One treats Ed Ruscha’s simultaneous conceptual influence and physical absence in *New Topographics* as a point of departure to theorize neutrality in photography, and throw the ambitions and commitments of the photographers who *were* in the exhibition into relief. William Jenkins was heavily influenced by Ruscha’s 1960s photo books in articulating the show’s premise, but did not ultimately attempt to include him; I argue that while Ruscha’s aesthetic anticipated *New Topographics*, his posture of irony and the materiality of his photo books would have been discordant with the social commentary and masterful print craft in the show. This chapter is where I more fully elucidate the aforementioned intertwined concepts of “implied” versus actual authors and viewers, the relationship of style to viewership, and the notion of emotional temperature. Contextualizing these ideas alongside sources ranging from Roland Barthes’s *The Neutral* to the paintings of Edward Hopper and the 1970 MoMA show *Information*, the chapter furthermore considers the deadpan and banal as modes of response adjacent to the neutral.

Chapter Two charts the connections between photographic expressivity and attitudes towards the American landscape, especially where it concerns the representation of the West, in historical sources that informed the work of the *New Topographics* photographers and the expectations of their audience. It focuses on Robert Adams's contribution as a way to address the exhibition's departure from those prior models of representing the American landscape, and frames those models – the sublime and picturesque inherited from romanticism – as having always been concerned with codifying not subject matter, but rather *response*. Adams remains the photographer in the exhibition who is most invested in issues having to do with the environment, and in 1975 was hesitant to participate in what was pitched to him as an “anti-Ansel Adams” show. Like Ansel – with whom he shared a last name, but was not related – Robert was drawn to the West and its brilliant, high altitude light. However, his photographs invoke romantic tropes only to subvert them. Analyzing Adams's photographs in relation to those of his generic predecessors, including the nineteenth-century geological survey photographs of Timothy O'Sullivan, I argue that the contrast between his cool aesthetic and Ansel Adams's warmer, conventionally expressive one emblemizes ecology versus conservation as models of environmentalism. By foregrounding human presence, Robert's photographs placed viewers into a stance of responsibility and ambivalence towards the possibility of the landscape's redemption – a position I furthermore connect to Adams's own spiritual background and the theological notion of “grace.”

Chapter Three examines how Joe Deal and Lewis Baltz borrowed formal strategies from minimalist and conceptual art to subtly critique suburban and corporate sprawl. Like Adams, Deal and Baltz trained a cool eye on rapidly growing cities in the

West, but did so with self-conscious reference to contemporary art in other media. I interpret Deal's square-format, aerial photographs of the suburbanized Albuquerque foothills in light of seriality, and Baltz's rigorously formal views of Irvine industrial parks as a photographic variant of minimalism. Crafting viewerships that were in dialogue with models of beholding in those other art forms, their bodies of work positioned viewers to regard their subject matter with a cerebral skepticism, and even pessimism. This chapter furthermore mines the significance of how Deal always identified as a "photographer," whereas Baltz eventually preferred to be known as an "artist." Indeed, in 1971 Baltz became the first photographer to be represented by the contemporary art gallery Castelli Graphics, and sought an international, non-photo-specific audience for his work; his reception foreshadows the scope of *New Topographics*'s influence outside the United States since 1975.

By contrast, Chapter Four interprets Stephen Shore's color photographs – the only color images in the exhibition – as outliers that place pressure on the prevalent association of *New Topographics* as uniformly critical of the built environment. I argue that it is not necessarily the factor of color that most meaningfully sets Shore's work apart from that of his peers, but rather how his pictures positioned their audience to view their postwar architectural subjects more sympathetically. Shore's work in the exhibition therefore demonstrates how a "neutral" posture can be deployed for ends other than critique. Indeed, Shore is a former regular from Andy Warhol's factory who collaborated with the architect authors of *Learning from Las Vegas* the same year as *New Topographics*, in 1975. Like Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, and cultural landscape studies scholars such as John Brinckerhoff Jackson, he focused on the forms

and surfaces of the vernacular built environment to examine – but not necessarily judge – American cultural habits and values.

Finally, the epilogue thinks forward to how the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, who were the only photographers in the exhibition from outside the United States, serves as a salient site to examine the influence of *New Topographics* abroad and into the present. It sets up a foundation for an expanded study that would evaluate the extent to which *New Topographics* can be said to have initiated the posture of authorial detachment so common in lens-based practice today, beginning with the work of the Bechers' students from the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. The Bechers considered themselves documentarians of disappearing structures of industrial heritage, but their grids were heralded as conceptual masterpieces by artists like Sol LeWitt and Carl Andre. The simultaneous interpretation of their work as documentary and conceptual thematizes the different registers that *New Topographics* invoked at the level of reception, and illuminates why the exhibition remains such a viable model and multivalent influence among younger generations of photographers.

Greater Context: the “Photo Boom”

Another story behind all of this material that remains to be written is that of the “Photo Boom”: the name given to the sudden embrace of photography as an academic subject and collecting object both for museums and individuals in the 1970s. In this decade, photography “assimilated and generated new meanings and markets.”⁵² In analyzing this moment and trying to account for why it happened when it did, one finds

⁵² Salvesen 12

that the roads tend to lead back to a certain cast of characters and institutions: among them the Eastman House and the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, LIGHT Gallery in Manhattan, and the graduate program in photography at the University of New Mexico. All were vital training grounds for figures who would influence the medium in subsequent decades, whether as practitioners, thinkers, or advocates. The fact that only one of them was in New York also points to how the “centers” of the photography world in this moment extended far beyond the confines of that city, and were instead geographically dispersed, even peripheral compared to those of other media. Nearly all of the *New Topographics* photographers were involved with these institutions at one time or another, often traveling between them as they sought to find their paths and establish their careers. This web of connections therefore underscores how the exhibition stood at the nexus of important shifts in the mid-1970s that would shape the landscape of contemporary photography. Interwoven with analysis of the photographs in the exhibition and their reception, each chapter of this dissertation seeks to recover and highlight facets of this network.

The 1970s were a key period for photography’s acceptance as art. This decade witnessed the emergence of a thriving market for photography in the United States in auction houses and galleries; Sotheby’s began selling photographs in 1976. Many museums established separate curatorial departments for photography (the early exception was the Museum of Modern Art, whose department had been inaugurated in 1940⁵³). Colleges and universities expanded their offerings in photography coursework –

⁵³ Alfred Barr began envisioning a department for photography as early as 1929, but even with Beaumont Newhall’s landmark exhibition *Photography 1839-1937*, the department was not yet being seriously planned. Once David McAlpin contributed funding and the MoMA board accepted the idea, the department was formally established in 1940.

in art history and fine arts departments rather than journalism programs, where the subject had been taught previously.⁵⁴ Many photographers responded to this newfound critical and institutional acceptance and support by making photography books and issuing prints in editions, series, and portfolios, and the term “vintage print” gained traction. In the realm of color photography, William Eggleston’s 1976 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, curated by John Szarkowski, represented a watershed moment even as reviews for the show were divided. Closing out the decade, in 1979, Ansel Adams was on the cover of TIME Magazine. All of these events represent a critical mass of activity that positioned photography more prominently in the art historical, commercial, and public eyes.

However, the photography world as a social entity remained relatively small. Curators, photographers, and gallerists all knew each other, and they enjoyed a great degree of institutional autonomy and freedom, as well as access to one another. Gallerist Peter MacGill recalls that “during that time, anybody who was involved in the field could quite literally meet half of the people who were approached and described in John Szarkowski’s *Looking at Photographs*.”⁵⁵ The downside to this closely knit community was how long it took the wider public to catch up. Harold Jones, the first director of LIGHT Gallery (who preceded Jenkins as a curator at the Eastman House) recalls of the years just prior to the “boom”: “There were no photo galleries in the world. My friends and I, who were all photographers, used to sit around and lament: when would people

⁵⁴ Beaumont Newhall began to teach the history of photography at the University of New Mexico in 1971. A year later, the first endowed history of photography professorship was granted to Peter Bunnell at Princeton in 1972, and Joel Snyder began teaching the subject at the University of Chicago in 1976.

⁵⁵ Peter MacGill, recorded talk at the Art Institute of Chicago for exhibition *When Collecting Was New: Photographs from the Robert A. Taub Collection*, April 26, 2013.

take photography seriously? When would a photographer be able to make a living from their work?”⁵⁶

When Tennyson Schaad, a New York lawyer, reached out to Jones in 1971 to serve as the first director for a new photography gallery in the city, Jones was able to request “total independence” in terms of the exhibitions he would stage and how the gallery would be run. Previous photography galleries had included Limelight (which was a coffee shop that also sold photography), Image Gallery, Underground Gallery, Heliographers, and most notably, Witkin Gallery.⁵⁷ Founded in 1969 by Lee Witkin, the latter featured 19th and early 20th century photography displayed salon-style, and also sold books and posters. By contrast, Jones established LIGHT as an artist-focused gallery that exhibited work that was “contemporary.”⁵⁸ In Jones’s words, “contemporary meant now,” and referred not just to the gallery’s dedication to promoting living photographers, but to the work they were currently making.⁵⁹ It would become the first commercially viable gallery for photography understood as a medium of creative expression, and would earn its photographers critical recognition. At the very beginning, LIGHT’s openings were well-attended, but very few visitors came for the duration of the exhibitions.⁶⁰ Within two years, however, through word of mouth communication among the gallery’s audience – predominantly “artists, writers, and creative people,” in Jones’s recollection –

⁵⁶ Harold Jones, recorded talk at the Art Institute of Chicago for exhibition *When Collecting Was New: Photographs from the Robert A. Taub Collection*, April 26, 2013.

⁵⁷ For more information on Limelight, see Helen Gee and Denise Bethel, *Helen Gee: Limelight / A Greenwich Village Photography Gallery and Coffeehouse in the Fifties* (New York: Aperture, 2018).

⁵⁸ See Natalie Rosenheck, “Light Gallery Opens: Room at the Top?” *Popular Photography* Vol. 70, No. 3 (March 1972), 106, 109, 110. Press releases, inventory lists, and price lists from the early years of the gallery likewise contain the byline: “a gallery for contemporary photography.”

⁵⁹ Harold Jones, conversation with author, August 31, 2017.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

attendance grew. The gallery began to profit, selling individual prints and even entire series to individuals and museums.⁶¹ LIGHT would play an instrumental role not only in the growth of photography collections in museums across the United States, but also in expanding the “horizon of expectations” for art photography, as evidenced by the range of reactions recorded in their exhibition guest books.⁶²

New Topographics included photographers who were represented by galleries ranging from the photography-focused LIGHT (Deal, Gohlke, Nixon, and Shore) and Fraenkel Gallery (Wessel), to the more broadly oriented Castelli (Adams and Baltz) and Sonnabend (the Bechers). This fact speaks to the exhibition’s mediation between the previously insular photography community and an emerging, more porous one that would be more integrated into the broader world and discourse of post-conceptual art. In this constellation of individuals and institutions, one catches glimmers of a larger story: that of how photography became *contemporary*. It was, as Joe Deal concluded in retrospect, “a rare moment.”⁶³

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² These guest books are in the LIGHT Gallery Archive, Center for Creative Photography.

⁶³ Joe Deal, e-mail to Britt Salvesen, August 23, 2008. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography.

Chapter One

Medium Cool: Photography and the Neutral

The banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual? ...How are we to speak of these common things, how to track them down, how to flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they are mired, how to give them meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak of what is, who we are...

—Georges Perec¹

Neutrality is a vexing concept to define in pictorial terms. It is difficult to describe what something like the inverse of expressivity looks like, precisely because of the tendency to lapse into such language: defining neutrality by what it is not. One could say that a neutral picture – to momentarily illustrate this tendency further – is one that *lacks* hierarchy, appears *vacated* of its creator's ideas or editorializing, *fails* to evidence compositional decision-making, or *deters* the viewer's emotional engagement. It is no more precise to say a neutral picture is one that looks “as if a machine could have made it,” because automated images are always products of human intention to some degree, and the question remains why we identify such images – like those of a security camera – as authorless. How do we know neutrality when we see it? Why do certain pictures come across to us as unauthored, devoid of subjective expression – while others appear imbued with evidence of their makers?

¹ Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (1974) (London: Penguin Books, 1999 edition), 204.

These questions conceptually anchored *New Topographics*, an exhibition that has been heralded as groundbreaking primarily for its subject matter. The latter association becomes especially curious when a careful re-reading of curator William Jenkins's introductory essay for the exhibition's catalog reminds us that at no point does he frame the significance of *New Topographics* in terms of its photographers' attention to the built environment. Their work "picture[s], almost without exception, man-made structures within larger contexts such as landscapes," Jenkins notes on the first page. But the curator's real interest is the topic of style. He starts his essay by quoting a passage from Jorge Luis Borges:

...I should try to tell, in a straightforward way, plain stories, so that I will try to get away from mazes, from mirrors, from daggers, from tigers, because all of those things now grow a bit of a bore to me. So that I will try to write a book, a book so good that nobody will think I have written it. I would write a book – I won't say in somebody else's style – but in the style of *anybody* else.²

"There is little doubt that the problem at the center of this exhibition is one of style,"

Jenkins then begins in his own voice. At the risk of oversimplifying the individual photographers' contributions, he proposes that the most important aspect of the work in *New Topographics* is its "stylistic context."³ Elsewhere Jenkins uses the phrase "picture-making attitude," and on the final page of the relatively brief text, "viewpoint."⁴ He employs the word "neutrality" multiple times throughout, but also interchangeably, "anonymity." Posing the question: "Is it possible to negate style, to make a photograph

² Jorge Luis Borges, "A Post-Lecture Discussion of His Own Writing," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (June 1975), 710. As quoted in William Jenkins, "Introduction," in *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* (Rochester: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975), 5-7 (5). Frank Gohlke had recommended the passage to Jenkins.

³ Jenkins 5

⁴ Jenkins 7

that is style-less?”⁵ the curator provisionally concludes: “To...elect to make pictures that look a certain way is a stylistic decision, even if the effort is to subdue the intrusion of style in the picture.”⁶

Certainly a large part of what qualifies *New Topographics* a watershed in photographic history is its focus on the built environment rather than nature alone. This represented a significant departure from its historical precedents in the landscape genre. The exhibition’s photographers articulated their own interests in these terms; Robert Adams and Joe Deal in particular aligned their concerns and ambitions with the modern environmental movement and the emerging academic field of cultural landscape studies. In other words, the content of their photographs propelled the photographers’ identifications with the tradition of landscape representation, and determined some of the artistic and intellectual contexts to which their photographs contributed. But since 1975, there has been a tendency to collapse the banality of the architecture in the pictures with the manner in which it is represented, or rather to treat the photographs as self-evidently “neutral” by virtue of what they picture.⁷ Many accounts of *New Topographics*, as well as commentary on contemporary photography that the show is said to have influenced, describe the work as “cool” and “detached” without substantiating those qualities

⁵ Jenkins 6

⁶ Jenkins 6

⁷ For example, see Cecile Whiting, “The Sublime and the Banal in Postwar Photography of the American West,” *American Art* Vol. 27, No. 2 (Summer 2013): 44-67. Whiting addresses the factors of feeling and emotion (elements of what this study would term “response”) in her discussion of Romanticism, but does not carry that over to her 20th century subjects, as her argument suggests that photographs by figures like Robert Adams and Ed Ruscha signaled a new iteration of the sublime by virtue of representing the vast “mushrooming” of suburbia. In her essay, what ultimately qualifies their images as “sublimely banal” is their photographs’ content, not the responses they elicit.

further.⁸ The result is that in spite of the exhibition's popularity, the style that *New Topographics* sought to identify has remained undertheorized. The inextricability of style, form, and content in a photograph is something that Jenkins acknowledged ("Unfortunately, the simple descriptive function of the photographic image is linked to other, more complex issues," he lamented.)⁹ Nevertheless, diving into *how* and *why* the images read as neutral or banal to their audience – in other words, examining the interpretive circuits they set up, rather than treating their "neutrality" as a property inherent to the photographs themselves – is a more productive way to account for the style that the exhibition sought to name, as well as its art historical significance. What *New Topographics* reinvented was not simply the subject matter of an American landscape photograph, but the kind of *response* such images could or even should elicit for their viewers.

It is by attending to this facet of the exhibition – the photographs' reception and the show's conceptual-theoretical underpinnings – that *New Topographics* becomes an important event not just in photographic history, but in the history of art production in the 1970s. The bodies of work in the show participated in a larger artistic impulse in these years to make art that can be located on the "cool" end of an imagined spectrum of

⁸ For instance, Charlotte Cotton names "a cool, detached, and keenly sharp type of photograph" as one notable strain of contemporary practice, but then cites examples of such work without digging deeply into *why* the work reads that way. When she addresses Bernd and Hilla Becher, she offers that their "way of looking at things is 'cool' and without an artist's subjective expression," without describing what expressivity and its inverse really look like. Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004). See also Stefan Gronet, "Alternate Pictures: Conceptual Art and the Artist Emancipation of Photography in Europe," in Douglas Fogle, ed. *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960-1982* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003), 89. The photographers addressed here call their own approach "cool."

⁹ Jenkins 6

emotional temperature, which is theorized in what follows. Reviewing the limited iteration of *New Topographics* that was installed at the Otis College of Art and Design in spring 1976, Robert Woolard wrote: “The fact remains that this display is not a feast for the eyes... it is intellectually stimulating, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the ordinariness of the subjects and the anonymity of the approaches.”¹⁰ Woolard may as well have been describing an exhibition of minimalist or conceptual art, which frustrated certain audiences in these years because the art appeared to give so little in the way of expression, narration, or interpretive guidance. Audience reactions to *New Topographics* mirrored this, as people made observations such as: “It doesn’t seem to have a message...It doesn’t seem to make a statement one way or the other.”¹¹ The opportunity thus arises to examine why it was so common in these years to make art that appeared to have been informed by a cerebral or observational – rather than emotive – stance, and in turn, why viewers so often turned to a vocabulary of coolness to describe their responses to such work.

Nothing Personal: Ed Ruscha in and out of *New Topographics*

The dissatisfying oversimplification that results from qualifying *New Topographics* as a watershed primarily in terms of its subject matter comes into relief with the case of Ed Ruscha’s relationship to the exhibition. The West Coast Pop artist was not among the ten photographers shown in *New Topographics* in 1975, and has never

¹⁰ Robert W. Woolard, “Man-Shaped Landscapes,” *Artweek* Vol. 7, No. 13 (March 27, 1976): 12.

¹¹ Tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

commented on the exhibition – likely because Jenkins never contacted him about it.¹² Yet he photographed very similar architectural subjects a full decade before the show occurred, and was the first artist that Jenkins named in his catalog introduction. Ruscha epitomized the approach that Jenkins sought to conceptualize: a mode of image-making distinguished by an apparent economy of expression. Jenkins termed it “a minimum of inflection,” and argued that Ruscha had initiated this “picture-making attitude” in his photographic books of the 1960s, which showcased ordinary subject matter in the built environment like gas stations and apartment complexes.¹³ The curator summarized what distinguished Ruscha’s work and in turn anticipated *New Topographics*: “The pictures [are] stripped of any artistic frills and reduced to an essentially topographic state, conveying substantial amounts of visual information but eschewing entirely the aspects of beauty, emotion, and opinion.”¹⁴

Reflecting on *New Topographics* thirty years later in 2006, Jenkins stated that he now wishes he had included Ruscha because the artist would have “fleshed out that part of the show that’s not quite so photographic.”¹⁵ This presents the occasion to examine what about Ruscha’s photographic books was both generative for the exhibition and nevertheless discordant with it, as well as Jenkins and the photographers’ understanding ca. 1975 of what *New Topographics* represented, if not something “photographic.”

¹² Bill Jenkins interviewed by Britt Salvesen, June 30, 2006. Center for Creative Photography, Oral History Collection, VOP06:018.

¹³ Jenkins 5, 7

¹⁴ Jenkins 5

¹⁵ Bill Jenkins interviewed by Britt Salvesen, June 30, 2006. Center for Creative Photography, Oral History Collection, VOP06:018. Jenkins elaborates: “In retrospect I wish I had [included Ruscha]. He would have fit right in there. And wouldn’t have made the Bechers seem so out of place... Why I didn’t try to track down Ruscha and include his work, I still don’t know. I regret not including him.”

Comparing the receptions of Ruscha's and the *New Topographics* photographers' work indicates that it had to do with the intertwined factors of style and response. Ruscha's simultaneous influence and physical absence in the exhibition serves as a point of departure to theorize the "neutral" sensibility that Jenkins and Exhibition Manager Joe Deal sought to name with the show, but also the deadpan humor and irony that Ruscha's work communicated, and *New Topographics* did not. The artist's status as something of a productive outlier in *New Topographics* also opens onto the topic of the show's aforementioned relation to the "coolness" and unsentimentality that characterized much of postwar art and was also a preoccupation of the era's literary and media theory. Considered in this context, *New Topographics* emerges as both a product and agent of larger currents in the 1970s regarding authorship, expressivity, and emotional temperature in the arts.

...

That Jenkins never contacted Ruscha about *New Topographics* in the first place is likely somewhat due to the objections of some of the photographers. A letter that Lewis Baltz wrote to Joe Deal in spring 1975 indicates how prominently Ruscha was figuring in Jenkins's pitch of the show to the photographers, and also reveals Baltz's own sense of the increasing overlap between the previously distinct spheres of photography and contemporary art. Commenting on the finalized list of photographers to be included in the show, he wrote:

I can fully understand Bob [Adams] and Nick [Nixon]'s objection to having too much laid at Ruscha's doorstep, but I don't, for myself, share their feelings. His work exerted a strong influence on me at a time when I was formulating a number of positions in my own things. And I don't think it possible to exaggerate the influence he had on the art world in turning their attention to photography, although of a very different sort than the photography world was concerned

with.¹⁶

Indeed, the division among the *New Topographics* photographers regarding their attitudes about Ruscha largely stemmed from what can be characterized as the challenge the artist's work posed to the very notion of a fine art photographic tradition. Baltz, who himself eventually preferred to be known as an "artist" rather than a photographer, believed Ruscha's work represented "photography degree zero," and went so far as to steal the books from his art school library.¹⁷ Deal was highly aware of them as an undergraduate art student and considered Ruscha important especially for Pop art. The books were a "delight" for Stephen Shore and his friends.¹⁸ Robert Adams, Nicholas Nixon, and Frank Gohlke, on the other hand, would later acknowledge the work's value, but generally felt that Ruscha was working on an entirely different axis than themselves and objected to his inclusion in the show.¹⁹

In mid-October 1975, just as *New Topographics* opened, Gohlke tape-recorded a stream of consciousness reflection on the exhibition and Ruscha's work and sent it to Jenkins at the Eastman House.²⁰ In the recording, he expresses feeling perplexed toward

¹⁶ Letter from Lewis Baltz to Joe Deal, May 28, 1975. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:4/1.

¹⁷ Baltz referred to Ruscha's photo books as "photography degree zero" a number of times, notably at length in Marvin Heiferman, "Lewis Baltz in Conversation with Marvin Heiferman," *Art in America* (January 2010): 94-103 (98-99). As an art school student, the young Baltz "borrowed and then stole" *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, and *Sunset Strip* from the San Francisco Art Institute Library in 1967. See Heiferman 98-99 and Britt Salvesen, "New Topographics," in Salvesen, *New Topographics* (Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona; Rochester: George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film; Göttingen: Steidl, 2009), 11-67 (26).

¹⁸ Salvesen, "Introduction," 27

¹⁹ Adams commented that Ruscha was "clever, sometimes funny," while Nixon characterized Ruscha's books as "better idea than thing." Salvesen, "Introduction," 27.

²⁰ Jenkins solicited statements from all the photographers except the Bechers, but Gohlke is the only one who tape-recorded his. Few statements survive in the exhibition file at the Eastman Museum.

what he perceives as Ruscha's "unwillingness to make certain kinds of discriminations that account for his attitude toward photography," and even subtle resentment about Ruscha's "contempt for the photograph as a hand-crafted item."²¹ The photographer questions Ruscha's posturing about his lack of a role in his own photographs. As Gohlke observes, despite Ruscha's "seeming anti-formalism" and "casualness" toward his photographs' production, his photographs are still "formal statements" crafted by Ruscha, their author. Gohlke sounds perturbed by what he perceives as a facetious evasion on Ruscha's part of the labor that actually goes into making his work. Ruscha may claim that anyone could take his pictures, but "Ansel Adams couldn't... Adams's picture of a gas station would be different, indicating that a formal position is being taken in those books," Gohlke rightly observes.²² Continuing to try to make sense of Ruscha's work in relation to canonical modernist precedents (which illuminates Gohlke's own set of interpretive references, and his commitment to a certain tradition), he connects Ruscha's work to that of Walker Evans and Eugene Atget. These photographers too, Gohlke says, made pictures that appear to "have no formal properties," and yet they are distinguishable from one another, indicating that they do indeed possess style.²³ He reflects on Evans in particular: "That attempt to make a photograph from which the photographer seems to be absent is something... all of us, I think, primarily have learned from him."²⁴ Although disgruntled with Ruscha at the time, then, in 1975 Gohlke still found a way to locate the artist within photographic history (or perhaps it is more accurate to say that he could not

²¹ Frank Gohlke, tape-recorded statement on *New Topographics*, October 14, 1975, Richard and Ronay Menschel Library, George Eastman Museum.

²² *Ibid*

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ *Ibid*

help but do so): through the notion of a mode of working where the photographer appears to suppress their relationship to the subject matter.

What Gohlke appears to have been trying to process for himself on the tape is that neutrality is still a posture: a matter of how a photographer models their own authorial presence in their work, recalling what Evans himself once described as “documentary style.”²⁵ It was not only Ruscha’s lack of dedication to print craft that bothered Gohlke, but also the artist’s own rhetorical downplaying of how calculated his style was, which is something the *New Topographics* photographers did not perform in the same manner or to the same extent. Examining the evolution of Ruscha’s ideas and the response he sought for his photo books begins to illuminate why he was both emblematic of the impulse *New Topographics* sought to identify, and after something different than Gohlke and his peers who were included in the exhibition.

Various Ways to Become an Artist

Ed Ruscha was in fact not unfamiliar with the photographers Gohlke aligned him with, like Walker Evans, and he especially admired Robert Frank.²⁶ But the

²⁵ Evans remarked to an interviewer in 1971: “Documentary? That’s a very sophisticated and misleading word. And not really clear. You have to have a sophisticated ear to receive that word. The term should be *documentary style*. An example of a literal document would be a police photograph of a murder scene. You see, a document has use, whereas art is really useless. Therefore art is never a document, though it certainly can adopt that style.” Leslie Katz, “An Interview with Walker Evans” (1971), in *Photography in Print*, ed. Vicki Goldberg (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 364.

²⁶ Ruscha commented on Evans: “Evans was a profound influence on me... You could tell that he gave thought to the abstract qualities of a picture,” quoted in Sylvia Wolf, *Ed Ruscha and Photography* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art; Göttingen: Steidl, 2004), 20. Ruscha also encountered Frank’s *The Americans* (1959) shortly after it was published, and “knew that it was a landmark statement. He captured America so beautifully, at a particular historical time. That had a heavy impact on my thinking, and yet the imagery doesn’t necessarily translate into any kind of direct influence on my work. Frank influenced me through the back door.” Quoted in Wolf, 20-21.

circumstances in which the young artist was exposed to those photographers indicate how early his creative trajectory diverged from that of an aspiring fine art photographer. On the one hand, from a young age Ruscha was trained to especially appreciate groups of images that gained meaning when viewed together; as a child, he was obsessed with both reading and drawing cartoons, which anticipated his use of serial imagery later in his career, as well as his work's humor. Collecting stamps trained the young Ruscha's eye for the surface qualities of printed images and the differences between certain printing processes like engraving versus offset.²⁷ Working as a paper boy, it was part of Ruscha's daily routine to engage with both mass-produced imagery and vernacular architecture. The survey-like ambition of books like *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) was foreshadowed by Ruscha's fantasizing about making a model of his paper route with all the houses he was responsible for delivering to, which he "could study like an architect standing over a table and plotting a city."²⁸

Later, Ruscha's formal training as a student concentrated in the popular realm of commercial arts and illustration.²⁹ The Oklahoma City native chose Chouinard (now CalArts) for college and began his studies there in Southern California in fall 1956. As Sylvia Wolf notes, "Rather than being trained in art through visits to museums and the study of classical painting, his visual background was formed by absorbing media images

²⁷ Wolf 14

²⁸ Quoted in Calvin Tomkins, "Ed Ruscha's L.A.," *The New Yorker*, July 1, 2013.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/07/01/ed-ruscha-l-a>

²⁹ For extended examinations of Ruscha's training, see Jennifer Quick, "Pasteup Pictures: Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*," *The Art Bulletin* 100 (July 2018), 125-152; Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); and Ken D. Allan, "Ed Ruscha, Pop Art, and Spectatorship in 1960s Los Angeles," *The Art Bulletin* 92 (September 2010), 231-49.

and practicing graphic communication.”³⁰ At the time, Ruscha recalls admiring Franz Kline, but even more so Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and assemblage artists like Ed Kienholz, all of whom used readymade or pre-existing forms such as targets, numbers, letters, or found objects in their work. When Ruscha learned how to develop film and make photographic prints, it was from a commercial photographer, Alex Hovsepian, whose course positioned photography as a tool for design rather than a creative medium in its own right.³¹

Ruscha’s training in the “commercial arts” rather than “fine arts” (as Chouinard distinguished between the tracks students could pursue) thus primed him to value communication, reproduction, and the combination of text and image, rather than the outpouring of an artist’s subjectivity associated with Abstract Expressionism, which was nevertheless in vogue at Chouinard at the time. His embrace of photography evolved in accordance with the design orientation of his education and interests.³² In 1965, two years after publishing *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), the artist declared: “Above all, the photographs I use are not ‘arty’ in any sense of the word. I think photography is dead as a fine art; its only place is in the commercial world, for technical or information purposes.”³³ Yet this quasi-Warholian pronouncement underplayed the amount of labor and calculation that went into making his photographs and coordinating his books’

³⁰ Wolf 15

³¹ Wolf 17

³² For a nuanced examination of what “design” meant to Ruscha and his practice, see Quick, “Pasteup Pictures.”

³³ Ed Ruscha, quoted in John Coplans, “Concerning Small Various Small Fires: Edward Ruscha Discusses His Perplexing Publications,” *Artforum* Vol. 5 (February 1965), 24-25 (24). Reprinted in *Leave Any Information at the Signal*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 23-27.

production; they only *appear* de-skilled.³⁴ Indeed, it has been suggested that “re-skilled” is a more apt descriptor for what is going on in the work.³⁵ In a move that was at once practical and highly suggestive of the extent of Ruscha’s labor and the way he thought about it, the artist calculated the per-unit production cost of *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* to be \$1.35.³⁶

As he was beginning to conceptualize *New Topographics* in March 1975, while his prior show *The Extended Document* was still on view, William Jenkins viewed a first-edition copy of Ruscha’s *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (**fig. 1.1**) at the Eastman House’s study room.³⁷ The object he would have encountered was something the artist had designed from the start as a kind of “mass-produced object,” with the title and typography in mind prior to actually taking the photographs along Route 66.³⁸ Via his own self-publishing firm “Heavy Industry Publications,” Ruscha had marketed it as a

³⁴ For more on this topic, see Britt Salvesen’s discussion of Ruscha’s books in relation to their conceptual source of real estate photography in “Real Estate Opportunities,” in *Reframing the New Topographics*, eds. Toby Jurovics and John Rohrbach (Chicago: Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago), 71-86.

³⁵ See Helen Molesworth, *Work Ethic* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

³⁶ This encompassed everything from supplies like paper, glue, and postage to services he enlisted from others, such as typography design, binding, and collating. Expenses list in record book for *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, in Edward Ruscha Photographs of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard, 1965-2010, Getty Research Institute 2012.M.1, Box 17, folder 6. The different writing implements Ruscha used to make the notations here indicate that he was keeping track of his expenses in real time.

³⁷ Britt Salvesen, “Introduction,” footnote 75, p. 61-62.

³⁸ Ruscha elaborated on his process in the 1965 Coplans *Artforum* interview: “The first book came out of a play with words. The title came before I even thought about the pictures... If you look at the book you will see how well the typography works – I worked on all that before I took the photographs” (*Signal* 23-24). When asked about cropping, Ruscha responded that any cropping “[arose] from the consciousness of layout in the book,” (24). For a thorough analysis of Ruscha’s relationship to the fields and industries of design and the commercial arts, see Quick, “Pasteup Pictures.”

“noncoffee-table book.”³⁹ He had worked on planning it for months (“I’m dead serious about everything I make,” he once stated while reflecting on the project).⁴⁰ Forty-eight pages in length, and a modest (and portable) 18 by 14 centimeters when closed, the soft-bound book contains photographs of precisely what its title names. Joining Ruscha on a journey from Los Angeles back to his hometown of Oklahoma City, the viewer encounters twenty-six gasoline stations from different points of view, from across streets and highways and during the day and at night. The photographs generally lack cars and people. The images vary in dimension, with some traversing a double page spread. They are printed in offset on white paper, while the title on the book’s cover is printed in red. When it was submitted to the Library of Congress, the book was initially rejected because of its “unorthodox form and supposed lack of information.”⁴¹ Ruscha responded by turning the incident into a clever advertisement in the March 1964 issue of *Artforum* (**fig. 1.2**).⁴² “My interest in facts is central to my work. Not that you’ll find factual information in my work,” he would later remark.⁴³

Ruscha’s irony and deadpan humor are elements that help to explain his work’s incompatibility with *New Topographics* and Library of Congress cataloging standards

³⁹ Undated newspaper clipping, in Edward Ruscha Photographs of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard, 1965-2010, Getty Research Institute 2012.M.1, Box 17, folder 5. In this ad, Ruscha also calls the Sunset Strip photographs “motorized photos.”

⁴⁰ Quoted in Willoughby Sharp, “A Kind of a Huh: An Interview with Edward Ruscha,” *Avalanche* 7 (Winter/Spring 1973): 30-39. Reprinted in *Signal*, 64-72 (64-65).

⁴¹ Letter from Library of Congress processing department to Ed Ruscha, October 2, 1963. Edward Ruscha Papers and Art Collection, The University of Texas at Austin, Harry Ransom Center.

⁴² See *Artforum*, Vol. 2, no. 9 (March 1964): 55.

⁴³ Bonnie Clearwater, “An Interview with Ed Ruscha,” *Art Press*, no. 137 (June 1989), reprinted in Ed Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2002), 292. For more on Ruscha’s self-professed allegiance to “facts” and the meaning of that word in these postwar decades, see Joshua Shannon, *The Recording Machine: Art and Fact During the Cold War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

alike. Before studying how those qualities come across, however, we need to turn to the way neutrality was theorized in this period, which sheds light on the ideas that both consciously and more ambiently drove Ruscha, his contemporaries, and admirers like Jenkins and Baltz.

The Baffling “Neutral”

When Roland Barthes delivered a series of lectures on “the Neutral” at the Collège de France in 1977 and 1978, he was not preoccupied with pictorial manifestations of the concept. His lens was characteristically structural and linguistic, treating “the neutral” as a grammatical category, an entity involved with the production of meaning. The newly appointed chair of literary semiology emphasized that his task in his lecture series was not to *define* the neutral, but rather to examine “twinklings” of it.⁴⁴ Instead of using the term “neutrality” understood as a quality, Barthes specifically names the object of his inquiry as “the neutral,” which connotes something of a domain, mode, or condition. He wants to examine “where the Neutral leads,” he writes, resisting the urge to say “what it is,” because in his view, “that would be definitional dogmatism; rather: to discover a region, a horizon, a direction” is his aim.⁴⁵ His method in the lectures could be characterized as rigorously and passionately pursuing nuance; as if taking a cue from his very subject, he talks about and around “the neutral” without ossifying it, holding conclusions in flux.

Barthes’s text helps to account for the linguistic and cognitive conundrum

⁴⁴ Preface to Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, translated by Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), xxi.

⁴⁵ Barthes 45

described at the very beginning of this chapter. Early in the lectures, he revisits how structural linguistics has established how meaning is produced through difference.⁴⁶ When we use language, it demands that we position and identify ourselves with entities that semiology calls “paradigms,” which are binaristic, structured in oppositional terms such as yes or no, masculine or feminine, active or passive, positive or negative. Barthes once characterized this condition as “the fascism of language.”⁴⁷ What distinguishes the neutral, meanwhile – what makes it so subversive, even “scandalous,”⁴⁸ Barthes proposes – is its escape of this difference. Just as the paradigm is “the law against which the Neutral rebels,” the neutral is “that which outplays the paradigm,” or “everything that baffles the paradigm.”⁴⁹ He continues:

...For I am not trying to define a word; I am trying to name a thing... My definition of the Neutral remains structural. By which I mean that, for me, the Neutral doesn't refer to “impressions” of grayness, of “neutrality,” of indifference. The Neutral – my Neutral – can refer to intense, strong, unprecedented states. “To outplay the paradigm” is an ardent, burning activity.⁵⁰

Indeed, Barthes is not examining how something like “neutrality” is coded; instead, “the neutral” emerges here as that which transcends coding. Yet this is difficult to imagine because of how concepts operate in our cognition. Barthes draws a comparison with silence, or in one Latin term, *silere*, meaning “stillness, absence of movement or noise.”

He continues:

As we know, in music, silence is as important as sound: it is a sound, or again, it is a sign. Here, we reencounter a process that struck me as early as *Writing Degree Zero* and has obsessed me ever since: what is produced against signs, outside of signs, what is expressly produced so as not to be a sign is very quickly recuperated as a sign. That's what happens to silence... silence itself takes on the

⁴⁶ Barthes 7

⁴⁷ Roland Barthes, “Lecture,” trans. Richard Howard, *October* no. 8 (Spring 1979): 5.

⁴⁸ Barthes, *The Neutral*, 51

⁴⁹ Barthes, *The Neutral*, 6

⁵⁰ Barthes, *The Neutral*, 6

form of an image...⁵¹

The paradox of a concept like silence or the neutral is that as soon as we name it, we have made it into a sign, a thing, an image. Barthes writes: “This “negative” is ceaselessly “straightened up” into a positive as soon as one begins to speak.”⁵² He elaborates on our necessity to think and speak in signs: “To make known, to state the *not to speak*, however lightly, there needs to be speech at a certain moment. Neutral = impossible: to speak it is to defeat it, but not to speak it is to miss its ‘setting up.’”⁵³ Although the neutral transcends coding in Barthes’s formulation, we can still – cannot help but – consider the mechanisms by which it is activated, or “set up.”

The neutral is a domain of suspension, interstitiality, liminality, floating – or as Barthes names it, “neither-nor.”⁵⁴ Barthes’s sources of embodiments of the neutral encompass things like sleep (specifically, he alludes to the period of “neutral awakening” – time before thought, before awareness) to phenomena in religion and various intellectual traditions. In the domain of visual art, it is somewhat curious that for Barthes, Minimalism, with its associations of “restriction, erasure, minimum...plain obviousness...” actually represents a “false image of the Neutral.”⁵⁵ Barthes clarifies: “From my point of view, the assimilation of the Neutral with the minimal is a misinterpretation... because the Neutral doesn’t erase the affect but only processes it.”⁵⁶ His issue appears to be not with Minimalist art, but rather how it is theorized. The neutral does not *lack* affect; rather, its affect is experienced differently.

⁵¹ Barthes, *The Neutral*, 26

⁵² Barthes, *The Neutral*, 43

⁵³ Barthes, *The Neutral*, 28-29

⁵⁴ Barthes, *The Neutral*, 81

⁵⁵ Barthes, *The Neutral*, 199

⁵⁶ Barthes, *The Neutral*, 199

Despite characterizing the neutral as a broader mode apart from aesthetics, then, Barthes's text proves enlightening here for its emphasis on how the neutral (again, he avoids "neutrality") can be understood as operating at the level of positioning, or how things are put into relation with one another. In the case of literature or visual art, these entities can be thought of as the author or artist positioning or adopting a certain mode of address to their reader or viewer. Take, for example, Barthes's discussion of how unassertiveness – a concept at odds with the "assertiveness" of language itself – must nevertheless still be asserted. The same follows for expressing doubt or negation. Transposing these ideas to a visual art context, it becomes possible to conceive of a "neutral" style in positive rather than negative terms, as a mode of image-making where the author is paradoxically present in the form of absence. Such work does not lack affect; rather, its affect is unconventional according to existing standards regarding expressivity.

Ruscha, the *New Topographics* photographers, and their artist contemporaries drew from a wide set of ideas, materials, and conventions in order to code their images as neutral, or make them appear less legibly authored than the work of their modernist precedents, thereby inscribing their viewers into less familiar stances – positions that resonate with Barthes's "neither-nor." Rather than merely assemble a list of characteristics or strategies they invoked, however, it is productive to foreground the factor of reception, framing the significance of such attributes in terms of the responses or associations they provoke for the viewer. This means examining transactions and circuits of meaning rather than only intention and production, as has been the tendency in prior scholarship on *New Topographics* and much of the individual photographers' work.

Indeed, Barthes declares that he is looking at examples of the neutral “not in language but in discourse” – in other words, in its operation or usage, evoking something like the circuitry of reception.⁵⁷ Neutrality is best understood as a matter of positioning, a mode that names a kind of viewership that is set up by the author or artist and fulfilled by the reader or viewer. When we say a work reads as “neutral,” we are expressing something about how the artist has disrupted the paradigm: frustrated how the art object positions us, and how we in turn position ourselves in relation to it.

Neutrality is typically framed as a lack of other qualities that indicate expressivity. But the apparent lack of those qualities still operates in terms of the gestures and calculations (or “inflections,” as Jenkins would say) of authorship, and draws upon conventions, whether from fine art contexts or otherwise. To make art where one appears to suppress one’s relationship to the subject matter is still intentional and rhetorical. It is to seek a certain kind of response – or subjective, cognitive event – on the part of the viewer, and to assume that the viewer comes to the work with certain interpretive equipment.

“Huh?”: Style and Response

Ruscha knew this about the posture he enacted, even if he didn’t name those ideas as such. In 1962, one year prior to producing *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, the artist made his iconic oil and acrylic painting, *OOF* (**fig. 1.3**). The first of many word paintings and prints he would make over the following decades, it confronts the viewer with the kind of onomatopoeic, monosyllabic word that appears in comic strips and cartoons (**fig. 1.4**) –

⁵⁷ Barthes, *The Neutral*, 211

the same kind of word favored by his contemporary Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein. The painting's blunt confrontation is exacerbated by its high-contrast, two-color palette (bright yellow on a ground of deep blue), large scale relative to the viewer (at over five feet in both height and width), and all-caps text that mimics a clean, commercial sans-serif typeface. "You get punched in the stomach, and that's 'Oof,'" Ruscha explained of its title.⁵⁸ The painting could be said to deliver a punch to the gaze. Yet rather than the forceful and more dramatic rings of words like "Pow!" or "Blam!", there is also a cumbersome quality to "Oof," a slackness, an absurdity. Aside from a punch, it could suggest the sound of slumping into a too-deep sofa made of cheap leather. It is also a word that is useful in contexts where one wishes to express exasperation or bewilderment. To return to Barthes's terminology, "Oof" is the kind of utterance that "baffles the paradigm," not exactly prescribing a particular kind of response to its receiver. It's a guttural exclamation that has some force to it, but leaves the listener hanging.

"Huh" is a perhaps even less clear of an expression in terms of how it positions the one who hears it, and it was the word that critic Willoughby Sharp seized upon for the title of a 1973 interview he did with the artist.⁵⁹ Having begun the interview by telling Ruscha he is interested in "the particular sensibility" of the artist's books and "the kind of ironic take you have on ordinary things," Sharp steers the conversation to address the kind of response Ruscha wants his viewers to have to his work.⁶⁰ Ruscha elaborates on *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*: "I realized that for the first time this book had an

⁵⁸ Quoted in Tomkins

⁵⁹ See Sharp, reprinted in *Signal*, 64-72.

⁶⁰ Sharp, in *Signal*, 64.

inexplicable thing I was looking for, and that was a kind of a “Huh?” That’s what I’ve always worked around. All it is is a device to disarm somebody with my particular message. A lot of artists use that.”⁶¹ Sharp asks: “Would Duchamp be the first “Uh” artist?” Ruscha answers: “I think that would be spelled H-U-H, with a question mark... I just use that word to describe a feeling that a lot of artists are attempting to bring out, and some are doing it very well.” Ruscha does not expound on the dimensions of that feeling or why he and his peers are gravitating to it. When Sharp presses him for examples, the artist refers to something akin to land art: “I don’t know, somebody digging a hole out in the desert and calling it sculpture. You know, it’s a surprise to people.”⁶²

What is striking about Ruscha’s comments here is that he is circling around the idea that style is rhetorically motivated. In *OOF*, Ruscha goes so far as to literally name the response he wants his viewers to feel with the text on the canvas, offering a concise material equivalent of art historian Irene Winter’s claim that style should be understood as a combination of form *and* the response sought by that form.⁶³ Through her analysis of art of the Ancient Near East, Winter has advanced an expanded conception of style that accounts for factors of affect and viewer agency in addition to form and iconography. In the wake of theories of style formulated by canonical art historical figures like Heinrich Wölfflin, Erwin Panofsky, and Meyer Schapiro (all of whom more or less treat style as an immanent property of objects or mechanism of identification, whether to the object’s creator, period, or geography),⁶⁴ Winter argues that the opportunity remains to more

⁶¹ Sharp, in *Signal*, 65.

⁶² Sharp, in *Signal*, 65.

⁶³ See Irene J. Winter, “The Affective Properties of Style: An Inquiry into Analytical Process and the Inscription of Meaning in Art History,” in *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, eds. Caroline Jones and Peter Galison (London: Routledge, 1998), 55-77.

⁶⁴ For example, Meyer Schapiro defined style as “the constant form – and sometimes the constant

thoroughly consider how the *viewing* experience is embedded in a cultural context. She advocates examining the relation of style to cognition, or viewers' "familiarity with and sensitivity to the full range of associations" provoked by the art object:

It is style... that sets up the parameters for and the emotional linkages of affective *experience*, via the culturally conditioned sensory motors of visual perception. And in that respect, issues of style engage *both* properties of the work *and* functions of response. In short, style both inheres in a work and lives in the eye of the beholder.⁶⁵

Artists produce form to set up what Winter terms "affective" (in her text, synonymous with emotional) responses, which allows us to conceive of style as "a consciously deployed strategic instrument with specific rhetorical ends."⁶⁶ After all, Winter notes, the term "style" connotes both praxis and a set of visual properties; in turn, "stylistic analysis" should not only attend to form and iconography, but also to the maker's agency in setting up a certain response. In considering response part of the equation, style becomes a tool to characterize the affect of the work of art and how it is manifested though a reciprocal interaction between artist and viewer.

To return to Ruscha's *OOF*: it is comprised of bright yellow letters painted on a

elements, qualities, and expression – in the art of an individual or group." See Schapiro, "Style," in *Anthropology Today*, ed. A. L. Kroeber (Chicago, 1953), 287-312. It should nevertheless be noted that some canonical art historians have considered viewing psychology in their discussions of style or emphasized the agency of viewers, as in the cases of Alois Riegl's concept of attention and Ernst Gombrich's notion of the "beholder's share." See Alois Riegl and Benjamin Binstock (translator), "Excerpts from 'The Dutch Group Portrait,'" *October* Vol. 74 (Autumn, 1995): 3-35 and Margaret Olin, "Forms of Respect: Alois Riegl's Concept of Attentiveness," *The Art Bulletin* Vol. 71, No. 2 (Jun., 1989): 285-299. See also Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 286. The notion of the beholder's share is discussed across the entirety of Part III of *Art and Illusion*, spanning chapters VI to VIII. For a secondary perspective on the matter, see also *Gombrich on Art and Psychology*, ed. Richard Woodfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

⁶⁵ Winter 72. In framing response as involving both intellectual knowledge plus sensory perception, Winter cites James S. Ackerman, "Interpretation, Response: Suggestions for a Theory of Art Criticism," in *Theories of Criticism: Essays in Literature and Art* [Occasional Papers of the Council of scholars of the Library of Congress, no. 2] (Washington, D.C., 1984): 33-53.

⁶⁶ Winter 57

deep blue ground, on a roughly square canvas. But to limit discussion of its style to those formal elements would be to miss how the painting's blunt address trades upon the presence of a culturally embedded viewer who has some experience looking at comic books or cartoons. The exclamation will "ring" differently to audience members with varying degrees of humor and conjure a variety of mental imagery. As baffling or abstract as "OOF" is as an utterance, it carves out a more familiar position for the viewer who has a similar set of cultural references to Ruscha's, comprised not just of fine art sources, but also popular, non-art ones like comics. In turn, the ways in which audiences have responded to *OOF* over time tell us about viewers' shifting expectations and points of reference.

This recalls what literary theorist Hans-Robert Jauss termed the "psychic process" activated by a written text involving its author and reader, as well as his notion of the "horizon of expectations."⁶⁷ Indeed, the reception-oriented branch of literary theory that emerged in the 1980s provides several concepts that become useful here for analyzing the interpretive labor that Ruscha's images or those in *New Topographics* placed upon their audience, and how interpretation is historically and culturally bound. Jauss advocated for understanding the history of a literary text as encompassing a progression of instances of its reception over time. In this scheme, the initial moment of the text's creation is bound by one historical "horizon," or context of cultural meanings within which it was produced, but the interpretive contexts of the text's subsequent readers represent shifts in this horizon.⁶⁸ Jauss introduces the notion of a "horizon of expectations" as a systematic

⁶⁷ See Hans-Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetics of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

⁶⁸ For a gloss of Jauss and this concept of the "horizon," see Terry Eagleton, "Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Reception Theory," in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University

way to access how a text either conformed to historical readers' expectations, or challenged and subverted them. The way to reconstruct this horizon is to identify period conventions using a cross-section of works contemporary to the text in question, and subsequently identify aspects of the text that may have been provocative and therefore challenged readers with "aesthetic distance." He describes the activity of interpretation thus, emphasizing the agency of both the text itself and the reader: "A literary work... predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions... The psychic process in the reception of a text is... the carrying out of specific instructions in a process of directed perception."⁶⁹

In the case of Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, the fact that the Library of Congress deemed it devoid of "useful information" is not merely humorous; it indicates that 1) the printing process, materiality, and graphic conventions Ruscha used served as "signals" that primed the library employees to plumb the book for utilitarian value or information, but also that 2) Ruscha managed to slyly undermine those conventions, because it was ultimately judged to be "useless" – the term, we will recall, that Walker Evans used to distinguish art from document.⁷⁰ The books may have mimicked the appearance of something like an inexpensively reproduced technical manual or catalog, but failed to live up to the informative function of such materials because of factors like their pithy captions, the varied (rather than consistent, and therefore connoting systematic) vantage points of the photographs, and assortment of gas stations that seemed

of Minnesota, 1983), 74-90, especially p. 83.

⁶⁹ Jauss 23

⁷⁰ Katz 364

random, rather than chosen for their distinctiveness or exemplary value. Yet just as it possessed “aesthetic distance” to the viewer who mistakenly assigned the work to a more utilitarian or technical context, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* was also incomprehensible to someone like Frank Gohlke who was trying to make sense of it in terms of the conventions of fine art landscape photography. Gohlke may have looked at Ruscha’s images of the gas stations and thought of similar subject matter in the 1930s documentary photographs of Walker Evans, but could not comprehend Ruscha’s deliberate choice to eschew careful composition or print craft.

It follows that for Jauss, literary history is to be found in the relationships between readers over time, in the activity of reception. Accordingly, this is one way to account for how conventions are altered; what once roused unfamiliarity for certain audiences may eventually appear predictable or standard – for example, in Ruscha’s case, recognized as an icon of conceptual or Pop art.⁷¹ The devices that Ruscha and his contemporaries like Roy Lichtenstein employed eventually cohered into a set of strategies associated with a movement. Yet for a cataloger at the Library of Congress and a more traditional fine art photographer alike, in the mid-1960s, the work was prone to provoke the response that Ruscha was after: “Huh?” Halftone reproduction and offset lithography, typefaces familiar from mass-produced printed materials, photographs that appeared to have been casually or amateurishly composed, and even the books’ humble, portable size triggered viewers’ associations with imagery from advertising and popular culture – the “designed”

⁷¹ Ruscha and his 1960s audience in Los Angeles would have come to know American Pop art by way of Walter Hopps’s 1962 exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum, *New Painting of Common Objects* (September 25 – October 19, 1962). It preceded “Six Painters and the Object” at the Guggenheim (March 14 – June 12, 1963), which was curated by critic Lawrence Alloway, who had been instrumental in theorizing Pop in the context of the Independent Group in London.

material that Ruscha had been trained to produce in school.⁷² The settings in which such images are encountered, such as newspapers or real estate brochures, furthermore underscore why viewers habitually read them as impersonal, created by no one in particular. Still today, we are acculturated to regard such images as expedient vehicles of information in a utilitarian sense – and therefore as non-autographic, as non-creative applications of photography. As Britt Salvesen has shown in her comparison of both Ruscha's photo books and *New Topographics* to mid-1970s real estate photography, actual real estate imagery (**fig. 1.5**) employs a set of conventions that encourage the imaginative projection of prospective buyers – for example, wide angles that show as much of a property's exterior as possible and make it appear beautiful and spacious. They are not intended to be polysemic, but rather fairly narrow in their meaning: "Crucially, the intent is to control interpretation for the purposes of sale, based on an understanding of how people read pictures of houses and not on how they read photographs as pictures."⁷³ In other words, they possess style in the sense of having a consistent set of formal characteristics (and, to recall Winter, even the rhetorical dimension of enticing buyers), but not style understood as something linked to expressivity, or something that points back to any maker in particular. Rather, to harken back to the quote that Jenkins borrows from Borges, such material is marked by a style of "*anybody* else."

It was not only because Ruscha's art *lacked* conventional signs of photographic expressivity or his own hand, then, that caused his photography books to read as "neutral" to certain viewers. Rearticulated positively, it was because his books'

⁷² Again, for a particularly thorough and compelling analysis of the design orientation of Ruscha's education, see Quick, "Pasteup Pictures."

⁷³ Salvesen, "Real Estate Opportunities," 82

materiality and the commercial conventions he drew from activated the very formal knowledge that many viewers had used when interpreting anonymously published imagery from broader popular culture. Even if subconsciously, being prompted to deploy that formal knowledge in a fine art context like a gallery or museum – the venues where his books were eventually largely housed, after becoming popular through Ruscha’s self-distribution to a diverse range of individuals and institutions⁷⁴ – resulted in a certain feeling of dissonance. And this was precisely what Ruscha wanted: “I liked the idea that my books would disorient,” he said.⁷⁵ Like Ruscha, the *New Topographics* photographers eschewed picturesque convention in depicting their postwar architectural subjects, but they did not desire this response of disorientation on the part of their audience. Whereas Ruscha even got a thrill from people misunderstanding his work to the point that he turned it into more art, as exemplified by the *Artforum* advertisement.

Indeed, a productive way to frame all of this is in terms of how Ruscha’s formal and material decisions implied – or didn’t imply – himself as “author” in his work. The vocabulary and models of the reader response branch of literary criticism become useful here once more. In his 1961 book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, scholar Wayne Booth

⁷⁴ In his record book for *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, Ruscha kept track of everyone to whom he had given or sold a copy of the book. The names recorded include: the Sunset Strip Chamber of Commerce; LACMA and the Pasadena Art Museum; fellow artists Salvador Dalí, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Sol LeWitt, Ed Moses, Larry Bell, Bruce Nauman, Ed Kienholz, and Nam June Paik; the director Michelangelo Antonioni; curators Irving Blum, Walter Hopps, Henry Geldzahler, Helene Winer, Sam Wagstaff, and John Coplans; Pace Gallery; collector and dealer Betty Asher; the art historian Lucy Lippard; critic Lawrence Alloway; and Ruscha’s mother, and his wife Danna. Record book in Edward Ruscha Photographs of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard, 1965-2010, Getty Research Institute 2012.M.1, Box 17, folder 6.

⁷⁵ Ruscha, quoted in Bernard Blistène, “Conversation with Ed Ruscha,” in *Edward Ruscha: Paintings/ Schilderijen*, exh. cat. (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 1989), 134. Reprinted in *Signal*, 300-08.

proposed the entities of the “implied author” and “implied reader.”⁷⁶ When one reads a literary text, he argued, an image of the text’s author – a sense of their personality and voice – is formed in one’s mind. This is the “implied author,” separate from the actual person who produced the text. Similarly, the text “implies” its own reader, an entity distinct from actual, individual readers. When a given reader understands the text, it is because they have fulfilled the role of the implied reader, thus enjoying what Booth terms a state of “agreement” with the implied author.⁷⁷ Problems arise, however, when the author refuses to imply his or herself, a mode that Booth terms refusing to “take a stand.”⁷⁸ The experience of reading a text where one feels un-implied or uninvited as a reader, as a result of having an unclear sense of the author’s presence in the text is a disorienting one.⁷⁹

The phenomenon Booth describes helps us understand the interpretive challenge that Ruscha’s work and *New Topographics* posed to their audiences. On the one hand, certain of their formal qualities suggested that the work had been made by no one in particular. As Jenkins termed it, a “minimum of inflection” is what came across both in Ruscha’s work and that of the photographers in *New Topographics* because of factors like the sense that the frame had been laid on the scene arbitrarily, without much deliberation or thought.⁸⁰ Additional qualities that viewers interpreted this way included the images’ tonality and their seemingly non-hierarchical compositions that dispersed the

⁷⁶ See Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (University of Chicago Press, 1961), especially pp. 70-76.

⁷⁷ Booth in fact elaborates the concept of “agreement” in a different book, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 14-19.

⁷⁸ Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 240.

⁷⁹ On this subject, see part III of Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, “Impersonal Narration,” especially chapter 10, “The Uses of Authorial Silence.”

⁸⁰ Jenkins 5

viewers' attention across the picture plane in multiple directions, never to settle, rather than guiding and mooring it in the way that prior modernist landscape photographs had. Conversely, elements that conventionally read as "expressivity" in the historical landscape genre – contrast, varied planes of focus and fine detail, hierarchical composition, and subject matter consistent with the sublime, the beautiful, and the picturesque – are interpreted as narrating more clearly and positioning the viewer into a stable stance. Without these elements, the result is that the attitude from the implied author is one of indifference at once to the subject matter *and* the viewer.

Yet paradoxically, by appearing conventionally absent from his photographs, Ruscha is also felt more emphatically as a humorous persona behind his work. This is often contingent upon viewing the images in their book contexts, and viewing multiple of the images or books together. The very cumulative effort of assembling photo books of "twenty-six gasoline stations," "nine swimming pools and a broken glass," or "various small fires and a glass of milk," for example, is in itself an absurd endeavor, the humor lying in factors like the arbitrary numbers "twenty-six" and "nine," the non-sequiturs like broken glasses or milk, and the irony of the great deal of labor that went into depicting such mundane things.⁸¹ In other words, by erasing all conventional signs of expressivity from the work, what is left for the viewer to respond to is the larger gesture of making the books themselves – and this ends up being an exaggerated sense of a scheming creator behind the work, a sly and clever implied author who wishes to make his audience go, "Huh?" Like Buster Keaton's iconic deadpan, the cultivated absence of expression becomes itself a trademark. Ironically, "non-style" becomes a kind of signature.

⁸¹ Kevin Hatch describes elements like the broken glass and milk as "non-sequiturs" in "'Something Else': Ed Ruscha's Photographic Books," *October* no. 111 (Winter 2005): 107-126.

Deadpan and Banal as Modes of Response

As Jenkins worked to assemble *New Topographics* in summer 1975, he recognized the temperamental gulf that existed between Ruscha and the *New Topographics* photographers, and at the time concluded that displaying Ruscha's photo books alongside the others' prints would undermine the exhibition's cohesion. What their work had in common was their cultivation of neutrality understood as a disruption of the conventional manner of positioning between photographer and viewer, where the photographer appears to suppress their relationship to the subject matter, and in turn, the viewer. As we have seen, defining the "neutral" style in this way holds implications for our definition of style itself: as both a set of formal qualities of the object *and* the response they provoke, something not just bound by the material object, but only fully activated with the activity of interpretation. Yet despite being emblematic of this approach that Jenkins wanted to identify, Ruscha's humor and the materiality of his photo books – not to mention the diverse, non-photo-specific audience he sought for them⁸² – placed his work at odds with the general tone of seriousness, the print craft, and the dedication to medium on display at the Eastman House. As *New Topographics* photographer John Schott summarized in 1975: "Ruscha's pictures are not statements about the world through art, they are statements about art through the world."⁸³

In 1969 Denise Scott Brown called Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* "deadpan," and proposed that his photographs represented a non-judgmental regard of the

⁸² See footnote 72 for a selective list of people and institutions who owned *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*.

⁸³ Quoted in Jenkins 5

built environment, modeling “receptivity and openness” to postwar architecture and sprawl.⁸⁴ A year later in 1970, the critic Lawrence Alloway likewise associated his photographs with “factual appearance,” and ascribed them “deadpan candor.”⁸⁵ As Aron Vinegar has noted, “deadpan” is one of the most common words used in describing Ruscha’s work, and it is worth examining what the term actually describes about his photographs. Vinegar himself has framed this in light of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, specifically Heidegger’s notion of “being there.” Treating the deadpan as a “mood” or “attunement,” Vinegar in fact wishes to “shift our understanding of the deadpan away from a mode of a ‘rhetorical’ delivery.”⁸⁶ His lens therefore counters the reception-oriented lens of this project, but he nevertheless aims to theorize what the “deadpan” *really looks like* in photography, and how it formalizes a way of attending to the world with “indifference and equanimity.”⁸⁷ Similar to neutrality, the deadpan (as well as the banal) can be productively framed as modes of viewership that result from a weak sense of implied authorship, and therefore place a particular kind of interpretive work on the viewer. Especially in the context of representing landscape and the built environment, they can furthermore be considered modes specific to the 20th century and its architecture.

The deadpan was initially elaborated in the context of cinema. “Pan” was slang for face in the nineteenth century, and “deadpan” at once connoted a face that appeared flat or expressionless, and a mode of delivery in speeches or acting where “humor is

⁸⁴ See Denise Scott Brown, “On Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning,” *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* (May 1969): 184-186.

⁸⁵ Lawrence Alloway, “Artists and Photographs,” in Fogle, *The Last Picture Show*, 20-21 (20).

⁸⁶ Aron Vinegar, “Ed Ruscha, Heidegger, and Deadpan Photography,” *Art History* Vol. 32, No. 5 (December 2009): 852-873 (853).

⁸⁷ Vinegar 853

delivered without change in emotion or expression, usually while speaking in a monotone pitch.”⁸⁸ One reason that people may have interpreted Ruscha’s work in this way is his tendency to choose subjects like parking lots or apartment façades that themselves give little in the way of narrativity, because of their literal flatness and being made of commonplace materials. Yet we must remember that the very source of the term concerns a rhetorical situation between performer and audience, and therefore an exchange of meaning, not simply a linear transmission of it. Attending to viewing psychology is what helps clarify what the deadpan is, and in relation to the aims of this analysis, why its presence in Ruscha’s work placed his photo books at odds with *New Topographics*. Deployed in the context of representing the postwar built environment, Ruscha’s deadpan positions the viewer to regard the landscape with a kind of bemused indifference, which is very different from critique.

In all of his projects except for *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, Ruscha’s manner of photographing his subjects serially but still from varying angles, rather than uniformly frontal perspectives, cultivates the deadpan because it evokes a lack of precision and therefore intention or narrativity, which prevents the pictures from adding up to reflect any particular ambition or purpose. The varied and haphazard-seeming compositions obscure certain features of the structures (rendering the pictures less “useful”) and connote expediency, suggesting that Ruscha’s primary impulse was simply to record, for example, “*some* Los Angeles apartments” (an example of one of his titles that frames the endeavor of making it as more arbitrary than it actually was). In that volume and *Real Estate Opportunities*, the pavement and sky command just about as

⁸⁸ Vinegar 854

much space as the structures, leveling their relative importance (or unimportance). The buildings are generally centered compositionally (**figs. 1.6, 1.7**), which suggests amateurism in the sense of complying with the instructions Eastman Kodak supplied to their cameras' snapshot makers. The viewer cannot help attending to the surrounding elements Ruscha has casually allowed into the frame. Similarly, in *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*, the parking lots themselves generally occupy the same amount of space in each image, but Ruscha makes little attempt to eliminate the detritus on their perimeters (**fig. 1.8**). In each of these books, the "stuff" surrounding the nominal subjects in the pictures – a function of Ruscha's adoption of a consistently inconsistent perspective – serves as a surplus of visual data.⁸⁹

In other words, Ruscha labors to compose his photographs casually, which works against the viewer's effort to read meaning into them because the frame is in itself conventionally interpreted as one form of authorial decision-making in photography. This, in addition to the images' low contrast in their offset-printed form, delivers something like a photographic equivalent of the monotone pitch often used by performers acting in a deadpan mode. And to deliberately eschew editorializing is to suppress the viewer's sense of intellectual or emotional investment in the subject matter on the part of the author. The result is that the viewer is made to sort through what reads as evenly presented "information" to identify the author's stake in it, and what ours should be in return. Faced with this task and seemingly little guidance from the implied author, even

⁸⁹ Kevin Hatch has identified this as a quality of Ruscha's photo books that is self-reflexive about the medium of photography, since in photographs, there is content that was both intended and unintended by the maker. See Hatch, 115-117. Nineteenth-century critics considered this issue as well; see Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," *Atlantic Monthly* (1859): 124-281.

subconsciously, the viewer may withdraw from the image in a state of what Eugenie Shinkle has termed “perceptual boredom.”

Indeed, Shinkle, whose art historical research engages affect and neuroscience, has convincingly theorized the banal as an evenness of viewer response that is prompted by a corresponding evenness of photographic depiction.⁹⁰ She wants to theorize the “prosaic approach to photographic seeing” evident in the work of contemporary figures like Thomas Ruff and Martin Parr, as well as those who began practicing photography earlier in the 20th century, such as the *New Topographics* photographers Robert Adams and Stephen Shore, and William Eggleston and Nan Goldin.⁹¹ Recalling Winter’s conception of style, Shinkle defines banality as both an aesthetic (by which she means a “theme or motif uniting a group of work” – she does not use the term “style”) and “mode of reception.”⁹² She associates it with “resistance to emotional and critical engagement,” which is a function of a picture’s content, style, and spatial structure.⁹³ As Shinkle observes, when we describe something as “banal,” it typically expresses a negative value judgment; as such, the banal is “part of the modern history of taste... a sensibility intrinsic to modernity,” as well as “a kind of shorthand for those routines and value systems of high capitalism that are as annoying and trivial as they are obligatory.”⁹⁴ Shinkle at first alludes to mundane subject matter that represents “the antithesis of originality,” like Ruscha’s apartment complexes and parking lots, but ultimately frames

⁹⁰ See Eugenie Shinkle, “Boredom, Repetition, Inertia: Contemporary Photography and the Aesthetics of the Banal,” *Mosaic* Vol. 37, No. 4 (December 2004): 165-183.

⁹¹ Shinkle 166. Her inquiry also extends to certain fashion photographers like Terry Richardson and Juergen Teller.

⁹² Shinkle 165

⁹³ Shinkle 165

⁹⁴ Shinkle 167

the banal as operating not at the level of content, but rather reception. Linked to the conventions of vernacular photography, and in particular types of images associated with repetition, overfamiliarity, and disposability (like snapshots and passport photos), the banal manifests at the level of how we *consume* images. Shinkle writes: “Cultural overfamiliarity with certain kinds of images acts as a deterrent to critical engagement.”⁹⁵ The banal photograph, conjuring the viewer’s own experience with imagery like advertisements, predisposes us to engage with it with a minimum of attention, at both a literal and metaphorical surface level.

Shinkle argues that the way that fine art photographs adopt an aesthetic of the banal is to merely “re-present” its content rather than “transform” it, or record rather than editorialize, “to work against photography’s transformative potential” and “aspire to the status of objects.”⁹⁶ It is to invoke the conventions of types of images where “our typical relation to them is one of habit.”⁹⁷ This treatment is then duplicated at the level of reception in the form of the viewer’s perceptual boredom: a “forced inactivity of mind” toward the image.⁹⁸ It is curious to note that for Shinkle, banality is “specific to the perspectival image” and photographic space, because of the kind of imaginative projection a photograph invites. The fact that the viewer can imagine inhabiting or navigating the three-dimensional space represented in a two-dimensional photograph constitutes a “narrative proposition” of sorts.⁹⁹ Depth is a form of narrativity. For this reason, in Shinkle’s scheme a painting cannot be properly banal. Rather, what is a banal

⁹⁵ Shinkle 167

⁹⁶ Shinkle 167, 174

⁹⁷ Shinkle 169

⁹⁸ Shinkle 167, 168.

⁹⁹ Shinkle 176

is something like the inverse of Henri Cartier Bresson's "decisive moment": a photograph that crafts an "indecisive moment," one that flattens space and therefore forces stillness upon the otherwise flowing activity of perception.¹⁰⁰

Shinkle does not take her inquiry in this direction, but defining the banal in this way – as operating at the level of reception, inextricable from a particular kind of landscape (the built environment of late capitalism), and drawing upon the conventions of "vernacular" imagery – renders it something like an inverse of the picturesque, and therefore a late installment in a long history of theorizing viewing psychology and the responses we have to our environment in pictures. Whereas Cécile Whiting has qualified the photographs of figures like Robert Adams as representing a "new sublime" primarily by virtue of their subject matter (for example, because they depict the overwhelming vastness of postwar suburbia), Shinkle emphasizes "the kind of look that the banal object anticipates," highlighting the viewer's interpretive agency and the range of other kinds of imagery whose conventions these photographers drew upon.¹⁰¹ She is right to point out that banal photographs often invoke the conventions of images we regard in the manner of use, habit, or obligation, but it is worth emphasizing one factor that does not enter into her analysis: that such images are often published as anonymous, or have collective or corporate authors. A major reason why they repel our attention or long looking is our assumption that no one in particular made them; their sense of an implied author is relatively weak. This is why the deadpan and banal can be considered subsets of the neutral; Shinkle does not articulate it as such, but the way she defines the banal has a great deal to do with authorship and expressivity, and its perceived lack.

¹⁰⁰ Shinkle 169

¹⁰¹ Shinkle 175

“Deadpan” and “banal” should therefore be understood not only as descriptors for content, but rather a photograph’s mode of address and the kind of response it elicits. The fact that both terms appear frequently in discussion of Ruscha’s work, but that “deadpan” has historically not been a very common descriptor for *New Topographics* in commentary and scholarship on it, is telling. “Deadpan” emerged in cinema as a comedic mode, and as such, invoking the word to describe Ruscha’s work is both to characterize his photo books’ mode of address and acknowledge their humor. Furthermore, it is not his individual photographs taken alone, but rather their presentation in the context of his photo books and their mass-production materiality that yields the clever persona of Ed Ruscha. And the resulting sense that this implied author gets a “kick” out of his architectural subjects – that he is by all indications unperturbed by what they might say about American culture and values – is antithetical to the way the vast majority of the work in *New Topographics* positioned its audience to regard the built environment more critically. In other words, Ruscha and the *New Topographics* photographers’ cultivation of neutrality held different stakes. As Shinkle writes, such a non-style could be efficacious: “The banal aesthetic confronts us with our own reluctance to spend time with images... Aesthetic engagement with the banal... has the capacity to open up a different kind of vision, an attention to the material circumstances of looking, which might then be transformed into ethical and political action.”¹⁰² If this was the author’s intention, however, the audience had to overcome their aversion to what they could often only inchoately describe as “cool” or “detached” art.

¹⁰² Shinkle 181-182

From Edward Hopper to *Information*: Theorizing Emotional Temperature

From the content of a picture, to the cultural and societal moment in which it originates, and even to particular technologies and media themselves, art historians, theorists, and curators have proposed a variety of determinants for what this analysis, finally, terms “emotional temperature.” The “cool,” especially, has gone by many names. For instance, as Joshua Shannon has noted, after World War II and especially in Southern California, the world of Ruscha and his contemporaries was transformed by the rise of Big Science, the development of the military-industrial complex, and the “increasingly statistical management of many kinds of activity.”¹⁰³ Artists in SoCal made work to reflect this new reality, embracing a cerebral mode Shannon terms “factualism.” Indeed, Lewis Baltz photographed the corporate parks generated by these new industries in his series and book, *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California* (1974), from which he selected his prints to contribute to *New Topographics* in 1975. Through Shannon’s lens, the blunt frontality of Baltz’s compositions could be interpreted as a “factual” approach to vantage point that doubles and thereby critiques the impenetrability of this new class of architecture and the industries it simultaneously housed and shielded from public view. Benjamin Buchloh, likewise, might suggest interpreting Baltz’s body of work in light of what he has described as the “aesthetic of administration” and “critique of institutions” that marked much of the otherwise heterogeneous conceptual art of the late 1960s.¹⁰⁴ In his scheme, the art of figures like Ruscha, Sol LeWitt, and Lawrence Weiner (whom Buchloh considers heirs to Duchamp and the notion of art as idea) replaced Pop’s

¹⁰³ Joshua Shannon, *The Recording Machine: Art and Fact during the Cold War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 3.

¹⁰⁴ See Benjamin Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105-43.

aesthetic of industrial production and consumption with one that gave form to its own “administered society,” deploying strategies of dematerialization, repetition, series, language, and institutional critique.

It is remarkable to note how strongly Erika Doss’s recent account of Edward Hopper’s paintings from decades before can be seen as anticipating this moment as described by Shannon or Buchloh, her analysis being all the more notable because she actually addresses emotion. Doss has interpreted Hopper’s art in light of what she identifies as an “emotional regime” of restraint that flourished in the United States from the turn of the twentieth century into the period following World War II.¹⁰⁵ She argues that Hopper’s lone, brooding figures and vacant interior spaces visualize the “feeling” of occupying and navigating this regime, which she relates to the managerial bureaucracy of new corporations and their office environments, and how they mandated that one exercise “disciplined self-control.”¹⁰⁶ She introduces the term “emotional style” to describe both this type of comportment and its representation.¹⁰⁷ Doss traces how, encouraged to exercise restraint at work, Americans took their passion and indulgence elsewhere into the consumerist arenas of shopping, entertainment, and sports – areas of modern life that were as iconic for the period as those office spaces. Correspondingly, in his paintings that examined and reflected the impact of this shift upon “class, communication, and

¹⁰⁵ See Erika Doss, “Hopper’s Cool: Modernism and Emotional Restraint,” *American Art* 29, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 2-27. It should be noted that Doss does not argue this regime characterized *all* of American life and media; “it was not the emotional style personified by the oppositional swagger and rebellious self-expression of charismatic modern American musicians and movie stars like Frank Sinatra and James Dean... Nor does Hopper’s cool resonate with the nonchalant self-possession, and self-defense, of American jazz artists like Lester Young and Miles Davis. Rather, Hopper’s cool evokes the transition to an American emotional style of tense inhibition characterized by control, discipline, and restraint,” 10.

¹⁰⁶ Doss 3

¹⁰⁷ Doss 23

intimacy,” Hopper drew from popular imagery like that of advertising and films (indeed, the same types of images that Pop artists would appropriate as source material in the following decades).¹⁰⁸ In Doss’s analysis, this move by Hopper towards banal and corporate sites, combined with the apparent introspection of his figures and his paintings’ “vague...narrative legibility,” forges to establish their coolness.¹⁰⁹ “Cool” is the emotional order of Hopper’s day: a climate that a person complied with despite the repression it required, and which precipitated art like Hopper’s. It is more that the subjects and spaces of Hopper’s paintings materialize this larger behavioral imperative, rather than the coolness being contingent upon the interpretive dynamics his paintings activated for his audience. However, Doss does briefly allude to reception when she says Hopper’s paintings have an “inherently affective character due to their “ambiguous and incomplete narratives” and cool color palette.”¹¹⁰

Shannon’s account of art production in the decades following Hopper’s – the Cold War era – adopts a similar top-down model where a larger cultural climate leads artists to produce form symptomatic of it, but in his estimation, the artists also resist and undermine it. Citing Michel Foucault’s emphasis on epistemic conditions as a methodological influence, Shannon proposes that work like Ruscha’s photography books participated in a “recording machine epistemology” unique to the postwar era: a way of talking, thinking, and knowing that was rooted in “fact.”¹¹¹ From 1968 onward, many artists became interested in the notions of machine, surface, and system. Their art did not passively reflect “the factual orientation of the culture at large,” however; it resisted it. As

¹⁰⁸ Doss 4

¹⁰⁹ Doss 7

¹¹⁰ Doss 23

¹¹¹ Shannon 5

Shannon clarifies, “it would be more accurate to see it as an effort to strain that empiricism through art’s traditional non-instrumentality” – pairing unruly ideas and materials, for example, with the rigidity of the grid or predetermined constraints for making, and thereby interrogating or even parodying society’s very appetite for structure, statistics, and facts and figures. “Evacuating purpose from the contemporary obsession with fact, this art made that obsession all the more apparent, and available for thought.”¹¹² One thinks, for example, of how Baltz photographs the pavement in the industrial parks in a way that reveals how it cracks and undulates rather than remaining perfectly level, as if the earth beneath it defies being tamed and made into concrete “fact.”

Shannon’s concept of the “factual,” Buchloh’s “administrative” aesthetic, and “emotional restraint” as elaborated by Doss are all adjacent, yet not quite equal to what this analysis proposes terming the “cool” as one end of a spectrum of emotional temperature. Each of their frameworks provides compelling ways to analyze what distinguishes something like Ruscha’s photographs, but they are heavily premised upon formal qualities and strategies, the ways artist structured their practice, or the cultural context of production, and therefore neglect to substantially consider the element of reception, which would help to account for what *enables the art to read* as “factual,” “administrative,” or “restrained” in the first place.

It enriches our understanding of this moment and its art to consider how all of these proposed synonyms of “coolness” engage a set of relations between authorship, viewership, and expressivity that add up to what this study calls “emotional temperature.”

¹¹² Shannon 6

As a tool for stylistic analysis, it can be conceived as a metric of the interpretive labor a work of art places on its audience, as a function of how artists imply both themselves and their viewers through formal cues in the art object. It characterizes both the object's mode of address *and* the viewership it intimates. In the sciences, temperature is a measure of the transmission of energy; it follows that here, the transmission of energy can be thought of as expressivity, that of the author's to the viewer. On the "warm" end of this imagined spectrum is art that is legibly – that is to say, conventionally – expressive, where the majority of its audience can get a strong sense of both the subjectivity of who created it and its transmission of meaning, even if individuals' interpretations differ. This amounts to a feeling of being positioned stably by the artist. Conversely, when we deem something "cool," it is because the work reads as unconventionally authored (or conventionally *un*-authored), and therefore inexpressive. A lack of a discernable message positions us less stably, or in an unfamiliar way given the expectations informed by the fine art context in which we encounter it. Reading and interpreting it is felt as laborious; it may take more effort in requiring us to deploy knowledge and experience from non-art contexts to try and make sense of it.

As elaborated here, emotional temperature therefore engages many of the same issues as Jauss's "horizon of expectations" and "aesthetic distance" as tools for analyzing literature's conventionality. The relative warmth or coolness of a certain work of art can change over time and can differ between audiences, allowing us to recover historiated and culturally specific readers or viewers. Yet emotional temperature is distinguished by 1) attending specifically to the issue of expressivity, or the relation of convention to the perceived legibility of authorship, and 2) naming a viewership: characterizing the

position that the object implies for its viewer, who responds accordingly.

In retrospect, curator Kynaston McShine's 1970 exhibition *Information* at the Museum of Modern Art, which included work by Ed Ruscha (despite the artist's claim that viewers would not "find any factual information" in his work), can be understood as having tried to name an impulse along these lines.¹¹³ Commentary on the show has emphasized its content and its artists' conceptual points of departure as the factors that made the assembled work cohere, but *Information* can also be framed as having identified a tendency in the period's art having to do with interpretive labor. International in scope, the show sought to take stock of recent art that appeared "coolly involved" in its "general attitude."¹¹⁴ In the press release, McShine connected this "cool" quality to the way the art in the exhibition addressed and positioned its viewers: the art in *Information* "enables us to participate, quite often as in a game," he wrote.

At other times it seems almost therapeutic, making us question ourselves and our responses to unfamiliar stimuli. The constant demand is a more aware reaction to our natural and artificial environments... These artists are questioning our prejudices, asking us to renounce our inhibitions and if they are reevaluating the nature of art, they are also asking that we reassess what we have always taken for granted as our accepted and cultural conditioned aesthetic response to art.¹¹⁵

In other words, the artists McShine had assembled all adopted strategies that read as "cool" to viewers because they were then unconventional, shocking viewers out of complacency and redefining what our *response* to art objects could be. McShine sketched a genealogy for the exhibition comprised of figures and sources both art historical and

¹¹³ Bonnie Clearwater, "An Interview with Ed Ruscha," *Art Press*, no. 137 (June 1989), reprinted in *Signal*, 292.

¹¹⁴ Press release for *Information* (Museum of Modern Art, July 2 – September 20, 1970), July 2, 1970. Accessed in MoMA's online exhibition archives: https://www.moma.org/d/c/press_releases/W1siZiIsIjMyNjY5MiJdXQ.pdf?sha=fb008da66d24aef2

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*

otherwise; he located *Information* in an “intellectual climate” inspired by “Marcel Duchamp, Ad Reinhardt, Buckminster Fuller, Marshall McLuhan, the I Ching, the Beatles, Claude Levi-Strauss, John Cage, Yves Klein, Herbert Marcuse, Ludwig Wittgenstein and theories of information and leisure...” Zeroing back in on art historical movements, he added that Dada, happenings, Pop, and minimalism each had implications for the art that appeared in *Information*.¹¹⁶

It was not only that the work in the show *possessed* “the look of information” or *resembled* material in our culture associated with informational contexts; it *invoked* it – a “look” understood as an active stance of making sense of the art and the world. And most of the time, encouraged to adopt such a look, the viewer wouldn’t in fact gather any typical version of “information” at all, because to recall Walker Evans’s distinction between art and actual document hinging upon usefulness, or Shannon’s argument in *The Recording Machine*, much of this “factual” art undermined or critiqued the systems whose conventions they borrowed. The disparity between the certainty that the information-seeking gaze typically provides, and the lack of resolved meaning the art actually delivered, was largely the point. By withholding conventional signs of narrativity, guidance, and resolution, this art would lead its ideal viewer to come to terms with their culture’s very expectations of those things.

To map these ideas onto Ruscha and *New Topographics*: guidance is what viewers typically encountered in photographs of the American landscape, so it was not only their inclusion of human-built elements into their pictures, but the way in which they represented those subjects with an aesthetic that seemed uncharitable to the viewer that

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*

constituted the novelty and interpretive difficulty of their work. Yet again, even if they had this in common, the materiality of Ruscha's books placed them at odds with the dedication to photography as a medium present in *New Topographics*. Echoing Shinkle's theorization of the banal photograph, Shannon names low contrast, shallow shadows, seemingly casual angles or points of view, and the cheapness of Ruscha's architectural subjects themselves as the elements of his photo books that "suggest a hard refusal of the traditional revelatory power of modernist photography... planarity is offered as a symptom of the superficiality of the picture, and perhaps even of reality itself."¹¹⁷ Ruscha's obsession with surfaces – of apartments, parking lots, and swimming pools – dovetail with his "thin" approach to representing them, in Shannon's analysis quite literally "re-presenting" them without editorializing, drama, or adding depth.¹¹⁸ The position intimated for the viewer, then, is "cool" by the terms of this analysis: one of looking at mere re-presentation, rather than form that has undergone some kind of subjective intervention. Ruscha commented in 1972, rhetorically downplaying his own subjectivity and establishing the primacy of his concepts over the individual photographs: "I don't even look at it as photography. They're just images to fill a book... the camera is used simply as a documentary device, the closest documentary device, that's what it's all about.... I like facts. Facts, facts are in those books."¹¹⁹ Such a statement would likely never be uttered by the *New Topographics* photographers, who possessed faith in their medium even if certain of their photographs evidenced a kind of skepticism or lack of faith in their subjects.

¹¹⁷ Shannon 1

¹¹⁸ Shannon 1

¹¹⁹ Quoted in A.D. Coleman, "My Books End Up in the Trash" (1972), in *Signal*, 49.

In light of the intellectual and cultural touchstones McShine cites for *Information*, the notion of interpretive labor also dovetails with what Marshall McLuhan theorized as “hot” and “cool” media in his 1964 book *Understanding Media*.¹²⁰ There, McLuhan ascribes temperatures to individual media in terms of the degree of interpretive work they place on their consumers. Film, for example, is a hot medium because of the amount of direction it provides for its viewer; absorbed in a film, the viewer is not required to supplement what is provided in the image to a great degree. By contrast, he classifies comics as cooler because they demand that the reader “fill in” information in the narrative gaps between their illustrated frames in the manner of what McLuhan terms “participation” or “completion.”¹²¹ The scheme corresponds to a metaphor of image resolution, or “definition,” as McLuhan says; the less resolution or definition, the more gaps the viewer must fill in.¹²² Temperature also corresponds to the viewer’s own self-awareness of her interpretation. Hot media are absorptive, whereas in encountering cool media, the viewer may self-consciously think about the effort of interpretation itself. Notably, McLuhan’s preoccupation with mass media and the mass image rendered him influential among the British Pop artists. Writing about the Independent Group in 1958, Lawrence Alloway had articulated a central tenet of the group’s position, anticipating McLuhan: “The new role for the fine arts is to be one of the possible forms of communication in an expanding framework that also includes the mass arts.”¹²³

¹²⁰ See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (1964), first MIT Press edition (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

¹²¹ McLuhan 23

¹²² McLuhan 22

¹²³ Lawrence Alloway, “The Arts and the Mass Media,” *Architectural Design*, London, February 1958; reproduced in C. Harrison and P. Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 717. The Independent Group (IG) had first gathered at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1952. The artists involved included Eduardo Paolozzi, William

Curiously, McLuhan classifies photography as a hot medium, in accordance with his additional criterion that photographs activate predominantly one sense; just as they belong primarily to the domain of the visual, radio – another “hot” medium – belongs to the domain of sound. Whereas television is cool because it involves both vision and sound. The latter is a striking example of places where McLuhan’s classification system suggests that when layered with one another, different media can solicit a person’s “participation” in competing ways.

Technological determinism (not to mention the arbitrariness of what constitutes a “gap”) aside, what is significant here is McLuhan’s linkage of coolness with interpretive effort right on the heels of the publication of Ruscha’s first photo books. What bridged McLuhan’s project and McShine’s in *Information* half a decade later was that both thinkers used the concepts of information and temperature as metaphors for the communication of meaning. In retrospect, both of them were devoted to exploring problems of interpretation and response. When considered in light of this cultural and theoretical moment, Ruscha’s work and *New Topographics* appear as important contributions to this impulse that was named and theorized across media in the 1960s and 1970s. Similar to how Barthes conceived of “the neutral,” such cool art did not seek to repress viewer response, but rather to shift its character.

Conclusions: the Stakes of “Cool” and Ruscha’s Lukewarm

If Ruscha and the *New Topographics* photographers’ use of photography

Turnbull, and Richard Hamilton, while its thinkers included figures like Alloway, Reyner Banham, and Peter and Alison Smithson. See David Alan Mellor, “The Independent Group,” in Chris Stephens, ed. *The History of British Art 1870 – Now* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, in association with Tate Britain, 2008), 160-161.

represented “an extension of [themselves],” to invoke McLuhan’s definition of “medium,” then the selves that emerged in their work – the “implied authors,” to state it again in the terms of literary theory – were very different.¹²⁴ With the overall question of what prevented Ruscha from being included in *New Topographics* still in mind, I want to suggest, finally, that his humor in fact complicates the emotional temperature of his photo books by lending them a kind of warmth. The Library of Congress’s rejection of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* in 1963 stemmed from how the book displayed the conventions of informative material without delivering actual information; in other words, the library perceived Ruscha’s book as too “warm” in a way, not cool *enough*. From the perspective of the acquisitions department, the book may have resembled the kinds of catalogs, manuals, or typologies that the technology division would be in the business of collecting, but there was something “off” about it – something ever so slightly authored, something ineffably funny. It was, in terms of cataloging standards, a joke.

The idea of emotional temperature helps to account for what makes Ruscha’s photo books such complex objects, so difficult to categorize, and prone to provoking very different reactions to particular types of viewers. To Lewis Baltz as an art student in the late 1960s, they were “cool” in the best way, as he admired them for approximating a version of “photography degree zero,” seemingly evacuated of Ruscha’s expressivity. In later years when he referred to *New Topographics*, Baltz would speak of Ruscha as “the presiding spirit over the whole show.”¹²⁵ For Frank Gohlke, meanwhile, Ruscha’s books

¹²⁴ McLuhan 7

¹²⁵ Quoted in “Last Interview of Lewis Baltz with Jeff Rian,” *L’Oeil de la Photographie*, published November 25, 2014, accessed at: <http://timfleming.blogspot.com/2014/11/last-interview-of-lewis-baltz-with-jeff.html>

flew in the face of fine art modernist photographic aesthetics and print craft. They were “cool” in the sense of being so dissonant with his own expectations and points of reference that he could barely make sense of them. And yet for William Jenkins, even though the curator never contacted Ruscha while he was organizing *New Topographics*, the artist’s work perfectly encapsulated the impulse towards the “styleless style” he was trying to name with the exhibition’s title, hence Ruscha’s prominence in Jenkins’s introductory text for the catalog.

Paradoxically, then, while Ruscha’s overall project may have been oriented toward coolness as this analysis has elaborated it, what prevented him from being included at the Eastman House in 1975 can, in a way, be identified as a kind of warmth. His conventionally self-effacing aesthetic anticipated *New Topographics*, but his clever humor and posture of deskilling were discordant with the social commentary and conviction in the medium and tradition of photography that otherwise marked the work in the show. To invoke the analogy John Szarkowski would draw three years later in 1978: in retrospect, the humor in Ruscha’s work places it closer to a “mirror” model of photography, where the picture points inward, a form of attachment (as opposed to detachment) to its maker, whereas *New Topographics* can be said to have featured photographs that postured as “windows,” their meaning pertaining to the world external to the picture.¹²⁶ As reviewer Robert Woolard wrote of the West Coast iteration of *New Topographics* at Otis, presaging Szarkowski’s scheme: “As good archaeological documents should, they have the transparency of windows through which the man-altered

¹²⁶ See John Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978).

landscape can be viewed.”¹²⁷ For Ruscha, the stakes of adopting a “neutral” posture pertained to what has become a career-long inquiry into picture-making, whereas for the *New Topographics* photographers, by and large it concerned awareness of what was happening to the American landscape in the 1970s. By challenging viewers’ expectations of what an “American landscape photograph” should look like, and how it should make them feel – expectations that had been formed by the work of their own modernist photographer forebears – their work could provoke viewers to consider whether the images’ revelations about our culture’s habits and values were something to be celebrated or critiqued. Presuming an intelligent audience who would bring to the work their own “beholder’s share,” as Ernst Gombrich would term it, the photographers left it to their audiences to understand their work’s message that it was predominantly the latter, if to varying degrees.

And yet, as Barthes would remind us, what distinguishes “the neutral” is that it escapes binaries like hot and cold. *New Topographics* can be understood as having presented a thesis about the “cool” end of the spectrum as it relates to style, expressivity, and response. But as the subsequent chapters of this study will now investigate, while registering as “cool” overall, certain aspects of each photographer’s work also appealed to viewers in a manner of subtle warmth: the generic accessibility lent by Robert Adams’s reference to romantic landscape aesthetics, for example, or the rich and specific colors in Stephen Shore’s prints. It is not to a degree that moved these bodies of work into the “warm” half of the spectrum, but rather tempered them enough to prevent total alienation on the part of the exhibition’s audience.

¹²⁷ Robert Woolard, “Man-Shaped Landscapes,” *Artweek* Vol. 7, No. 13 (March 27, 1976): 12.

By framing the exhibition and the style that it identified from the standpoint of reception, this analysis qualifies *New Topographics* as a turning point in photographic history in terms other than its photographs' content. In so doing, it aims to provide a more fruitful framework for mapping the show's influence in more recent photographic practice. That none of the ten bodies of work in *New Topographics* can be squarely situated at the extreme "cool" end of the spectrum – in other words, that each can be considered a "significant outlier" in the manner Ruscha has here – attests both to the work's complexity and the robustness of the exhibition as a test of art historical categorization. Perhaps our proclivity for binaries is an iteration of the modern desire for "fact," an orderliness or sense of resolution that thought-provoking photographs nearly always hold in flux.

Chapter Two

“A Radical Faith in Inclusion”: Robert Adams’s Ecology

To the complaint ‘There are no people in these photographs,’ I respond, ‘There are always two people, the photographer and the viewer.’

-Ansel Adams¹

Artists sometimes claim that they work without thought of an audience – that they make pictures just for themselves. We are not deceived. The only reward worth that much effort is a response, and if no one pays attention, or if the artist cannot live on hope, then he or she is lost.

-Robert Adams²

We gaze slightly downward upon the rear of a split-level brick tract house (**fig. 2.1**). The photograph’s caption names its location as the Denver suburb of Longmont. A glimpse of curved road at the left of the frame indicates the house’s position on a cul-de-sac. The dwelling’s roof is radiant, nearly indistinguishable from the even brightness of the sky. The same blazing, high-key light bleaches the home’s curving concrete patio, where pieces of furniture cast shadows that are shallow in depth, suggesting that it is close to mid-day. Along the bottom edge of the photograph, within the thick carpet of sod that comprises the home’s lawn are the barely visible branches of a sapling that will take decades to provide substantial shade. One can feel the heat radiating off the patio; it is nearly too bright to look at. If the photograph could record sound, it might be the droning

¹ Ansel Adams, quoted in Robert Hirsch, *Seizing the Light: A Social and Aesthetic History of Photography* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 252.

² Robert Adams, *Why People Photograph* (New York: Aperture, 1994), 29.

hum of air conditioners. The house is unremarkable, nondescript. And yet details – like the toy visible on one of the window sills – serve as evidence of the inhabitants’ commitment to make a life in this arid place, of their investment in its future. To a Christian viewer, the arrangement of the patio furniture might even resemble that of an altar flanked by a minister’s chair in a church, facing pews that would hold a congregation.

This photograph was among the twenty prints that Robert Adams contributed to *New Topographics* in 1975. The images measured six by seven inches³ – a size “by today’s standards... small and mean” – and depicted new construction in suburban Denver, the same subject matter Adams had pursued in the book he published the year before, *The New West*.⁴ Already a photographer of recognition, Adams had four of his prints in the collection at the Museum of Modern Art, and had been included in exhibitions at MoMA in 1970, 1971, and 1973.⁵ The 1971 show introduced his work to fellow photographers Lewis Baltz, who then helped Adams secure gallery representation by Castelli Graphics,⁶ and Tod Papageorge, who in retrospect has written of seeing the exhibition:

For me... and for the other photographers I knew who visited this exhibition, the

³ Adams made them with a Pentax. See his description of his equipment and process in *Landscape Theory*, ed. Carol diGrappa (New York: Lustrum Press, 1980), esp. pp. 10-16 (12).

⁴ Mark Ruwudel, quoted in Leah Ollman, “LACMA traces photography’s New Topographics movement,” *LA Times*, November 15, 2009. *The New West* was published by Rappaport Publishing, Inc.

⁵ John Szarkowski bought them for twenty-five dollars apiece. Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁶ The MoMA show that Baltz saw was *Photographs by Robert Adams and Emmet Gowin*, on view December 15, 1971 – February 29, 1972. Representation by Castelli occurred ca. late 1975, the time of *New Topographics*. See Thomas Dugan, *Photography Between Covers: Interviews with Photo-Bookmakers* (Rochester: Light Impressions Corporation, 1979), 174. Subsequently, Adams stated that he withdrew from representation by Castelli for “complicated” reasons ca. 1980. Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

surprise of these unprepossessing, six-inch-square pictures resided less in their subject, or in Adams's feelings about it... than it did in the way he had printed his photographs to distill the brilliant Colorado sunlight to a nearly nuclear intensity that, even as it glared down on the poor things it exposed, seemed to envelop and, occasionally, succor them.

Adams received National Endowment for the Arts and Guggenheim fellowships in 1972 and 1973.⁷ These achievements followed his first visit to the Eastman House in 1969, when he had shown his work to then-director Beaumont Newhall.⁸

Adams selected the group of images for *New Topographics* from work that he would later edit into the series *Denver* and *What We Bought*.⁹ The work was the product of the photographer's effort to grapple with what had happened to the landscape in his absence, in between leaving Colorado to attend college and begin graduate school in southern California and his return to teach English at Colorado College in 1962.¹⁰ He reflected in 1980:

I came back to Colorado to discover that it had become like California... The places where I had worked, hunted, climbed, and run rivers were all being destroyed, and for me the desperate question was, how do I survive this? [Edward] Hopper had already given me a clue, although I didn't understand it as a

⁷ Tod Papageorge, "What We Bought," in Robert Adams and Joshua Chuang, *The Place We Live: A Retrospective Selection of Photographs, 1964-2009*, vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 47-71 (49).

⁸ Britt Salvesen, "New Topographics," in Salvesen and Alison Nordström, eds., *New Topographics* (Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona; Rochester: George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film; Göttingen: Steidl, 2009), 11-67 (13).

⁹ It should be noted that Adams did not conceive of these bodies of work as destined for books from the start (see Dugan 175). Adams first published *Denver: A Photographic Survey of the Metropolitan Area* in 1977 with images he had taken in 1973 and 1974, and in a later edition published through Yale in 2009, expanded the scope of the work to include images from 1970-1974. The production costs of the 1977 printing were covered by the National Endowment for the Arts. Meanwhile, he produced the work for *What We Bought* between 1970 and 1974, and only first published it as a book in 1995.

¹⁰ Adams first attended the University of Colorado at Boulder, but found it too large, so he transferred to the University of Redlands, which was Baptist-affiliated. He graduated in 1959, married Kerstin Mornestam in 1960, and earned his PhD in English from USC in 1965. He began teaching in the middle of his doctoral degree, after he had completed his exams. Adams eventually left academia in 1970.

whole.¹¹

Perhaps Adams felt a kinship with Hopper's solitary, pensive figures, or admired his paintings' "vacancies" – a term Adams had used in describing the space in Timothy O'Sullivan's 1870s geological survey photographs.¹² Though decades apart in production and created in remarkably different circumstances, both O'Sullivan's and Hopper's pictures are distinguished by their stillness, a quality that Adams's photographs of the suburbanized West share. Indeed, Lewis Mumford noted of Hopper's paintings in 1933: "Hopper has caught one phase of America, its loneliness and its visual exhilaration: the loneliness of even occupied houses, the exhilaration of even mean cottages and sordid tenements."¹³ If Mumford's statement named tract houses instead of tenements, it may as well have described Adams's photographs of Denver, which are distinguished by a quality of light that Lewis Baltz described as "a perpetual noon."¹⁴ It is simultaneously brilliant and toxic-looking, both engaging and repelling the viewer's gaze, a contradiction that echoes Mumford on Hopper ("loneliness" mixed with "exhilaration"), and parallels the feeling Adams himself described after printing the photographs from *The New West* for the first time: "I thought I was picturing a scene I hated. But there was something about this picture that was beautiful. It made no sense to me at all, but the traffic and the

¹¹ diGrappa 8

¹² Robert Adams, introduction to *The American Space: Meaning in Nineteenth-Century Landscape Photography*, ed. Daniel Wolf (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 9. Printed elsewhere as Robert Adams, "Towards a Proper Silence," *Aperture* No. 98 (Spring 1985: "Western Spaces"), 4-15. Adams also alluded to Hopper in his 2010 oral history interview, mentioning that Hopper's landscapes helped him remember the East Coast after he no longer lived there, and missed it. Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹³ Lewis Mumford, "The Art Galleries: Two Americans," *New Yorker* 9, November 11, 1933, 78.

¹⁴ Lewis Baltz, review of *The New West*, *Art in America* Vol. 63, No. 2 (March/April 1975), 41-43 (43).

house were both unexpectedly, disconcertingly glorious.”¹⁵

Through his photographs in *New Topographics*, Adams sought for his audience to experience the same fraught vacillation. The viewer is compelled to mourn what has happened to the landscape at the hands of greedy developers, and also to take responsibility for it, ultimately settling into a stance of hopeful ambivalence regarding the possibility of the landscape’s redemption. It is in this way that the work encourages the viewer to adopt a point of view that resonates with ecology, the branch of environmental thought that was increasingly popularized at the time that Adams made the work. Coloring the way Adams intimates this position are not only his own environmentalism, but also somewhat more latently, his faith and literary background.

Indeed, the differences between the way his and his predecessor Ansel Adams’s photographs encode the landscape emblemize ecology versus conservation as models of environmentalism. In addition to helping us situate *New Topographics* in relation to its broader 1970s cultural context and track how the exhibition’s participants contended with Ansel Adams’s legacy, comparing their work also helps to throw the modernism of *New Topographics* – or certain of its photographers – into relief. Robert Adams’s photographs thematize faith, so to speak, both in the West and in the medium of photography to reveal our relationship to it.

The Problem with “Topographics”

On August 1, 1975, the George Eastman House issued a press release for *New Topographics*, which would open in October. There, William Jenkins took the

¹⁵ Interview with Constance Sullivan, in Robert Adams, *Cottonwoods* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 5.

opportunity to explain the show's title, though in so doing, he could not avoid grappling with a contradiction built into its premise. "The word TOPOGRAPHY is used in the title of the exhibition not in its map-making connotation," he began authoritatively, "but in the meaning provided in the New American Heritage Dictionary: "The detailed and accurate description of a place or region." He continued, connecting the term to the approach that the exhibition sought to identify: "The maintenance of this topographic attitude is the most important unifying aspect among these nine photographers. Judgments upon the subject matter have been purposely suspended in deference to simple, accurate, visual information. Presentation and selection of the subject has been more important than a statement about it." Yet in the next sentence, Jenkins felt compelled to temper that claim: "This is not to say that judgments upon the subjects do not occur. They do, as a result of selection and presentation." Nevertheless, he concluded by reinforcing the thesis about the photographs lacking apparent judgment: "But for the most part even the most vulgar aspects of our society seem neutralized as the result of this topographic approach. The viewpoint is anthropological rather than critical, scientific rather than artistic."¹⁶

Jenkins's hedging about the presence or absence of judgment in the photographs can be attributed to how the images perform both postures simultaneously, as well as circumstances that he and Deal would emphasize in retrospect: that the show was a bit of an experiment.¹⁷ To varying degrees, the work in *New Topographics* placed their viewers

¹⁶ Press release, August 1, 1975, International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House. Accessed in *New Topographics* exhibition file, George Eastman Museum.

¹⁷ Jenkins commented in 2006: "People come to me and think that I understand this because I invented it, and I didn't really understand it very well then. I think my essay reveals that." Salvesen, "Introduction," 49. Likewise, Joe Deal commented in 2008: "Bill even stated in the catalog essay... that the work of each photographer is richer in meaning than the aesthetic point the exhibition was making. The purpose of the exhibition was not to represent the work of each photographer in all of its depth and breadth. Work was selected that supported the thesis of the

into a critical stance at the same time their makers labored for them to appear authorless and uninflected. This was something that the photographers themselves grappled with as the exhibition was being prepared. For example, as Jenkins and Deal were finalizing the checklist that summer, Adams expressed misgivings about being included in the show. He was hesitant to participate in what Jenkins had pitched to him as an “anti-Ansel [Adams]” show (in Jenkins’s own recollection).¹⁸ By that phrase, Jenkins meant an attitude summarized by the statement: “Instead of lying about what’s there, let’s talk about what *is* there.”¹⁹ Robert bristled at the implication that Ansel represented the American landscape in a way that was untruthful. He was also skeptical about the “neutral” sensibility that Jenkins and Joe Deal claimed to unite the photographers in *New Topographics*. Ever attuned to the subtleties of language (Adams had received his PhD in English in 1965), he reflected upon the word *topographic* in 1977: “The term is too narrow to encompass all of our sins, and it expresses a scientific attitude that, in fact, most of us I suspect don’t feel.”²⁰ An additional reason for his reluctance to participate was that, as Jenkins explained more recently, Robert “didn’t see himself as theoretically oriented as Baltz did, or Deal, or Nick Nixon. He saw himself then – and continues to see himself – as somebody who is directly connected to subject matter and is concerned with the condition of the world, and not so concerned with photography and how it works.”²¹

exhibition without misrepresenting the work of photographers who were included.” E-mail from Joe Deal to Britt Salvesen, August 23, 2008. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:1/104.

¹⁸ Bill Jenkins interviewed by Britt Salvesen, June 30, 2006. Center for Creative Photography, Oral History Collection, VOP06:018.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Dugan 171.

²¹ Bill Jenkins interviewed by Britt Salvesen, June 30, 2006. Center for Creative Photography, Oral History Collection, VOP06:018.

It is striking that despite Jenkins's evaluation of these circumstances in hindsight, the curator still names Adams as the photographer whose work has remained closest to the sensibility he sought to identify in the 1975 exhibition.²²

Even before *New Topographics* opened, then, there was disagreement over whether its premise was compatible with all nine bodies of work in the show, with Adams's misgivings featuring prominently in that debate.²³ Nevertheless, Adams's involvement with the exhibition set the course of his reception for decades. His association with Joe Deal and Lewis Baltz as the unofficial "core" group of *New Topographics* photographers was already reinforced by 1981, when several venues in England exhibited the trio together in what was designed as a small-scale, traveling reprise of the show, but with new work by the photographers.²⁴ Accompanying the exhibition was an event called "The New Topographics: A British Overview," underscoring the perception of "New Topographics" as a style or paradigm with international outgrowths. In November 1980, Lewis Biggs, the exhibitions coordinator at Bristol's Arnolfini Gallery, had contacted Baltz to propose a show comprised of twenty prints each by him, Deal, and Adams, and also a fourth photographer not necessarily from *New Topographics*. The gallery was then choosing between two photographers from the 1975 Eastman House show – Nicholas Nixon and Stephen Shore – and two other

²² Ibid

²³ John Schott and Frank Gohlke were likewise skeptical of the show's premise.

²⁴ The venues included the organizing Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol (September 12 – October 17, 1981), the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham (January 23 – February 20, 1982), B2 Gallery in London (December 5 – January 9, 1981), and Open Eye Gallery in Liverpool (October 28 – November 28, 1981). The Arnolfini hosted two days of related programming that included a lecture by Joe Deal. A catalog for the show was produced, and it included an essay by Paul Highnam. See related materials in Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:2/55. Adams showed work from his series "From the Missouri West." Deal showed material from his "Long Beach" and Beach Cities" series, and Baltz showed work from "Park City."

American photographers who dealt with landscape, John Gossage and William Eggleston.²⁵ (Curiously, Jenkins had also initially considered including Eggleston in the Rochester exhibition, as well as Lee Friedlander.²⁶) Ultimately only Adams, Baltz, and Deal were included in the U.K. iteration, which continued to link Adams's approach to that of peers he felt to be more conceptual in orientation, and reinforced their identity as a group for an international audience. Reacting to the show in *The Guardian*, reviewer Philip George characterized Adams's point of view as "the most warm-toned of the three," echoing Robert Woolard's identification of Adams as "one of the least detached" of the group when he reviewed the Otis College of Art and Design iteration of *New Topographics*.²⁷ Nonetheless, George unreservedly referred to *New Topographics* as a "school of photographers" who all worked against "the emotional appropriation of a landscape by the photographer."²⁸

In ascribing "warmth" to Adams's work – or at least identifying his work as the "warmest" among his peers – George pointed to the way that Adams's photographs, of all those in *New Topographics*, display an awareness of precedents in American landscape photography that were in turn influenced by conventions of earlier romantic landscape representations, which coded responses of awe, uplift, and transcendence. As a member

²⁵ Letter from Lewis Baltz to Joe Deal, November 21, 1980. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG229:4/1.

²⁶ Letter from Lewis Baltz to Joe Deal, May 28, 1975. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:4/1. Baltz wrote: "From what I recall of our original list, the deselection of Friedlander, Eggleston, etc. will add direction to the show (which is not to slight their work, but to suggest that the context has been fined down to something which they are only peripherally involved with."

²⁷ Robert Woolard, "Man-Shaped Landscapes," *Artweek* Vol. 7, No. 13 (March 27, 1976): 12.

²⁸ Philip George, "New Topographics," *The Guardian*, Wednesday, September 23rd, 1981. George did also acknowledge: "But as is usually the way with "schools" or movements, the differences between them are as significant as the common ground."

of a group of photographers distinguished by their eschewal of the “emotional appropriation” of the landscape, George’s line of reasoning followed, Adams was nevertheless the “warmest” among them. Put differently, Adams’s work read as relatively “warm” *in spite of* working against “emotional appropriation.” George thus implies that one can gauge the “temperature” of a landscape picture by the degree to which the photographer appears to “appropriate” the landscape. This of course introduces the need to examine what causes a landscape to appear “appropriated” by an artist, which will be addressed in what follows. Nevertheless, George’s review is immediately striking for how, in the context of discussing *New Topographics* only six years after its Rochester iteration, he alluded to a relationship between emotional temperature and authorship, and specifically appeared to associate warmth with the model of landscape representation that the photographers rejected – that is, the “emotional appropriation” signaled by Romanticism. Furthermore, he positioned Adams as remarkable among his peers for the particular way his work figured this relationship.

Examining Adams’s relationship to romantic tropes and paradigms is a productive way to determine how his photographs read as more legibly “authored” than those of his *New Topographics* peers. This factor of authorship in his photographs takes on an even greater significance given Adams’s literary background, which has not yet been treated critically in scholarship on the photographer.²⁹ His photographs thus provide a particularly salient site to analyze the reception of *New Topographics* as a barometer of the very readability of landscape photographs in that moment, and how the exhibition’s

²⁹ Only Joshua Chuang’s essay “The Making of a Photographer” alludes to the circumstances of Adams’s education in a substantive way. In Robert Adams and Joshua Chuang, *The Place We Live: A Retrospective Selection of Photographs, 1964-2009*, vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 21-39.

relationship to earlier photography of the western United States can be productively mapped along the lines of reception.

The New West

At the Eastman House, Adams's prints traversed two sides of a cube in the middle of the gallery space. Lewis Baltz's photographs occupied the other two walls of the cube (**fig. 2.2**). Both photographers' prints, which faced Joe Deal's large, square prints on one of the outer walls of the gallery, were oriented horizontally and nearly identical in size; Adams's measured six by seven inches, while Baltz's were slightly wider, at approximately six by nine inches. Like the rest of the gallery, the walls of the cube were painted gray, by Deal's design.

Adams's photographs pictured the tract houses that had taken over the greater Denver Metropolitan Area by the mid-1970s, including split-levels and ranch homes, as well as trailer parks. As one reporter observed in 1974, the environmental impact of that phenomenon was already visible: "Denver was once a tidy little city with a crystalline view of the Front Range, a place where asthmatics could escape. Now it's a sprawling megalopolis with more cars per capita than Los Angeles, submerged many a day beneath a blanket of heavy smog."³⁰ Adams photographed the structures from a variety of distances, such that viewed together, the images provide a resounding sense of place of a city in flux, operating on a more transient time scale than the geological time of the mountain ranges that surround it. In wider views, the tract houses coalesce into bands or patterns suggestive of their rapid proliferation across the flat expanses of the Front

³⁰ Peter Barnes, "If it's Progress, We Don't Want It," *New Republic* 170 (May 4, 1974): 10-11 (10).

Range. Closer views of the homes train the viewer's focus on their surface particulars, encouraging one to draw conclusions about the quality of life of the houses' inhabitants.

Both types of images were represented in *New Topographics*'s modest catalog, where each of the photographers received three plates intended to convey the scope of their bodies of work.³¹ One of Adams's images that was chosen for print was *Tract house, Boulder County, Colorado* (**fig. 2.3**), from 1973. Occupying its middle ground is a two-story house with decorative half-timber framing, a kitschy imitation of the load-bearing framing typical of Tudor-style architecture. Recorded at mid-day, the shadow it casts barely extends beyond its footprint into the yard, which remains an expanse of leveled, grass-less earth. Below, in the foreground, a swath of concrete road and curb-less sidewalk sweeps along the bottom edge of the image and turns upward at the left edge of the picture, leading the viewer's eye further into the middle ground of the space and the other houses under construction down the street, giving way, finally, to farmland and foothills. The flag on the mailbox of the faux Tudor is up, perhaps to signal the presence of outgoing mail, but there are few other signs of habitation. And the hazy, organic contour of the distant mountain range – which Adams includes in its entirety, but which the house's roofline very nearly interrupts – appears more durable than the newly constructed neighborhood and street. The light and mountains root the photograph in its Colorado location, but this is not the open frontier of myth. Here, culture has overtaken nature.

In the second photograph printed in the catalog, Adams recorded an intersection in a suburban neighborhood of South Denver (**fig. 2.4**). Sky and pavement occupy nearly

³¹ All of the plates reproduced works that were physically included in the exhibition.

the entire frame – and in particular, recently laid pavement, evidenced by the portion of the street at the left, where there is a depression that awaits another layer of concrete. Radiant and clear, the light bears down on the band of houses that span the photograph horizontally. They recede abruptly into the distance along the squat, plunging orthogonal formed by the road ahead. Because the sky and street are tonally similar, the way the houses bisect the image encourages the viewer to compare these two horizontal swaths of the picture above and below, and note the clean, airy purity of the sky against the oil-stained street, which also bears the marks of construction vehicles. There is virtually no shade to be found in the scene. The viewer may even feel exposed and vulnerable, placed as we are in the middle of a road where, as the drips and tire marks attest, cars and trucks are passing.

And in *Mobile homes, Jefferson County, Colorado*, 1973 (**fig. 2.5**), the last of the photographer's plates in the catalog, Adams photographed a trailer park before a distant mountain from a slightly elevated vantage point. Though his proximity to the trailers rendered them large in the foreground, the mountain still manages to appear to dwarf the structures. Cast in shadow, the imposing landform takes on a subtly menacing presence, contrasting with the brilliant light on the metal exteriors of the mobile homes, which appear stained and battered in places. Though dotted with street lamps like a permanent neighborhood, when juxtaposed with the expanse of bare land behind it, the settlement looks arbitrary, temporary. Here, built and natural environment appear at odds, even locked in a stalemate, subtly encouraging the viewer to reflect upon the audacity of suburbanization.

The visitors to the Eastman House generally found these plaintive pictures

difficult. Adams could have anticipated as much, considering the reaction to the 1971 exhibition of his work at the Museum of Modern Art, where visitors had called his prints “cold,” “dry,” “dead,” and “lifeless.”³² Four years later, during the run of *New Topographics*, Joe Deal was teaching photography in Rochester and instructed his students to go to the Eastman House that December to record visitors’ responses to the work on view. The commentary reveals how much of the work in the exhibition left the audience feeling unmoored in their interpretation.³³ Visitors could not square what they saw before them in the galleries with the concept of “landscape photography” they had brought with them to the institution, let alone the model that was on view simultaneously in other galleries of the museum with works from the permanent collection. One visitor stated simply, “I haven’t seen these pictures before.” Another visitor expressed the perceived incompatibility of the work with evaluation according to fine art standards: “I don’t think liking or disliking comes into it; they’re interesting, like looking into a catalog.” The show drew critical comments laced with bafflement and exasperation, such as this one: “I don’t like them – they’re dull and flat. There’s no people, no involvement, nothing.” And multiple people suggested the photographs may have been made in a commercial context, indicating that the work prompted comparison to non-expressive

³² During the run of the MoMA show (December 15, 1971 – February 29, 1972), Adams snuck into the galleries to watch people reacting to the work. He recalled witnessing a couple studying his prints: “One of the all-time best experiences I’ve ever had in that regard was a young guy and his girlfriend came in and—I suppose they were in college—and they had read the review [by Gene Thornton], obviously. And they started and they went around both Emmet’s and my work, around the room. And it seemed to me, in front of almost every one of my pictures they would say some variant of “cold,” “dry,” “dead,” “lifeless,” and this little litany really became the more remarkable as it was extended, until they got to the very end, and then I forget which one of them said—I think it was the guy—said, “It’s just like Denver!”” Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

³³ All quotes from this paragraph excerpted from tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

applications of photography: “They obviously didn’t take it from an artistic point of view. It looks like it was their job, their project.” This recalled similar reactions in the press about the exhibition’s photographers at other times throughout the 1970s, when critics compared the work to real estate photography.³⁴ Yet other visitors on that December day picked up on the social commentary to be gleaned from Adams’s and his peers’ work, as evidenced by the exchange between Chris and Jack described at length in this dissertation’s introduction. At first completely bewildered by the work, after discussing the photographs with her partner Jack, Chris concludes while facing Adams’s photographs: “I don’t like to think there are ugly streets in America... but when it’s shown to you, without beautification, maybe it tells you how much more we need here.”³⁵

The notion of authorship provides a productive lens to take stock of these diverse responses and note their connecting threads. The majority of the audience members allude to perceiving the work as simultaneously *artless* and *authorless*, prompting the opportunity to examine why the work in the exhibition reads that way, and how those two qualities are intertwined. It is also significant that despite encountering landscape photographs that were utterly non-conforming to established convention, some viewers did grasp a social message, as evidenced by Chris’s response. This presents the

³⁴ Hilton Kramer wrote about Bernd and Hilla Becher’s work in the 1977 Art Institute of Chicago survey, “Europe in the Seventies: Aspects of Recent Art”: “The pictures themselves are not intended to exert an esthetic appeal, and in fact they have no esthetic appeal. They look like the sort of pictures one sees in a real estate office.” In Kramer, “Art View: Intentionally Starving the Eye,” *New York Times*, October 9, 1977, p. 35. Britt Salvesen has written about real estate photography as a conceptual source both for Ed Ruscha and *New Topographics*. See Salvesen, “Real Estate Opportunities,” in *Reframing the New Topographics*, eds. Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach (Chicago: The Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2010), 71-85.

³⁵ Excerpt from tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

opportunity to examine the dynamics of the work's implied viewers versus actual audience, and the tracks by which individual viewers completed the photographs' interpretive circuit.

Expressivity and Conservationism

In order to determine why the audience found the work unintelligible as fine art landscape photography in the terms available to them at that moment, and why they read the work as “neutral,” “cool,” or “detached” from a maker, we must start by examining what would have counted as an “expressive” landscape photograph ca. 1975, or put differently, what made a photograph of the American landscape appear warm and “attached,” rather than detached.

Some of the visitors to the show – whose audience was dominated by students and enthusiasts of photography from the Kodak-based city of Rochester, New York – may have seen Ansel Adams's solo show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art the previous spring, in 1974.³⁶ By the mid-1970s, Ansel, then in his seventies, enjoyed as canonical a status as could be imagined for a fine art photographer at that time. The Museum of Modern Art had collected photographs for decades and had a department since 1940, but photographic history was not yet widely taught at universities, and several large, encyclopedic museums such as the National Gallery of Art still lacked departments dedicated to the medium. Spurred by a gift from Adams's close friend David Hunter

³⁶ *Photographs by Ansel Adams* was on view in the Prints and Drawings galleries at the Met from April 24 – June 30, 1974. It was organized by Andrea Rawle and Phyllis D. Massar. Notably, parts of the exhibition extended into the 16th century Vélez Blanco Patio, adjacent to the Prints and Drawings galleries. Adams's photographs were thus juxtaposed with the delicate ornament of the historic marble patio, which was reconstructed at the museum in 1964.

McAlpin, the 1974 Met retrospective, which was Adams's first solo exhibition in New York City, reinforced the iconic status that the wider public already associated with him thanks to books like *This is the American Earth* and his relationship with the Sierra Club.³⁷ Adams's dual persona was that of photographer *and* environmentalist, and this was reflected in his audience. For many Americans, his photographs of the West in such publications and wilderness campaign appeals even served as their primary visual knowledge of the landscape, if they were unable to travel to the region themselves. This is one facet of why Adams, as well as peers like David Brower and Eliot Porter, pursued the form of the coffee table book as a way to promote the cause of wilderness preservation.³⁸ Indeed, *This is the American Earth* galvanized the public outcry that led to the Wilderness Act, which President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law in 1964.³⁹

The selection of work in the retrospective reinforced the inextricability of the photographer's vision and the negative and print. This is something Adams himself had codified in his quasi-evangelical books for practicing photographers, which furthermore primed viewers of landscape photography to expect pictures in that genre to conform to that aesthetic. As Adams proposed (in some ways echoing Edward Weston's notion of pre-visualization, or "seeing photographically"⁴⁰), in witnessing the iconic, pristine

³⁷ See Ansel Adams, *This is the American Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1960). Robert owned a copy of this book given to him by his wife Kerstin's parents. For more on Ansel Adams's environmentalism, see also Jonathan Spaulding, *Ansel Adams and the American Landscape: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

³⁸ Finis Dunaway, *Natural Visions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xvi. In Chapter 5 of this book, Dunaway examines the "curious phenomenon of the environmental coffee table book" as an integral part of the cultural history of American environmental reform.

³⁹ The Wilderness Act protected nine million acres of "unsettled and minimally cultivated federal lands." For a comparison of *This is the American Earth* with Peter Blake's more polemical *God's Own Junkyard* (1964), see Cécile Whiting, "The Sublime and the Banal in Postwar Photography of the American West," *American Art* Vol. 27, No. 2 (Summer 2013): 44-67 (46).

⁴⁰ See Edward Weston, "Seeing Photographically," *The Complete Photographer*, Vol. 49 (1943).

beauty of untouched wilderness, landscape photographers should “visualize” it and draw upon their mastery of technical knowledge to meticulously expose and craft a negative that would yield a print that did justice to, or even augmented, the scene’s majesty.

Combined with Adams’s physical effort to access rare or remote wilderness scenery with his heavy equipment in tow, the notion of technical mastery and discipline augmented the public’s perception of Adams’s status as a creative photographer.

On view in the 1974 exhibition were 156 objects spanning fifty years’ worth of work. The photographs emblemized the approach to landscape photography that Adams had cultivated since the 1920s: an exclusionary one, which posited nature as separate from or devoid of human presence.⁴¹ It was therefore consistent with the way the Wilderness Act had defined that kind of landscape: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”⁴² In step with romantic landscape aesthetics, Adams photographed scenery in a manner intended to provoke internal responses of wonder, vulnerability, and pleasure in the viewer, shooting from vantage points that emphasized the towering scale of snowcapped mountains to the delicacy of light filtering through autumn aspen leaves. He consistently included multiples of these natural forms in single frames, conveying a variety of points of interest. Furthermore, he endeavored to

⁴¹ For a study of how this idea gained traction in American culture and environmental thought, see William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), 69-90.

⁴² Howard Zahniser of the Wilderness Society, quoted in the Wilderness Act of 1964 (full title: “An Act to establish a National Wilderness Preservation System for the permanent good of the whole people, and for other purposes”), Public Law 88-577, September 3, 1964. Source: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-78/pdf/STATUTE-78-Pg890.pdf>

make use of the full range of tonalities from black to white in his prints, a feat he once compared to striking each of the 88 keys on a piano. For Adams, who left a career as a pianist to pursue photography, musical metaphors helped to express ideas about the medium and print craft. In his view, the negative was like a score, and the print, a “performance”: an individual iteration, inextricable from Adams’s subjectivity, an evolving interpretation.⁴³

The cover image for the Met catalog was one such iconic image. The imposing, craggy rock face of Half Dome occupies three-quarters of *Moon and Half Dome, Yosemite National Park*, which Adams made in December 1960 (**fig. 2.6**). Parts of the monolith are shrouded in shadow, forming a dynamic interplay of edges that keep the viewer’s eye moving around the image while still anchoring it by the pop of the bright moon against the sky, which appears close by thanks to Adams’s use of a long lens. Since Adams does not include the valley floor in the image, the point of view appears to suspend the viewer across from the lower portion of Half Dome, establishing an illusion of floating, which is a striking contrast to the weight and solidity of the picture’s subject matter. We are encouraged to marvel at Half Dome’s rich and varied texture, the result of a geological process of shedding that has naturally occurred for eons sending pieces of rock tumbling to the valley below. Regarding the image’s tonality, there is still information in the shadows; it is generally exemplary of Adams’s typical usage of a wide

⁴³ Adams commented: “We may draw an analogy with music. The composer entertains a musical idea. He sets it down in conventional musical notation. When he performs it, he may, although respecting the score, inject personal expressive interpretations on the basic patterns of the notes. So it is in expressive photography... the print itself is somewhat of an interpretation, a performance of the photographic idea.” See Ansel Adams, foreword to *The Print: Contact Printing and Enlarging* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1950). The Center for Creative Photography staged an exhibition originating with this idea in spring 2018, “Ansel Adams: Performing the Print” (on view from February 17 – May 20, 2018).

tonal range. As evidenced by the photographer's contact sheet for *Moon and Half Dome*, in the darkroom Adams further shaped the picture's massing of organic surfaces, for example, by rendering the texture of the rock face in greater relief using dodging and burning. The scene is presented in sharp and even focus, with maximum depth of field, recalling the technical imperative named in the title of f.64, the group he had helped found in 1932 that was dedicated to pursuing straight, purist "camera vision." Yet by modulating the light in the print, Adams still moves the viewer's eye around the photograph in a hierarchical way.

Adams in fact cropped this image from a square format frame, as he made several bracketed exposures of the scene with his Hasselblad on the way to driving to Yosemite's Ahwahnee Hotel late one winter evening. These circumstances – that of Adams noticing the remarkable play of light on scenery while driving by it, and stopping to arrest it before it changed – also recall the story of how Adams created another especially iconic photograph (and one likewise involving the moon) that was on view in his Met retrospective. *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico* (**fig. 2.7**) was an exception to the photographer's typical avoidance of the built landscape. In an often-recounted series of events, on the early evening of October 31, 1941, following a frustrating day of shooting in the Chama Valley, Adams was driving south along a rural highway between Taos and Santa Fe when he was arrested by the play of fleeting dusk light on a humble graveyard of crosses and the silvery clouds and moon above. The photographer "glanced to the left and saw an extraordinary situation – an inevitable photograph!"⁴⁴ Knowing he had only a few minutes at the most to capture the scene, and with no time to find his light meter, he

⁴⁴ Ansel Adams, *Examples: The Making of Forty Photographs* (New York: Little, Brown, 1989), 41-43.

(and his assistant Cedric Wright and son Michael, who were in the car with him) scrambled to assemble his tripod and large format camera. Estimating the aperture and shutter speed based on his knowledge of the luminosity of the moon to be 250 foot candles, he made only one exposure before the light faded.⁴⁵

The dramatic tale of the image's making is both part and parcel of its legendary status in photographic history, and emblematic of a kind of landscape photography that heroizes the photographer. As Adams reflected, the event "combined serendipity and technical recall."⁴⁶ By mastering the tools of his medium, he had made himself available to capture such ephemeral phenomena quickly, in the moment. Acknowledgment of this was common in responses to his photographs; as the Met's curators noted in the catalog for his retrospective, "One wishes one could question [Adams] in person about each of the images, eliciting the great anecdotes about the trip, the season, the weather, the light – all the things still so alive in his recollection – the special circumstances which were just right for the creation of each perfect and inimitable Ansel Adams photograph."⁴⁷ Here they expressed not only their reverence for Adams's skill and effort to access and record rare scenery, but their perception of the photographer's subjectivity in his photographs, as well as their identification of each picture with unique, rather than commonplace, conditions of light or weather. The photographs, and their display of technical mastery,

⁴⁵ Anecdote supplemented by interview with Michael Adams, "Ansel Adams's Most Famous Photograph: Moonrise over Hernandez," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_Ar5ZPuKUM

⁴⁶ Ansel Adams, *Examples: The Making of Forty Photographs* (New York: Little, Brown, 1989), 41-43.

⁴⁷ *Photographs by Ansel Adams* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974), n.p. Similarly, John Szarkowski once said: "When you look at a good Ansel Adams photograph, you think you know the temperature, the relative humidity, the month." Quoted in Phil Hirschhorn, "Shedding New Light on Ansel Adams," CNN Travel online, July 14, 2003. <http://www.cnn.com/2003/TRAVEL/07/12/sprj.st03.adams.show/index.html>

were interpreted as implicating their maker and his experience.

It is difficult to imagine such a narrative being linked to Robert Adams's photographs in *New Topographics*, and the reason is not as simple as subject matter or print aesthetics, but rather – framed more broadly in a way that includes those factors – a connection between viewers' perception of authorial subjectivity and the formal knowledge that photographs activate. The way Ansel Adams described *Moonrise* as an "inevitable picture" – that he looked out the window of his car and recognized what he saw as an image, latent in the landscape – is consistent with the viewing habits of the picturesque, locating Ansel and his photographs within a romantic pictorial tradition that linked qualities of landscape to internal response both on the part of the artist, and by extension, the viewer. This is what Philip George implied by the phrase "emotional appropriation of the landscape" – and what the *New Topographics* photographers made a creative challenge of avoiding.

There is a rich pre-history, in other words, both to Ansel's practice of "visualization" and the viewing psychology of his photographs. An individual following the itinerary of the Grand Tour in the eighteenth century would have been guided by the ideas of theorists of romantic landscape aesthetics like Edmund Burke, who described how beauty was associated with qualities of smoothness, small size, and symmetry. Meanwhile, the sublime was linked to vastness, altitude, and subject matter that made the viewer feel vulnerable, such as towering mountains and threatening storms.⁴⁸ That these categories described *responses we have to pictures* – rather than witnessing nature in person – is underscored by how the sublime allowed for a kind of pleasurable fear that

⁴⁸ Edmund Burke, *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, available on Bartleby.com (www.bartleby.com/24/2).

was only possible with the safe distance of representation.⁴⁹ Mediating between the beautiful and sublime was the picturesque, which William Gilpin defined in 1802 as “expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture.”⁵⁰ Principles of the picturesque mode included variation, mixture, texture, and deliberate irresolution, which – when paired with certain subject matter like fog or crumbling ruins – was intended to appeal to the imagination by inspiring a sense of nostalgia and history.

What is particularly significant about these categories and this corresponding episode in art theory is that they fostered a practice of looking at the landscape in a way that was informed by one’s familiarity with landscape pictures, an activity of both projecting and recognizing convergences of pictorial conventions in what one saw. This was especially aided by the tool of the Claude glass, the optical instrument that artists and travelers used to transform any view of nature into a picturesque composition.⁵¹ Standing with their backs to their chosen scenery and holding up the device in front of them, which had a slightly convex curve, viewers looked upon a softened version of the landscape where color and tonal range were reduced and rendered “painterly.” What is remarkable about this activity is the purposeful distancing or abstraction from the landscape that it involved, in the form of the optical mediation of the device. The standard of making pictures in the landscape genre thus became pictures themselves, and the world, a field of potential compositions, waiting to be recorded and elaborated – but seen through the lens

⁴⁹ In 1961, art historian Robert Rosenblum even noted a resonance between romantic landscape painting and Abstract Expressionism, basing that comparison in something like a notion of response. He linked the sublime to “experiences of awe, terror, boundlessness and divinity that began to rupture the decorous confines of earlier aesthetic systems.” See Rosenblum, “The Abstract Sublime,” *ARTnews* 59, no. 10 (February 1961): 39-40.

⁵⁰ William Gilpin, *Essay on Prints*, 1768 (London: Cadell and Davies, 1802), xii

⁵¹ The Claude glass was named after the artist Claude Lorrain, whose work was emblematic of the picturesque and a source of its conventions.

of the aesthetic category of the picturesque.⁵²

It was not only by photographing conventionally romantic scenery like mountains and trees, then, but also by *visualizing* the landscape in this manner and encouraging his audience to do the same, that Ansel Adams practiced in a romantic vein. The consistently long focal depth he used was at odds with the deliberate irresolution or suggestiveness of the picturesque, but he did seek out fleeting atmospheric conditions. In a way that further recalls the operation of the Claude glass, he also used darkroom skill to heighten contrast, such that his prints functioned as augmented versions of what they pictured. The scenes in his images were things that Adams did not see at once with his eyes, but instead constructed with his *mind's* eye, so to speak. As he once reflected: "When I'm ready to make a photograph, I think I quite obviously see in my mind's eye something that is not literally there... I'm interested in expressing something which is built up from within, rather than just extracted from without."⁵³ The point of origin for his photographs was the anticipation of a subjective, emotional response, which he fine-tuned with his work in the darkroom, on behalf of the people who would see his prints.⁵⁴

⁵² As scholar Sidney Robinson writes of the paradigm: "[the picturesque] makes an artifact that employs natural elements or the appearance of natural forces; it does not convey nature directly... unlike the sublime or even the beautiful, the picturesque straightaway engages in representation." Sidney K. Robinson, *Inquiry into the Picturesque* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 93.

⁵³ Ansel Adams, quoted in *Ansel Adams: A Documentary Film* (United States: Sierra Club and Steeplechase Films, Inc., 2002). Transcript available at www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/ansel/filmmore/pt.html.

⁵⁴ Cecile Whiting has characterized the relation of the sublime to Adams's craft: "Adams exploited his craft with extreme care so as to ascribe the aesthetic drama of the sublime to the site itself rather than to his artistic intervention." See Whiting 48. Sally Stein has also interpreted Ansel's visualization as an echo of Pictorialist manipulation: "In many respects visualization could be as manipulative as the Pictorialist technique of manual embellishment it sought to supplant. It was certainly more calculating, while the appearance of manipulation was far more subtle, embedded in the range of mechanical controls so that all effects seemed to emanate from the scene rather than being externally imposed. Given Adams's abiding love of unspoiled nature, it was only fitting that the photographs he made should appear to be wholly natural, that is, direct

Ansel's photographs can thus be interpreted as equivalents of emotional experience, or analogs of particular, charged events. They are also testaments to personal quest. The mountainous terrain in his images is often awe-inspiring because it is difficult to imagine how one would safely traverse or climb it. A viewer may study the distant peaks in *The Tetons and the Snake River, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming*, 1942 (**fig. 2.8**) or *Maroon Bells near Aspen, Colorado*, 1951 (**fig. 2.9**), for example, and consider that they have never been touched by people because they are too steep. Yet consistent with the sublime, this is experienced as a matter of pleasure and interest rather than potential peril, because the scale in the image is so vast, the photographer's vantage point so far. Fleeting elements like the light filtered through the billowing clouds in *Tetons* and the shimmering reflections on the lake's surface in *Maroon Bells* furthermore trade in picturesque drama and contribute to a conception of the American West as pristine, untouched wilderness.⁵⁵

All of this is to recover what likely read to museum visitors as a "warm" – that is to say, expressive and authored – landscape photograph in 1975, and why Ansel Adams proved such a useful foil to the *New Topographics* photographers, even if (as was the case with Robert) they were not equally quick to renounce him and his approach, and

"objective" recordings of the natural scene." See Sally Stein, "On Location: The Placement (and Replacement) of California in 1930s Photography," in *Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity 1900-2000*, ed. Stephanie Barron, Sheri Bernstein, and Ilene Susan Fort (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000), 175.

⁵⁵ It should be noted, as Finis Dunaway has argued, that "the sublime needs to be understood in historical terms, as a dynamic and changing aesthetic that is adapted to suit the concerns of particular people at particular moments in time." For example, "the Progressive-era photographer Herbert Gleason adhered to the romantic sublime of monumental peaks and towering trees," while "New Deal filmmakers emphasized the sublimity of nature as a violent, destructive force" which they connected to the "ecological calamities" of the thirties. Dunaway, *Natural Visions*, xix and chapters 1-4.

there were other photographers who could have served as shorthand for the approach they rejected. The warmth corresponds to the familiarity of the interpretive equipment that is set into motion by the conformity of the pictures to generic convention, which is part and parcel of the extent to which the pictures implicate their maker and the maker's activity of selecting and idealizing the scenery. Ansel's photographs positioned their viewers into stable stances consistent with conventions established by precedents ranging from 18th century European painting to the work of Albert Bierstadt or Thomas Moran (whose work, it should be noted, Robert Adams described as "fiction"⁵⁶), ones that privileged the individual's encounter with nature, and – crucially – whose applications were read as products of such an encounter. In embracing those conventions, Ansel reinforced himself as an heir to that tradition, and prompted viewers to deploy corresponding interpretive strategies they had cultivated by looking at such fine art landscape representations in museums.⁵⁷ It was not only the majestic subject matter, but also the way he encoded it that was conventionally legible and accessible to viewers, well within the bounds of the

⁵⁶ Adams, "Introduction," *The American Space*, 6. He writes: "One way to judge the importance of [survey] photographs is to compare them to paintings from the same time... I think, for example, of the painting now in the White House by Thomas Moran of the bluffs at Green River, a picture in which the sky seems derived from the English moors, lush and moist. It is a fiction, as are most of Moran's finished paintings, just as are those by Albert Bierstadt, the other celebrity painter of the time." He adds in footnote 3 of his essay: "The changes that the two made... were always additions in the direction of Wagnerian theatricality, and it is impossible not to conclude, when confronted by studies so uniformly better than the finished works, that the painters did not understand what they were doing..." And later elaborates: "generally speaking, the painters imposed Switzerland on the Rockies... producing western landscapes that were crowded rather than spacious; they turned mountains vertiginous, hung thick atmospheric effects on peaks and through valleys, and placed in the foreground camps and grazing animals," 7.

⁵⁷ For an examination of the representation of the West in nineteenth-century painting and broader visual culture, as well as an account of how Americans and Europeans developed a taste for the sublime in art, see Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). See also Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape Painting 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

“horizon of expectations” for the genre in that moment.⁵⁸ Because the majority of his photographs conformed to a set of conventions that had been theorized as signaling the “emotional appropriation” of the artist (and, more specifically in relation to the picturesque, a kind of cognitive appropriation as well), they read as authored, or attached to a maker, creative and expressive. The implied response was clear, familiar, and comfortable.

It was by figuring untouched nature as a site to experience redemption and transcendence that Ansel believed he could advance the cause of conservationism. The photographer’s subscription to conservationism is well-known and chronicled by his own activities and writings. It was a philosophy that was instilled in him from a young age, when, as a hyperactive child, Ansel found respite in nature.⁵⁹ Too restless to succeed in a traditional school setting, he received tutoring from his aunt Mary Bray, who subscribed to the thought of “the aggressive freethinker and agnostic” Robert Green Ingersoll, “a popular anticlerical orator and self-proclaimed American infidel. His message replaced blind faith in God with a pantheistic awe before the powers of nature.”⁶⁰ This association of landscape as redemptive motivated Ansel’s participation with the Sierra Club, which had been founded in 1892 by the naturalist and environmental philosopher John Muir with the initial mission to protect the Sierra Nevada. Indeed, in 1890, the U.S. Census

⁵⁸ See Hans-Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

⁵⁹ Adams was an only child and had a decidedly Victorian upbringing. When he was born in 1902, his mother was nearing 40, and combined with his family’s affluence, the age and outlooks of the adults around him set the course for a socially and emotionally conservative environment for his childhood.

⁶⁰ Anne Hammond, *Ansel Adams: Divine Performance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 7, referencing Mary Street Alinder, *Ansel Adams: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 11.

Bureau had announced the “closing” of the frontier, which spurred public concern over the loss of wilderness and led to the creation of agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service. Understood as a national movement, conservationism coalesced and gained steam in national politics at this time of Adams’s childhood at the turn of the twentieth century.⁶¹ By 1919, when Ansel joined the Sierra Club, it also functioned as a recreational society. He spent several summers working in Yosemite, published his first photographs and writings in the Club’s bulletin, and had his first solo show as a photographer in 1928 at its headquarters in San Francisco. By 1934, he was elected to the Sierra Club’s board of directors. As he rose within the organization and developed his signature aesthetic, then, he was – like many of his fellow citizens – also forming his ideas about what constituted “nature” and what humanity’s relationship with it could and should be, which shaped his photographs’ implication of what kinds of landscapes deserve our collective attention.

As early as the 1910s there had already been debate over whether the Sierra Club’s goal should be to completely protect nature (in other words, to adopt a strictly “preservationist” approach), or to consume resources responsibly (which signaled a more “conservationist” approach).⁶² These debates have continued into the present, as generations of Sierra Club leaders and board members work to remain true to their mission to “explore, enjoy, and protect the wild places of the earth” while addressing the

⁶¹ For overviews of the emergence of the conservation movement, see Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959); Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); and Stephen Fox, *The American Conservation Movement: John Muir and His Legacy* (1981; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

⁶² This especially emerged with debate around the construction of the Hetch Hetchy dam and reservoir to address San Francisco’s water needs.

changing times. And throughout, “from the Progressive era through Earth Day, the camera would provide reformers with a way to link politics to visual culture, to turn environmental debates into questions of seeing.”⁶³

What remains particularly significant for the purposes of this analysis is how the conception of nature that Ansel Adams subscribed to – as unpeopled, and thus pure, and that Americans should join in a mission to keep it that way – is part and parcel of the response his photographs sought, and the function of landscape photography that his work argues for: awe and admiration, which might move viewers to participate in nature’s protection. By declaring themselves against this model and including the built environment in their photographs, the *New Topographics* photographers expressed that they found Ansel’s work to be grandiose, or at best (as Robert would likely phrase it), misleading by omission, not reflective of the actual state of the developed West by the mid-1970s.⁶⁴

It is noteworthy that the organizers of the 1974 Ansel Adams retrospective mentioned towards the end of their catalog essay: “People to whom the work is new will be seeing some of the greatest extant modern photographs of our – alas! – too rapidly disappearing landscape.”⁶⁵ By 1974, the threat that rapid development posed to the western landscape was on their minds to the extent that they were moved to frame even Ansel Adams’s photographs in this way. Their words allude to the anticipation of change even though the work evoked such an eternal time scale. Robert Adams, who had also

⁶³ Dunaway, *Natural Visions*, xvii.

⁶⁴ On the subject of believing in Ansel Adams’s pictures, Robert nevertheless once said: “Of course I’ve never gotten even a half right picture of aspen... the only ones I believe in are Ansel Adams’s.” diGrappa 6

⁶⁵ *Photographs by Ansel Adams* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974), n.p.

worked for the Forest Service as a young person, had this realization already. He recollected in 1980: “My initial impulse... was to work for traditional conservation, but I didn’t follow it long because the fight looked over.”⁶⁶ It was there that he and his *New Topographics* peers picked up the inquiry into the American landscape.

“Hard-bitten calm”: Surveying the West ca. 1870 and 1970

If Ansel Adams’s landscapes activated – and affirmed – the interpretive equipment his ideal viewer had gleaned from witnessing the beauty of America’s national parks or looking at romantic landscape representations in art museums, Robert’s photographs presumed a similarly environmentally passionate, museum-going viewer, but in service of thwarting such expectations. At the most fundamental level, he included human-made structures in his pictures, staging an encounter between the viewer and the built environment rather than nature alone. At a more philosophical level, however, his photographs in *New Topographics* rendered the notion of the “emotional appropriation” of the landscape more of a question than a certitude, let alone a reason for pursuing landscape photography. His work engaged with convention by having its meaning be contingent upon the presence of a viewer trained to regard the landscape as Ansel’s photographs had, but advanced convention by challenging the viewer to inhabit a response based not so much on affirmation or stability, but rather ambiguity. This is the source of the work’s message of ecological responsibility.

The non-hierarchical compositional schemes, middle distance from the subject matter, even light, and intrusion of human-made elements into the field of vision are all

⁶⁶ diGrappa 8

factors by which Robert's photographs departed from those of his romantic predecessor, and thus read to his implied viewers as dissonant with landscapes that they had been trained to interpret as authored, unique, and uplifting. Take, for instance, the interruption of the power lines in *Farmland at the north edge of Denver, Colorado*, 1973 (**fig. 2.10**), which slice through the overcast sky and register with more precision – more proximity, and therefore access – than the distant mountains, which remain at both a literal and psychological remove. Even in photographs where the mountains do not appear at all, Robert manages to subtly evoke their lack. For example, *Remodeled tract house, Thornton, Colorado*, 1973 (**fig. 2.11**) locates the viewer in the Denver suburbs, presumably in view of the Rockies, by its caption. And yet the photographer has eliminated the horizon entirely, training our focus on the exterior of a typical home of the area and achieving a kind of visual claustrophobia. The house spans the photograph horizontally, locking the viewer's eyes in a series of dead ends: the shallow concrete steps that presumably once met the front door run into a wall, and the slice of driveway visible at the left ends in an inscrutable dark shape that may or may not be the new entry to the house.⁶⁷ All of the curtains, even those of the hallmark picture window, are drawn; not only does this serve as another dead end by preventing our gaze into the house, as a reflective surface the window mirrors not a view of the Rockies but the contours of another interchangeable house across the street. The effect of these opaque, indifferent surfaces, photographed at close range, is the sense that the lifestyle created by these developments is one of anonymity and isolation. Critic Max Kozloff termed this affect

⁶⁷ Eugenie Shinkle has likewise written of the "perceptual inertia" provoked by the organization of space in Adams's photographs of tract homes. See Shinkle, "Boredom, Repetition, Inertia: Contemporary Photography and the Aesthetics of the Banal," *Mosaic* Vol. 37, No. 4 (December 2004): 165-183 (177).

“symptomatology” – the feeling that something is amiss.⁶⁸ Revisiting the caption, the viewer may wonder what was so wrong with the young home that the owners felt it necessary to modify. Registered in graphic, even clinical crispness, the image is nevertheless reticent and withholding, preventing our visual – and, by extension, imaginative – access.

Adams’s departure from the expressive model emblemized by Ansel does not alone account for how his prints read as both neutral and subtly critical by individual visitors to the Eastman House, however. In order to further contextualize this perceived quality of a hostility to life or well-being (at the level of interpretation) and to imaginative access (at the level of viewing), we can look to geological survey photographs of the West made one hundred years earlier, which we know influenced Robert’s compositions and print craft, and which his photographs in *New Topographics* emulated positively, in contrast to the relationship of negation or rejection that his work possesses with Ansel’s. Significantly, just before *New Topographics* went up at the Eastman House in October 1975 (which, as detailed in both the introduction and Chapter 3, was titled with older “topographic” survey photography in mind), an exhibition called *Era of Exploration* was on view at the Albright-Knox Gallery in nearby Buffalo.⁶⁹ There, co-curators Weston Naef of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and James N. Wood argued for the artistry and historical significance of survey photography.⁷⁰ These nineteenth-

⁶⁸ See Max Kozloff, “Bad News from Epic Landscapes” (1994), in *Lone Visions, Crowded Frames: Essays on Photography* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press), 192-206.

⁶⁹ See Weston Naef and James N. Wood, *Era of Exploration: The Rise of Landscape Photography in the American West, 1860-1885* (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Gallery, in association with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975). The exhibition was in Buffalo from March 21-April 27, 1975, and traveled afterward to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, the Corcoran, and finally, the Oakland Museum of Art.

⁷⁰ In particular, the show brought A.O. Russell and Carleton Watkins’s work to new prominence.

century precedents therefore not only served as an aesthetic point of reference for Adams; they also likely figured as an interpretive one for at least some of the photography enthusiasts who visited *New Topographics* in Rochester later that fall.

Robert Adams bought a print of Ansel Adams's *Moonrise* in 1966.⁷¹ The year before in 1965, however, the young photographer had also happened upon a "milk crate-sized" box of Timothy O'Sullivan's prints in the Western history section of the Denver Public Library⁷² – not an art museum, it should be emphasized – and became captivated by his sense of how the nineteenth-century photographer "compulsively sought to find shape, to adjust his perspective until the plate registered every seemingly inconsequential element in balance"⁷³ in pursuit of a "hard-bitten calm."⁷⁴ Following from O'Sullivan's example of picturing the West without sentimentality, what Adams would pursue in the work that appeared in *New Topographics*, he wrote at the time, was a "visual stability in which all components are equally important."⁷⁵

See Jennifer Roger's comparison of this show and *New Topographics* in "Era of Exploration" and "New Topographics": *Annotated Bibliographies of Two Landmark Exhibitions*, Master of Arts in the Program of Photographic Preservation and Collections Management, Ryerson University, 2007.

⁷¹ Adams recalls that he paid around forty dollars for the print. Joshua Chang, "The Making of a Photographer," in Robert Adams, *The Place We Live: A Retrospective Selection of Photographs, 1964-2009*, Vol. III (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 21-39 (30; also footnote 34 on p. 39).

⁷² Papageorge 49. Adams specifies in his oral history interview that it was a "Safeway box." Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁷³ Adams, introduction to *The American Space*, 9.

⁷⁴ Correspondence between Robert Adams and Toby Jurovics, October 10, 2008. Cited in Toby Jurovics, *Framing the West: The Survey Photographs of Timothy H. O'Sullivan* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress and Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2010), 222. The full quotation reads: "The impression O'Sullivan's pictures left on me, despite their sometimes convulsive subjects, was of a hard-bitten calm. And occasionally of joy, though he might never have used those words. All of which seemed, when I was young, a helpful accomplishment in a difficult landscape. It still seems that way, perhaps even more so as the condition of the West has deteriorated."

⁷⁵ Adams, preface to *Denver: A Photographic Survey of the Metropolitan Area* (New Haven: Yale

With these observations, Adams alluded to the absence of hierarchy that characterizes survey photography. Along with the images' sharpness and stark geometry, such qualities can be at least partially traced to the initial functions and audiences of the photographs, as Joel Snyder and Robin Kelsey have argued in accounting for the photographs' appearance.⁷⁶ Having performed survey work during the Civil War and made photographs under the supervision of Mathew Brady, and beginning in 1863, the studio of Alexander Gardner (44 of his photographs were included in *Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the War*), Timothy O'Sullivan became the official photographer for the Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel under Clarence King in 1867. King subscribed to catastrophism as a theory to account for the geological history of the region. O'Sullivan worked on his survey between 1867 and 1869, and between 1871 and 1874 worked for another led by Lieutenant George M. Wheeler. The pressure of making wet plate collodion negatives in the battlefield had prepared him well for doing so in the harsh conditions (though less harsh than those of the war⁷⁷) of the undeveloped West. Tasked with creating imagery that would "give a sense of the area,"

University Press, 1977), n.p.

⁷⁶ See Joel Snyder, *American Frontiers: The Photographs of Timothy H. O'Sullivan, 1867-1874* (Millerton, N.Y: Aperture, 1981), and "Territorial Photography," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 2002), 175-201; and Robin Kelsey, *Archive Style: Photographs and Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850-1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). Both Snyder and Kelsey are invested in accounting for what has been interpreted as the photographs' proto-modernist aesthetic. Snyder's central claim is that photographs with informational and commercial functions can possess self-consciously stylistic features without exhibiting ahistorical aesthetic traits. He emphasizes that O'Sullivan's primary audience was survey leaders like Clarence King, and the photographs appeared to represent a new kind of landscape that required King and his fellow academics' expertise to know and cultivate. Whereas Kelsey points to institutional and bureaucratic factors that shaped O'Sullivan's task and output, as well as the conventions of other graphic material produced during the surveys, ultimately attributing "archival ingenuity" to O'Sullivan and uncovering a politics of style in his survey pictures.

⁷⁷ Toby Jurovics observes that the "survey members were almost always safe, well provided for, and aware of their surroundings." See Jurovics, *Framing the West*, 40.

O’Sullivan portrayed the region as inhospitable both to life and representation according to Romantic convention.⁷⁸

Consider, for example, his 1867 image *Tufa Domes, Pyramid Lake, Nevada* (**fig. 2.12**). To the eyes of an audience on the East coast, the land forms of the tufa domes would have appeared remarkably alien, their strangeness heightened by the lack of any other familiar natural elements in the photograph to provide a sense of scale. Recalling the look of specimens on a blank page (as Kelsey has observed, drawing a comparison to the other kinds of graphic material that comprised the surveys’ output), their bulbous forms are rendered stark and graphic against the faintly registered lake and sky, which are not particularly visible because of the sensitivity of collodion emulsion to their blue color. The photograph exemplifies the practice that arose in this period of masking out skies in favor of a white field on the print. The washed-out sky is therefore not something that contemporaneous viewers would have necessarily thought strange, but did contribute to O’Sullivan’s anti-picturesque aesthetic because it eliminated the atmospheric element of clouds that would otherwise counterbalance the sharpness of the rocky terrain.

In other photographs where O’Sullivan recorded more common geological formations, the landscape continues to appear inaccessible. This often comes across as a result of the way O’Sullivan cultivates a shallow foreground and compressed sense of space operating along the pictures’ z-axis. For example, a rock face shrouded in shadow engulfs the left side of the frame in *Black Canyon, Looking Below Near Camp 8, Colorado River, Arizona* (1871) (**fig. 2.13**). Intimidating rather than inviting, it encroaches on the viewer’s perceived vantage point, acting as a barrier to a wider view of

⁷⁸ Snyder, “Territorial Photography,” 192

the middle and background. And in images like *Karnak, Montezuma Range, Nevada* (fig. 2.14) and *Contorted Limestone, Wright's Cañon, Nevada* (fig. 2.15), the region's geological quirks are presented as disorderly patchworks of rough, rocky surfaces. These claustrophobic, disjointed spaces do not lend themselves to imagining the camera having occupied any kind of hospitable, accessible vantage point.

Luminous and exacting, and eschewing series of gently receding planes of focus in favor of abruptly looming ones, O'Sullivan's photographs were decidedly un-painterly in relation to the norms of their period, portraying the western American landscape as a series of "geologic monstrosities and grotesqueries."⁷⁹ Snyder articulates the images' resultant interpretive difficulty and rhetorical function: the photographs are "territorial, but they... [refuse] to formulate the land in the most readily available terms, by blocking habitual routes of imaginative access."⁸⁰ This was in contrast to the work of O'Sullivan's contemporaries, such as Carleton Watkins's monumental mammoth plates, which appealed more to the gazes and aspirations of tourists, developers, or farmers (and indeed, were made with larger and more varied audiences and clients in mind).⁸¹ By appearing resistant to beautiful or picturesque convention, the frightening West in O'Sullivan's survey photographs could be interpreted by their intended audience of Congress and military officials as in need of taming and development, a new kind of landscape whose resources required management by trained experts like Clarence King.

⁷⁹ Snyder, "Territorial Photography," 189

⁸⁰ Snyder, "Territorial Photography," 200

⁸¹ As Snyder writes, having addressed the emphasis on faithfulness to scenery (as opposed to imagination or interpretation) in the period's critical reception, "the evolving character of photographic practice and reception allowed [Watkins] to think of himself as an entrepreneur whose job was to record preexisting scenes in a thoroughly disinterested manner," "Territorial Photography," 188. See also Douglas Nickel, *Carleton Watkins: The Art of Perception*, (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1999).

O’Sullivan thus simultaneously eschewed the authored appearance of a romantic landscape and also made images that read as persuasive. It is not that the pictures themselves were inherently persuasive; rather, the way O’Sullivan formulated the landscape resulted in images that made themselves particularly available to the needs of people like Clarence King and his fellow professionals – the specialists, Snyder reasons, who could “understand” this landscape.⁸²

It was therefore not as simple as the variables of western space, stark form, and radiant light, but rather this combination of an apparently “neutral,” unauthored quality and subtly rhetorical function that rendered 1870s survey photography a useful precedent for Robert Adams and his 1970s peers. On the one hand, Adams and the other *New Topographics* photographers were likewise trying to represent a bewildering frontier – though in their case, one presented by postwar sprawl. Yet furthermore, O’Sullivan’s photographs were incompatible with the notion of authorship that propelled romantic landscape aesthetics; the context of their production was unencumbered with the popular reception-related demands of that tradition. As a result, they represented the West as “a stage without a center,” as Adams wrote, imagining a fictional theater where the audience is not told where to look.⁸³ By emulating O’Sullivan’s spare vistas and unconventional

⁸² Snyder, “Territorial Photography,” 200

⁸³ Robert Adams, “Introduction,” *The American Space*, 7. In the same essay, he continued: “Timothy O’Sullivan was, it seems to me, the greatest of the photographers because he understood nature first as architecture. He was our Cézanne, repeatedly creating pictures that were, while they acknowledged the vacancy at the center (a paradoxical symbol for the opacity of life) nonetheless compositions of perfect order and balance,” 8. It should be added that Robert has backed away from a reading of O’Sullivan’s landscapes as grotesque or malevolent: “Whether O’Sullivan’s pictures... suggest a hostile universe comes down, I think, to expectations. If we require a world designed for us, then the West they pictured is threatening, even malevolent. Alternatively, however, we can try as they did to see the landscape from a less self-centered point of view, and perhaps find in that perspective some consolation,” 9.

organization of space, Adams could lead his viewers to occupy a similar stance of recognition that the landscape needed something – not cultivation and taming (as O’Sullivan’s audience back in Washington would have gleaned), but rather protection, and more thoughtful consumption.

Indeed, Ansel Adams himself even considered O’Sullivan’s photographs “surrealistic and disturbing” when he first encountered them, turning to anachronistic vocabulary to articulate how the photographs appeared bewildering, hostile to a viewer seeking uplift.⁸⁴ This was his assessment of the nineteenth-century photographer’s output amidst the “rediscovery” of O’Sullivan and others in the 1930s, which saw figures like those involved with survey and Civil War photography recast as proto-modernists and appropriated by moderns to serve as a “usable past.”⁸⁵ Adams had been given an album of O’Sullivan’s photographs by a Sierra Club member and mountaineer. He shared it with Beaumont Newhall, who included it in his 1937 *History of Photography* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, setting into motion some of the circumstances that would enable subsequent generations of photographers to find inspiration in survey imagery.⁸⁶

It is therefore noteworthy that Ansel’s reaction to O’Sullivan in fact anticipated Newhall’s assessment of Robert Adams’s work when the young photographer visited the veteran curator at the Eastman House in 1969. To Newhall, Robert’s subject matter was “unattractive” and “monotonous,”⁸⁷ and for decades before the curator warmed up to his

⁸⁴ See Britt Salvesen, “Surrealistic and Disturbing: Timothy O’Sullivan as Seen by Ansel Adams in the 1930s,” *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2008), 162-179.

⁸⁵ For a thorough analysis of this historiographic moment, see Sarah M. Miller, *Inventing “Documentary” in American Photography, 1930-1945*, dissertation, University of Chicago, 2009.

⁸⁶ Salvesen 166

⁸⁷ Beaumont Newhall, review of Robert Adams, *The New West*, *Colorado Magazine* Vol. 54 (Winter 1977), 81.

work, Newhall repeatedly urged him to use stronger filters.⁸⁸ Robert was using a 4x5 Sinar view camera he had ordered at the conclusion of his graduate studies.⁸⁹ It created a large enough negative from his Tri-X film to yield “a rich print, a creamy one”⁹⁰ – but his prints were distinguished by their concentration in midtones.⁹¹ To invoke Ansel’s piano analogy, rather than playing notes from the entire range of the keyboard, Robert concentrated on a few of its middle to upper octaves, with very few of his shadows ever reaching a state of pure black. Indeed, curator Toby Jurovics has characterized Adams’s prints, as well as those by Frank Gohlke and Lewis Baltz in *New Topographics*, as “high key and kind of dry-feeling.”⁹² Adams’s printing mentor Myron Wood had taught Robert an “unorthodox” way of processing film that “yielded exceptionally smooth skies” and the ability to print in such a narrow, yet rich range of soft grays.⁹³ Before 1973, this was helped along by Adams’s use of high quality Agfa Brovira paper.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. See also Chuang, “The Making of a Photographer,” 31.

⁸⁹ The camera came with three lenses and a tripod. Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁹⁰ Dugan 177. When Dugan asked Adams in this interview whether he was content with his equipment, he answered: “For what I’m doing now, yes, the format and size are right, though the Sinar I’ve had for about ten years has gotten to me. With tripod and holders it comes to maybe 30 pounds. Hiking up and down mountains with that leaves me good for only an hour or two of seeing. So I’ve been using a Nagaoka, a little wooden Japanese camera.”

⁹¹ diGrappa 10. Adams adds that square-format pictures he made between 1967-1971 were done with a Hasselblad, and by 1977 he had also acquired a Japanese 4x5 camera called a Nagoka. He also mentions he gravitates towards using an 80-millimeter lens, although he is also fond of “an old 135 Kodak Wide Field Ektar” (diGrappa 12, 16).

⁹² Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁹³ Chuang, “The Making of a Photographer,” 27. See also diGrappa 12-14, where Adams elaborates on this process, which involves submerging the film in the developer and removing it alternating according to timed intervals. In his oral history interview, Adams mentions that Wood studied briefly under Edward Weston.

⁹⁴ Adams was frustrated in 1973 when, in response to the period’s oil crisis, the Hunts cornered the silver market, leading Agfa to decrease the amount of silver in their papers and photographers to stockpile old product. Adams thought the end result was “a shade better than a Xerox sheet.” Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian

Tod Papageorge has likewise described Adams's printing methods as involving an "intentional wringing-out of the tonal range...to the bright end of the photographic gray scale," noting that the quality of light in Adams's photographs is also largely achieved in the printing stage of darkroom work. He differentiates Adams's printing methods from Henry Wessel Jr.'s, in light of assessing Adams's participation in *New Topographics*:

Interestingly, Wessel's pictures, which were made earlier than Adams's, describe the brilliant light of the West as it would register to an eye that had adjusted to it, showing detail both in the low, or shadow, end of the photographic gray scale as well as in the brightest tones. Adams's photographs, on the other hand, suggest the first, squinting glance taken at an object cast in bright light, one in which neither deep shadows nor white walls, for example, can be adequately read. Technically, Wessel manipulated the exposure and development of his *film* in order to compress the tonal range in his photographs, retaining detail at both ends of that range, but at the cost of contrast (which he obviously considered no cost at all) and some separation of tone. Adams effectively reversed these procedures, exposing and developing his film normally as a way to emphasize the separations of tone in his negatives, and then manipulating his *printing* to further emphasize the contrast of these separations, particularly at the lowest and highest ends of the tonal scale.⁹⁵

Papageorge's optical analogy poetically connects what this analysis frames as a matter of interpretive discomfort to a feeling of physical discomfort familiar to any viewer: that of stepping out from a dark space into blinding sunlight, and straining for a moment to see. Toby Jurovics has also described the feeling of almost needing to "squint" at Adams's prints.⁹⁶ This idea resonates, too, with comments from *New Topographics* that described it as a taxing experience: "Isn't this a depressing comment on our world today? You can't take too much of it." Another visitor described the photographs in the show as "very

Institution.

⁹⁵ Papageorge 49; the extended footnote that describes Adams's versus Wessel's printing is number 39 on page 71.

⁹⁶ In response to Jurovics voicing this observation, Adams responds: "Which is exactly what I wanted." Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

harsh.”⁹⁷

Newhall’s initial evaluation of Robert’s work as somehow lacking as fine art landscape photography – in other words, the work’s dissonance with what he recognized as “authored” landscape representations worthy of museum collection and exhibition – also relates somewhat ironically to the museological issues that Rosalind Krauss would soon identify in her critique of the art historical treatment of survey photography in “Photography’s Discursive Spaces.”⁹⁸ Newhall himself was instrumental to the canonization of O’Sullivan as an “author,” with which Krauss took issue. And yet he was initially unable to appreciate contemporary images of the built landscape that had been inspired by those nineteenth-century precedents, in a way deeming them not “authored” enough in appearance. Even an admirer of survey photography like Newhall was not immune to the interpretive challenge that Adams’s work posed, still expecting landscape photographs that had been self-consciously made in a fine art context to conform to what could be termed a “Stieglitzian” vein: uplifting, transcendent, and expressive.

The survey images’ status outside the typical “discursive space” of landscape art (Krauss would call them “views”), however, was among the factors that rendered them so ripe for reference by practitioners like Adams who were trying to come to terms with another kind of terrifying terrain. Clarence King had written of the “pitiless” sky that hung over himself and his survey expedition team in 1866 as they traversed the desolate Great Basin Desert.⁹⁹ One hundred years later, the increasingly smog-filled sky over

⁹⁷ Excerpt from tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

⁹⁸ See Rosalind Krauss, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View,” *Art Journal* Vol. 42, No. 4 *The Crisis in the Discipline* (Winter 1982), 311-319.

⁹⁹ Clarence King, “The Range,” *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 28, No. 159 (May 1871), cited in Snyder

Denver was off-putting in a new way, and in order to represent it, Robert Adams turned to the kind of taut compositional schemes that O'Sullivan had. He reflected:

I would not have photographed the West as extensively as I did had it not been for O'Sullivan. I liked him because he seemed more honest about disagreeable fact than did many nineteenth-century photographers – less selective in favor of the picturesque. And he seemed better able to make subtly unified pictures. I believed that wholeness (form) was the supreme achievement of art, and O'Sullivan's work often managed it, often without calling attention to that strength.¹⁰⁰

His wording here of “wholeness (form)” suggests a nearly spiritual or theological understanding of the response he was searching for in his pictures, or what a successful landscape photograph accomplishes: the revelation of nature's “order beyond human making or unmaking” underneath the chaos we impose upon it.¹⁰¹

Ecology and Grace

Pictures are given, not taken.
-Robert Adams¹⁰²

All three of the photographers considered so far in this chapter – Robert Adams, Ansel Adams, and O'Sullivan – shared a commitment to representing western space, scale, and light, but to very different ends in terms of response. Robert short-circuited the romantic response to the unpeopled landscape, one emblemized by Ansel and deeply familiar to the majority of his 1970s audience. He titled the book he published just after *New Topographics* in 1977 as *Denver: A Photographic Survey of the Metropolitan Area* – framing his endeavors in that decade with all the observational coolness that the word “survey” suggests. And yet his work is melancholy in a way that O'Sullivan's is not, nor

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¹⁰⁰ Jurovics 11

¹⁰¹ Adams, “Introduction,” *The American Space*, 8.

¹⁰² diGrappa 6

Joe Deal and Lewis Baltz's, for that matter. His photographs are dreary *and* glorious, spare *and* lyrical, stark *and* serene in a way that the notions of "rejecting Ansel Adams" and "emulating Timothy O'Sullivan" don't entirely encompass.¹⁰³ And in this alchemy lies the character of the paradigm-shifting response his photographs intimate: one premised on viewing the landscape in terms of ambiguity and responsibility, rather than either of the polar qualities of uplift or alienation.

Adams implies a viewer who is willing to join him in looking at these landscapes that prior tradition would suggest do not deserve our attention, and considering what they teach us about ourselves. Finis Dunaway has framed this insistence on viewing the natural and built environments together in terms of the notion of "ecological citizenship," a stance at the intersection of environmentalism with civic responsibility. As Dunaway argues, *New Topographics* "implicitly questioned the limited models of the self and citizenship upon which the wilderness aesthetic had depended."¹⁰⁴ What has nevertheless gone under-examined is how this operates at the level of reception in the photographs, beyond subject matter – for example, how the reverence-inducing stillness of Adams's images works to position the viewer to inhabit this mode, as well as the relationship between Adams's environmentalism and the theological tone of the language he has used to describe the landscapes he photographs and the stakes of his and others' work.

Adams's photographs in *New Topographics* ask the viewer to adopt what he termed his "radical faith in inclusion," an emphatic acceptance of what lay before his

¹⁰³ Although it should be noted that Adams himself has written of O'Sullivan's work as embodying such contradictory terms: "O'Sullivan's goal seems to have been, as Cezanne phrased it, 'exciting serenity.'" Adams, "Introduction," *The American Space*, 8.

¹⁰⁴ Finis Dunaway, "Beyond Wilderness: Robert Adams, New Topographics, and the Aesthetics of Ecological Citizenship," in *Reframing the New Topographics*, eds. John Rohrbach and Greg Foster-Rice (Chicago: Columbia College Chicago, 2010), 13-43 (14).

lens, which he identified as a precondition for discovering beauty in suburbanized Denver.¹⁰⁵ Consider the poignantly distressing image Adams made of a single-level tract house in his own community of Longmont, Colorado (**fig. 2.16**).¹⁰⁶ The photograph depicts a house and its vegetable garden from close proximity, relative to the larger body of work in the show. Consistent with the other prints in the exhibition, Adams rendered his subject in a narrow tonal range of soft grays, and appears to have made the picture under harsh noon light to minimize shadow. There is no discernable border between the sun-baked garden and the home's lawn of dirt and gravel, the small rows of plants failing to measure up to the kitschy vitality of the flower pattern on the curtains above. The furniture looks haphazardly cast about the patio, as if momentarily abandoned by the home's inhabitants. A hose at the left snakes in and out of the photograph's frame, hinting at, but withholding, the possibility of quenching the land's apparent thirst. Similar to the photograph of the faux Tudor house in Boulder County, here, Adams has repeated the device of having the Rockies present yet distant in the form of spanning the photograph horizontally, still entirely visible despite being sandwiched in between the house's roof line and the power lines. If one chooses to make a home in Colorado in the early 1970s, the image asserts, one must greet the whole view, tract housing and all. It is an image that presents the attempt to cultivate and make a home in this place as simultaneously vain and humble – a contradiction that Lewis Biggs of the Arnolfini

¹⁰⁵ Adams, introduction to *Denver*, n.p. Likewise, when asked in 1977 if he pursues a certain kind of light, Adams responded: "Only in the sense that landscapes are typified by certain kinds of light. As you know, Denver is now usually covered by smog, so when you're trying to tell the truth about that landscape, you have to try to tell the truth about that atmosphere," Dugan 178.

¹⁰⁶ Adams lived in Longmont until 1997, and then moved to Astoria, Oregon. Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

gallery read in Adams's body of work as a whole.¹⁰⁷

A photograph Adams made of tract house developments in the suburbs of North Glenn and Thornton, Colorado (**fig. 2.17**) from a much farther and slightly elevated vantage point answers the previous picture's need for rain, picturing the landscape on what appears to be the brink of a thunderstorm. The swath of homes in the lower third of the frame bows outward toward the viewer on a convex curve, then recedes for miles into the distance. The entire scene is dwarfed by a storm cloud overhead, which is beginning to dispense bands of rain. In terms of a generic precedent, the photograph's composition closely echoes that of John Constable's small-scale oil sketch, *Rainstorm over the Sea* from ca. 1824-28 (**fig. 2.18**), which similarly pictures a cloud that dwarfs the terrain underneath it, but with violent vertical brushstrokes to suggest a downpour. Both pictures portray nature as powerful, but in Adams's photograph, the monotonous sprawl of the tract housing encroaching on the viewer's vantage point thwarts the ability to identify with the scene from a stably romantic position. The built environment appears not yet as ruin, but as an omen, paired with the shallow foreground of land that hasn't yet been developed. And yet at the same time, the distance from the subject matter could also be interpreted as speaking to the concept of "Form" Adams references; it is as if adopting such a wide view of the landscape correspondingly affords the viewer a "bigger picture" in a conceptual sense, in terms of time; the viewer may read the houses as transient, one

¹⁰⁷ Biggs observed that the human presence in Robert's work wasn't necessarily completely predatory or destructive: "While Ansel Adams's vision was of the grandeur of the landscape, Robert Adams shows nature at best complemented by man's activities, at worst threatened with destruction by them." Lewis Biggs, "New Topographics: Views of the United States as revealed in the recent work of three young American photographers: Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and Joe Deal," *Arnolfini Gallery Bulletin* (September 1981), p. 1. Likewise, Adams himself wrote in his introduction to *Denver* in 1977 that the inhabitants of the houses he photographed "participate in urban chaos" but were nevertheless "admirable."

among many waves of westward conquest, and recognize that beneath them, the ground is eternal. Paradoxically, the cloud, while an ephemeral manifestation and icon of the shifting weather, also signals this more eternal time scale.

Adams does not often write or speak directly about his own work, but rather about particular landscapes or geography, or other people's photographs. Accordingly, his commentary on the photography of others can provide insight into the ways in which his own work positions its audience. As he wrote of survey photography in 1983:

Among the most compelling truths in some of the early photographs is their implication of silence. Western space was mostly quiet, a fact suggested metaphorically by the pictures' visual stillness (a matter both of their subject and composition)... Another quality of space of which I am reminded when I look at the old photographs is the easy tempo of life in it... and by extension the tempo appropriate for anyone who hopes to experience space.¹⁰⁸

Directly alluding to the realization about time I have just described, he continues: "The pin-sharp views...suggest through the photographer's patience an appropriately respectful acknowledgement of the geologic and botanic time it took to shape the space itself. How can we hope, after all, to see a tree or rock or clear north sky if we do not adopt a little of its mode of life, a little of its time."¹⁰⁹ This reflection likely reveals something of Adams's working process: it sounds slow and contemplative (recall Thoreau in *Walden*: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately...and see if I could not learn what it had to teach...").¹¹⁰ Perhaps Adams alluded to the frustrations of some of his own audience when he continued, still speaking about survey photography:

¹⁰⁸ Adams, "Introduction," *The American Space*, 1-2.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid* 2

¹¹⁰ Adams first practiced silence and stillness in nature as a child with his father: "Down in the big swamp, down the hill from our house in New Jersey, one of the first lessons I had was if you sit still long enough, you will begin to see remarkable things. And he was absolutely right." Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

“They restore to us knowledge of a place we seek but lose in the rush of our search. Though to enjoy even the pictures, much less the space itself, requires that we be still longer than is our custom.”¹¹¹ He may as well be describing the frustration a novice experiences when attempting to meditate for the first time.¹¹²

Here we should return to Adams’s statement that the term “topographics” for the title of the 1975 exhibition was too “scientific” and “too narrow to encompass all of our sins.”¹¹³ Adams’s choice of the word “sins” is significant because of its religious connotation, and how the photographer has consistently also spoken about light in spiritual terms. Raised in a liberal Methodist family, Adams had wanted to become a minister until he attended college.¹¹⁴ At the Baptist-affiliated University of Redlands, where he received a B.A. in 1959, he took literature classes with William Main, “a gentleman... with a quick mind and lifesaving good nature”¹¹⁵ and professor “you’d cross the country for” who himself had been influenced by the moral theology of Reinhold Niebuhr.¹¹⁶ A contemporary (and rival) of John Dewey and the author of *The*

¹¹¹ Ibid 3

¹¹² Eugenie Shinkle has argued that “the banal aesthetic confronts us with our own reluctance to spend time with images,” Shinkle 181. See Chapter 1’s discussion of banality as a mode of reception.

¹¹³ Dugan 171. John Szarkowski also reiterated this “sin” terminology in his foreword to *The New West*: “Adams’s pictures describe with precision and fastidious justice some of the mortal and venial sins that we have committed against our land in recent decades.” John Szarkowski, “Foreword,” in Robert Adams, *The New West: Landscapes Along the Colorado Front Range* (Boulder: Colorado Associated University press, 1974), 5-9 (8).

¹¹⁴ Adams estimates that it took approximately six months at Redlands to realize he did not want to become a minister. He also identifies this period as the last time he was an active churchgoer. Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹¹⁵ Adams described Main this way in remarks he delivered at the Museum of Modern Art in 1978. See talk transcript in Robert Adams artist file, Castelli Graphics records, 1965-2001. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹¹⁶ Chuang, “The Making of a Photographer,” 23. See also “Chronology,” in Chuang and Adams, *The Place We Live: A Retrospective Selection of Photographs, 1964-2009*, Vol. III, 129-149 (131). Main himself in fact published on the subject of pedagogy. See William W. Main,

Nature and Destiny of Man (1943), Niebuhr was noted for his stance of “Christian realism” throughout the course of his career.¹¹⁷ This worldview informed the first stanza of his popular “Serenity Prayer,” which reads: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.” Adams’s landscapes could be understood as using photography to foster something like the “wisdom to know the difference,” or at the very least posing the question of how much we can still change, what is sustainable and what is not.

Fused with the appreciation of nature he’d had since he was a child, and his expanding environmentalist consciousness – Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* was published in 1962, and the Clean Air Act was enacted in 1963, to name two landmark events that occurred as Adams taught at Colorado College – the experience of having read thinkers like Niebuhr shaped Adams’s perspective that “paradoxically... we need to see the whole geography, natural and man-made, to experience a peace; all land, no matter what has happened to it, has over it a grace, an absolutely persistent beauty.”¹¹⁸ Momentarily removing the spiritually-inflected terms of “peace” and “grace” from his statement, what remains is a concise articulation of the perspective of ecology. For, counter to conservationism, which focuses on preserving particular landscapes noted for their exceptional beauty or distinctive flora and fauna, ecology adopts a wider view. Like conservationism, it privileges the protection of natural resources and responsible consumption of them, but it is distinguished by considering all landscapes –

“Bearings for Readership,” *College English* Vol. 17, No. 5 (February 1956): 305.

¹¹⁷ As Joshua Chuang notes, “Niebuhr had once been a powerful advocate for the social gospel, but came to view its tenets as naive and broke with many of his contemporaries to assert the limited, contradictory, and ultimately tragic character of human life.” Chuang, “The Making of a Photographer,” 24.

¹¹⁸ Adams, *The New West*, 12.

encompassing both the natural and human-made – worthy of attention. It pursues a study of relationships and interaction between people and their environment, rather than separation or exclusion. Whereas conservationism might be considered idealistic in that respect, ecology is realist, turning its attention to human interaction with the natural world so as to better understand its dimensions and consequences.¹¹⁹

Ecology, then, is the nearest intellectual analogue to Adams's photographic inquiry into the built environment as it was on display in *New Topographics*. His images elaborate an aesthetics of this particular branch of environmental thought as it had gained traction in broader American culture by 1975, concurrent with cultural landscape studies or cultural geography in the academy. And yet to bring the words "peace" and "grace" back into consideration, it should not be ignored how such statements Adams has made throughout his career have consistently interwoven ideas about ecology with spiritual or theological language and themes, which harkens back to the role of religion in the very roots of the conservation movement.¹²⁰ This tendency is visible in his commentary by the early 1970s, as he continued in his introduction to *The New West* in 1974: "Even subdivisions, which we hate for the obscenity of the speculator's greed, are at certain times of day transformed to a dry, cold brilliance... Nothing permanently diminishes the affirmation of the sun."¹²¹ Adams also maintained that the subject of his pictures was not the structures in them, but rather "the source of all Form, light... light of such richness

¹¹⁹ In particular, systems ecology also borrowed tools from the fields of engineering, cybernetics, operations research, and mathematics. See Whiting 61.

¹²⁰ For scholarship on the connections between religion and environment in American culture, see Catherine L. Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: from the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Mark Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997); and Thomas R. Dunlap, *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2004).

¹²¹ Adams, *The New West*, 12.

that banality is impossible.”¹²² Light, the most fundamental generative element of photography, has the capacity to transform and bestow grace even on a landscape that human beings have desecrated.

In Christian theology, “grace” refers to the redemptive presence of the divine, and specifically, that which is unsolicited or even undeserved. The doctrine regarding the mechanisms by which human beings receive this grace differs between various denominations, but the general idea is that people are granted the grace of God mercifully, out of a kind of unconditional love that is nevertheless amplified if the person also aspires to goodness in their conduct.¹²³ The notion of light as a vehicle for grace resonates not only with the transformative quality of light as a metaphor for enlightenment, but also the idea of original sin in Christian theology. If Ansel Adams’s nature was edenic in the sense that it depicted a state of purity before “the Fall,” Robert’s nature would represent the after, a state of being unable to go back, but still aspiring to goodness and benefiting from the redemption of a divine being. (In 1980, he framed the trajectory of his practice: “I started in the mid-60s taking nature pictures, pure. But I finally had to admit that the Garden was off-limits.”¹²⁴) Aided by the blazing western light, as John Szarkowski (a more receptive curatorial viewer than Newhall) wrote of his work just prior to *New Topographics*, Adams “discovered in these dumb and artless agglomerations of boring buildings the suggestion of redeeming virtue.”¹²⁵ Using light in the form of photography, Adams could be said to symbolically reinscribe the grace of the

¹²² Ibid

¹²³ For example, in the Bible, the book of Ephesians, chapter 2, verse 8 reads: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God."

¹²⁴ diGrappa 6

¹²⁵ Szarkowski 8

despoiled landscape – and at the same time, consistent with an ecological perspective – its worthiness of our attention and action. The photographs can thus be understood as visual metaphors for grace, although Adams insisted in 1980 that such a task was not on his mind as he worked.¹²⁶

Making photographs also appears to have functioned for Adams as a method of gaining a kind of spiritual sustenance, or renewing his sense of hope in spite of his own cynicism, which was cyclical.¹²⁷ A year after *New Topographics*, when asked if he was hopeful about his subject matter, Adams answered: “No, I’m not. It seems to me that as long as the economic system is what it is, very little is going to get better. I live in a town of 35,000 people and we have over 300 realtors. That’s 300 people working full time for land development with no restraints, selling houses no matter how ill-built.”¹²⁸ He wrote with similar pessimism in 1983:

...We do not seem much to love the space that is left. One thinks not only of the greed of developers, which is numbingly obvious, but of a widespread nihilism that now extends through much of the population, witness the reflexive littering, the use of spray paint on rocks, the girdling of trees near campgrounds, and the use of off-road vehicles for the maximum violence of their impact. The West has ended, it would seem, as the nation’s vacant lot, a place we valued at first for wildflowers, and because the kids could play there, but where eventually we stole over and dumped the hedge clippings, and then the crankcase oil and dog manure, until finally now it has become such an eyesore that we hope someone will just buy it and build and get the thing over with. We are tired, I think, of staring at our corruption.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ “The effort, as I see it, is to document coherence in an apparently incoherent situation. Which means that first you have to believe in coherence, though that can’t itself be photographed, and then you have to find a visual metaphor to suggest it. Of course when you’re working you don’t think at all about doing such a thing, or you’d end up with a piece of mystical goo.” diGrappa 8.

¹²⁷ The photographs of Ansel Adams also functioned similarly for him. He wrote in a letter to Ansel in 1979: “I am grateful to you for your pictures, which have rescued me often from my own despair.” In *Along Some Rivers: Photographs and Conversations* (New York: Aperture 2006), 10.

¹²⁸ Dugan 176

¹²⁹ Adams, “Introduction,” *The American Space*, 3.

With more optimism, however, Adams had written in 1981 that works of art should aspire to beauty, or “form,” the “coherence and structure underlying life,” and the antidote to “the suspicion that life may be chaos and that therefore our suffering is without meaning.”¹³⁰ Writing about light in a way that parallels how others have written about or attempted to represent the divine as incomprehensible, or only visible or knowable through a form of mediation or negation,¹³¹ he continued: “The Form toward which art points is of an incontrovertible brilliance, but it is also far too intense to examine directly. We are compelled to understand Form by its fragmentary reflection in the daily objects around us; art will never fully define light.”¹³²

Adams was not the first landscape photographer to articulate the stakes of his practice in spiritual terms, framing the matter of our care of the landscape as one of redemption for both it and ourselves. The Sierra Club and other wilderness appeals “fused religious concepts with scientific knowledge to present conservation as a secular movement enlivened by sacred purpose.”¹³³ Adams has done so less polemically, and

¹³⁰ Robert Adams, *Beauty in Photography: Essays in Defense of Traditional Values*, 24.

¹³¹ Theologian Natalie Carnes has written about how these ideas intersect with art. See Carnes, “Presence, Presentness, and Grace: Reflections on Art and Theology with Michael Fried and Marina Abramovic,” *Transpositions* online, <http://www.transpositions.co.uk/presence-presentness-and-grace-reflections-on-art-and-theology-with-michael-fried-and-marina-abramovic/>. Carnes writes: “This logic...of negation and fullness, denial and excess, echoes a logic deep in Christianity. It is a logic by which the bread becomes more than bread in its denial of substance, thereby becoming the body and blood of Christ. It is the logic by which a saint becomes more than herself in the denial of self, thereby mediating the presence of Christ. It is the logic by which the Son’s self-negation reveals the Father. All of these denials and presences are subtly, though importantly, different, yet their resemblances are far more striking. Perhaps we may find in art an analog that dramatizes something of how the presence of Christ, the Image of the invisible God, comes to us in the world. Perhaps this Image offers us ways of perceiving and expressing the negations by which images mediate presence and the ways by which something becomes more than it literally (materially) is. Perhaps in this mutual illumination of Image and images, we might learn something of how the excess that is sometimes called presence, sometimes presentness—how this grace comes to us in the world.”

¹³² Adams, *Beauty in Photography*, 25

¹³³ Dunaway, *Natural Visions*, xviii-xvix

specifically amidst the particular movement of the Social Gospel in Christianity. Nevertheless, he joined his predecessors in subtly drawing upon “deep wellsprings of American culture, including Puritan sermons and transcendentalist thought, to criticize modern society and convey their desire for cultural and political change.”¹³⁴ Dunaway notes that an additional intriguing aspect of this phenomenon in terms of photographic theory in the last quarter of the twentieth century was that those who used photography in service of environmental reform were generally unperturbed by ontological debate in the academy:

They also regarded the camera as a technology of memory, a machine that could preserve threatened landscapes on film. Worrying about the loss of nature, they tried to create visual monuments to vanishing places...Environmental reformers believed that the camera could help them bring aesthetics and emotions into politics... in these different areas of reform, artists and activists tried to challenge the utilitarian calculus of American politics by infusing public debate with beauty and passion... While modern cultural critics fretted over the reproduction of reality, wondering if images estranged viewers from the physical world, environmental reformers expressed little anxiety over the status of nature in an age of mechanical reproduction. Their enthusiasm for the camera rested on the belief that it could elicit an emotional response in spectators, awakening them to the beauty of nature and arousing their concern for its protection.¹³⁵

At the time of *New Topographics*, environmental reform was an arena where the epistemological value of the photograph enjoyed conviction rather than skepticism.

To ground the rather abstract notion of “grace” more concretely in broader art writing of the 1960s and 1970s, we can turn to how the concept was mobilized by Michael Fried. These are circumstances that are especially germane to the concerns of this study because of the connection to viewing psychology. In his 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood,” Fried referred to the concept of grace as an analog for a quality operative in

¹³⁴ Ibid

¹³⁵ Dunaway, *Natural Visions*, xviii.

what he considered to be successful examples of modernist art.¹³⁶ “Presentness,” he names it at first, is the opposite of “literalness” or mere “objecthood,” the sensibility and quality that modernist art needs to transcend in order to be successful, in his view. The kind of art objects that remain just that – objects – possess only “presence,” which necessitates the relational activity of viewing subjects to activate and complete the circuitry of their meaning in a manner that Fried characterizes as “theatrical.” Such works that merely reiterate (or “hypostatize”) their objecthood, rather than attempt to transcend it, fall short of the “conviction” and “acknowledgment” that Fried is looking for – exemplified, for instance, in the work of one of his favorite artists, Anthony Caro. Fried writes that Caro’s colorful sculptures of welded steel are especially “resistant to being seen in terms of objecthood” because they are legibly composite forms, which diminishes the possibility of becoming anthropomorphizing in the manner of what Donald Judd termed “specific objects.”¹³⁷ Fried writes: “The mutual inflection of one element by another, rather than the identity of each, is what is crucial... the individual elements bestow significance on one another precisely by virtue of their juxtaposition.”¹³⁸ If there is relationality, it is contained within the sculpture rather than implicating the beholder. And this sort of self-sufficiency is what enables Caro’s sculptures to transcend mere “presence,” or “the look of non-art.”¹³⁹ What they achieve is “presentness,” and as Fried famously concludes his essay: “presentness is grace.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ See Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” *Artforum* Vol. 5, No. 10 (Summer 1967), 12-23.

¹³⁷ Fried quotes Judd: “A beam thrusts; a piece of iron follows a gesture; together they form a naturalistic and anthropomorphic image. The space corresponds,” Fried 12. The quote is from Judd’s “Specific Objects,” where he is alluding to the work of Mark Di Suvero. See Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” *Arts Yearbook* No. 8 (1965), 74-82 (78).

¹³⁸ Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 20

¹³⁹ Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 15

¹⁴⁰ Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 23

For this modernist critic, then, the word “grace” expressed what could be characterized as a particular kind of generosity in Caro’s sculptures, which Fried interprets as having no built-in requirement of the viewer’s durational, physical engagement with them in space. They are determinate and independent, rather than indeterminate or contingent. While acknowledging that we do of course circumnavigate sculptural works across time and in space, Fried writes: “It is as though one’s experience of [modernist sculpture] *has no* duration – not because one *in fact* experiences [it] in no time at all, but because *at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest*.”¹⁴¹ Fried’s description of a phenomenon of something like an immediate wholeness becoming apparent to a viewer resonates not only with how Robert Adams talks about “wholeness (Form)” and the ability of light to reveal that form, but also why he admired the photographers he did in the 1970s, such as Edward Weston: because of how they “discover[ed] a tension so exact that it is at peace,” as he wrote in *The New West*.¹⁴²

And indeed, Fried has more recently turned his attention to Adams’s own 1970s photographs, reading them in light of Clement Greenberg’s notion of a “density of decision.”¹⁴³ This is a concept Greenberg elaborated in “Convention and Innovation,” one of a series of lectures he gave in April 1971.¹⁴⁴ As Fried details, there Greenberg began

¹⁴¹ Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 22

¹⁴² As Carnes has observed, there are prominent parallels between the ways in which “presence” is discussed in art and theology (see previously cited Carnes, “Presence, Presentness, and Grace”). See also Natalie Carnes, *Image and Presence: A Christological Reflection on Iconoclasm and Iconophilia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

¹⁴³ Michael Fried, “Density of Decision: Greenberg with Robert Adams,” *Nonsite.org*, May 3, 2016. <http://nonsite.org/article/density-of-decision>

¹⁴⁴ Greenberg gave the lectures at Bennington College and subsequently published them. See Clement Greenberg, “Seminar 6,” *Arts Magazine*, June 1976. Also printed as “Convention and Innovation” in Charles T. Harrison, ed. *Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 47.

by defining art as aesthetic experience made “communicable” by “submit[ing it] to conventions,” or “forms.” Part of the satisfaction we derive from looking at art, Greenberg proposed, derives from our perception of the decisions the artist made in navigating the possibilities and constraints of those conventions. Greenberg continued: “Quality, the very success or goodness, of formal art derives, formally, from these decisions, from their intensity or destiny,” thereby establishing the concept as a qualitative metric. A weaker or “vacuous” artwork (to use Greenberg’s own term) lacks this density, presenting matter that appears “unformalized,” not sufficiently unlike the raw material with which the artist began.

Already, this concept is suggestive for the case of photography, where intention is particularly complex because the “raw material” would logically be the visual field of the world. The reception of *New Topographics* raised the very question of how photographers “formalize,” or rather organize, transform, and inject their subjectivity into what lies before the lens in order for their photographs to appear to contain ideas or creative labor. After glossing this passage, Fried turns finally to considering how this plays out in Robert Adams’s landscapes (in particular, he singles out *Colorado Springs, Colorado* from 1970, **fig. 2.19**). His claim is that in Adams’s photographs, everything brims with intentionality. The pictures are particularly rich with a “rightness” of formal interrelationships in their structure, like those he admired in Caro’s sculptures. Adams’s work therefore seems to resist the tendency for photographs to include things the photographer didn’t intend; for Fried, his images appear to counter that kind of porousness. Fried quotes Adams talking about what makes for a particularly successful image: “It implies an order beyond itself, a landscape into which all fragments, no matter

how imperfect, fit perfectly.” And the significance of such overall sharpness – such density in a *photograph* in particular – is that “nothing could be less like lived vision,” Fried argues. Jolted out of a passive viewing mode by Adams’s stark light and the geometry of his shadows, the critic feels “exhilarated.”¹⁴⁵

Fried’s aim here is to account for the formal *compellingness* of Adams’s photographs and extol his mastery of light. Unsurprisingly, he concludes short of considering Adams’s relation to environmentalism. Yet I want to echo his observation that “nothing could be less like lived vision” precisely to that end that goes unconsidered by Fried: the work’s timely environmentalist message that is set into motion at the level of response. Ironically, what Fried admires (from his standpoint of writing in 2012) about Adams’s photographs at a formal level – what he identifies as the density of authorial decision evident in Adams’s organization of “forms” – contributed to the work’s interpretive difficulty in 1975, but this challenge could be efficacious. Denied the comfort of being told more directly where to look in the manner of a more “emotionally appropriated,” hierarchically composed and focused, romantic landscape, one could not consume these landscape photographs in the manner of their art historical precedents.

That dissonance is the mechanism by which the work labors to place the viewer into an ecological mindset of reading the landscape in terms of responsibility and consequence, rather than uplift. Fried interprets the form in Adams’s photographs as autonomous in the vein of “presentness,” but I want to propose that when considered in relation to generic convention, the same formal qualities that Fried admires in fact operate emphatically porously in terms of how they situate the viewer more critically at

¹⁴⁵ Fried, “Density of Decision”

the level of reception. The even light and compositional tautness of Adams's photographs is what reads as stillness and suggests silence. It sets into motion a more diagnostic way of looking at the landscape as a record of symptoms that tell the viewer something about the spiritual health of the culture. Hierarchy implies selection, which – to recall the particularly salient example of Ansel scrambling to record the light on the New Mexico cemetery – is a time-bound event carried out by a creative, thinking, discerning subject. In picturesque theory in particular, hierarchy points back to a maker, whereas focal evenness across the picture plane, the deliberate harnessing of diffuse light, and middle distance from the subject matter, among other factors, displace the task of filtering and selecting onto the viewer. Presented on the same plane, the rigidity, geometry, and almost texture-less facades of the built environment appear emphatically at odds with the mountains, trees (the “hospitality” of the landscape, Emerson once called them), brush, and clouds.¹⁴⁶ The photographs pose the question of what is to be done, and if this state of affairs represents the future we should wish for ourselves.

Attending to the theological tone of the language Adams has used to describe these photographs is therefore not a digression, but rather helps to flesh out the character of his environmentalism and the contradictory warmth of his photographs in spite of their being anti-picturesque.¹⁴⁷ It expands the meaning of their “heavy, palpable radiance” –

¹⁴⁶ Emerson believed that trees constitute the hospitality of the landscape. See, for example, his poem “The River” (1827), where he writes: “I feel as I were welcome to these trees / After long months of weary wandering, / Acknowledged by their hospitable boughs.”

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/emerson/4957107.0009.001/1:14.7?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>

¹⁴⁷ A religious element is also common to many of Adams's own favorite artists. He considered this in his 2010 oral history interview: “Art lost a very important driving mechanism when it was separated from worship. And so as you might imagine, I'm deeply discouraged by a lot that has happened in the visual arts, particularly in the last 30 or 40 years. It seems to me that the goal of art as has been enunciated over and over again for centuries is to instruct and delight. And as we have backed off from the “instruct” part of it, the whole thing has become pretty shallow. If

the light that bathes and so appears to somehow redeem his subjects.¹⁴⁸ It is light that paradoxically prompts exhilaration at the sight of the ugly and ordinary, allows for hope in the face of greed and destruction, and – again, similar to how grace operates in Christianity – enables the viewer to recognize the potential for redemption, and take responsibility for the landscape’s stewardship. John Szarkowski concluded his foreword to *The New West*, citing a biblical tale:

Though Robert Adams’s book assumes no moral postures, it does have a moral. Its moral is that the landscape is, for us, the place we live... if we have abused it, broken its health, and erected upon it memorials to our ignorance, it is still our place, and before we can proceed we must learn to love it. As Job perhaps began again by learning to love his ash pit.¹⁴⁹

If Ansel Adams’s truest subject was “the way that light dissolves weight,”¹⁵⁰ Robert’s could be identified as how light makes the landscape appear solid, and therefore real – not a distant pleasure, but a pressing concern.

Many viewers felt put off by the lack of people in Robert’s photographs (“It’s almost as if nobody lives anywhere,” one viewer observed¹⁵¹). Yet Ansel Adams’s photographs are for the most part completely devoid of people, and did not prompt the same criticism. What was challenging about Robert’s work in 1975 was the combination of the lack of figures with something else: the photographs’ nonconformity to landscape

you—if you don’t require that art somehow relate to and validate and help us affirm life, finally, while being honest, hopefully, art becomes a kind of a minor activity. So yeah, I mean, if I’m to tell you the artists that mattered to me, they will often—not always, but often have a—I suppose, a religious element to them. Rembrandt is a great figure to me as an etcher and a draftsman.” Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁴⁸ Tod Papageorge, “What We Bought,” in Adams, *The Place We Live*, Vol. III pp. 47-71 (50).

¹⁴⁹ Szarkowski 9

¹⁵⁰ John Szarkowski, *Ansel Adams at 100* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, in association with San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2001), 23.

¹⁵¹ Excerpt from tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

pictures that had been interpreted as containing the narrating presence of their author. Because he did not exercise the more conventional tools of photographic authorship, the built environment in his photographs appeared “not beautiful, but important,” as Szarkowski articulated the more cerebral kind of the response they elicited.¹⁵² And such a response was then fairly foreign to the museumgoer, more ambiguous than stable. This amounted to a recalibration of the role of the photographer as the author of a landscape.

Author and Audience

This chapter has endeavored to chart the connections between photographic expressivity and attitudes towards the American landscape, especially where it concerns the representation of the West, in historical sources that informed Robert Adams’s and his peers’ work and his museum-going audience’s points of reference. It has characterized the idealized viewer that Adams’s lyrical, yet cautionary photographs imply: an American who is familiar with the larger cultural conversation about the environment happening in the mid-1970s, and whose concern is prompted by recognizing the dissonance between the scenes in Adams’s photographs and those they expected to encounter in attending a landscape exhibition at an institution like the Eastman House.¹⁵³ One could add, as well, that a characteristic of this idealized viewer is openness to the revelatory or transformative quality of the light, which Adams has described with spiritually-inflected language throughout his career.

It was generally recognized that the bodies of work in *New Topographics* bore an

¹⁵² Szarkowski 8

¹⁵³ Adams specified the American viewer he had in mind: “I really think that the subject matter that interests me is hard for anyone other than an American to understand and value. You have to know the place firsthand,” Dugan 177.

environmentalist message to varying degrees; as another reviewer of the UK iteration of the show quipped, listing off the kinds of audience members who should attend it: “A super exhibition for anyone interested in the camera, in the USA, or both. Not to mention ecologists and conservationists.”¹⁵⁴ Precedents like Ansel Adams’s photographs and survey photography alike comprised such an audience member’s interpretive equipment. At the production end, this was Robert Adams’s equipment, too, and a source of inspiration. He connected his admiration of 19th century survey photography to his desire to hold on to hope: “The possibility... of reconciliation... is part of what keeps them from being of only sentimental interest. To love the old views is not entirely hopeless nostalgia, but rather an understandable and fitting passion for what can in some measure be ours again.”¹⁵⁵

Adams’s emotional investment in his craft and tradition, which had begun while poring over runs of *Aperture* and *Camera Work* in Colorado,¹⁵⁶ helps to explain his hesitation about Jenkins and Deal’s assertion that a rhetoric and aesthetic of non-intervention united the bodies of work in *New Topographics*. What was at stake in rejecting the body of conventions his generation had inherited from Ansel Adams was the ability to lead viewers to assume a more critical position. Nevertheless, even Adams’s photographs – the “warmest” among his peers, according to the reviewer in the UK – did indeed depart from romantic precedents in the genre to such an extent that many visitors

¹⁵⁴ Edward Phelps, review of *New Topographics* in the U.K., “Oh, brave new world!” *South-West Evening Chronicle*, October 2, 1981.

¹⁵⁵ Adams, “Introduction,” *The American Space*, 4.

¹⁵⁶ Concurrent with teaching at Colorado College, Adams spent Fridays at the Colorado Springs Art Center looking at their runs of these publications and “learning photo history from that little library.” Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

to *New Topographics* felt unmoored in their interpretation, and were unable to complete that interpretive circuit. Not all the audience members were capable of recognizing the photographs' transcendence, leaving the task of accounting for the instances where that circuit of meaning collapsed.

This introduces the final coordinate that must be assembled in order to make sense of Adams's work in the exhibition, and his environmentalism: his literary background, which is something he in fact shared with *New Topographics* photographers Nicholas Nixon and Frank Gohlke.¹⁵⁷ The frontispiece for *The New West* reads, after all, "Written and photographed by Robert Adams [my emphasis]." In its particular moment of 1975, the fraught reception of *New Topographics* thematized the very readability of landscape photographs. This is why it is productive to consider the stakes of Adams's modeling of his authorial presence in his photographs in relation to the literary theory of the period, which was likewise preoccupied with the agency of readership and issues of interpretive difficulty.

Adams left academia in 1970 (the same year he published *White Churches of the Plains*) to pursue photography full-time, instead of teaching English.¹⁵⁸ His photographs in these years ended up giving form in some ways to the very concerns of the discipline's theory as it played out through the 1980s – sources that serve as touchstones for this dissertation. From Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), to Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied Reader* (1974), and Hans-Robert Jauss's *Towards an Aesthetics of Reception* (1982), the ascendant school of thought in literary theory in these decades became

¹⁵⁷ Nixon at one time wanted to be a literature professor, and Gohlke likewise has graduate degree from Yale in literature.

¹⁵⁸ Papageorge 51, and footnote 13, p. 69.

focused on issues of reception, naming itself “audience-oriented” or “reader-response” criticism. Its task was to consider how the reader produces meaning in a text, through lenses ranging from the semiotic to the phenomenological.¹⁵⁹

It does not appear that Adams was particularly mindful of these disciplinary currents, perhaps as a result of feeling burned out by his doctoral studies. In a 1977 interview, he spoke of some of the literature that inspired him and alluded to such circumstances. He read “maybe three or four novels a year,” he said, mentioning “Walker Percy, Jane Austen. It took me about ten years to get over the effects of graduate school, but I really like to read again. I like poetry a lot – Ammons, Graves, Wilbur, Corman. And the essayists – Matthiessen, Hoagland, McPhee, Hellman.” As for more intellectual sources or non-fiction, the photographer listed “*Art in America*, *Exposure*, *Afterimage*, *The New York Review of Books*... *The New Yorker*.”¹⁶⁰ References from literature helped him articulate things he wanted to say about photographs and nature (“Nabokov writes, you know, that there is only one other place with the intense blue sky of central Russia – it’s Colorado”¹⁶¹). And a metaphor about theater once helped him describe how landscape photography could sit somewhere between social documentary and lyricism, between despair and hope:

Is what has happened to the West a matter for those social scientists who take a mechanistic view of man, or for theologians, who see us as moral beings capable of choice? The best answer to this unanswerable conundrum seems to me to be the compromise offered by classical tragedy. The plays are convincing because they falsify neither side of our ambiguous experience, which is of both freedom and fate – freedom as we know the world to be more exciting than the monotones of a naturalistic novel, and fate as we live in a world worse than anyone could

¹⁵⁹ For an overview of these approaches, see the introduction to the anthology *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Inge Crosman and Susan R. Suleiman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

¹⁶⁰ Dugan 178

¹⁶¹ diGrappa 10

have desired.¹⁶²

Prior to committing to photography full-time, Adams published some literary and film criticism, where his writing voice is – similar to his photographs – both erudite and economical. In one essay, the photographer attributed the then-recent popularity of films with less resolved narratives, such as those by Jean-Luc Godard, to how “we are less than satisfied by the answers from within our own tradition... we have widely abandoned our customary demands for intellectual coherence in favor of attention to the specific and revelatory texture of life.”¹⁶³ Contrary to the anxiety of other critics, Adams believed that film would not displace literature, reasoning that the two media are equipped for different tasks. Film is concerned with “the profound surface of things,” he argued. Once again returning to theologically-inflected language, he continued: “The artist can, in films, say what he cannot in other ways – he can reveal the holiness, beyond complaint, in the surface of life.”¹⁶⁴ Even when Adams was not specifically talking about still photography or landscape, then, he alluded to ideas that were germane to his own work – for example, that of an art of description rather than narration, art with a greater degree of unresolved meaning, or the “terrifying but beautiful lucidity” of films like Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona*.¹⁶⁵

It is ironic that in this same essay Adams attributed “failure” to the “new novels” of Alain Robbe-Grillet, because the photographer’s complaints presaged the frustrations of *New Topographics*’s audience. “Works like *The Voyeur* and *In the Labyrinth*, full of

¹⁶² Adams, “Introduction,” *The American Space*, 4.

¹⁶³ Robert Adams, “Pictures and the Survival of Literature,” *Western Humanities Review*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Winter 1971), 79-85 (81).

¹⁶⁴ Adams, “Pictures and the Survival of Literature,” 81.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid* 82

minute facts that signify little, simply do not repay in either enjoyment or new knowledge the effort it takes to read them,” Adams lamented of Robbe-Grillet.¹⁶⁶ Yet to once again revisit the responses that Joe Deal’s student would record that December weekend at the Eastman House in 1975:

“I don’t think liking or disliking comes into it, they’re interesting, like looking into a catalog...I was just thinking to myself, I don’t want to go to Colorado if all the tracts are like that. There’s not much imagination.”

“This is a project, these towns... did they do this in every town?”

“Nice, sharp pictures that don’t really have much feeling.”

“They’re not of particular interest – [they’re more like] random shots, expertly done.”

“Look at this picture – I just, *why*? What is he trying to show?”¹⁶⁷

On the heels of Adams’s own complaint of Robbe-Grillet’s “minute facts that signify little,” it is remarkable how many of these audience members invoked concepts like information, catalogs, or surveys in trying to describe why they didn’t “get” the photographs’ message, or why the photographs read to them as assemblages of mere “facts” that did not add up to a clear story. Ascribing to them a lack of subjectivity or narrativity, they concluded (incorrectly) that *New Topographics* must have been something like a survey of certain towns, for example – a series of projects with a social science function, rather than creative bodies of work.

Indeed, these responses must be acknowledged for what they are: those of actual *audience* members, rather than of the “implied reader” Adams’s photographs intimate.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid 83

¹⁶⁷ Excerpt from tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

Here we can turn to the rhetorical approach to reader response criticism. Proponents of this method, notably Booth, advanced the notion that the literary is communication, with authors and readers, respectively, serving as senders and receivers of messages.¹⁶⁸ As addressed already in both the introduction and Chapter One, in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth explained that the act of reading could be understood as one of decoding the meaning of a given text. He proposed the notion of the “implied author” and “implied reader.”¹⁶⁹ In a text, he argued, the author is present in the form of a “second self,” a personality made legible in the voice of the text.¹⁷⁰ Just as well, its counterpart is the implied reader, who functions as the text’s ideal interpreter. The exemplary reader plumbs the text for its message, eventually grasping it in the very process of mentally reconstructing the author, with whom this imaged reader would be in what Booth terms “complete agreement.”¹⁷¹

Taking stock of Booth’s scheme, Susan Suleiman notes that it is important to understand that the implied entities are fictive ones, “interpretive constructs” arising from the act of interpretation itself.”¹⁷² In the performance of reading or looking, the reader or viewer *is* not the ideal, but elucidates and confronts the ideal vis-à-vis her involvement. As Iser expounded in his 1974 book on the entity of the implied reader, the reader’s task

¹⁶⁸ Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman identify Roman Jakobson as having advanced a particularly “sophisticated formulation” of the rhetorical branch. See Jakobson, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Style and Language*, ed. T. Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), pp. 353-59.

¹⁶⁹ See Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), especially pp. 70-76; 151. Suleiman’s gloss of Booth’s scheme is particularly lucid. See Suleiman, “Introduction,” in *The Reader in the Text*, pp. 7-11.

¹⁷⁰ Booth describes how this is distinct from the entity of the “narrator,” who communicates directly with the reader. The “implied author” is the one whose attitudes shape the book, and the “author,” the real-world person who actually writes the book.

¹⁷¹ On agreement and disagreement between implied author and reader, see Booth, Chapter 5: “General Rules, IV: Emotions, Beliefs, and the Reader’s Objectivity,” 119-148.

¹⁷² Suleiman, “Introduction,” 11

can be thought of as filling in emotional and cognitive “gaps” the author sets up in the text, which should be thought of as “a combination of forms and signs designed to guide the imagination of the reader.”¹⁷³ And different readers will have different associations they draw from to fill in those gaps, different ways of engaging with “the pre-structuring of the potential meaning by the text.”¹⁷⁴ Iser even pondered the possibility of the critic really ever accessing that experience, but nevertheless concluded that attempting to do so was still worthwhile:

But how shall we then describe the dynamic character of a text? Can one, in fact, access the keen disturbance so often experienced in reading serious literature?... If texts actually possessed only the meaning brought to light by interpretation, then there would remain very little else for the reader. He could only accept it or reject it, take it or leave it. The fundamental question is, however, what actually does take place between text and reader? Is it possible to look into that relationship at all, or is it not the critic simply plunging into a private world where he can only make vague conjectures as speculations? Is one able to express anything at all about those highly heterogeneous reactions that run between text and reader? At the same time it must be pointed out that a text can only come to life when it is read, and if it is to be examined, it must therefore be studied through the eyes of the reader.¹⁷⁵

Here, Iser expressed how there will always be vast numbers of individual audience members whose diverse interpretive activity the critic cannot access. What we *can* reconstruct, however, is the general, fictive entity the text implies, and the range of forms that individual readers’ responses may take based on period conventions and norms.

As the reception of *New Topographics* demonstrated, it is likelier that audience members will have a greater difficulty filling in those gaps when the author refuses or

¹⁷³ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 58; xii.

¹⁷⁴ Iser, *The Implied Reader*, xii

¹⁷⁵ Wolfgang Iser, “Indeterminacy and the Reader’s Response in Prose Fiction,” in *Aspects of Narrative: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. J. Hillis Miller (New York, 1971), 2-45 (3).

fails to imply their own presence in the work (at least in a conventional way). Booth describes this as an author neglecting to “take a stand.”¹⁷⁶ The formal dimensions of Robert Adams’s photographs discussed in this chapter constitute the ways in which Adams “declared” himself to a lesser degree than his romantic predecessors in the genre. As a result, some members of the exhibition’s audience whose reactions were recorded on tape describe feeling *unimplied*, or uninvited. Iser elaborated on how this relates to the reader’s interpretive equipment in a literature context:

Through his past experiences, the educated reader expects specific things from prose and poetry; but many works of art play about with those expectations... the expectations can be shattered, altered, surpassed, or deceived, so that the reader is confronted with something unexpected which necessitates a readjustment.¹⁷⁷

He furthermore identified such work where the author’s presence is minimized as that which changes convention and even our very conception of a medium:

The author-reader relationship, which was thus developed by the eighteenth-century novel, has remained a constant feature of narrative prose and is still in evidence even when the author seems to have disappeared and the reader is deliberately excluded from comprehension... the reader of modern novels is deprived of [prior] assurance... This development reflects the transformation of the very idea of literature...¹⁷⁸

Indeed, the author’s seeming “disappearance” from the text is the subject that William Jenkins asked the photographers to comment on before writing his catalog introduction for *New Topographics* in summer 1975. In the published essay, he quoted several of the photographers considering this concept of a deliberate style of non-intervention. Frank Gohlke proposed that “much of this sense of neutrality lies in the way the edges of the

¹⁷⁶ In particular, Booth discusses this phenomenon in *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 240. Crosman and Suleiman discuss it in their “Introduction,” *The Reader in the Text*, p. 9.

¹⁷⁷ Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 58

¹⁷⁸ Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 102

picture function and that the work in the show (including his own) maintains an essentially *passive* frame. That is, rather than the picture having been created by the frame, there is a sense of the frame having been laid on an existing scene without interpreting it very much.”¹⁷⁹ Adams, however, veered into more emotional language in his response: “Pictures should look like they were easily taken. Otherwise beauty in the world is made to seem elusive and rare, which it is not.”¹⁸⁰

For his part, Adams even thought his work in the Eastman House exhibition was warmer than what he had produced before. Baltz had written in his review of *The New West* (1974): “What distinguishes Adams from most of his photographer contemporaries is the distance, both emotional and intellectual, that he maintains from his subjects.”¹⁸¹ Two years later, Adams reflected: “Well, I hope there is still the distance, because it implies a search for Form beyond social disaster, but I also hope the distance is not passionless.” He added: “The style of what I was doing changed some between *The New West* and *Denver*, and it has again since *Denver*... I’m photographing land forms at the moment, and they’re not, in some senses, as cold as the suburban scenes.”¹⁸² The photographer therefore turned to the concept of emotional temperature as a way to distinguish between his own bodies of work, both the images and their subject matter. It is worth noting that the images in *The New West* were square format, which could indeed be considered “cooler” than a horizontal orientation because at least the latter is more readily interpreted as landscape. For some reviewers, Adams’s dedication to print craft

¹⁷⁹ Jenkins, “Introduction,” 5

¹⁸⁰ Ibid 7

¹⁸¹ Lewis Baltz, review of *The New West*, *Art in America* Vol. 63, No. 2 (March/April 1975), 41-43.

¹⁸² Quoted in Dugan, 173.

appears to have lent his work some warmth and accessibility, even to the point of suggesting conservatism. Critic Andy Grundberg wrote in 1981: “Adams’s landscape style is essentially classical... he might be considered a purist.”¹⁸³ And fellow photographer Mark Klett did not even find *New Topographics* “cool” enough; dissatisfied with the exhibition, he would attempt a “truly topographic project” in the form of the Rephotographic Survey Project (RSP).¹⁸⁴

Conclusions

Ultimately, Robert Adams’s body of work in *New Topographics* figures as a barometer of the exhibition’s relationship to the broader artistic and cultural movements of romanticism, modernism, and environmentalism. Wrestling with how they are intertwined in his work is a testament to its complexity and why it resists easy categorization. The work is anti-picturesque, yet not entirely anti-romantic; it upends certain romantic conventions while retaining others, such as the transcendent symbolism of light. Hesitant to completely denounce Ansel Adams’s work, Robert nevertheless rejected his predecessor’s vision of the West as a series of pristine and unpeopled landscapes awaiting the “emotional appropriation” of the photographer. His photographs render the redemption of the landscape a question rather than a certitude, presenting the dull structures of the “new West” as places that appear hostile to individuality, community, and history. It is an image of the West that is timely rather than timeless, which suggests the skepticism and anti-essentialism of postmodernism. And yet Robert’s

¹⁸³ Andy Grundberg, “The Point of Photographs,” *New York Times* (November 29, 1981).

¹⁸⁴ Mark Klett, Aperture Foundation lecture “Photography in Context: The Influence of The New West,” March 12, 2008, New York, NY.

work is not anti-modernist; if anything, as Grundberg's identification of his work as "classical" attests, Adams's prints are feats of technical mastery. He was, and remains, deeply committed to the medium and craft of photography, and drew inspiration from his forebears. Timothy O'Sullivan's survey photographs in particular served as a touchstone for the kind of steely resolve he was after in his photographs, as well as a conception of landscape photography rooted in the notion of survey, where multiple images accrue meaning when viewed together. Still today, Adams's preferred form for disseminating his images remains the photographic book because of "the way people encounter pictures in books – by themselves, in quiet, at length," and because they reach a wider audience, which nevertheless renders reproduction quality critical to how his work is received.¹⁸⁵

Adams's formal discipline in the work included in *New Topographics* can be understood as being in service of a greater good. Presented in grainless print, his images appear simultaneously dreary and glorious, exuding aesthetic self-discipline as they prompt sympathy for the environment. The photographer once reflected on the

¹⁸⁵ Robert Adams and Joshua Chuang, "Robert Adams: Summer Nights, Walking / Interview with Joshua Chuang," *Aperture* No. 197 (Winter 2009): 52-59 (52). In 1977 Adams observed that "books reach out to an even wider audience" than exhibitions. He added: "And it's an audience for whom I have a natural inclination. I educated myself as a photographer from books." He also commented on the process of putting together a book: "Honestly it's all difficult – finding the money, figuring out the typography, sequencing the pictures, doing whatever writing is necessary," Dugan 176. In Adams's 2010 oral history interview, he and Toby Jurovics discuss book printing quality in the 1970s. Jurovics says: "One of the things that has always seemed to me a problem about interpreting not just your work but a lot of work that was made in the—in the '70s, was the technology of book reproduction, or the lack thereof, or the lack of funding; and in particular, thinking about the photographers and *The New Topographics*, where there were critics and reviewers writing about the desperate nature of these photographs. And in a—in a poor reproduction, it all seems pretty lost and desperate. And what you never got was that—" Adams interjects: "Sense of light... Yeah. That's absolutely right. Years later, John Szarkowski did an introduction to *The New West* for me, which was great—and probably saved the day. But he remarked to me casually, he said, "They didn't get it, did they?" The printing company that did it. And Rappaport did, I think, the best they could do, but he was right. They didn't get it—if by "it," you mean the redemptive half of the picture." Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

combination of compelling form and social or political meaning: “The shot of the smoke is of course about a socially damaging event. But the picture also has some graphic strength and I’ve been criticized for that. Though my feeling is that composition is the main tool we have, and that a photographer has to use it. Composition is what concentrates the viewer’s attention.”¹⁸⁶ In 2009, he again clarified his stance regarding the relationship between aesthetic and environmental pursuits:

Like countless others, Kerstin and I put in many hundreds of hours each year working on issues related to the environment [such as deforestation], animal protection, and local government. While I do not believe art can directly influence problems in these areas, I do believe that it can strengthen people’s engagement with life in general... it can give them some hope and courage, which is the necessary first step toward political engagement.¹⁸⁷

Adams was not out to “change the world” with his work, which is not particularly polemical anyway. Rather, what *New Topographics* achieved on the one hand was a reorientation of landscape photography away from an emphasis on the author, and towards the agency of the viewer in the creation of photographic meaning. The receptive viewer of Adams’s work would “see the harm of our work and determine to correct it,” embracing its call to responsibility for “the place we live.”¹⁸⁸ How the photograph solicited such a commitment was a matter of delicate balance on Adams’s part. As he stated, finally, in his 2010 oral history interview: “I don’t like propaganda...nobody does. And so what is it that art is really instructing us in? My own feeling is that it’s helping us find a stasis, a calm, a sense of wholeness, of cohesion, of meaning, finally, in life that helps us get up in

¹⁸⁶ diGrappa 12

¹⁸⁷ Letter from Adams to Holly Markovitz Goldstein, January 12, 2009. In Goldstein, *American Landscapes as Revisionist History: The Frontier Photographs of Mark Klett, John Pfahl, Deborah Bright, and Robert Adams* (PhD Diss, Boston University, 2010).

¹⁸⁸ Adams, *The New West*, xii and John Szarkowski, Foreword to *The New West* (pp. 5-9), 9.

the morning and re-engage...”¹⁸⁹

Part of what made Adams’s work so challenging was how it framed the narrative of westward settlement as more of a mistake rather than a triumph. Preserved within the responses to *New Topographics* in 1975 are expectations that viewers held in that moment about the western American landscape and its representation, and also how landscape photographs should address them and make them feel. The ability of Adams’s and other *New Topographics* photography to read as banal or authorless (and, as I have argued here, therefore concerning) was contingent upon the presence of a certain kind of viewer: one who possessed a culturally ingrained set of pictorial and generic expectations, and projected them in the act of viewing. In contrast to Ansel’s sublime vistas, Robert’s work was emphatically about just what *was* there, and taking responsibility for it.

Some viewers were too put off by the excessively familiar subject matter to inhabit the critical stance the photographers intended, but others did grasp the photographs’ message, and considered them emphatically contemporary. Both kinds of reactions are expressed in this single comment from the exhibition: “We can go upstairs and see the *art* – that is timeless. These photographs are obviously for *today*.”¹⁹⁰ Whether or not viewers appreciated the work, many of them perceived that the object was the landscape, but the subject was ourselves.

¹⁸⁹ Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁹⁰ Excerpt from tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

Chapter Three

Attitude Becomes Form: Lewis Baltz and Joe Deal's Conceptualism

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.

-William Jenkins¹

There is something paradoxical in the way that documentary photographs interact with our notions of reality. To function as documents at all they must first persuade us that they describe their subject accurately and objectively; in fact, their initial task is to convince their audience that they are truly documents, that the photographer has fully exercised his powers of observation and description and has set aside his imaginings and prejudices. The ideal photographic document would appear to be without author or art. Yet of course photographs, despite their verisimilitude, are abstractions; their information is selective and incomplete.

-Lewis Baltz²

If the idea of authorial non-intervention was something that Robert Adams was hesitant to ally himself with, it was a notion that Lewis Baltz and Joe Deal readily embraced. What the *New Topographics* photographers had in common, in Baltz's view, was that they represented the built environment in the manner of a "legal brief."³ And yet both he and Deal recognized that adopting such a posture was more complex than straightforward, and turned to sources outside of photography to contextualize their understanding of what such a posture entailed. Unlike Robert Adams, Baltz and Deal

¹ William Jenkins, "Introduction," *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* (Rochester: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975), 5-7 (7).

² Lewis Baltz, review of *The New West* by Robert Adams, *Art in America*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (March/April 1975), 41.

³ Oral History Interview with Lewis Baltz conducted by Matthew Witkovsky, 2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

were eager to position what they were doing in relation to art in other media that was similarly preoccupied with questions of authorship and expressivity. Their contributions to *New Topographics*, in particular, provoke a cerebral response.

The photographers' statements that Jenkins quoted in his introductory essay expressed different conceptions of the role of authorship in their photographs, and the presence or absence of judgement in their work. The concept of a "neutral" or styleless style was under construction not only for Jenkins, but also for the photographers, figuring in the exhibition as working definition, rather than a settled one.⁴ The curator ended his essay in a provisional tone: "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," simultaneously downplaying the theoretical ambitions of the exhibition and placing it into dialogue with the previous show he had curated at the Eastman House, *The Extended Document*.⁵ Yet the statement by Baltz that he included just paragraphs earlier complicated that thesis; the photographer stated that the "ideal document would be without author or art."⁶ As Baltz was aware, and as this analysis contends, the

⁴ Again, Jenkins commented in 2006: "People come to me and think that I understand this because I invented it, and I didn't really understand it very well then. I think my essay reveals that." Britt Salvesen, "New Topographics," in Salvesen, *New Topographics* (Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona; Rochester: George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film; Göttingen: Steidl, 2009), 11-67 (49). Likewise, Joe Deal commented in 2008: "Bill even stated in the catalog essay... that the work of each photographer is richer in meaning than the aesthetic point the exhibition was making. The purpose of the exhibition was not to represent the work of each photographer in all of its depth and breadth. Work was selected that supported the thesis of the exhibition without misrepresenting the work of photographers who were included." E-mail from Joe Deal to Britt Salvesen, August 23, 2008. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:1/104.

⁵ Jenkins 7. *The Extended Document* was on view from February 1 – April 30, 1975, and featured the work of John Baldessari, Tom Barrow, Michael Bishop, Marcia Resnick, Richard Schaeffer, and William Wegman. Jenkins has since expressed that he wishes he were asked about this exhibition more than about *New Topographics*.

⁶ Lewis Baltz, review of *The New West* by Robert Adams, in *Art in America*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (March/April 1975), 41. Quoted in Jenkins, "Introduction," 6.

photographs in *New Topographics* lacked neither.

Building upon the previous chapter's examination of Robert Adams's work in the exhibition, this chapter continues to investigate how a neutral posture could work to place implied viewers into a critical stance. That the photographers in *New Topographics* were able to cultivate idiosyncratic variations on that posture – in other words, that their photographs could read as “neutral” despite looking very different – underscores how neutrality is not a quality that is inherent to certain photographs, but is rather a posture that is activated by the viewer's interpretive activity. Among all of the photographers in *New Topographics*, Deal and Baltz placed their viewers into a particularly unsentimental mode of attention and drew inspiration from minimalist and conceptual art. They cultivated this stance through very different formal means than Adams, but to a similar end: to lead the viewer to contemplate what was happening to the landscape in the places they photographed, and what it indicated about dominant American culture and values in the 1970s. Rejecting romanticism to an even greater extent than Adams, they also nevertheless echoed aspects of Adams's rhetoric that in order to know the landscape, it must be observed directly, which only became possible when the photographer minimized his editorializing. Trying to square this quasi-modernist stance (for it has a “straight” photography ring to it) with other antimodernist, conceptual principles at work in their photographs helps to illuminate how *New Topographics* thematized larger shifts in contemporary photographic practice. As Baltz put it in retrospect: “Much of the American photography of the 1970s seems curiously affectless and divorced from the political, social, and interpersonal issues that surfaced during the decade. If it is so, it is less the blame of uncaring photographers than of those same photographers' chastened

view of the powers of their medium.”⁷

A range of experiences looking at minimalist and post-minimalist art, conceptual art, and imagery like photographs of the 1969 moon landing and topographical maps all informed the ways in which the audience of *New Topographics* could have made sense of the photographs. Similar to the case of how Adams’s work invoked the larger cultural conversation occurring around the modern environmental movement, the meanings of Deal and Baltz’s bodies of work are layered with other cultural and intellectual developments such as the nascent discipline of cultural landscape studies and the rise of corporate industrial park architecture. Reading their photographs in light of these phenomena illuminates how in *New Topographics*, “anthropological” and “critical” – opposed values, according to Jenkins’s catalog introduction – were not mutually exclusive. Rather, the photographers’ iterations of an “anthropological” style (and its associated terms: scientific, objective, minimal, neutral) *animated* the critical in the act of viewing.

...

Like Robert Adams, Joe Deal and Lewis Baltz each worked on the outskirts of a rapidly expanding city – Albuquerque and Los Angeles, respectively – and observed and researched those locations at length. Two years after the exhibition, Deal was adamant that “None of the photographers whom I have spoken to in *New Topographics* would ever attempt to change anything with their photographs... they are making observations

⁷ Lewis Baltz, “American Photography in the 1970s: Too Old to Rock, Too Young to Die,” in *American Images: Photography 1945-1980*, ed. Peter Turner (New York: Penguin, 1985), 159. Reprinted in Lewis Baltz, *Lewis Baltz Texts*, edited by Matthew Witkovsky (Göttingen: Steidl, 2010), 47-75.

rather than being politically active in any way.”⁸ Yet when Jenkins had characterized *New Topographics* as a “stylistic event” in his draft for the catalog introduction, Deal responded: “What about the landscape that these photographers have chosen to photograph?”⁹ For Deal, “stylistic event” shifted the exhibition too far into the territory of formalism; in Deal’s understanding, the show was going to be “about the changing environment” rather than formal concerns.¹⁰ After Deal expressed his reservations, Jenkins added a disclaimer to his essay: “It should be stated at the outset that while this introduction will concern itself with the exhibition as a stylistic event, the actual photographs are far richer in meaning and scope than the simple making of an aesthetic point.” Deal would later write in retrospect:

As minimalist writers have done, I think the photographers in *New Topographics* were attempting to strip away literary and stylistic conventions and turn an observant eye to humdrum everyday experience. This was not thought of by any of them as formalism or an exploration of photography’s formal properties. It was a way of trying to let a more familiar world enter the arena of photographic practices. If a neutral position was taken – whether it is called objectivity or formalism – it was to make the subject more immediate, not to make the subject style itself.¹¹

In other words, Deal regarded the posture of a “styleless” style not as an end in itself, but one that held high stakes. It was geared towards enabling a certain response in the viewer, one immediately tied to the social context of which the built environment was a symptom.

It makes sense that Deal was particularly invested in sorting out the relationship between form, subject matter, and sociopolitical meaning in *New Topographics*, since he

⁸ “Joe Deal: New Topographics,” an interview conducted with Deal at Arizona State University, Tempe on February 1, 1977, edited by James Hajicek, *Northlight* No. 4 (May 1977), 7.

⁹ Undated lecture notes, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG:229:13/2.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Undated lecture notes, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG:229:13/2.

was instrumental in helping Jenkins organize the show. This chapter endeavors to restore his role, as well as the input of Lewis Baltz, to the narrative of the exhibition's origins and enduring influence.¹² Of the ten photographers represented in Rochester in 1975, Deal and Baltz were particularly intellectual about their practice, and shared a friendship and correspondence.¹³ Reflecting upon the show in 2006, Jenkins, insisted that it was conversations between the three of them – himself, Deal, and Baltz – that really made *New Topographics* happen.¹⁴

An interview with Deal published in *Northlight* in 1977 provides greater specificity about the show's origins; there, the photographer stated for the record that the show was technically born in Southern California. This is striking in hindsight, given the show's enduring association with the western American landscape despite not all of the work representing that region, and how its traveling iteration at the Otis College of Art and Design (thanks to Baltz knowing its curator) garnered one of the only positive reviews of the show.¹⁵ Deal recalled: "It began in Los Angeles as the result of a conversation between Bill Jenkins, Hal Glicksman, and Lewis Baltz. They were talking

¹² Britt Salvesen's 2009 *New Topographics* catalog at the Center for Creative Photography foregrounds these circumstances. But among a wider audience, in this author's experience, it still appears that very few people are aware of the extent of Deal's role.

¹³ The two met prior to *New Topographics*, when Baltz came through Rochester. The friendship developed further once Deal moved to California in 1976. E-mail from Joe Deal to Britt Salvesen, August 23, 2008. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:1/104. In this e-mail, Deal elaborates upon how all the photographers in the exhibition knew one another. He mentions that Robert Adams is the only photographer from *New Topographics* that he never met, and that Hilla Becher came to the opening of *New Topographics* in Rochester.

¹⁴ Bill Jenkins interviewed by Britt Salvesen, June 30, 2006. Center for Creative Photography, Oral History Collection, VOP06:018.

¹⁵ "The exhibition is intellectually stimulating, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the ordinariness of the subjects and the anonymity of the approaches.... Though some of the surfaces seem dull, the ideas which *New Topographics* represents are vital and fundamental. It is to be recommended without reservation." Robert Woolard, "Man-Shaped Landscapes," *Artweek* Vol. 7, No. 13 (March 27, 1976): 12.

about Baltz's pictures, the historical precedents for them and gradually began talking about other contemporary photographers working along similar lines..."¹⁶ When there was a gap in the Eastman House's exhibition schedule in 1975, Deal suggested that the museum fill it with a show inspired by what had been discussed in L.A. Initially, the exhibition was to be broader in scope and more historically focused, with a chronology beginning with the work of Francis Frith. Deal had in fact gotten the very idea for the show's title in response to a case of 19th century stereo views and early postcards that Robert Sobieszek had curated at the Eastman House and labeled "topographics."¹⁷ As the idea developed, however, Deal and Jenkins narrowed in on more contemporary work that dealt with the postwar built environment, and also work that appeared to express "a kind of attitude that came through Atget, Walker Evans, and Ed Ruscha."¹⁸ The twin core principles of the show from its inception thus had to do both with subject matter – the built environment rather than architecture in isolation – and the "attitude" with which it appeared to be represented.¹⁹

¹⁶ Hajicek 5-6. Glicksman was then director of the Otis Art Institute, and Baltz had taken a history of photography course with him. Baltz and Jenkins had already met at this time, because Baltz had already visited the Eastman House in 1971.

¹⁷ Deal recounted these circumstances in 1997: "It's a long time ago, but my recollection is that there was a small display case in Eastman House in the hall which had stereo cards and postcards from the nineteenth century. The label for the case was called "topographics." I went to Bill [Jenkins] and said, "How about New Topographics or Contemporary Topographics?" That's how I remember it." Source: Annie Gilbert, "New Topographics: the Trajectory from Creative Intention to Critical Response," unpublished essay, 1997. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG229:1/19. In this same essay, Bill Jenkins is quoted corroborating Deal's memory, adding that the photographers that Sobieszek labeled as "topographics" included British photographers like Francis Frith, James Wilson, and George Washington Valentine. In 2008, Deal reiterated the same narrative of events to Britt Salvesen, further explaining that the subtitle "Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape" was added to distance the association of the title with mapmaking. Source: e-mail from Joe Deal to Britt Salvesen, August 23, 2008. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:1/104.

¹⁸ Quoted in Gilbert.

¹⁹ Britt Salvesen situates *New Topographics* in relation to other landmark exhibitions in this period: "As their titles indicate, the exhibitions "Toward a Social Landscape" and "New

Significantly, it is also thanks to Deal's own archival efforts that we have the responses of audience members who saw *New Topographics* during its run in Rochester, as well as other materials from the exhibition.²⁰ Deal was both highly interested in and dedicated to preserving audience response to the show. He taught photography in Rochester while working at the Eastman House, and in December 1975, instructed his students to visit the museum's galleries and tape-record visitors reacting to the work. The findings of a student named Bess Abel are preserved in Deal's archive.²¹ Consisting of tape-recorded conversation and supplementary typed and hand-written transcripts of speech that was not recorded, Abel's assignment provides a remarkable trove of responses to the exhibition from a variety of visitors: young and old, students and professionals, photography specialists and non-specialists, residents of Rochester and travelers from abroad. The people react to the work in real time and speak to an astonishing variety of aspects, from their admiration of the photographers' print craft to their bafflement toward the subject matter, the bodies of work they respond to most strongly, the personal meaning or interest they ascribe to certain images, and even their thoughts on seeing *New Topographics* in the specific institutional context of the Eastman House.

Documents" got at new ways of seeing the contemporary environment, but with an emphasis on the urban scene or street photography, and on the hand-held camera or snapshot aesthetic – the subjective presence of the photographer was still quite explicit in these works. Jenkins and Deal found themselves looking for a certain distance, an effacement that did not sacrifice (or select) details." Britt Salvesen, draft of introduction for CCP catalog, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, page 8.

²⁰ In Deal's archive at the Center for Creative Photography, all *New Topographics*-related materials are housed in Box 10 (AG229:10). The files contain materials that were not preserved in the exhibition file at the Eastman House, such as the mock-up for the Plexiglas-mounted text that greeted viewers upon entering the exhibition.

²¹ It is unclear why Abel's assignment is the only one Deal kept.

It must nevertheless be emphasized that these are the responses of actual, flesh-and-blood audience members, rather than idealized or “implied” viewers. As a set of data or evidence, they are specific rather than general, the products of a very particular kind of encounter. As anyone who has ever been spontaneously interviewed can attest, in being asked for one’s opinion in the context of the gallery space, one’s response is inevitably a kind of performance. This is also true of gallery guest books where visitors record their reactions to work on view, and perhaps because of the more private rather than interactive nature of that activity, jot down more polarizing thoughts about either liking or hating the work. The student interviewer, too, is performing in her exchanges with the people she approaches (or didn’t approach); perhaps because Deal was her teacher, she asked more specific questions about whether people liked his work, and what kinds of themes he seemed to be investigating. The individuals whose reactions are recorded on the tapes likely had some self-consciousness about what they were “supposed” to see or feel, or whether their own responses measured up to what the photographers intended. Put slightly differently, in failing to like or appreciate the work, they may have felt they were “misreading” it – yet misinterpretation only occurs in relation to an “implied” response.

Surveys produce multiple kinds of information that are – as Baltz characterized the documentary value of photographs – “selective and incomplete.”²² The audience of the exhibition was numerically larger and more diverse than the quotes actually allow us to understand. Nevertheless, the tape and transcripts comprise invaluable material for reconstructing the set of conventional expectations towards landscape photography circa

²² Lewis Baltz, review of *The New West* by Robert Adams, *Art in America*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (March/April 1975), 41.

1975, and how *New Topographics* challenged the generic status quo.

Ground Rules: Joe Deal in Albuquerque

Passing through the Eastman House galleries in December 1975, a couple named Maureen and Todd responded to Deal's photographs. Todd offered his interpretation of the photographer's intentions, as far as he could glean them: "It seems to me that he wants to investigate the relationship between the landscape and the residences, in this case, and people, how they laid out their houses, where they laid it out... the angle expands quite a bit of area in all the pictures. If he was simply interested in architecture, he wouldn't put all of that in the picture." Maureen added: "It reminds me of the place where I grew up, which was a developing city, a very new suburban area, and these pictures really capture that feeling – of the land still maintaining some of its integrity, before suburbia has completely overwhelmed it."²³

The couple's interests were in line with how the photographer developed this particular body of work. A Kansas native, Deal had been raised between the suburbs of Topeka, the city of Albany, Missouri, and St. Paul, Minnesota. Throughout his upbringing, he became interested in photography and architecture concurrently. A particularly formative recurring experience was noticing terrain that Deal would later describe as "the edge of history": where natural landscape or farmland met suburbia.²⁴ As

²³ Excerpt from tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

²⁴ This phrase is the title of a book Deal had in his personal library – William Irwin Thompson, *At the Edge of History: Speculations on the Transformation of Culture* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1971). Deal used the phrase in an application he submitted for a 1978-79 Guggenheim Fellowship to photograph in Southern California, indicating that he likely had the book in his library by then. He further elaborated that he wanted to examine this particular kind of

a young person, the photographer was “very conscious of living on the edge” and mindful of the historical and ecological dimensions of westward development and urbanization in the United States. Each time his family moved, it was to a new house that bore no traces of its previous owners, but was situated in proximity to land that Deal associated with “something older”: vacant lots, open fields, and in one case, an active farm.²⁵ Eventually, this interest in the edges of landscapes would dovetail with a preoccupation with the edges of the photographic frame.

...

When Deal assisted William Jenkins with conceptualizing and realizing *New Topographics*, it was in fact during his second stint working at the Eastman House. Five years earlier, in December 1970, Deal had first begun working at the museum as a guard and janitor, employment he secured in order to fulfill duties as a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War.²⁶ A year into this two-year service period, he was transferred to the Exhibitions Department, where he assisted with installation and clerical tasks as a preparator.²⁷ In December 1972, he requested a leave period to pursue an dual MFA and

landscape to explore “how inhabitants display their materialism or idealism.” See Deal’s activity files related to his Guggenheim applications, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG:229:1/11. Deal was eventually awarded a Guggenheim in 1983-84, which he used to make his series “Subdividing the Inland Basin.” Previous awards included National Endowment for the Arts fellowships in 1976 and 1979; no materials from those applications exist in his activity files.

²⁵ Undated lecture notes, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG:229:13/2.

²⁶ Materials related to Deal’s conscientious objector activities are housed in the Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG:229:1/1. Deal applied for, and was granted, a Conscientious Objector classification by his draft board, the stipulation of which was working for two years for a non-profit educational institution that benefited the public. Between 1966 and 1970 he wrote 100 letters to institutions in Albuquerque and just one to Rochester, to the Eastman House, and that is the position that came through. Deal describes this sequence of events in an interview he did with Pamela Blackwell on March 10, 1983, page 1. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG:229:1/15.

²⁷ Interview of Deal by Pamela Blackwell, March 10, 1983. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG:229:1/15. Page 1.

MA in Photography under the mentorship of Van Deren Coke and Tom Barrow (whom he'd already met at the Eastman House) at the University of New Mexico, beginning in the spring semester of 1973.²⁸ This unique program that culminated in a dual degree was the only one of its kind in the nation, and it initiated Deal into a community of figures who would become important in photographic history.²⁹ In addition to Coke and Barrow, Beaumont Newhall, Harold Jones, and Deal's fellow *New Topographics* photographer Nicholas Nixon were all either instructors or students there.

Deal's first round of employment at the Eastman House had come on the tail of his graduation from the Kansas City Art Institute in 1970.³⁰ At the KCAI he earned a BFA with a concentration in graphic design (KCAI did not then have a photography program).³¹ Painting ended up indirectly drawing Deal to photography; the young art student was especially interested in photorealism. In hindsight, Deal's fondness for this genre anticipated his photographs' detailed description of the surfaces of the built environment. Deal recalls that he and his peers in school were highly aware of Ed Ruscha and the Pop art movement, which he considered significant for how its subjects were taken from popular culture.³² At the time, Deal aligned his own work more with Pop than

²⁸ Deal obtained the MFA (separate from his MA) from UNM in 1978. Nixon was also close friends with Frank Gohlke, which is how Deal met Gohlke. Deal recounts how Gohlke would come visit Nixon in New Mexico and they would all go shooting together. Ibid 4.

²⁹ For a contemporaneous overview of the program, see Ken Baird, "Albuquerque Experience," *The British Journal of Photography*, July 14, 1978, pp. 598-602.

³⁰ Joe Deal's CV, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG229:1/9.

³¹ Blackwell 1. Deal and some of the other students lobbied for a photography program and the school created a department for photography after he left.

³² In 1981, Deal would define Pop as "the selection of cultural symbols usually found in advertising, and the removal of these symbols from their social context and placement of them in an art context." See Deal, undated lecture notes for a talk at the Oakland Museum of California, on the occasion of the 1981 exhibition "Slices of Time: California Landscapes 1860-1880 and 1960-1980," organized by Therese Heyman and Ted Hedgpeth. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:1.

the tradition of fine art photography.³³

The only canonical, modernist photographer Deal recalls admiring in his undergraduate years (and for the tongue-in-cheek reason of being “a good calendar photographer”) was Edward Weston. But in Rochester, Deal took advantage of “the traffic of photographs through the House” and learned more about photographic history from the Eastman House’s collection.³⁴ He continued to look at Weston and became particularly captivated by Walker Evans’s work, which he would credit generously with “learning to see, not only photographs, but learning to see things in the world and the way that photographs phrase them.”³⁵ In terms of 19th century landscape photography, he studied the prints of William Henry Jackson, Carleton Watkins, William Bell, and Alexander Gardner. Sustained exposure to Timothy O’Sullivan’s work only came later, when Deal sought out O’Sullivan’s photographs of geological formations as he produced his own series *The Fault Zone*.³⁶ In the early 1970s, it was not as much the geological survey photographers who influenced Deal as those who photographed the construction of railroads across America. Figures such as William Henry Jackson, Frank Jay Haynes, and Andrew J. Russell appeared “less interested in the sublime and more interested in the human presence on the landscape,” he noted.³⁷ Deal also recalled being impressed by a small installation of Roger Fenton’s Crimean War photographs, landscapes he described

³³ Blackwell 5

³⁴ Quoted in Hajicek 1

³⁵ Quoted in Blackwell 3

³⁶ Blackwell 3. Deal was interested in O’Sullivan’s representations of geological formations, whereas he associated figures like Watkins more with “monumental themes or the pastoral landscape.”

³⁷ E-mail from Joe Deal to Britt Salvesen, August 23, 2008. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:1/104.

as “eerily empty... chilling, both as documents and as pure landscape.”³⁸ Meanwhile, an important influence in terms of Deal’s own contemporaries was the 1971 exhibition *Sixties Continuum*, a survey of contemporary photography curated by Van Deren Coke, who was then at the Eastman House but would become one of Deal’s instructors at UNM.³⁹

When he was not working at the museum, Deal began photographing the architecture in Rochester using square format film, which he considered a “comfortable” choice given his design background.⁴⁰ He was particularly drawn to 1930s internationalist-style structures that employed a large amount of glass. Deal was interested in such buildings’ facades, as well as their manicured landscapes, which seemed to express an “attitude” about having “control over the elements.”⁴¹ He furthermore linked this interest to his exposure to the Bauhaus during his undergraduate studies, and the German art school’s “emphasis placed on progress and technology.”⁴² Aside from these buildings from the Thirties, Deal also photographed a variety of styles of houses in Rochester, such as Victorians, often from relatively close proximity. By 1972, he had secured representation and begun exhibiting his work at LIGHT Gallery in New York, but he remained unsatisfied with how the success of his pictures seemed

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Hajicek 1. For the curator’s framing of the exhibition, see Van Deren Coke, “60s Continuum,” in *Image: Journal of Photography and Motion Pictures of the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (March 1972), 1-6.

⁴⁰ Blackwell 2. Deal elaborated: “I remember one assignment after another in undergraduate school, working with an eleven inch square. In fact, my prints are about that size now. It is not that I thought of the square format as ideal, but it was something I felt comfortable with. Also I was interested in its resemblance to television images. I was trying to print like a television image, soft and overall gray... Also, its resemblance to snapshots from my childhood – I remember square photographs taken with a Brownie camera. I liked all those aspects of it.”

⁴¹ Quoted in Blackwell 2

⁴² Blackwell 2. See also Joe Deal, “Career Summary,” in undated fellowship application, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG229:1/10.

contingent upon the historical quality of the architecture.⁴³

Moving to New Mexico would energize Deal's practice and help the photographer further narrow in on his intellectual concerns and idiosyncratic style. Albuquerque provided him with a different kind of vantage point from which to observe the built environment, and Deal found that he increasingly wanted to focus not on architecture in isolation, but also on the context that surrounded it. The "scale of the buildings was somewhat diminished in relationship to the landscape" in this region, he noticed, in comparison to the East Coast.⁴⁴ Arriving in Albuquerque in 1973, then-26-year-old Deal would have encountered a rapidly expanding city whose population had doubled in the two preceding decades.⁴⁵ Density and overcrowding was a pressing concern, although less so for the city's wealthier inhabitants, who increasingly gravitated to the more spacious property lots of the North Valley and Northeast Heights. Bordering the foothills of the Sandia Mountains, this was the area of Albuquerque where the newest construction was occurring in the early 1970s, primarily in the form of single-family residences that many homeowners felt compelled to surround with fences.⁴⁶

Deal soon developed a strategy of photographing these new neighborhoods from the elevated vantage point of the foothills, continuing to work in square format as he had

⁴³ Undated lecture notes, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG:229:13/2.

⁴⁴ Joe Deal, "Career Summary," in undated fellowship application, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG229:1/10.

⁴⁵ See Patrick McNamara, "A Social Report for Metropolitan Albuquerque" (The Second Year Report of the Social Indicators Project), The Albuquerque Urban Observatory, January, 1973 (36). In 1970, the population of Albuquerque was 315,774. Between 1960 and 1970 alone, the population of the Bernalillo County increased by 24%, whereas the national average in that decade was 13.3%.

⁴⁶ Ibid. This area "accounted for the preponderance of single-family construction from 1967 to 1971." By contrast, in the more central metropolitan area, between 1950 and 1970 there was a "50% jump in total renter-occupied housing units, reflecting a phenomenal growth in multi-family dwelling units in the city." Corresponding with this growth, many more people were employed in the construction and real estate industries than previous decades.

in Rochester.⁴⁷ Stripping away what he called “the vagaries of the sky and the horizon,”⁴⁸ he filled each square frame with a dense patchwork of houses, yards, roads, construction sites, and parcels of still unoccupied land. He printed these images as 13-inch square prints from his medium format, two-and-a-quarter negatives. As the largest prints shown a year later in *New Topographics*, they shared a corner with Nicholas Nixon’s body of work depicting Boston as if through a disembodied eye (**fig. 3.1**). The juxtaposition of the two photographers’ bodies of work highlighted how Deal’s adoption of a distanced, yet not-quite-aerial view places the viewer into a conventionally unfamiliar vantage point, one that de-naturalizes the developments and works to underscore their arbitrariness and incoherence.

Many of the photographs record instances of contrasting styles of architecture in a single frame. In one *Untitled View* (**fig. 3.2**), as all of Deal’s photographs were labeled (a term perhaps indicative of Deal’s own critical academic self-consciousness, where he may have been familiar with Rosalind Krauss’s essay “Photography’s Discursive Spaces”⁴⁹), an adobe house occupies the center of the image, joined across the street by two ranch-style brick homes. One of the ranch houses has a clearly well-watered lawn, whereas the adobe house’s lawn appears patchier, with traces of tire tracks. A square of rocky dirt at the back of the property, which differs in tone from the rest of the yard, may be the site of either an earlier structure or a new project. Closer to the house is a tarp-covered boat, which registers as an absurd anomaly in the desert setting. Power lines run

⁴⁷ Deal often went shooting with Nicholas Nixon and Frank Gohlke. See Blackwell 4.

⁴⁸ Deal’s statement about *New Topographics*, quoted in William Jenkins, “Introduction,” *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* (Rochester: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975), 7.

⁴⁹ See Rosalind Krauss, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View,” *Art Journal* Vol. 42, No. 4 (Winter 1982): 311-319.

across the lower portion of the image, where there are further traces of the inhabitants' activity: a circle of stones, a pile of lumber, and even the small, rare figure of a person who appears to be trimming some bushes. With no fence to demarcate the boundaries of the property, the yard dissolves into untamed brush on three sides.

In another view of Albuquerque (**fig. 3.3**), three lengths of fencing of different materials meet at the near-center of the photograph. To the left is a two-story adobe house whose front lawn is a mixture of a curving expanse of grass and an area of stone with a polka dot pattern of bushes. To the right, a row of evergreens blocks the view from that yard into the next. In the distance, other swaths of homes cut across the photograph, with individual houses rendered distinguishable by the contours of their jumbled roof lines. Near the top of the image, the homes blend in to one another to an extent that they form a horizontal band of gray. As indicated by the foreground, Deal – and by extension, the viewer – survey this terrain from an elevated remove, amid cacti, brush, and boulders.

In the interview tapes that Deal's student made, one of the Eastman House visitors describes these photographs as “moonscapes.”⁵⁰ Their statement is a succinct expression of the strangeness these photographs posed to viewers in 1975. Deal had made the terrain of Albuquerque so unfamiliar – so foreign, and airless – that this viewer likened it to the experience of gazing upon a kind of landscape literally not of this world. Given that the famed first manned mission to the moon by the United States had occurred only six years before, it makes sense that “moonscape” served as a quick, intuitive association for this visitor.⁵¹ In many of the photographs from the July 20, 1969 event (**fig. 3.4**), the moon's

⁵⁰ Transcript of unrecorded speech kept with tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

⁵¹ It should be noted that astronomical photography of the moon predated the moon landing,

dry, rocky surface often occupies at least the lower two-thirds of the picture plane, directing viewers' attention to the footprints left by the crew members of Apollo 11. In other words, the images place viewers into a position of scanning, and thus witnessing, the evidence that the crew really did come in contact with that terrain and leave their literal marks on it. The ground is also illuminated in harsh, clinical light underneath the sky, which appears as a black void due to the moon's lack of an atmosphere. Higher terrain in the distance of the pictures suggests the presence of hills or mountains, but without smaller elements in the landscape like trees to gauge scale, the topography remains disorienting. In looking at these moon landing photographs, a contemporary viewer may have even recalled the kinds of audio that accompanied the live televising of the event, if they were one of the millions who watched it: static and silence, punctuated by the beeps of NASA's radio communications from Houston and the reading aloud of numbers and calculations as they tracked the rocket's descent. These visuals, combined with the audio, contributed to the conventions that motion pictures had already cultivated for decades to achieve the very feel of futuristic "science" and "space exploration" in movies: tropes that connoted the abstract ideas of objectivity, research, and the unknown.

In comparing his photographs to that kind of picture, then, this individual visitor's interpretation helps to further elucidate the horizon of expectations for *New Topographics* at this moment. Visitors' points of reference were not comprised only of fine art photography and the broader landscape tradition in other media, but also contemporary imagery from popular culture that they encountered in venues like television, films, and

however, as Maurice Lowey and Pierre Puiseux published their book of large-format heliogravures, "Photographic Atlas of the Moon," in 1910. Beginning in 1894, they undertook a 14-year project to photograph the moon's surface from the Paris Observatory.

news reports. Post-1969, an image of rocky terrain of uncertain scale illuminated in bright, even light recalled the experience of looking at widely-circulated photographs of the moon. This was a point of reference for Deal, too; in his personal library, the photographer kept several large books of photographs of the moon published by NASA between 1968 and 1973.⁵² However, even though moonscapes could be classified as a “vernacular” image type, it should also be noted that such pictures inherited representational conventions from fine art sources. As Albert Boime has noted, a “magisterial gaze” marked much of 19th century landscape painting, especially that of the Hudson River School.⁵³ In adopting an elevated, yet not quite aerial point of view, expansive vistas by figures like Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran set up viewers to inhabit an ideological gaze in line with the doctrine of Manifest Destiny because they evoked the vantage points of a those with power or authority over the landscape: the land surveyor mapping a territory, a military strategist, or even God. They positioned the viewer into a stance of regarding the landscape in terms of its potential for future settlement or the use of its resources. A century later, NASA’s own photographs were couched in these conventions, encouraging the public to regard the visual products of space exploration in this same manner.

⁵² The author visited Deal’s library at his home in Providence, Rhode Island on June 11, 2018. Deal’s copies of these books have stamps that mark them as the former property of a technical library in Torrance, California, indicating that Deal bought them secondhand, perhaps when he lived in Riverside. Deal commented on moon photography in the context of a meditation on photographic formalism: “Another source, which I discovered later, is a book put out by NASA on the unmanned Ranger missions to the moon which had as their task the photographic mapping of the moon’s surface. The NASA scientists, in an attempt to force photography into clear, unclouded terms, termed the smallest recognizable object in a photograph the ‘figure of merit’ and the person looking at the photograph the ‘optimum filter.’” Undated lecture notes, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG229:13/2.

⁵³ See Albert Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting, ca. 1830-1865* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

Despite this complex and layered engagement with landscape conventions, however, some audience members did not even locate Deal's photographs in that genre. One visitor to *New Topographics*, a man in his 40s, commented: "I keep saying they're good for their purpose – what I like more is landscapes, seascapes, that sort of thing."⁵⁴ The student interviewer did not push him to elaborate on what he meant by the photographs' "purpose," but his word choice is striking because of how it implies an anticipated use for the photographs, a utilitarian context that may have determined their aesthetic. The man's judgment of the photographs as something other than "landscape" likely stemmed from two important formal decisions by Deal: his choice of the square format, and the exclusion of the horizon from his photographs.

The manner in which Deal works with the square format in these photographs renders their contents non-hierarchical. On the one hand, the square eliminates the horizontality that viewers instinctively expect of pictures in the landscape genre. The square has no gravitational pull. Combined with the elevated viewing position, which flattens the spatial relations on the ground and makes the plane of the land appear to tilt upwards, the effect is an even field of information.⁵⁵ All is rendered foreground, a pattern as opposed to a "pictorial view," as Deal distinguished.⁵⁶ A reviewer of Deal's work

⁵⁴ Transcript of tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

⁵⁵ On the notion of a pictorial "tilt" in period criticism, see Leo Steinberg, "The Flatbed Picture Plane," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). Addressing the work of Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and others, Steinberg identifies a shift from the vertical to horizontal in terms of how artists approach the picture plane. Elements like Rauschenberg's or Warhol's collaged mass imagery reorient the canvas from a "worldspace" to a "receptor surface," mimicking a table top or studio floor – something that Steinberg interprets as representing a corresponding shift in art's subject matter from "nature to culture."

⁵⁶ Hajicek 9. Deal elaborated: "I suppose that the elimination of familiar clues is a residue of my design background. I am interested in filling up the frame from edge to edge so it is dense with

termed this the photographer's "optical democracy," describing how the elements of his pictures "just hang there: up and down, and across," as if dangling on the flat plane of a "tapestry" rather than receding space.⁵⁷ The resulting evenness of information, elimination of hierarchy, and diminished receding perspective prevent the viewer's eye from coming to rest upon any particular place, suspending it in a perpetual state of scanning.

For example, in **fig. 3.5**, the viewer's eye may come to rest upon any number of objects and structures in the photograph: the boulders and cholla cacti in the foreground, the repeating pattern of vertical electrical poles that recede into the distance, or the odd inflated structure in the back yard of the nearby house, perhaps used for a recreational or sporting activity. But because of the angle from which Deal has photographed the scene, the viewer attends equally to the space that surrounds these elements, which includes unoccupied land of brush and juniper bushes, paved roads, and the recognizably smooth fairways of a golf course – the latter, especially, appearing dissonant with the rougher, parched terrain. The combination of these textures both natural and unnatural, which we can "read" more easily from this heightened vantage point than we could from the ground, appears random and chaotic.

The placement of the roads in Deal's photographs works to augment this quality of optical restlessness. Whether straight or curving, cutting across and in and out of the frame, the roads suggest visual pathways for the eye to follow. But in pursuing where

information. It is not a pictorial view that includes clouds, horizon, and landscape, but more relentlessly packed details of the landscapes and man's presence in it."

⁵⁷ James Hugunin, "Joe Deal's Optical Democracy," *Afterimage* Vol. 6, No. 7 (February 1979), 4-6. Hugunin took this phrase from the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset's text "On Point of View in the Arts," *The Partisan Review* Issue 8 (August 1949), 822-836.

they lead, the viewer is led out of the picture and back into it again to re-examine the things alongside the roads. Stuck in this loop, it is difficult for the viewer to get a stable sense of the “lay of the land,” so to speak. For example, in **fig. 3.6**, the frame is occupied nearly entirely by what appears to be undeveloped land. A road slices into the photograph from the distance on the right side of the picture and snakes to the left and towards the viewer, only to curve to the right again and exit the frame. As if to counterbalance the optical motion this elicits, Deal anchors the photograph nearly directly in the center with a large bush, placing its static shape in perpetual tension with the snaking road. Though it was not a type of imagery mentioned in any of the interview tapes, such photographs in the series recall surveillance imagery not only because of their heightened, wide perspective and lack of emphasis on any one part of the picture, but also how the intractability of the vantage point can only hint obliquely at action occurring outside the frame, in the manner of a stationary surveillance camera. Indeed, as Jenkins noted in his catalog introduction, Deal’s fellow photographer Frank Gohlke observed that in much of the work in *New Topographics*, “there is a sense of the frame having been laid on an existing scene without interpreting it very much.”⁵⁸

The move of centering the bush could be interpreted as slyly parodying the hackneyed convention of centering photographic subjects in snapshots. Such a “wink” to the viewer is not consistent across the body of work, however, and while he thought about irony and humor as they operated in Pop art, Deal was not seeking to communicate them in his photographs.⁵⁹ Importantly, viewers also did not read those qualities into his

⁵⁸ William Jenkins, “Introduction,” *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* (Rochester: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975), 5.

⁵⁹ Deal described Pop art irony as performing a “wink” to the viewer. See Deal, undated lecture notes for a talk at the Oakland Museum of California, on the occasion of the 1981 exhibition

pictures, as much as what can be summarized as a look of information. Viewing the landscape from above, rather than from the familiar, level vantage point of a passing car, positioned the Eastman House visitors to plumb these images for evidence of human decision. As one visitor commented, indicating that they were receptive to being positioned in this way: “Houses explain people, how they put them together, how clean they are, what kind of car, what kind of dog.”⁶⁰ The viewer enters into what can be characterized a *diagnostic* mode of looking: one that involves scanning the visual information, and subsequently, analytically drawing conclusions.

Such a stance is similar to that of viewing a topographical map, although Deal’s photographs frustrate that information-seeking “look” because the land fails to cohere. In scanning a topographical map, a viewer mentally translates a pattern of contour lines into landmarks and features in relief. Contour lines that are closer together indicate steeper terrain. Different patterns and colors employed by the mapmaker correspond to features like forests, plains, plateaus, and bodies of water. Mentally decoding the graphic gives a hiker a better sense of the challenge involved in traversing the landscape on the ground, or provides a builder the data from which to ascertain a viable construction site. It is somewhat ironic that the aforementioned visitor to *New Topographics* ascribed Deal’s photographs a “purpose,” then, since Deal’s photographs generally refuse legibility in

“Slices of Time: California Landscapes 1860-1880 and 1960-1980,” organized by Therese Heyman and Ted Hedgpeth. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:1. Furthermore, Deal once commented: “I think that a lot of the people looking at the photographs in *New Topographics* think that the photographs are satirical. It really depends on your attitudes to different building styles and is really more of a result of what the viewer brings to the work than what the photographer intended to put there,” Hajicek 17.

⁶⁰ Excerpt from tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

such terms. Viewing these homes, roads, and “landscaped” areas from the consistently elevated angle does not enable one to imagine what it would be like to traverse the terrain on the ground, but rather leads the viewer to recognize and scrutinize instances of randomness, arbitrariness, and even carelessness. Indeed, reviewer Robert Woolard characterized the meeting of the natural and built environment in Deal’s photographs as one of “collision,” violence and discord rather than harmony.⁶¹ The dark trail of water snaking from the garage and down the driveway in **fig. 3.7**, for example, does give an indication as to the slope of the land the house sits upon, but also gives pause by encouraging the viewer to reflect upon the wasteful behavior of using large amounts of water to maintain human constructions like lawns and dirty cars. Each image becomes a study in telling juxtapositions; traces of human aspiration in the form of construction sites or self-consciously placed rows of shrubs share space with piles of refuse and empty lots that suggest abandoned projects. By transforming the landscape into patterns that can be “read” for information about human behavior rather than the topography of the land itself, Deal’s photographs encourage the viewer to judge the ways in which people have intervened upon the landscape.

The implied physical position of the viewer plays an important role in this position of omniscience. Deal intimates the viewer as sharing his position separate from – and thus capable of judging – this built environment. It is not the familiar position of a roadside or passing car, or even a scenic overlook, because there is typically nothing human-made occupying the foreground. Instead, in each photograph from this body of work, the foreground is taken up by wild land, likely hillsides that were too steep for

⁶¹ Robert Woolard, “Man-Shaped Landscapes,” *Artweek* Vol. 7, No. 13 (March 27, 1976): 12.

easily constructing houses. From such height we become privy to spaces we typically do not access from the ground, such as the houses' roofs (**fig. 3.8**), which – dotted with pipes, vents, chimneys, and antennas – read as traces of the drive to manage life in this arid place, and make it more comfortable. One may think back to the likening of the photographs to “moonscapes”; these objects underscore the inhospitableness of the arid climate, similar to the hermetically sealed space suits that astronauts depend upon to breathe.

From Deal's near-aerial perspectives, the self-consciousness of the region's conventionalized landscaping also comes into relief. Deal once offered his definition of a “Southwestern landscape” as “when you just spread some rocks out and plant a few cacti, even though it takes gallons and gallons of water.”⁶² Here he expressed both an environmental consciousness and the uncanniness of viewing terrain that is intended to look wild, but whose moments of too-perfect symmetry betray its unnaturalness. In one of Deal's photographs, one of the house's inhabitants even supplements such a “landscape” with a decorative wagon wheel leaning up against the front of their house (**fig. 3.9**). Isolated for the viewer's prolonged scrutiny, the object registers as a relic of Manifest Destiny's endgame. The photograph frames the homeowner's decorative gesture as one born out of a perhaps unconscious desire to naturalize that idea, or imaginatively claim the identity of a pioneer.

...

The mode of scanning that Deal's photographs place the viewer into, I propose, is the source of their criticality. As the photographer himself stated: “I don't feel that I am

⁶² Lecture notes for a talk at the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol, UK on October 17, 1981. Draft and related materials in Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:2/55.

operating as a conscience of a larger public as much as a conscious eye.”⁶³ Yet for visitors to *New Topographics*, it could also be overwhelming and provoke perceptual fatigue. Deal’s awareness that the photographs could be taxing on both the gaze and the mind is supported by his statement that he did not include the horizon in his photographs because it would have served as a form of “relief.”⁶⁴ He did not intend for viewers to feel comfortable, let alone uplifted, looking at his photographs. The photographs therefore ran the risk of being off-putting to the extent that viewers did not complete the interpretive circuit the photographer intended.

While she interviewed visitors at the Eastman House, Deal’s student did not shy away from pointedly asking people what they thought of her teacher’s work, and some responded with criticism or frustration: “It’s just the same picture over and over again,” a student from the Rochester Institute of Technology lamented. Another viewer complained: “It doesn’t seem to have a message...It doesn’t seem to make a statement one way or the other.”⁶⁵ Several years before *New Topographics*, Roland Barthes had written an essay arguing that the photograph constituted a “message without a code.”⁶⁶ As if expressing this idea in the inverse, for some viewers, Deal’s photographs remained ciphers – codes without discernable messages.

Deal exhibited this work at LIGHT Gallery in New York in the same year as *New Topographics*. Guest books from that exhibition, as well as another in early 1978 where

⁶³ Hajicek 16

⁶⁴ Lecture notes for a talk at the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol, UK on October 17, 1981. Draft and related materials in Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:2/55.

⁶⁵ Tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

⁶⁶ See Roland Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” in Alan Trachtenberg, ed. *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven: Leete’s Island Books, 1980).

his work was exhibited with prints by Harry Callahan, preserve a range of responses similar to the ones recorded in Rochester.⁶⁷ A handful of viewers could not resist making an easy pun from the photographer's name that implied that they did not appreciate the work: "Big deal." Perhaps most striking are the responses that indicate ambivalence: "I get nostalgic feelings looking at these spaces and places that I now intellectually reject," a visitor from Florida wrote.⁶⁸ Equally remarkable are comments where viewers already anticipate the work's historical value. "It's good to see it now instead of just 50 years from now," one visitor surmised, noting that she enjoyed scrutinizing the varied types of terrain in Deal's images, although it made her want to "change my mind about wanting to move west."⁶⁹ This last statement echoed another particularly candid conclusion from Rochester during *New Topographics*: "Don't move to Albuquerque, New Mexico, man."⁷⁰

Many of the responses at LIGHT are from what sound like fellow photographers, or at least viewers who were familiar with the history of the medium, which is not surprising given the gallery's focus on contemporary photography. "f.64?" one visitor suggested, drawing a comparison of Deal's photographs to the ultra-sharp gelatin silver

⁶⁷ Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:2/2. There are two guest books from LIGHT: one from December 9, 1975 to January 10, 1976, and one from March 29-April 22, 1978.

⁶⁸ Ibid, guest book from 1975. I received a similar response in person from an audience member after presenting material from this chapter at a conference. I presented a paper comparing Robert Adams and Joe Deal's work from *New Topographics* at the annual Southwest Art History Conference in Taos, New Mexico in October 2016. One of my fellow presenters, Nathan K. Rees, approached me afterward to express how he responded ambivalently to Robert Adams's Denver photographs. While he perceived the melancholy with which Adams rendered the tract homes, he had also grown up in the area and thus associated the photographs' subject matter with "home."

⁶⁹ Ibid, 1978 guest book.

⁷⁰ Tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

prints of modernist West Coast predecessors.⁷¹ “A long way from P.H. Emerson!” exclaimed another, likely in response to how Deal’s uniform sharpness offered an utter antithesis to Emerson’s landscapes’ selective focus.⁷² But several, while admiring Deal’s print craft, nevertheless remained baffled by his subject matter: “Nice print quality, but not much else,” an anonymous viewer scribbled in the 1975 guest book. A particularly caustic commenter even confused Deal’s deliberate eschewal of contrast for poor print quality: “I really don’t know what a supposedly excellent gallery like LIGHT is doing showing your work – it’s boring, tedious, and poorly printed,” she began. “Your photographs are flat, poorly planned, have nothing to say. If this work is part of the future of photography, God help the future.”⁷³ In other words, a familiarity with photography did not guarantee a viewer’s appreciation. Even Deal’s fellow photographer Joel Meyerowitz, who visited the exhibition that yielded the 1978 guest book, admitted that it had taken him some time to appreciate what Deal was doing: “Dear Joe, I enjoyed this much more than I have (I must admit) in the past. It feels like you’re having a good time – open, playful, observant but relaxed. I stood with you at that vantage point.”⁷⁴

There are comments regarding the photographs’ lack of apparent judgment, as one visitor wrote: “It’s too bad you left out your moral judgments, etc. – especially your aesthetic – technically you’re good, but the image lacks meaning... the square format heightens my boredom.”⁷⁵ Another visitor noted this same quality, but with more of a

⁷¹ 1975 LIGHT Gallery guestbook, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:2/2.

⁷² 1978 guest book, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:2/2.

⁷³ Ibid, 1978 guest book.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 1978 guest book. Given that this comment came from 1978, it is possible that Meyerowitz was referencing having a hard time appreciating Deal’s work in *New Topographics* in 1975.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 1975 guest book. This visitor signed her name Linda McConnell.

positive response, tying it to Deal's process and attitude towards his subject matter:

"Pretty impressive – I liked the subject – though it's banal I didn't notice any sarcasm.

It's hard to photograph Middle Am.[erican] culture without coming across with a blatant attitude – yet I don't read the prints formally only," they concluded, perhaps alluding to their perception of socioeconomic or environmental commentary in the photographs.⁷⁶

Indeed, visitors who interpreted the photographs as critical identified the subject of that critique as alternating between the demise of the natural landscape and the quality of life in the Albuquerque suburbs. A visitor from Southern California commented that he perceived that Deal's interest lay in "the preservation of nature, juxtaposed with suburbia."⁷⁷ A visitor who sounds as if he could be from Britain (given his word choice) wrote: "Very compelling glimpse at... America. All those wide open spaces and all those poor saps crowded into these horrid tracts; piled up on top of one another and fenced-in ad nauseum..."⁷⁸ In other words, these viewers perceived the photographs' message as concerning not only the land that the real estate had taken over, but also what it was like to live in these sprawling, yet isolating developments. The lack of people in Deal's photographs underscored the latter. "Am puzzled and pleased by the no-people-ness. Where did you hide them? The 'effect' was great," a critic from the *Village Voice* complimented in the 1978 guestbook.⁷⁹ A.D. Coleman had presaged this critic's comment in 1973 when he likened Deal's photographs to "stage sets"; yet for Coleman, this diminished the work: "...[Deal] appears unable to create any event to transpire within his *mise-en-scene*." Neglecting to read the details in Deal's photographs as indicative of

⁷⁶ Ibid, 1978 guest book.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 1975 guest book.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 1978 guest book.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 1978 guest book. The critic was April Kirply [sp?].

potential narratives he could complete in his mind, for Coleman, Deal's photographs remained "slightly ominous pregnant pauses."⁸⁰ Coleman had already been familiar with Deal's work and regarded it with interest, but remained unconvinced of its originality, having written in the wake of the 1972 show *Summer Light* at the gallery: "Joe Deal's cold, aloof building facades... owe a considerable debt to Lewis Baltz but are affecting nonetheless."⁸¹

It is important to note that visitors to LIGHT were likely by default interested in "contemporary" photography – in tune with how LIGHT marketed itself⁸² – whereas the public and critics alike associated the Eastman House with more of a historical focus, failing to take note of some of the more groundbreaking exhibitions occurring in Rochester relating to contemporary photography.⁸³ That some were seeking out more romantic or conventional landscape photography during their December visit is one conclusion that can be drawn by this aforementioned comment on the interview tapes: "We can go upstairs and see the *art* – that is timeless. These photographs are obviously for *today*." Visitors read *New Topographics* and its emphasis upon the postwar built environment as "contemporary": consonant with their own time, significant to the

⁸⁰ A.D. Coleman, "Using Many Images to Make One Photograph," *The New York Times*, October 21, 1973, 32.

⁸¹ A.D. Coleman, "A Smattering of Visions," *Village Voice*, August 17, 1972, 26. *Summer Light* was held from June 27 – August 18, 1972.

⁸² The word "contemporary" was applied to describe LIGHT as early as March 1972, in Natalie Rosenheck, "Light Gallery Opens: Room at the Top?" *Popular Photography*, Vol. 70, No. 3 (March 1972), 106, 109. Regarding the more general use of the word as applied to photography, a Virginia-based periodical called *Contemporary Photographer* was also in circulation from May 1960 to Fall 1971.

⁸³ William Jenkins says: "It appears that one of the reasons the art critics did not respond to the press releases was because, at the time, George Eastman House was not viewed by the general art world to be at the cutting edge of contemporary photography. Critics from New York, Washington, etc. were unwilling to travel to Rochester. We used to do these spectacular things that nobody paid attention to." Quoted in Gilbert.

present. On the one hand, this was a source of interpretive difficulty; it was challenging to view the photographs' subject matter with distance, since they pictured the built environment that viewers encountered daily, especially if they lived in the West. It is also a reason why is productive to consider the other contemporaneous art that may have influenced their perception of the exhibition.

...

Seriality – as both a mode of working or structuring one's practice, and a physical layout strategy – was important for the reception of Deal's photographs. On that weekend in 1975, Bess Abel encountered an undergraduate student from the Rochester Institute of Technology who was visiting *New Topographics* for the fifth time: "I like the way he sees," the student began, offering his perspective on Deal's work. But he continued: "You don't need that same site... I think he said it in five pictures and ran it through the washing machine twenty-one times." The mental image of photographs in a washing machine is a humorous illustration of how, for this student at least, all of the sites in Deal's photographs appeared more or less the same. The student felt no need to scrutinize them further once he had grasped "it" – presumably, what he perceived as the purpose, argument, or concept of Deal's series – from just a handful of pictures. Another visitor described Deal's work as "a system of exploring something."⁸⁴

Indeed, though Deal's prints each pictured different sites and solicited longer looking for more sympathetic viewers, the way the photographer had produced the body of work by working under a consistent predetermined set of constraints resonates with the approach of his conceptual artist contemporaries, including Ed Ruscha. A particularly

⁸⁴ The interviewer had asked this viewer to comment both on Deal's and Nixon's work, which shared a corner of the gallery space.

influential exhibition catalog in this respect was *Serial Imagery*, curated by John Coplans in 1968 for the Pasadena Museum of Art.⁸⁵ “The essay was influential in defining seriality as a genre of its own,” Deal reflected decades later, “and I think fed into the work of many photographers (certainly mine) who had not considered their work in this context before.”⁸⁶ Tracing seriality from Monet to Warhol, the exhibition proposed a historical lineage for Deal’s (and Ruscha’s) mode of working. For Coplans, to work in series did not qualify one’s work as serial; rather, “Seriality is identified by a particular inter-relationship, rigorously consistent, of structure and syntax,” he wrote, a “type of repeated form or structure shared equally by each work in a group of related works made by one artist.”⁸⁷ Such work was “concerned not with the notion of masterpiece, but of process.”⁸⁸ And encountering images that all appeared to possess equal weight as parts of a whole mandated a new way of making sense – a look that resisted the desire to locate a beginning and an end. “The basic structure of Serial imagery, then, can be likened to a pack of cards in which every card is the Ace of Spades.”⁸⁹

It is striking to note that the statement that Deal contributed to Jenkins’s catalog introduction is drier than the photographer’s later commentary on this body of work. When asked to connect his contribution to the larger theme of the exhibition, in June 1975 he began not with the social and environmental significance of the work – which he would emphasize more in later interviews, presentations, and grant applications – but

⁸⁵ John Coplans, *Serial Imagery* (Pasadena: Pasadena Museum of Art and The New York Graphic Society, 1968).

⁸⁶ E-mail from Joe Deal to Britt Salvesen, August 23, 2008. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:1/104.

⁸⁷ Coplans 10-11

⁸⁸ Coplans 17

⁸⁹ Coplans 12

rather by describing the photographs as the cumulative result of a self-imposed task:

In making these photographs I attempted to make a series of images in which one image is equal in weight or appearance to another. Many of the conscious decisions made while the series was evolving had to do with denying the uniqueness in subject matter or in one exposure as opposed to another in the belief that the most extraordinary images might be the most prosaic, with a minimum of interference (i.e. personal preference, moral judgment) by the photographer. An early decision was that a formal undifferentiated approach be used 'as a plate on which to serve up the subject matter,' so as to minimize the formal decisions which recur every time an exposure is made. The approach chosen accommodated my desire for less personal intrusion and greater uniformity. 1) By being at a greater distance from my subject matter it became difficult to significantly alter the angle of view or organization of the image by a step or two in any direction; 2) the point of view and distance from the subject allowed an acceptance by the lens of a greater amount of contextual information without allowing too great a dominance of one object over another. The elimination of the vagaries of sky and horizon is partly an attempt to fill the frame and create a self-contained, undifferentiated space, and is also the elimination of a familiar clue to scale and orientation, and to that extent indicates the degree of ground-directedness of these photographs. Beyond that they are pure subject matter.⁹⁰

Here, Deal frames his inquiry as a conceptual one, an examination of the relinquishing of authorial agency. He is interested in what happens when he chooses a vantage point that imposes physical limitations upon his movement to the extent that it undermines his compositional agency. Deal could choose how high he climbed one of the foothills, and maintained "I definitely look through the ground glass and I am making decisions all the time,"⁹¹ but given the far distance from his subject matter, shifting to a few feet to the left or right would not dramatically alter the contents of any individual frame. He was

⁹⁰ Deal's statement about *New Topographics*, quoted in William Jenkins, "Introduction," *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* (Rochester: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975), 6-7.

⁹¹ Joe Deal: *New Topographics*, an interview conducted with Deal at ASU on February 1, 1977, edited by James Hajicek, *Northlight* No. 4 (May 1977), 8. Deal elaborated: "I am trying to set up – I hesitate to use the word – but it is a kind of system which will facilitate a direct response to a subject which solves those agonizing formal decisions that are required when each exposure is approached as a new experience. That also prevents the kind of personal intrusion whether it be formal or judgmental... but not so much that it is like a machine doing it." 9

interested in exploring how these self-imposed, consistent parameters and restrictions would deliver photographs that looked a particular way – or put differently, that rendered and revealed aspects of the landscape in a particular way. Underscoring the conceptual basis of his procedure, he reflected: “I was forced to accept what I had found.”⁹²

Deal’s process could even be described in reverse as a series of instructions similar to those of a Sol LeWitt wall drawing. It might read something like this: “The executor of the art work climbs a foothill to the height that it is possible to view the built environment on the ground in a topographical, nearly aerial manner. The executor chooses a direction in which to photograph and tilts a tripod-mounted camera downward upon it such that the sky is no longer visible in the viewfinder. Setting the lens to an aperture of at least f.11, the executor makes an exposure.”⁹³ Similarly, a viewer of Ed Ruscha’s photographic books would likely be able to glean these parameters if prompted to translate what they were looking at into the instructions that yielded the objects: “photograph apartments, pools, and parking lots in square format.”

Yet despite Deal’s insistence that he is “denying the uniqueness in subject matter” and attempting to make images that are “equal in... appearance” to one another, his individual prints solicit longer looking and remain more individualized than Ruscha’s projects. In books of Ruscha’s like *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965) or *Real Estate Opportunities* (1970), the pictures are interchangeable, subservient to an idea. Posturing

⁹² Lecture notes for a talk at the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol, UK on October 17, 1981. Draft and related materials in Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:2/55.

⁹³ Curiously, Gene Thornton had described a similar hypothetical scenario in reviewing Robert Adams and Emmet Gowin when they were exhibited together at the Museum of Modern Art in 1972: “Their approach is so neutral and unemphatic that at times I felt I was looking at pictures made without any human direction by mere machines programmed to go off at set intervals and photograph whatever happened to be in front of them.” Gene Thornton, “Lifeless – With or Without People,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1972, D31.

as an amateur snapshooter, Ruscha centered the buildings in the frames and photographed them from inconsistent angles, which has the effect of the viewer potentially drawing the conclusion that Ruscha did not particularly care about his vantage point; what appears to matter is that Ruscha obtained the picture of an apartment, not the deliberations of how he composed it. It is difficult to imagine Ruscha making multiple exposures of the same apartment and choosing the “best” image; the canted angles suggest that Ruscha made single exposures of each structure quickly, while walking or driving by. The landscape in Ruscha’s photographs figures as extraneous information, both visually and textually, since Ruscha directs the viewer’s attention with the very titles and captions of his books. Without being aware of Ruscha’s title *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, for example, it is possible that a viewer would pay more attention to the concrete, grass, and landscaping surrounding the buildings. But directed thus by the text, the viewer glances over these surfaces quickly, preoccupied instead with the architecture and the typography of the complexes’ kitschy signage.

In Deal’s photographs, by contrast, by virtue of his elevated vantage point and elimination of the horizon line, the viewer is compelled to attend to the space around the suburban Albuquerque houses, the pavement and brush – and this takes time. By dispersing a density of visual information across the entirety of the square and rendering everything in even sharpness, Deal aims to solicit the viewer’s attention for a longer span of time than Ruscha. Despite being square in shape, Ruscha’s photographs still reinforce the motion of the viewer’s attention across a horizontal axis, and are comparatively diluted in terms of their density of information – which holds true in their published book form as well, as their rendering in halftone pales in comparison to fine gelatin silver print

grain. Ruscha is not interested in prolonged looking, whereas that is Deal's stock and trade. *Marvel at the detail this photograph has registered*, Deal's images seem to say, *and look at how much it suggests about people and their decisions*.

Deal's photographs also intimate more durational scanning because his subject matter varies, even though his statement downplays this circumstance. The photographs may be "equal in... weight" in terms of how they disperse viewers' attention, but are not so in appearance, upon close examination. The photographs do not read as permutations on the same "type" of structure in the manner of Ruscha's apartment buildings or Bernd and Hilla Becher's photographs in *New Topographics*. They are the products of a similarly rigid, nearly conceptually oriented process, but one which yields graphic arrangements that are highly individualized. Deal maintained that with the Albuquerque photographs, "I deliberately abandoned the singular image notion – that each new exposure was a brand new experience, independent of others..."⁹⁴ He contended that his photographs gained their meaning *en masse*. Yet it is also precisely the consistency of the square frame that compels the ideal viewer to scrutinize the variation in individual images. The RIT student with the "washing machine" comment could perceive that Deal's photographs were the result of such a quasi-conceptual process, but his negative interpretation of what he perceived as their sameness prevented him from further studying their detail.

The shift at the end of Deal's statement to "pure subject matter" is therefore initially puzzling, because what precedes it is dominated by formal terms: *weight*, *uniformity*, *frame*, *space*, *scale*. How can there be such a thing as "pure subject matter,"

⁹⁴ Joe Deal, Letter to Victor Schrager of LIGHT Gallery, May 20, 1976. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG229:4/88

when Deal has just described at length the amount of agency and forethought he actually has in “designing” his photographs, so to speak, in the form of the parameters he imposes? However, this is not so contradictory if we return to the idea of how style can function rhetorically.⁹⁵ In order to position his viewers to perceive the disjunctions in the built landscape he was photographing, Deal reasoned, he would minimize his own editorializing. He decided to pursue this by embracing a quasi-conceptual approach that, in writing, may have sounded distanced from socioeconomic meaning, but was in service of revealing the significance of “utility, geometry, and waste.”⁹⁶ As he later reflected: “The method of working grew out of a regard for the nature of the particular subject matter and was not just an esthetic posture.” By imposing compositional “ground rules,” as Deal cleverly termed them, he could “relentlessly showcase the subject matter.”⁹⁷

...

Deal’s collected notes in his archive indicate that the photographer was highly invested in the philosophical and theoretical dimensions of authorship. He sought out texts that would help him make sense of what comprised a style of detachment, and his own endeavor to make photographs that mimicked “how the lens sees.”⁹⁸ Such ideas appealed to his fellow *New Topographics* photographers as well; Frank Gohlke shared

⁹⁵ See Chapter 1’s discussion related to Irene J. Winter, “The Affective Properties of Style: An Inquiry into Analytical Process and the Inscription of Meaning in Art History,” in *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, eds. Caroline Jones and Peter Galison (London: Routledge, 1998), 55-77.

⁹⁶ Deal named these subjects in describing the concerns of his series *Subdividing the Inland Basin*. See his draft of a proposal for a Howard Foundation Fellowship, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG229:1/10. The application is undated, but Deal states within it that the series it concerns has been in development since 1983, and he intends to complete it by 1988, suggesting that the draft dates to the mid-1980s.

⁹⁷ Joe Deal, Letter to Victor Schrager of LIGHT Gallery, May 20, 1976. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG229:4/88

⁹⁸ Hajicek 11

the following passage by Jorge Luis Borges with Jenkins, who decided to use as a preface to his introduction essay for the catalog:

...I should try to tell, in a straightforward way, plain stories, so that I will try to get away from mazes, from mirrors, from daggers, from tigers, because all of those things now grow a bit of a bore to me. So that I will try to write a book, a book so good that nobody will think I have written it. I would write a book – I won't say in somebody else's style – but in the style of *anybody* else.⁹⁹

This passage provided a literary analogue for the photographic style they sought to identify in the exhibition: a deliberate eschewal of expressivity so as to craft the appearance of anonymity.¹⁰⁰

However, the photographers in *New Topographics* did not want to make photographs that could have been made by “anybody.” Such a position was closer to Ruscha's posture. Rather, they were interested in anonymity as a philosophical and stylistic problem (as was Ruscha), and how that concept might operate within landscape photography. A truthful landscape photograph in 1975, Deal and his fellow *New Topographics* photographers believed, should not editorialize in the manner of romanticism because such an approach distanced the viewer from the truth. Rather, the photographer must face the American landscape unsentimentally, and intimate the viewer as sharing that position. This is most likely what Deal meant by saying that “beyond” his self-imposed formal directives, his photographs were “pure subject matter”: he aspired to a sharp and dry-eyed recording of the landscape that would allow the truth of its

⁹⁹ Jorge Luis Borges, “A Post-Lecture Discussion of His Own Writing,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (June 1975), 710. As quoted in William Jenkins, “Introduction,” *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* (Rochester: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975), 5.

¹⁰⁰ It is worth noting that in this same issue of *Critical Inquiry*, Deal and Jenkins would have seen an article contributed by Nelson Goodman entitled “The Status of Style,” pp. 799-811. There, the philosopher expanded on his prior work on literary style by shifting attention to the pictorial.

transformation and degradation at the hands of developers, contractors, and homeowners to come forth. People have “trivialized the landscape” with poor planning and architecture, he stated in 1983 while speaking about his series *The Fault Zone*, which he began three years after *New Topographics* in 1978 and published as a portfolio in 1981. “We should care more for the land around us.”¹⁰¹ Lewis Baltz elaborated on how Deal’s approach rendered that message implicit to the viewer: “I don’t think he’s trying to *show* us something... He’s trying to let the world state its own case.”¹⁰²

What is curious about this idea of the photographer’s self-effacement is its quasi-modernist faith in the medium’s capacity to record the world, which restores some credence to Jenkins’s provisional thesis about the exhibition exploring “what it means to make a documentary photograph.”¹⁰³ Indeed, Deal wrote several years after *New Topographics*:

Until more recently, I have attempted to fully utilize the lens’s descriptive function and impartiality in recording specific locations in order to create a series of photographs which detail, in almost undifferentiated inventory, the marks and objects placed on the landscape in these locations. My interest in the man-altered landscape is a fascination with how these marks or objects alter the space in which they exist, particularly as made evident in the photograph, and also in how they might begin to suggest something about human value systems.¹⁰⁴

It was by minimizing his own expressive interference in the picture, Deal believed, that he maximized the camera’s recording capacity. Cultivating the lens’s “impartiality” to the fullest extent that he could would allow the landscape to reveal itself to the viewer.

The writings of Hollis Frampton informed Deal’s interest in the putative

¹⁰¹ “New Look Landscapes from Guggenheim Photographer,” *The Arts*, Sunday, July 31, 1983, p. C2; C8.

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ Jenkins 7

¹⁰⁴ Joe Deal, draft of fellowship proposal for Howard Foundation Fellowship, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG229:1/no folder number.

objectivity of the camera lens and its “non-selective” nature. A lecture Deal gave quoted Frampton: “The camera deals, in some way or other, with every particle of information present in its field of view; it is wholly indiscriminate.” From Frampton’s words, Deal concluded: “... you have to interfere with photography’s normal process to make it reveal something other than the banal facts in front of the lens.”¹⁰⁵ The photograph “leaves no trace of the hand of the photographer,” Deal wrote; its status is “knowledge without a knower.”¹⁰⁶

Another thinker Deal turned to in cultivating this philosophy was Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, whose writings gave Deal the idea of cataloging landscapes as a series of nouns rather than adjectives, or chains of words rather than metaphors. A reviewer of Deal’s work, James Hugunin, made the same observation when he wrote that in contrast to a narrative with adjectives, the Southwestern landscape “is merely cataloged by Deal into a visual equivalent of a list or matrix of nouns... tree, grass, home, street... water, brush, cacti, street... Borrowing from linguists, we can say that Deal’s organization of picture elements is an arrangement at the horizontal level of word chains, while [Ansel] Adams’s work stresses the vertical dimension of metaphor.”¹⁰⁷ Continuing the literary connection, Hugunin also invoked the French author Alain Robbe-Grillet in discussing the connotation of the term “topographics” with surface. For Hugunin, Robbe-Grillet may as well have been talking about Deal’s

¹⁰⁵ Undated lecture notes for a presentation on the history of photography, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG:229:1/no folder number.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Hugunin 5. On this distinction between metaphor versus metonymy, see also Angela Miller, “Home and Homeless in Art Between the Wars,” in John Davis, Jennifer A. Greenhill, and Jason D. LaFountain, eds., *A Companion to American Art* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 246-263.

photographs rather than tromp-l'oeil painting in the following passage: "It is, quite as much, an excessive transparency. Since there is never anything beyond the thing described, that is, since no supernature is hidden in it, no symbolism... the eye is forced to rest on the very surface of things."¹⁰⁸ Hugunin maintains that this is why a reading of Deal's photographs as satire is inaccurate; the photographs' "thereness," as he terms what he takes as their stylistic transparency, is cultivated in service of presenting precisely what is there, rather than through the filter of Deal's attitude or ideas about what is there.

The idea of a passive, non-hierarchical recording of subject matter in the vein of an inventory or catalog also comes across in a passage of Ortega's that Deal preserved in his files, where Ortega describes the lack of sharpness in profiles when looking at things at a distance, which he termed "distant vision":

Instead of fixing a proximate object, let the eye, passive but free, prolong its line of vision to the limit of the visual field. What do we find then? The structure of our hierarchized elements disappears. The ocular field is homogenous; we do not see one thing clearly and the rest confusedly, for all are submerged in an optical democracy.¹⁰⁹

Finally, as he continued to write applications for fellowships in the early 1980s, Deal was reading texts by figures from the emergent discipline of cultural landscape studies, such as John Brinckerhoff Jackson, David Lowenthal, and D. W. Meinig. The field sat at the nexus of a number of other disciplines, such as architecture, planning, environmental studies, and American studies, and especially human geography, out of which it predominantly grew.¹¹⁰ Following the philosophy of Jackson and these other

¹⁰⁸ Alain Robbe-Grillet, in *Notes for a New Novel*, quoted in Hugunin 5.

¹⁰⁹ José Ortega y Gasset, "On Point of View in the Arts," *The Partisan Review*, Issue 8 (August 1949), 822-836. Also printed in *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 111. Deal's clippings and passages of Ortega's are in his archive, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG:229:13/1.

¹¹⁰ The field of Human Geography can be traced to the work of geographer Carl O. Sauer at the

thinkers, Deal defined the connecting thread of his previous work to date as “a continuing belief that landscape and culture should not be viewed separately.”¹¹¹ He kept copies of passages from these figures’ writings in his files, among them the following 1953 excerpt by Jackson:

All this means simply one thing: a new human landscape is beginning to emerge in America. It is even now being created by the same combination of forces that created the old one: economic necessity, technological evolution, change in social outlook and in our outlook on nature. Like the landscape of the present, this new one will in time produce its own symbols and its own beauty... That landscape, however, is not yet here. In the early dawn where we are we can perhaps discern its rough outlines, but we cannot have any real feeling for it. We cannot possibly love the new, and we have ceased to love the old. The only fraction of the earth for which an American can still feel the traditional kinship is that patch of trees and grass and hedge he calls his yard. Each one is a peak of a sinking world, and all of them grow smaller and fewer as the sea rises around them.¹¹²

To a scholar familiar with Deal’s oeuvre, it is readily apparent why the ideas Jackson raises here were generative for the photographer. The determinants Jackson names as shaping the built landscape are among the factors Deal explored by photographing suburbia. Jackson’s observation about the compulsion to maintain yards, especially, resonates with Deal’s aims in photographing the Albuquerque homes from the height of the foothills, where the private spaces of fenced-in back yards became visible, laying bare their inhabitants’ aspirations.

University of California-Berkeley in the 1920s. Sauer galvanized the development of UC Berkeley’s geography school. Key texts of his include his 1925 paper “The Morphology of Landscape,” and his 1927 essay “Recent Developments in Cultural Geography,” which examined the issue of what is now termed the “built environment.” At the time, Sauer referred to it as “the forms superimposed on the physical landscape.” Sauer departed from prior “environmental determinist” methods of geography and instead directed attention to human agency and the cultural history and phenomenology of landscape.

¹¹¹ Joe Deal, draft of fellowship proposal for Howard Foundation Fellowship, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG229:1.

¹¹² J.B. Jackson, “Ghosts at the Door,” reprinted in Jackson, *Landscape in Sight: Looking at America*, edited by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 107-117. Initially published as “Ghost at the Door,” *Landscape* Vol. 1, No. 2 (Autumn 1953), 3-9. Transcription of paragraph in Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG229:13/1.

Indeed, Deal's proclivity for spaces like yards and dedication to showing viewers a comprehensive "built environment" recalls a passage from David Lowenthal's canonical essay "Not Every Prospect Pleases," which the photographer also preserved in his files.¹¹³ There, Lowenthal writes: "Appearances lead people in all cultures and eras to assume that some things are 'man-made,' others natural, when the truth would reveal the opposite, or more likely an intermingling of agencies." Deal agreed with Lowenthal that the things alongside of the highway, the banal and ordinary, were not only worth examining, but served as essential material for examining contemporary life.

Despite the influence these thinkers had on Deal, however, it is necessary to distinguish between the intellectual context and sources that informed the photographer's point of view and the actual reactions his photographs elicited in 1975 – which, as evidenced by the tape-recorded responses of the Eastman House visitors, ranged from bafflement to criticism, but almost never acceptance. J.B. Jackson explicitly advocated a *non-judgmental* examination of the built environment in service of gaining a better understanding of it. The absence of judgment was a theoretical and stylistic preoccupation of Deal's, and he worked to achieve that quality in his photographs from his position as their maker. Yet it is not consistently the position that he places his viewers into; rather, as I have argued here, the way Deal vacates his images of conventional signs of photographic expressivity and landscape orientation works to underscore the incoherence of suburban Albuquerque, and the disjunction between the built developments and the natural landscape of the foothills.

¹¹³ See David Lowenthal, "Not Every Prospect Pleases," in *Changing Rural Landscapes*, ed. Ervin H. Zube and Margaret J. Zube (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), 129-139.

Nevertheless, this range of intellectual sources points to broader cultural developments in the midst of which *New Topographics* occurred, and helps to account for how the photographer's own reading of this work continued to evolve. In 1983, Deal wrote in a fellowship application:

I find myself less interested in discussing theory or the formal strategies with which I work. I can no longer perceive myself as a detached observer, though I know that in some respects these photographs are more "documentary" than my earlier work. I think the moment I accepted the landscape as metaphor – as I did with *The Fault Zone* – my role as a photographer and my true subject changed. I see myself in the people in these photographs; and [I see] the landscape, rather than being a flat surface to be mapped, as contoured and malleable – in meaning and in fact.

The most important connection to all of my previous work, however, is a continuing belief that landscape and culture should not be viewed separately. That if, instead of seeing landscape as beginning where culture ends, we see the two as interactive and interdependent, we will achieve a better understanding of who and where we are.¹¹⁴

The conceptual strategies Deal had mobilized in his Albuquerque photographs were geared towards critical understanding, eventually leading the photographer to aspire to use his role as a photographer to serve a "witness to [his] own time."¹¹⁵

Primary Structures: Lewis Baltz's Industrial Parks

*"Industrial Park: That's a contradictory term and I thought it was insidious."*¹¹⁶
-Lewis Baltz

Reflecting in 2006 upon Lewis Baltz's practice as it fit into *New Topographics*,

¹¹⁴ Joe Deal, fellowship proposal for Howard Foundation Fellowship, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG229:1.

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¹¹⁶ Baltz, quoted in Annie Gilbert, "New Topographics: the Trajectory from Creative Intention to Critical Response," unpublished essay, 1997. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG229:1/19.

William Jenkins commented: “In 1975 what I knew about minimalism was: Donald Judd makes boxes, and Ad Reinhardt paints black canvases, but... I wasn’t part of that theorizing at all, I was in Rochester and did photography. But now I see why people ask those questions about minimalism. It *was* there. It was in the air. If there was anybody interested in minimalism in the show, it was Baltz... he was the California guy.”¹¹⁷

The twenty prints that Lewis Baltz contributed to *New Topographics* in 1975 came from a series he had completed the year before called *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California*. Baltz exhibited the work at the Castelli Gallery in New York (**fig. 3.10**) – in fact, concurrently with *New Topographics* – and published it as an eponymous book in 1974.¹¹⁸ The book’s captions are in both German and English, as Baltz wanted to court both American and German audiences.¹¹⁹ Joe Deal and Tom Barrow both helped Baltz sequence the photographs for the publication. Writing to Deal in spring 1975 in anticipation of *New Topographics*, which he believed was “shaping up into an exhibition of great strength,” Baltz also reflected upon that endeavor: “Yes, the sequencing is excellent. For which I owe you and Tom. It looks almost random, except, of course, had

¹¹⁷ Bill Jenkins interviewed by Britt Salvesen, June 30, 2006. Center for Creative Photography, Oral History Collection, VOP06:018.

¹¹⁸ See Lewis Baltz, *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California* (New York: Leo Castelli/Castelli Graphics; Rochester and New York: Distributed by Light Impressions, 1974). Castelli Graphics represented Baltz beginning in 1971. The exhibition of *New Industrial Parks* was held from November 29 – December 20, 1975 at the main Leo Castelli Gallery (thus overlapping some with *New Topographics* in Rochester), just after the gallery’s fall exhibitions of work by Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Baltz’s photographs were installed in a double horizontal row along the gallery’s walls, placed quite close together so that they appeared almost akin to a film strip. See installation views in exhibition file, Leo Castelli Gallery records, circa 1880-2000, bulk 1957-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Regarding Baltz’s relationship with the gallery: Leo Castelli first purchased Baltz’s work in May 1971, which Baltz describes in a letter to Hal Glicksman from May 29, 1971. See Hal Glicksman Papers, Getty Research Institute, 2009.M.5, Box 1, folder 8. Subsequently, Baltz’s first show at Castelli Graphics was *The Tract Houses*, on view from December 18, 1971 – January 15, 1972, installed at the same time as a selection of work by Richard Hamilton.

¹¹⁹ Balaschak 33

it been random, grouping would have occurred which would look narrative.”¹²⁰

Baltz’s statement points to how strong our impulse is to see narratives in groups of images, and indicates how hard the trio worked to deliberately sequence the photographs to short-circuit the viewer’s ability to do so.¹²¹ Indeed, of all the photographs in *New Topographics*, it is Baltz’s that most strongly resist the projection of narrative meaning. They instead meet the viewer with a blunt indifference that mimics the manner of address of minimalist sculpture. By placing the viewer into static, relentless, confrontation with the industrial parks’ featureless facades, and through an aesthetic of slick formal elegance, Baltz posits the buildings as sinister symptoms of larger societal ills.

Others have compared Baltz’s work to minimalism largely because of its reduced formal vocabulary and serial presentation. Curator Colin Westerbeck, for example, has argued that Baltz “made Minimalism more concrete, literally.”¹²² In his social history of photography textbook, Robert Hirsch glosses Baltz’s work as “a dispassionate, minimalist social critique.”¹²³ And in 2010, curator Matthew Witkovsky anchored an exhibition of Baltz’s early series *Prototypes* and later body of work *Ronde de Nuit* at the

¹²⁰ Lewis Baltz to Joe Deal, May 28, 1975. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG229:4/1.

¹²¹ Baltz commented in 2009: “...the New Industrial Parks is circular... it is not supposed to go anywhere. There is no development. There is no narrative. And it was very difficult to do that, because you find out if you take a little photograph, and you shuffle it like a deck of cards – it is almost a deck of cards, 51 – and just lay them out randomly, you see narratives. I mean, it was really very time-consuming to break that down as far as I did.” Oral history interview with Lewis Baltz by Matthew Witkovsky, November 15-17, 2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹²² Colin Westerbeck, *Seismic Shift* (Riverside: California Museum of Photography, 2011), 40.

¹²³ Robert Hirsch, *Seizing the Light: A Social and Aesthetic History of Photography*, third edition (Waltham, MA: Focal Press, 2017). The full quote reads: “Lewis Baltz’s project *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California* (1974) is a dispassionate, minimalist social critique of the desolate and soulless man-made sites of the sprawling, urban/suburban landscape, void of preceding landscape conceptions that depicted buildings as symbols of beauty and/or prosperity.”

Art Institute of Chicago with a Sol LeWitt cube. Witkovsky elaborated the reasoning behind the move in an essay where he proposed that Baltz's prints amount to a photographic iteration of "objecthood" as theorized by Michael Fried.¹²⁴ What remains undertheorized, however, is *how* the way Baltz subjects the landscape to a "minimalist" inquiry translates, as Hirsch terms it, to "social critique" – especially in the context of *New Topographics*. Scholar Chris Balaschak has argued for the criticality of Baltz's and his peers' "formalism," but in relation to their book projects rather than the 1975 exhibition, and without so much attention to minimalist aesthetics.¹²⁵

It is by framing Baltz's "minimalism" as an iteration of neutrality in the terms this project has advanced that we account for how a photographic variant of minimalism can communicate a critical view of the built environment. Recasting the interpretation of Baltz as "minimalist" in terms of viewer response and positioning – rather than resemblance – also yields a more expansive set of criteria for what qualifies any art work as minimalist. The photographs Baltz contributed to *New Topographics* and the manner in which he presented them were influenced by his own thinking about the conceptual art of his peers, his understanding of the notion of medium, and how viewership was being theorized in this period. Reading *The New Industrial Parks* in light of minimalism as theorized by its contemporaries sheds light on the interplay of authorship and viewing psychology in Baltz's photographs. Paradoxically, their economy of expression worked

¹²⁴ See Matthew Witkovsky, "Photography's Objecthood," in Lewis Baltz, *The Prototype Works* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2011), no page numbers.

¹²⁵ See Chris Balaschak, "New Worlds: Lewis Baltz and a Geography of Aesthetic Decisions," in Mario Pfeifer, *Reconsidering The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California by Lewis Baltz, 1974* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 25-55. Balaschak argues: "American landscape photography of the 1970s was critical, precisely due to its formalism... this chapter claims that the critical aspects of 1970s American landscape photography were not aimed at the built environment, but at the bureaucratic visual representation of those places," 30.

to condemn their subject matter.

...

A Southern California native, Baltz viewed the region's built landscape with both familiarity and loathing, eventually referring to it as "my detested birthplace."¹²⁶ The photographer's family nicknamed him "Duke" after actor John Wayne, a poker buddy of Baltz's father, who was an undertaker.¹²⁷ As a serious and brooding young person, Baltz resented the structure of his formal schooling and nearly failed out of high school, but found promise in studying art. His informal education in photography began at age 12, when he started spending time at a camera shop in Laguna Beach. Baltz's father had died when he was 11, and the camera shop's owner, William Current, made up for his absence. Current, who himself photographed Southwestern subjects, taught Baltz the basics of photography.¹²⁸ Rejected from Stanford University in 1963, Baltz attended Monterey Peninsula College before transferring to the San Francisco Art Institute, where he produced the work that would comprise his *Prototype Works* series and earned his BFA in 1969.¹²⁹ The *Prototypes* – "one of the most impressive bodies of student work ever assembled," in Witkovsky's estimation – initiated the artist's career-long investigation of the built environment and contemporary life.¹³⁰ Baltz soon returned to

¹²⁶ Quoted in Steve Chawkins, "Lewis Baltz dies at 69; photographer of stark, postmodern isolation," *Los Angeles Times*, November 27, 2014. Printed on front page of that day's "California" section (page AA) as "Portraitist of dystopia."

¹²⁷ Ibid

¹²⁸ Ibid

¹²⁹ According to Witkovsky, Baltz only named the *Prototypes* series around 1972. See Witkovsky, "Photography's Objecthood." The *Prototypes* are comprised of 84 photographs that were first published together only in 2005. Baltz began the series in 1967 and conceived of it as open-ended, although Witkovsky determines that Baltz did not add to it after 1973 (see Witkovsky's footnote 3). See also the chronology provided in the finding aid for the Lewis Baltz Archive, Getty Research Institute, 2013.M.31.

¹³⁰ Witkovsky, "Photography's Objecthood." Baltz's series *The Tract Houses* (1969-1971) is comprised of 25 images. Baltz exhibited them at Castelli Graphics in spring 1971 and also at the

Southern California for his graduate studies and received his MFA from the Claremont Graduate School in 1971. His MFA thesis was comprised of photographs from his series *The Tract Houses*.¹³¹

While he was a graduate student at Claremont, beginning in spring 1970, Baltz taught photography classes at nearby Pomona College. This was a special opportunity he later attributed to the unique atmosphere at the relatively young school.¹³² It put him in contact with three important figures: the campus museum's provocative curator Walter Hopps (who had not yet departed for the Corcoran, to be replaced by Helene Winter); Hal Glicksman, who was known for curating Light and Space art as director of the Otis Art Institute and would eventually join Hopps in Washington; and Irving Blum, who had served as the director of Ferus Gallery after Hopps. Baltz took a course that Glicksman taught on the subject of 19th century art history and developed a close relationship with him. At the curator's invitation, he exhibited work from his yet-unnamed *Prototypes* series at Pomona. It was Glicksman's final show he curated for the institution, and Baltz's first solo exhibition.¹³³ Shortly thereafter, in fall 1970, Baltz continued to build important connections on the East Coast; he met with Henry Geldzahler at the Metropolitan Museum, Jennifer Licht at MoMA, Michael Hoffman of Aperture, and

Eastman House in 1972. In the latter venue, "photographs by Bernd and Hilla Becher purposely appeared in an adjoining gallery." See William Jenkins, untitled text, *Image* Vol. 17, No. 2 (June 1974), 2.

¹³¹ There was no program in photography at the Claremont Graduate School at the time, nor at any of the five undergraduate colleges in the Claremont consortium. See Rochelle LeGrandsawyer, "Progressions of a Not-Photographer: Lewis Baltz 1969-1973," in *It Happened at Pomona: Art at the Edge of Los Angeles 1969-1973* (Pomona: Pomona College Museum of Art, 2011), 125-127 (125).

¹³² *It Happened at Pomona* 16. Baltz comments: "At that moment, CGS was a young school. Everybody was sort of radicalized and now I can't imagine just coming in as a graduate student and within one year getting a teaching position. A lot of responsibility was given to me very early on, which was great. I don't think that would have happened in a more established system," 18.

¹³³ *Ibid* 18. The show ran from May 25 – June 1, 1970 at the Pomona College Museum of Art.

David Whitney, among others.¹³⁴ Whitney's partner Philip Johnson introduced Baltz to Leo Castelli, which led to Baltz's representation at Castelli Graphics in 1971.¹³⁵ While on the East Coast for the occasion of his first Castelli show, he met with William Jenkins at the Eastman House, where Robert Sobieszek and Tom Barrow also worked by then.¹³⁶ The young artist's success continued throughout the decade; by 1973, he had been acquired by the Museum of Modern Art and received a scholarship from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1974, Hopps exhibited *The Tract Houses* at the Corcoran. And two years after *New Topographics*, Baltz would receive a Guggenheim fellowship in 1977.¹³⁷

...

The 51 photographs in the *New Industrial Parks* series surveyed the corporate parks that had proliferated along the margins of Los Angeles by the early 1970s. Baltz routinely passed them on the way from Laguna Beach, where he lived, to Claremont College, where he taught.¹³⁸ The buildings housed facilities for industries on the rise

¹³⁴ Rochelle LeGrandsawyer, "Progressions of a Not-Photographer: Lewis Baltz 1969-1973," in *It Happened at Pomona: Art at the Edge of Los Angeles 1969-1973* (Pomona: Pomona College Museum of Art, 2011), 125-127 (127).

¹³⁵ See Castelli Graphics records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. In Baltz's recollection, he visited Castelli at the uptown location on 79th Street. He dropped off his *Tract Houses* portfolio for Leo, who was preoccupied, went to a bar down 79th Street to drink and wait, and returned to the gallery to find Castelli leaving. Castelli told him: "Congratulations, Mr. Baltz. I'm sorry I have to take a flight for Europe and I'm going to be late if I don't leave now. But these are wonderful pieces and I'd like to buy a set and exhibit them. You can work out the details with my wife [Antoinette, also called Toiny] and the gallery director." Baltz sold the set of 25 working prints for \$1,000, which he maintained that the gallery still has. Recounted in "Last Interview of Lewis Baltz with Jeff Rian," *L'Oeil de la Photographie*, published November 25, 2014, accessed at: <http://timfleming.blogspot.com/2014/11/last-interview-of-lewis-baltz-with-jeff.html>

¹³⁶ Colin Westerbeck, "Epicenters: How the California Landscape Slid South," in Westerbeck, *Seismic Shift: Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, and California Landscape Photography 1944-1984* (Riverside: UCR/California Museum of Photography, 2011), 34-44 (41).

¹³⁷ See Baltz's CV, Castelli Graphics records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹³⁸ "Last Interview of Lewis Baltz with Jeff Rian"

since the Korean War, from leisure to aerospace, data processing and information storage, and defense research.¹³⁹ They were often built in proximity to freeways and airports and on land previously used for agriculture, which required a minimum of grading, but displaced the local economy. In 1974, Baltz elaborated on these circumstances in an untitled article in the Eastman House's journal, *Image*, which contained a small portfolio of photographs from the series. His chosen format of bullet points for the article mimicked the economy of the series itself, as well as the texts of his conceptual artist contemporaries:

Typical names: Often companies tend to select names which obscure the nature of their activities and the identity of their owners. These names are often drawn from the terminology of space exploration, cybernetics, electronics, plastics, and similar new technologies.

Typical environmental relations: Industries which tenant the new industrial parks are often induced to locate there by neighboring communities which regard light industry as an economic asset. Characteristics of heavy manufacturing and extraction industries, such as air, water and noise pollution, unsightly structures, and the necessity of a large unskilled labor force are explicitly absent from the new industries. In contrast, new industries tend to have substantially lower pollution levels; are housed in inoffensive, anonymous structures, often with extensive landscaping; and are staffed by a small, technologically trained labor force, earning middle to upper-middle range salaries.¹⁴⁰

Additional bullet points included the “typical site planning,” “typical construction techniques,” and “typical economic considerations,” where Baltz detailed, for example, how the buildings were predominantly constructed of concrete slabs with pre-fabricated windows and doors, usually cost between \$11.00 and \$50.00 per square foot, and were planned *en masse* throughout a region by a developer, rather than conceived and

¹³⁹ Lewis Baltz, “Untitled” [published elsewhere as “Notes on Recent Industrial Developments in Southern California”], *Image* Vol. 17, No. 2 (June 1974), 2. See also Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (Verso, 2011) which addresses the expansion of the aerospace and defense industries in Orange County in the 1960s.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*

constructed one-by-one.¹⁴¹

On the same page, in a brief companion text to Baltz's piece, William Jenkins compared his photographs to Bernd and Hilla Becher's work in order to throw into relief what he perceived as Baltz's greater degree of investment in photographic problems. The comparison was not in fact new; when Jenkins showed Baltz's *Tract Houses* at the Eastman House in 1972, it was alongside an installation of the Bechers' work, curated by Robert Sobieszek.¹⁴² While Baltz and the Bechers share a "precise, almost restrictive delineation of subject matter," and while viewers tend to regard both of their work as "astringent reportage," Jenkins observed, they differed greatly in how they used the medium of photography.¹⁴³ For Jenkins, the Bechers were "clearly involved in conceptual problems concerning function, form, and anonymity" and photography simply served as "the most convenient method of keeping visual records." The Bechers' project thus boiled down to an interest "in anonymous sculpture, not photography," in Jenkins's view. Whereas Baltz's photographs, he argued, only "pretend to a detached analysis" and take up photographic documentary as a problem; "If they are documents they are very poor ones since they provide so little usable information."¹⁴⁴ Jenkins was correct to frame Baltz's detachment as a posture, but it is striking that the photographers would ultimately locate themselves in the opposite camps from how Jenkins interpreted them in this moment. Despite being lauded by figures like Carl Andre, the Bechers were self-identified documentarians, while Baltz would eventually assert himself more as a

¹⁴¹ Ibid

¹⁴² At the time, Sobieszek wrote an article about the juxtaposition. See Sobieszek, "Two Books of Ultra-Topography," *Image* Vol. 14, No. 4 (September 1971): 11-13.

¹⁴³ William Jenkins, untitled article, *Image* Vol. 17, No. 2 (June 1974): 2.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid

conceptual artist: “I never saw myself as a photographer. I never liked photography very well. I never felt any allegiance to its so-called history... I made photographs because photography was the simplest, most direct way of recording something.”¹⁴⁵ The statement is almost Ruscha-like.

Baltz’s dismissive rhetoric about photography later in his career belied his masterful print craft and the circumstances that first drew him to the medium, an issue I will return to. What Jenkins’s text indicates is that just prior to *New Topographics*, the curator was identifying Baltz’s sense of allegiance to photography and its history (as opposed to other media or theory) as a factor at stake in the interpretation of the work, in addition to the status of Baltz’s photographs in relation to “documentary,” and how his photographs appeared to counteract narrative. The way Baltz’s work resists categorization serves as a microcosm of why *New Topographics*, likewise, occupies a fraught position between a documentary approach to landscape photography and something else: not quite fully modern, nor fully conceptual. As Baltz put it in 2009, “[*New Topographics*] proposed a model of photographic practice that was not conceptual, but was responsive to conceptual art. It was conceptually driven.”¹⁴⁶

...

The physical layout of *New Topographics* continued to subtly prompt the comparison of Baltz’s work to the Bechers’, since half of Baltz’s photographs were installed directly across from the section that featured the German couple’s work. Baltz’s photographs generally occupied a central position in the show, however, since they

¹⁴⁵ Quoted in Chawkins

¹⁴⁶ Oral history interview with Lewis Baltz by Matthew Witkovsky, November 15-17, 2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

traversed two sides of a cube in the middle of the gallery space (the other two walls of the cube were hung with Robert Adams's photographs). As indicated by the exhibition's layout and installation views (**fig. 0.1; 3.11**), entering the Brackett Clark Gallery at the Eastman House, visitors would have first stepped into the corner that showcased Frank Gohlke's photographs. But if they looked directly ahead, it is Baltz's luminous and tightly controlled prints that would have met their gaze.

If they proceeded forward and turned to the left, viewers would have begun to walk the length of one wall of the cube, confronted with Baltz's inscrutable façades of steel, glass, and sun-baked stucco. The sequence of the photographs on the walls in the exhibition, which each measured six by nine inches, departed from that of the book version of *The New Industrial Parks*. Installed in a horizontal row, their presentation also differed from what would later become Baltz's preferred format of the grid. From this direction, the first photograph in the lineup was *South Corner, Riccar America, 3184 Pullman, Costa Mesa* (**fig. 3.12**). Baltz situates the viewer facing a corner of an industrial building. One of the structure's smooth walls is illuminated in diffuse sunlight; the other is cast in even shadow. The walls meet almost at the exact center of the photograph, lending the image a balanced tautness. Moving outward from this midpoint, they are cut off by the photographs' edges, such that the viewer cannot know how far they extend in their unmarked planarity. The corrugated metal on the garage door at the right appears new and untarnished, as does the pitch black door nearby – which, like the stairs leading to the roof, offers a metaphorical way “out” of the image, but fails to disclose where it leads. It is unclear, likewise, whether the bed of dirt bordered by curbs in the foreground awaits greenery or additional poured concrete.

Immediately, this photograph establishes a tension that marks the entire body of work: that of banal, clinical surfaces that the photographer has nevertheless treated with a great deal of focus and attention, in the form of a rigorous, deliberate geometry. The blank walls lead in opposite directions into receding space, bifurcating and displacing the viewer's gaze to the photograph's perimeter, but the vertical elements in the center of the photograph like the rungs of the ladder, the sharp edge of the corner of the building, and the pipe affixed just to its left on the sun-drenched wall stabilize the viewer's gaze. It is in this way that the image both repels and moors the viewer's attention, paralleling the "mixture of attraction and horror" Baltz himself felt toward his subjects.¹⁴⁷ The pile of dirt in the foreground also begins to resemble a series of mountains or hills in miniature, potentially referring to the surrounding natural landscape – something the viewer cannot see, given the proximity to the looming structure. It is not that the photograph resists all imaginative access, then, but rather that it tempers the mechanisms by which viewers typically identify with the spaces depicted in its landscape genre.

The photograph that followed this one in the installation, *Milliken Road, between Gates and DuBridge Roads, looking East* (**fig. 3.13**) revealed more of the surroundings. There, Baltz photographed a gap between two industrial park buildings under construction. At the far-left center of the image, the ground surrounding the first of the structures is graded but not yet paved, while its counterpart on the right is still only built to the point of a concrete wall with a large square opening, presumably awaiting a garage door. The gap between the two structures is rich with further evidence of construction in

¹⁴⁷ Oral history interview with Lewis Baltz by Matthew Witkovsky, November 15-17, 2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

progress: a tangle of power lines and telephone poles, the pickup trucks of construction workers, several trailers, and the striped barrels of two cement trucks. In the far distance, the faint contour of mountains registers in the same tonal range as the sweeping clouds above. The delicate tones of both the sky and the foreground compress the dark band of brush and human-built elements that spans horizontally across the photograph. A few photographs later in the installation lineup, *East Wall, Western Carpet Mills, 1231 Warner, Tustin* (**fig. 3.14**) repeats this device of a compressed horizontal band, but here, it takes the form of a void. A long and squat industrial building appears as a monolith between the natural elements of slackened brush and overcast sky, registering like a redaction across both landscape and picture plane.

The impression that builds in viewing *The New Industrial Parks* one image after another is a California not of dreaming, but of weariness – and paradoxically so, since the structures are so new. The predominant disjunction in these photographs is also not of the natural versus human-built landscapes, as in Joe Deal. Baltz’s primary interest is in the built environment; the natural landscape in his photographs is either absent or too listless to fight back. Rather, the uncanniness comes as a result of the way Baltz simultaneously registers an abundance of evidence of human activity on the one hand, and a total lack of humanity, individuality, or character on the other – indeed, a “crowded vacancy.”¹⁴⁸ It is

¹⁴⁸ In 1971, Baltz’s work was shown alongside that of photographers Anthony Hernandez and Terry Wild in an exhibition called *The Crowded Vacancy* at UC-Davis (Memorial Union Art Gallery, April 5 – May 9, 1971). It was curated by Fred R. Parker, a former student of Jack Welpott’s at San Francisco State College, and traveled to the Pasadena Art Museum (June 29 – August 29, 1971). Only 700 copies of the catalog were printed. Parker had previously curated a show called *California Photographers 1970*, which noted how current California landscape photography seemed to be moving away from a model influenced by Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, or Minor White and rather towards an approach marked by an apparent lack of manipulation, commonplace subject matter, and even, flat light.

as if people are everywhere, but there is a deafening silence. The buildings nearly taunt the viewer with their oppressive stillness.

The blunt address and frontality of the photographs is not solely contingent upon the flatness of the industrial park facades, however. It is due to how Baltz stages the viewer's encounter with these forms, which is part and parcel of how he evacuates the pictures of conventional signs of his editorializing, his subjectivity. There is a term that the critical apparatus of the decade prior might have used to describe the resultant strangeness of his photographs: "theatricality." Though the theorization of minimalism in the 1960s largely occurred in the domain of the sculptural, several of its key terms can be productively transposed to address photographic conditions. Baltz's photographs activate similar formal knowledge as minimalist sculpture, which – coupled with the viewer's awareness that they are gazing upon the real, built landscape in the form of a photograph – positions the viewer to perceive the industrial parks as sinister symptoms of the bureaucratic management of life so endemic to late capitalism.

The theory that comes into play here originated approximately ten years prior to *New Topographics*. In 1965, Donald Judd had published an essay called "Specific Objects."¹⁴⁹ His thesis concerned a new direction for art where the art work presented "a static... shape to the viewer's gaze."¹⁵⁰ Rather than refer to illusionistic space, "three-dimensional work," as Judd termed this art (he disliked the term "minimalism"), could activate real space. A year later in 1966, the Jewish Museum exhibition *Primary*

¹⁴⁹ Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook* No. 8 (1965), reprinted in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 809-813. See also Robert Morris's "Notes on Sculpture" and "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2," *Artforum* Vol. 4, No. 6 (February 1966) and Vol. 5, No. 2 (October 1966).

¹⁵⁰ James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 51.

Structures was the first to survey Judd and his peers. Curator Kynaston McShine selected a number of British and American artists as exemplars of what was by then still known by a variety of terms: cool art, ABC art, reductive art. Though varied, much of the work exhibited an embrace of everyday materials, reduced shapes and forms, a refusal of subjective content, and the notion of artist-as-designer. Then in 1967, in his now-canonical essay “Art and Objecthood,” Michael Fried took this art to task for what he perceived as its transformation of sculpture into an event or situation.¹⁵¹ His central argument was that minimalist art (which Fried called “literalist” art) reverberated the viewer’s attention back onto the spaces in which they encountered these works and their own viewing “situation.”¹⁵² Commonplace, industrial materials like bricks and concrete, presented (in Fried’s opinion) literally in themselves rather than as constituent parts, gave so little in the way of authorial intervention that they appeared arbitrary. Rather than “acknowledge” their own conditions, they “hypostatized” it in a manner of literalness.¹⁵³ The viewer could not help but become self-reflexively aware of her own act of looking and the space in which she encountered the work. For Fried, this “theatrical” tendency posed a threat to the autonomy of the art object.¹⁵⁴ By necessitating the presence of the

¹⁵¹ Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” *Artforum* Vol. 5 (Summer 1967), 12-23.

¹⁵² “The experience of literalist art is of an object *in a situation* – one which, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*.” Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 15.

¹⁵³ Fried first introduced the concept of acknowledgment in “Shape as Form: Frank Stella’s New Paintings,” reprinted in the book version of *Art and Objecthood* as “Shape as Form: Frank Stella’s Irregular Polygons.” See Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 77-99. There, he writes: “[H]ypostatization is not acknowledgment. The continuing problem of *how* to acknowledge the literal character of the support – of *what counts* as that acknowledgment – has been at least as crucial to the development of modernist painting as the fact of its literalness, and that problem has been eliminated, not solved by the artists in question [the literalists]. Their pieces cannot be said to acknowledge literalness; they simply *are literal*” (88). For more on “acknowledgment” in Fried, see Danielle Follett, “The Stakes of Modernist Acknowledgment,” *nonsite.org* Issue 22 (November 1, 2017). <https://nonsite.org/feature/the-stakes-of-modernist-acknowledgment>

¹⁵⁴ See Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 15: “...the literalist espousal of objecthood amounts to

viewer to activate the work's meaning, Fried proposed, artists had injected relational and durational elements into sculpture. Viewing became an event, and the art work, non-art – a condition that Fried termed “objecthood.”¹⁵⁵

Fried thus condemned minimalist sculpture as a perversion of late modernist art. But his and Judd's terms are productive ones for characterizing the interpretive work that Baltz's photographs set into motion, and how they were received. Indeed, “Art and Objecthood” can be understood as theorizing something akin to what this project terms a “neutral” mode: a stance set up by the author that is keenly felt by the viewer as ungenerous, and therefore prompts interpretive discomfort. In contrast with this critique, in the same years that he engaged in this polemic with Judd and his peers (and for many years thereafter), Fried voiced admiration for Anthony Caro's sculptures because of what he took to be their self-sustaining “syntax” and the way their structure evidenced “acknowledgment” of their physical support.¹⁵⁶ Caro's sculptures read to Fried as compositions of elements that responded to one another, and therefore possessed internal relationships that were meaningful independent of the beholder's bodily presence; they were experienced as sculpture rather than mere object.¹⁵⁷

By Fried's metric, in other words, a large part of what makes an artwork

nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theater; and theater is now the negation of art. Literalist sensibility is theatrical because... it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work... the experience of literalist art is of an object *in a situation* – one which, virtually by definition, includes the beholder...”

¹⁵⁵ See Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 15: “Literalist art... aspires, not to defeat or suspend its own objecthood, but on the contrary to discover and project objecthood as such.”

¹⁵⁶ Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 203

¹⁵⁷ On “presentness,” see Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 15. For Fried's early writings on Caro, see especially Michael Fried, “New Work by Anthony Caro,” *Artforum* Vol. 5, No. 6 (February 1967): 46-47; “Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro,” *Artforum* Vol. 6, No. 6 (February 1968): 24-25; Introduction to *Anthony Caro*, exhibition catalog, Hayward Gallery, London, January 24 – March 9, 1969; and “Caro's Abstractness,” *Artforum* Vol. 9, No. 1 (September 1970): 32.

successful is that it is experienced as *authored*. It displays evidence of authorial intervention in the form of composition, synthesis, and resolve, which establishes a stable position for the beholder, rather than a contingent, “open-ended and unexacting” one, as he lamented of minimalism.¹⁵⁸ This in fact parallels the terminology that the period’s literary theorists like Wayne Booth used to describe literature as well; Booth differentiated between works that carve out a “stable” position for its reader versus ones where the author refuses to “take a stand,” rendering it impossible for the author and reader to reach a state of “agreement.”¹⁵⁹

Judd complained that sculpture like Caro’s was “made part by part, by addition, composed” – in other words, inflected.¹⁶⁰ Against such a model, he and his peer Robert Morris “assert[ed] the values of wholeness, singleness, and indivisibility,” Fried observed – the paradigm of the “specific object.”¹⁶¹ As Judd put it, “You should have a definite *whole* and maybe no parts... or very few... The parts are unrelational. I wanted to get rid of any *compositional effects*.”¹⁶² Yet it was this anti-compositional aspiration of Judd’s and his peers’ work that many viewers – Fried among them – found difficult to square with their expectations of what art should look like, and how it should address them.

This is precisely where the reception of minimalism helps to contextualize how viewers responded to Baltz’s work and *New Topographics* in 1975. The issue that much of the audience in Rochester had with the work was that it lapsed into something like

¹⁵⁸ Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 15.

¹⁵⁹ Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 14-19; 240.

¹⁶⁰ Judd, “Specific Objects,” 812

¹⁶¹ Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 12

¹⁶² “Questions to Stella and Judd,” Interview by Bruce Glaser. Edited by Lucy Lippard. *Art News* September 1966: 56-57. Reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), 150-154.

“objecthood” for them: a look of non-art, something that even resisted being *viewed*, so to speak. As one visitor declared of the exhibition in general: “I don’t like them – they’re dull and flat. There’s no people, no involvement, nothing.”¹⁶³ Standing in front of landscape photographs that eschewed conventional signs of expressivity, people felt something akin to what Fried described as a sudden self-consciousness toward one’s own viewing situation: a sense of being implicated in a seemingly indifferent manner of address.

Consider the position intimated by Baltz’s *East Wall, Nees Turf Company, 38T Pullman, Costa Mesa* (**fig. 3.15**). Typical of his series, the viewer encounters this façade at close proximity. The building is a faceted polygon with walls that meet at obtuse rather than right angles, such that the structure appears convex, bowing outward toward the viewer even as its frontal facet remains parallel to the picture plane. The tone of the walls is nearly indistinguishable from the overcast sky. The middle vertical third of the photograph is occupied by the wall that is closest to the viewer, which contributes to the picture’s claustrophobia. Structurally, the image delivers the reverse of something like Ansel Adams’s 1951 photograph *Maroon Bells* (**fig. 3.16**), which is emblematic of the kind of landscape visitors were accustomed to seeing in fine art photography exhibitions in this period. Like Baltz’s wall facet, the mountains in Adams’s photograph are the largest element by area, and Adams centers them compositionally, but they occupy the furthest plane of focus. His photograph steadily – one could even say, charitably – guides the viewer’s gaze backward to the mountain peak vis-à-vis a progression of foreground

¹⁶³ Excerpt from tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

and middle ground elements on either side, whereas Baltz's image turns this formula on its head, effacing its own readability as illusionistic space. It forces the viewer to reckon with the monumental element "up front," so to speak. Adams's mountains recede, keeping their distance; Baltz's wall encroaches. And unlike Adams's mountain landscape, which is rich with varied, picturesque texture, Baltz's walls are comparatively plain, much subtler. The lack of hierarchy becomes uncomfortable for the viewer, even aggressive – indeed, *theatrical*.

To momentarily invoke Judd's terminology, this response is heightened by how Baltz labored in composition and print to amplify the "specificity" of these shapes within the forms of the industrial parks. He deliberately worked in overcast conditions to eliminate shadow, and photographed them from angles that would minimize optical distortion. Shot straight-on, their surfaces appeared parallel to the picture plane, forcing the viewer to at least initially comprehend them as a kind of gestalt. Crucially, Baltz's vantage points don't correspond to those from which architectural photographers typically shoot their subjects, nor the positions from which we glimpse these buildings from passing cars. Yet the structures themselves resist comprehension by any privileged point of view. The proximity to them from this photographic no-man's land of middle-distance only makes them stranger, as does the way Baltz often uses the buildings to block access to the horizon line – a perspective he cleverly denies, for example, in a photograph of a Mazda car dealership, where the horizon appears only in reflection (**fig. 3.17**).

Baltz worked with a 35-millimeter camera – the only photographer in *New Topographics* to do so, aside from Henry Wessel, Jr. – but used sharp lenses and made

other decisions that crafted the appearance of larger format equipment. He employed a tripod for stability and used exceptionally low-light-sensitive film to achieve the finest grain possible in his prints.¹⁶⁴ By shooting in light conditions that minimized shadow, he flattened his subjects even further. And in the photographer's archive, his printing notes reveal that he painstakingly exposed various areas of his prints to augment their luminosity and tonality.¹⁶⁵ Paradoxically, the result of these deliberate, creative decisions were photographs that many viewers interpreted as *uninformative* and *expressionless*. The prints were rigorously precise, smooth, and even, somehow managing to augment the planarity and readymade quality of the buildings' exteriors.

It should be noted that Baltz himself did not read Fried; he was more familiar with Greenberg in these early years. "What I got from Greenberg was his idea – which he claims to have gotten from Kant – that for a work to have autonomous legitimacy, it needed to provide a kind of experience that was not provided by any other means," he said.¹⁶⁶ He did nevertheless link the notion of "objecthood" to how his strategies for

¹⁶⁴ Baltz shot the images on 35mm fine grain Kodak Panatomic-X and Safety film with a sensitivity rating of ASA 6 (the average being ASA 125), and used Perfection Micrograin developer. He printed on Agfa paper, which in the early 1970s contained more silver. He wrote of his process: "Despite...low film speed, lack of exposure latitude, and extremely long development times, this combination of materials produces an extremely high-resolution image, surpassing what can be obtained from more conventional materials, and allows me to use a 35mm camera in situations which would otherwise require a larger format negative." Quoted in Carol di Grappa, *Landscape Theory* (New York: Lustrum Press, 1980), 27.

¹⁶⁵ These printing notes are in the Lewis Baltz Archive at the Getty Research Institute, 2013.M.31, Box 38. Witkovsky has also written: "The negatives were first developed as if they were a piece of microfilm, that is, surfaces for the recording of flat and tonally primitive text. After killing the contrast in his negatives, Baltz laboriously tested local alterations in enlargement, over- or under-exposing portions of the image surface in roughly five to twenty-five separate steps in order to reintroduce contrast in a selective manner. The replacement of shadows, an indication of external light sources, with the suggestion of an inner luminosity, was one goal; saturation of tones was another." Witkovsky, "Photography's Objecthood," n.p.

¹⁶⁶ Oral history interview with Lewis Baltz by Matthew Witkovsky, November 15-17, 2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

exhibiting the prints enabled them to take on a nearly sculptural presence in the gallery space:

It was important to me to play a double game. That is to say, these photographs were images, and I wanted them to have a second existence as objects. Because a photograph is an object, but a certain kind of object – not the same kind of object as a painting or, say, a Maserati, but it's a certain kind of object. And I was interested in stressing that particular objecthood. As with the depth in the pictures. The pictures are not mounted flat on a piece of board. They're actually held off the board, just enough to be visible. The technique is described in almost every book dealing with archival processing...

You archivally process a second piece of paper of the same make, weight, and contrast grade, black, as the image. Then you mount them back to back with a dry-mounting tissue...

I trimmed the edges because I didn't want the sense of a *passe-partout* [a form of double matting] or of looking through a window. And I tacked them to a piece of five-ply Strathmore drawing paper.¹⁶⁷

This strategy is visible in the installation views from Baltz's show of the *Tract Houses* at Castelli Gallery and Castelli Graphics (**fig. 3.18**). The Strathmore board possessed an off-white tone that was "noticeably warmer than the prints and warmer, too, than most white frames or exhibition walls." Witkovsky observes: "Prepared in this way, the works were guaranteed not to 'sink in' to their surroundings."¹⁶⁸ It is curious to note that Baltz in fact seems to have intended the opposite effect early on; in October 1971, he wrote to Walter Hopps (who was by then at the Corcoran) to express his preferences for how his photographs should be physically displayed at Pomona: "As Hal [Glicksman] and I agreed, the framing should be simple to the point of being non-existent: the photographs, covered by glass, affixed directly to the wall. This would tend to diminish the objectness

¹⁶⁷ Oral history interview with Lewis Baltz by Matthew Witkovsky, November 15-17, 2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁶⁸ Witkovsky, "Photography's Objecthood," n.p.

of the works.”¹⁶⁹

Nevertheless, these properties of the prints propel Witkovsky’s argument in his essay “Photography’s Objecthood,” where he proposes that Baltz’s early *Prototypes* series in particular (for he is not addressing *The New Industrial Parks*) amounts to a photographic analog of objecthood as theorized by Fried.¹⁷⁰ Baltz “formulat[ed] a new form of address to the beholder, one predicated on a tension between the photographic image and the photograph as object,” he writes, describing a kind of vacillation for the viewer between looking *at* and looking *through* the photograph.¹⁷¹ The viewer wants to look through the photographic frame to what is depicted, but is pulled back into looking *at* its surface as just that – a material surface, with “milky white” highlights and “inky absorbency” in its shadows:

The more we look, the less we see, for an overall richness of texture has supplanted detailed information... our eyes wander in vain over a picture whose illusionistic space seems to have been evacuated of its markers, its depth, and finally even the shared atmosphere that we, like the presumed occupants of this credible fiction of a building, will need if we are to go on living.¹⁷²

The images do craft a bleak and airless world, and Witkovsky emphasizes that Baltz “wanted to think through a deeper politics in which form and content are indissociable.”¹⁷³ He even acknowledges: “It is difficult to get lost in a Prototype, which makes it correspondingly easier, in looking at these pictures, to be restored to a consciousness of one’s place in the world.” Yet in the rest of the essay, the author’s elucidation of his thesis remains primarily formal in concern, rather than foregrounding

¹⁶⁹ Letter from Lewis Baltz to Walter Hopps, October 2, 1971. Hal Glicksman Papers, Getty Research Institute. 2009.M.5, folder 8 (Lewis Baltz correspondence).

¹⁷⁰ Witkovsky, “Photography’s Objecthood,” n.p.

¹⁷¹ Ibid

¹⁷² Ibid

¹⁷³ Ibid

reception. He is also adamant that Baltz's ambitions "related only glancingly to fine art photography – a fact that has been systematically underplayed in critical commentary," and wants to shift the contextualization accordingly.¹⁷⁴

Witkovsky is absolutely correct that Baltz's key artistic points of reference were non-photographic ones, and that examining those sources of the artist's thinking yields a richer and more authentic understanding of his project. Baltz was a great admirer, for example, of not only Ed Ruscha and Donald Judd, but also Bruce Nauman, Joseph Kosuth (who is paid homage in the title of Baltz's *Prototypes* series¹⁷⁵), Lawrence Weiner, and Richard Serra (who was himself an early admirer of Baltz's work).¹⁷⁶ And the author makes the claim that Baltz's photographs *as prints* – as objects, Witkovsky emphasizes – help their viewer develop a critical self-consciousness by way of working against "the absorptive power of the photographic picture."¹⁷⁷ What goes underexplored, however, are the specifics of how that happens, especially given that actual viewers tend to look at photographs as images – as akin to windows, *through* them. No one mistakes printed photographs for actual windows, but the average viewer does not suspend their recognition of the content as being part of the real, visible world in favor of paying attention primarily to the photograph's surface. The idea that Baltz's prints work against that revelatory tendency is compelling, but the opportunity remains to reconcile this idea with how his audience in *New Topographics*, for example, actually responded to his

¹⁷⁴ Ibid

¹⁷⁵ Oral history interview with Lewis Baltz by Matthew Witkovsky, November 15-17, 2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Baltz refers to an early show the Kunsthalle Bern did of Kosuth, part of which was called "Prototypes."

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. Baltz tells a story about a time that he was in Irving Blum's office, when Serra (whom he didn't realize was Serra, because he didn't know what he looked like), complimented him on his photographs in passing.

¹⁷⁷ Witkovsky, "Photography's Objecthood."

photographs because of their interpretive expectations and equipment. Any argument that Baltz's photographs are critical must attend to *how* the strategies he adopted from other contemporary art were able to read as neutral, anti-expressive, and finally, critical in *photographic* form. At one point, Witkovsky wonders: "How can a photograph, of necessity flat and still, avoid rendering the landscape as a picture?" This analysis answers: it can't entirely, because of how people tend to look at photographs. Baltz's and his *New Topographics* peers' aspiration to do so is what lent the work its criticality, and an examination of those circumstances must be grounded in the photographs' reception.

It matters greatly, in other words, that Baltz's viewers knew that they were looking at photographs when they encountered his work. That awareness shaped how they attended to the photographs as images, and their expectations of generic conventions relating to expressivity that the photographs purposely withheld. These were not abstract shapes that Baltz himself had made; they were parts of the real, built environment that the artist had encountered in Irvine, and which any viewer could visit and see for herself (an effort that would be aided by Baltz's precise and clinical captions, which name the buildings' addresses with cardinal directions). The industrial parks were physical symptoms of the culture and time period that produced them, manifestations of the cultural values of 1970s America. Many visitors to *New Topographics* reacted to the work with exclamations along the lines of "I just – *why*? What is he trying to show?" Such audience members could not see the difference between how the familiar industrial parks looked to them in the real world and how they looked in Baltz's pictures, perceiving the photographs as both artless and authorless. This echoed the reception of minimalism, where "the purging of authorial feeling and demonstrable intention was

poorly received by viewers steeped in the aesthetics of abstract expressionism, who insisted that a work of art was by definition the handmade product of a subjective self.”¹⁷⁸ But others did perceive a critical slant to the work, as another person reflected while standing in front of the cube hung with Robert Adams’s and Baltz’s photographs: “At first they’re really stark nothing, but then you really look at it and it’s just about the way things are.”¹⁷⁹

What Fried describes as “theatricality,” then – the beholding situation that results from objecthood – is not incompatible with the photographs’ socioeconomic meaning, but is rather the vehicle for it, even if it is in a way that Fried would not endorse. The photographs’ unsettling affect and the self-consciousness they prompted was contingent upon the presence of a certain kind of viewer: someone primed to see the West coded as it was in something like an Ansel Adams photograph, consistent with the conventions of the sublime and picturesque. Transposed from minimalist sculpture and conceptual art to the photograph, Baltz’s strategies like flatness and serial presentation were so unconventional that they were off-putting, and moved people to contemplate the industrial parks’ bewildering interchangeability and their impact upon the natural landscape, as well as their very expectations of how a landscape photograph should make them feel. There was no question that Baltz himself viewed the structures as sinister. “Most of the built landscape is not made by architects,” he later noted, but rather developers or engineers. They were planned rather than designed. This “sub-

¹⁷⁸ James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 3.

¹⁷⁹ Excerpt from tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

architecture,” as Baltz called it, “accretes because of economic reasons, unmediated by anything else.”¹⁸⁰ As he once said to Walter Hopps: “Look at that... you don’t know whether they’re manufacturing pantyhose or megadeath.”¹⁸¹

I have argued that Baltz’s photographs prompt comparison to minimalism not only because their forms *resemble* “specific objects” or “primary structures”; they do so because of the *response* engendered by Baltz’s self-effacement. This is not to suggest, however, that his work entirely resolves the question of what would constitute a properly photographic version of minimalism. Seeking to free the art object from its rectangular confines, Judd wrote in “Specific Objects” that he wanted to move art *away* from the model where we automatically read flat surfaces as “clearer instances of a similar world.”¹⁸² Yet people tend to regard photographs as just that. As philosopher Kendall Walton has argued, when viewers are aware that they are looking at a photograph (as opposed to another kind of graphic representation, such as a painting), they immediately project a set of beliefs, conventions, and associations onto the image regarding its relationship to the real.¹⁸³

In addition to the fact that the form within Baltz’s photographs is immediately referential, there are other factors that challenge a reading of his work as definitively minimalist. For example, the idea of humble, industrial materials resonates only with Baltz’s subject matter, and not his masterful, even “slavishly produced” prints.¹⁸⁴ Unlike

¹⁸⁰ Oral history interview with Lewis Baltz by Matthew Witkovsky, November 15-17, 2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁸¹ Baltz, quoted in *Rule without Exception* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press and Des Moines: De Moines Art Center, 1990), 39.

¹⁸² Judd 811

¹⁸³ See Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

¹⁸⁴ Witkovsky, “Photography’s Objecthood,” n.p.

sculpture, which viewers circumnavigate in time and space, photographs are fixed and two-dimensional. And there are the disruptions that register in the surfaces upon closer, longer looking: the visual noise of debris, undulations in the blacktop, marks in the stucco that serve as traces of its application, and drainage pipes and light bulbs – as in Baltz’s photograph of an unoccupied Santa Ana warehouse, for example (**fig. 3.19**).

Nevertheless, as Lucy Lippard observed in 1972, “the word Minimal suggests a *tabula rasa* – or rather, the failed attempt at a clean slate.”¹⁸⁵

It thus seems productive to invoke minimalism here as scholar James Meyer has framed it: as a form of “discourse that shaped understanding of minimal practice itself,” which is remarkably heterogeneous and posited a variety of perceptual models.¹⁸⁶ After all, Baltz himself noted the difference between New York and California Minimalism.¹⁸⁷ We can locate Baltz’s work – and *New Topographics* – within a broader art world conversation about the role that expressivity should play in art as it shapes how a work addresses its beholder. Sculpture in the 1960s aspired to draw attention to the space in which viewers encountered it; in 1975, Baltz and his fellow *New Topographics* photographers posited a model where, unencumbered by conventional signs of expressivity, the photograph could place the viewer into a heightened state of awareness of their surroundings. Here, that awareness concerned not the institutional space of the

¹⁸⁵ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972 reprint), viii.

¹⁸⁶ Meyer 7, 8.

¹⁸⁷ “The finish was different, and I think the idea behind it contained a sort of Zen or meditative sense, which was very different from New York Minimalism’s materialists like Judd, Andre, and Tony Smith. Larry Bell’s boxes are six sheets of glass, but they are optically so beautiful. When I first went to New York, it was so gritty; the whole town looked to me as if Richard Serra and Carl Andre made it. New York Minimalism is more industrial. LA Light and Space is completely different. There was a lot of amazing California art.” As quoted in “Last Interview of Lewis Baltz with Jeff Rian.”

gallery or museum, but rather the real landscape of postwar suburban and corporate sprawl.

...

In the wake of examining how minimalism and its corresponding theory helps to account for the viewing psychology of Baltz's photographs, we return to the question of why Baltz ultimately preferred to be known as an "artist" rather than a "photographer." In hindsight, the circumstances of his early art training and the circle of people he associated with in Southern California and vis-à-vis Castelli Gallery render him an emblem of why, as Britt Salvesen has observed, *New Topographics* now figures in photographic history as "a bridge between the still-insular fine-art photography world and the expanding, post-conceptual field of contemporary art."¹⁸⁸ In the figure of Baltz in particular, one finds a salient point of access to consider the exhibition's relationship to art in other media, the West Coast art scene, and even photographic modernism more broadly. He may have appeared in Mike Mandel's deck of photographer baseball cards in 1975 – a project that continues to serve as "who's-who" of the photography world at that moment, and does, after all, include many of the other *New Topographics* photographers and Ed Ruscha – but he also deliberately positioned himself in a wider orbit socially, geographically, creatively, and institutionally. In 1985, he wrote in retrospect of photography in the 1970s: "Thus photography inherited some of that portion of the American art audience too intellectually torpid to understand, much less take interest in, the kinds of issues raised by the best American art of the 1960s."¹⁸⁹ Baltz considered 1960s-70s minimalism, post-minimalism, conceptualism, and earth art to be at the forefront of innovation and

¹⁸⁸ Salvesen, "Introduction," 12

¹⁸⁹ Baltz, "American Photography in the 1970s: Too Old to Rock, Too Young to Die."

theory, and he was not only a witness to it, but a participant.

From the beginning, Baltz maintained: “I wanted to be an artist, and I wanted to be an artist whose work was done in the medium of photography.” What didn’t appeal to him was what he saw as the “provincial” quality of the fine art photography world, how small and insular it could be.¹⁹⁰ It actually encouraged Baltz that the Claremont Graduate School did not have a program in photography; for his MFA he was looking for an intellectual community more than material resources or equipment.¹⁹¹ In 1969, he convinced administrators there, Guy Williams and Mowry Baden, of the mutual fit between himself and the program. He later recalled:

I wanted to do graduate work, I wanted to do more, meet more interesting people in the art world... and I absolutely did not want to go to a school that had photography, because I didn’t like photography very much... I think mostly what they needed to be convinced [of was] that I didn’t need any physical equipment, I didn’t need any technical advice. Which I didn’t. But I needed aesthetic advice. I needed people to read things with and discuss them with.¹⁹²

At the San Francisco Art Institute, where he had completed his undergraduate work, Baltz had felt that no one – neither his professors nor his fellow students – understood what he was producing. Part of it was because of the kind of landscape he photographed, which was not compatible with the “rigid hierarchy of subject matter” he ascribed to fine art photography at that time. “Unfortunately, my life very rarely involved going to Yosemite,” Baltz recollected. “My life was about going to shopping centers, being in a town, an urban situation, which seemed to me was also a landscape, but one that no one

¹⁹⁰ Oral history interview with Lewis Baltz by Matthew Witkovsky, November 15-17, 2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁹¹ LeGrandsawyer 125

¹⁹² Rebecca McGrew, unpublished interview with Lewis Baltz, June 11, 2009, Zurich, Switzerland. Quoted in LeGrandsawyer, page 125, also footnote 1.

had any interest in looking at. But I was interested in looking at it.”¹⁹³ Rather than a cohort of other students working the same medium, then, he desired a community with which he could exchange ideas, a group of peers who would be unencumbered by such medium-specific tradition or conventions.

Even though other role models would eventually overtake them as creative influences, as a young person, Baltz had been drawn to photography by way its prominent creative practitioners at midcentury. The young Baltz was captivated by Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (which he said “changed the emotional key of photography from European pathos to American irony”¹⁹⁴) and admired the romantic lifestyle of Edward Weston.¹⁹⁵ He liked what he saw in the exhibition *New Documents* when it traveled to SFMoMA in 1967, especially Lee Friedlander’s work. And a major reason why he initially pursued his undergraduate studies at Monterey Peninsula College was because the landscape photographer Wynn Bullock lived in Carmel.¹⁹⁶

Baltz also nearly studied with Walker Evans at Yale, where he applied to transfer from Claremont after his first year in graduate school. Yet he came to resent how “every graduate school had a master” who “sort of ran it a little bit like a fiefdom.”¹⁹⁷ Aside

¹⁹³ Oral history interview with Lewis Baltz by Matthew Witkovsky, November 15-17, 2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁹⁴ “Last Interview of Lewis Baltz with Jeff Rian”

¹⁹⁵ Oral history interview with Lewis Baltz by Matthew Witkovsky, November 15-17, 2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁹⁶ Laurie Brown, “Lewis Baltz – Photographer: A Monograph,” unpublished paper submitted to professors John Upton and Rick Steadry for a course on “History and Aesthetics of Photography” at Orange Coast College, January 16, 1973. Cited in Colin Westerbeck, “Epicenters: How the California Landscape Slid South,” in Westerbeck, *Seismic Shift: Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, and California Landscape Photography 1944-1984* (Riverside: UCR/California Museum of Photography, 2011), 34-44 (40). At the time he was interested in Bullock, Baltz was drawn to “symbolic mysticism,” which he would later reject.

¹⁹⁷ Oral history interview with Lewis Baltz by Matthew Witkovsky, November 15-17, 2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

from Evans at Yale, there was Robert Heinecken at UCLA, Arthur Siegel at the Institute of Design in Chicago, and Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind at RISD. Baltz was admitted to Yale but declined the offer, having decided that it was worth it to stay with community he had found in southern California.¹⁹⁸ This decision also enabled him to teach photography at Pomona College. As an instructor, his approach emphasized the history and theory of the medium to a greater degree than other studio courses, and the syllabus included readings in semiotics, French structuralism, and phenomenology.¹⁹⁹ Notably, it was also at this time that the people on campus at Pomona included figures like James Turrell and Robert Irwin – pioneers of Light and Space art with backgrounds in perceptual psychology.

One event does indicate that Baltz had some pride in being a photographer early on. In a letter that he wrote to Hal Glicksman in May 1971, the then-twenty-six-year-old proudly reported that Leo Castelli had proposed to show his work at Castelli Graphics that fall, which he considered especially significant because of his chosen medium. Playfully inverting the language of the 1969 moon landing announcement, he wrote: “A great step for me, a small step for mankind. If this comes up, I’ll be the first photographer to show north of 63rd Street, and I relish the distinction.”²⁰⁰ The importance of the

¹⁹⁸ LeGrandsawyer 126. Baltz said: “I’m here. I’m working here. I have these great people, and they know me. I haven’t even scratched the surface, much less exhausted it.” He did, however, continue to seek out Evans’s work and purchase catalogs, notably that of Evans’s 1971 show at MoMA. In a letter Baltz wrote to Hal Glicksman, he asks Glicksman if he saw the show (January 27 – April 11, 1971) and says: “I have the catalogue, and many of the works reproduced are new to me and really outstanding. I’d like to see it sometime, but I don’t think it’s coming to LA.” Letter from Lewis Baltz to Hal Glicksman, May 20, 1971. Hal Glicksman Papers, Getty Research Institute. 2009.M.5, folder 8 (Lewis Baltz correspondence).

¹⁹⁹ LeGrandsawyer footnote 3. She does not include the source information for this syllabus.

²⁰⁰ Letter from Lewis Baltz to Hal Glicksman, May 29, 1971. Hal Glicksman Papers, Getty Research Institute. 2009.M.5, Box 1, folder 8.

moment was not lost on critic A.D. Coleman, who reviewed the show in January 1972: “It’s... worth noting that this is Castelli’s first showing of straight photographs, no mean precedent in itself.”²⁰¹ In the same letter to Glicksman, Baltz added that he did not sympathize with photographers who disliked or felt threatened by contemporary artists who used photography in an instrumental manner: “P.S. D.C. sounds as if the photography scene is polarized on social as well as esthetic levels. Seems odd, as I (LA’s minority of one) personally get along fine with Heinecken, Curran, Fichter, et. al. despite our profound differences in ideas and work.”²⁰² And writing to Harold Jones that same year, Baltz expressed admiration for the Bechers and Ed Ruscha in the same breath, stating that *Anonyme Skulpturen* was “the most impressive photographic book since 26 *Gasoline Stations*.”²⁰³ He would be duly impressed by the Bechers’ work upon seeing an exhibition at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York in 1974.²⁰⁴

Indeed, both Ruscha and the Bechers’ work took the form of multiple images presented together, and this inspired Baltz to work serially himself. Like Deal, he had been heavily influenced by *Serial Imagery* at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1968.²⁰⁵ He reflected on that time: “I was aware that, probably, single photographs were not what I wanted to do... I wanted to work with groups of images...I wanted to be able to make a body of work. In fact, that body of work would be the unit, not individual images. I was

²⁰¹ A.D. Coleman, “Presence through Absence,” *The Village Voice* January 13, 1972, pp. 25-26 (25).

²⁰² Baltz added: “Perhaps I am a token realist. Or something.” Letter from Lewis Baltz to Hal Glicksman, May 29, 1971. Hal Glicksman Papers, Getty Research Institute. 2009.M.5, Box 1, folder 8.

²⁰³ Lewis Baltz, letter to Harold Jones, March 4, 1972. Harold Jones Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG:67

²⁰⁴ Balaschak 33. Balaschak cites a 2009 e-mail with Baltz.

²⁰⁵ John Coplans, *Serial Imagery* (Pasadena: Pasadena Museum of Art and The New York Graphic Society, 1968).

looking around, testing things, trying to find if there was a subject that could sustain that kind of engagement.”²⁰⁶ In tract houses and industrial parks, he found his answer – and in the photo book, a vehicle that could preserve that serial format and its manner of address. “No matter what happened to the objects,” he said, referring to galleries’ practice of breaking up series to sell individual prints, “I had the book. And one of the joys of multiples is that they can be put back together.”²⁰⁷

Working serially so as to de-emphasize single images – which Baltz furthermore undermined by carefully sequencing his books and installations – played into his effort to communicate a critical view of his subject matter. Similar to the move of evacuating his images of people, confronting viewers with multiple images presented in equal weight blocked the ability to project narrative onto the photographs, thereby increasing interpretive discomfort, and in turn, the possibility of grasping the work’s critical message. “An uninhabited picture has the possibility of the viewer projecting him or herself into the picture,” Baltz realized. He elaborated on his work’s assumption of the viewer’s agency in completing the photographs’ meaning:

I felt that if you wanted to have a rant, and to rage against something, the most effective way to do it was not to overtly rage against it, but would be to lay it out, bit by bit, piece by piece, the evidence – like in a legal brief... And let people, presumably, freely, come to the conclusion that you’ve directed them towards, keeping in mind that no one cares about your ideas, but if somebody believes that something is their own idea, they will die and kill for it. I’ve thought this has social value or propaganda value and can be effective in a way that scolding and moralizing cannot.²⁰⁸

This linkage of efficacy with ambiguity also came through in places where Baltz voiced

²⁰⁶ Oral history interview with Lewis Baltz by Matthew Witkovsky, November 15-17, 2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

²⁰⁷ “Last Interview of Lewis Baltz with Jeff Rian”

²⁰⁸ Ibid

his admiration of other artists. Lawrence Weiner's work, for example, was "powerful because it was ambiguous. Because it is ambiguous, it involves you, and it makes you think."²⁰⁹

For Baltz, photography was the most effective means by which to conduct a similar inquiry, to address and position viewers in this less narrativizing, and therefore more critical manner. It is striking that in his exhibition *Mirrors and Windows* show at MoMA in 1978, John Szarkowski assigned Baltz's work to the "mirrors" side of his thesis – the same side as Ruscha, where the photograph reflected the artist, as opposed to figuring as a window "through which one might better know the world."²¹⁰ Baltz's photographs are not served by Szarkowski's binary; they are not "mirrors," because they do not tell us about Baltz; and their rigorously frontal, compressed organization of pictorial space is at odds with the naturalism suggested by regarding the photograph as an illusionistic "window." Perhaps when Szarkowski deemed Baltz's photographs incompatible with the notion of a "window," it was because he sensed the alienation that colored the artist's practice. In Baltz's own words, photography was the best medium *not* to grow closer to his subject matter, but rather to "distance myself from a world that I loathed and was powerless to improve."²¹¹

Conclusions: Photographer and Artist

Ultimately, Joe Deal was perfectly content to be known as a photographer, while his friend Lewis Baltz identified as an artist. But the ways in which each of them thought

²⁰⁹ Ibid

²¹⁰ See John Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978).

²¹¹ Ibid

about their respective projects resonated with the rhetoric of “straight” photography: the belief that minimizing editorializing and depicting subject matter directly, in a purportedly unfiltered manner, enabled one’s viewers to somehow access photographic subject matter in a more authentic way. Baltz could have spoken for both of them when he declared: “I want my photographs to be neutral and free from aesthetic or ideological posturing.”²¹² Nevertheless, both of them were also aware that, as Baltz conceded: “Neutrality is a loaded word; it’s something you don’t ever totally achieve. Let’s say that compared with much more overtly subjective photographic statements, I tried to be uninflected, since objectivity and neutrality are only aspirations, not something attainable in the real world.”²¹³

What distinguished Baltz and Deal’s endeavor to adopt a “straight” mode was that in 1975, they were pursuing it with awareness of contemporaneous art that likewise aimed at a model of authorship in the form of its apparent absence. Baltz even proposed that Ed Ruscha’s work could be interpreted as continuous with earlier “straight” photography, rather than representing a rupture from it:

If you read what, say, Weston was writing in the 1920s, he talked about an industrial medium, reflective surfaces, contemporary subject matter – it’s a straighter line to Ruscha’s *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* than it would ever be to Ansel Adams’s pictures of Yosemite and their kitschy calendar sensibility. I was one of those guys who believed in straight photography, and what Ruscha was doing was simply straighter, photography degree zero, when photography became more and more transparent.²¹⁴

This particular statement came decades after *New Topographics*, but it helps to account for why Jenkins felt compelled to invoke the notion of “documentary” in trying to

²¹² Lewis Baltz, quoted in *Landscape Theory*, ed. Carol DiGrappa (New York: Lustrum Press, 1980), 23.

²¹³ Heiferman 97

²¹⁴ “Last Interview of Lewis Baltz with Jeff Rian”

identify what was at stake in *New Topographics* and the kinds of ideas that motivated its photographers.

Again, though, as Baltz argued in the context of reviewing Robert Adams's 1974 book *The New West*: "The ideal document would be without author or art."²¹⁵ And his and Deal's work was certainly art, and certainly authored – so strongly, in fact, as to paradoxically appear stylized, idiosyncratic and identifiable. It was not that Baltz and Deal were exploring problems of how to render subject matter "straightforwardly" for its own sake, linking formal clarity with documentary trustworthiness. Rather, the strategies they adapted from other contemporary art – working and presenting images in a serial manner, embracing an economy of means, imposing predetermined sets of constraints on themselves, and eliminating hierarchy in their photographs – all disrupted the positioning between author, viewer, and subject matter typical of a landscape photograph. It was a conceptually-informed endeavor that was, in the end, geared towards critique. As Baltz reflected on the art of this time period late in his life: "Art changed nothing, but by informing people's perception of the phenomenal world, it changed everything."²¹⁶ This echoed a point from his landmark 1985 essay on 1970s photography, where he elaborated:

If one wished to influence social or political issues, then images were no substitute for direct political struggle. Photography's value lies elsewhere: in describing the surfaces of the phenomenal world in a manner unique to itself; hoping, at best, to contribute a precise, if necessarily limited, understanding of the objects and events in front of the lens, and some insight into the mind behind it.

²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Lewis Baltz, review of *The New West* by Robert Adams, in *Art in America*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (March/April 1975), 41. Quoted in Jenkins, "Introduction," 6.

²¹⁶ "Last Interview of Lewis Baltz with Jeff Rian"

²¹⁷ Baltz, "American Photography in the 1970s: Too Old to Rock, Too Young to Die," 63.

The self-consciousness that Baltz expressed here supports Jason Weems's point that interpretations of *New Topographics* photographers like Deal and Baltz as critical may too often have the effect of positioning them fully "above the fray": separate from and outside of the desires and ideologies embedded in spaces like back yards and industrial parks.²¹⁸ Weems instead advocates an interpretation of their work as the products of a worldview marked by ambivalence and skepticism:

One wonders what might happen if we shaped a model of postwar landscape photography wherein the argument for avant-gardism was not so clear cut – where the images of [Baltz et. al.] are perceived not as statements of conviction, but as open-ended markers of a more uncertain engagement with a landscape whose definition remained equally unfixed.²¹⁹

This analysis has endeavored to show why reception is a vital avenue of inquiry to advance such an interpretation. For, crucial to establishing the work's ambiguity or skepticism is considering the way it positioned its audience in 1975. That both Deal and Baltz's work could read as "neutral" and "critical" simultaneously underscores how neutrality is a function of response, rather than a quality inherent to any art object. Minimalism, conceptual art, and the pair's photographs alike appeared cool and detached because of the conventions to which their audience was accustomed. Examining the reception of *New Topographics* in light of broader art world discourse helps to elucidate the approach that the exhibition identified, and qualify its watershed status not just in photographic history, but in the history of art production in the 1970s.

²¹⁸ Jason Weems, "The Meaning of Landscape in Late Twentieth-Century California Photography and Vice Versa," in Westerbeck, *Seismic Shift*, 77.

²¹⁹ Ibid

Chapter 4

Pop Goes the Photographer: Color and Culture in Stephen Shore

I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low.

-Ralph Waldo Emerson¹

I like boring things.

-Andy Warhol²

I really feel sorry for people who think things like soap dishes or mirrors or coke bottles are ugly, because they're surrounded by things like that all day long, and it must make them miserable.

-Robert Rauschenberg³

The photograph's caption indicates a set of coordinates: Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue in Los Angeles, California. The image (**fig. 4.1**) places the viewer at an intersection distinguished by its visual cacophony: signage, street lamps, telephone poles, and billboard advertisements appear against a cloudless blue sky, forming a complex arrangement of vertical and horizontal lines.⁴ An enormous sign for a Chevron gas station looms overhead, its bold ultramarine and cherry red logo echoed below on two fuel dispensers. To the left, the plunging offset orthogonal in the form of La Brea Avenue advances north toward the Hollywood Hills, which register as muted periwinkle. A pair

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," 1837.

² Quoted in Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol Sixties* (Boston: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015).

³ Robert Rauschenberg, quoted in Michael Kimmelman, "Robert Rauschenberg, American Artist, Dies at 82," *New York Times*, May 14, 2008.

⁴ Shore has said of this image: "I was interested in seeing how many of these visual interstices I could juggle in a single image." Stephen Shore, "Form and Pressure," *Aperture* No. 205 (Winter 2011): 44-49 (44).

of cars just beyond the pole in the foreground appears slightly blurred, as if just having accelerated at the signal of the green light ahead. The cars' synthetic, candy-like hues of orange and yellow are repeated in the McDonald's billboard disappearing out of the frame at the left, while on the other side of the street, Chevron's competitor Texaco occupies a lime green structure set back from the road. The entire anti-spectacle rests upon a patchwork of gray concrete. Nominally, it is a landscape photograph, but everything natural has been paved over; the entire composition is about the presence of people, and anchors itself around the things they have built. The viewer may wonder whether this paradox of banality and visual interest is offered for her pleasure or judgment, or something in between. This question takes on an even greater significance when we consider that the photograph was in fact made for a commission by the architect-authors of *Learning from Las Vegas*, who sent the photographer on a road trip to record such scenes in the American landscape, notable precisely because they were "ugly and ordinary."⁵

Just a few months after Stephen Shore made this image, which has since become canonical in the history of color photography and iconic within his oeuvre, he participated in *New Topographics* as the sole color photographer in the show. Paging through the exhibition catalog, which is otherwise printed in halftone, his photographs arrive as a sudden chromatic interruption. The same could be said of his prints' presence in the Brackett Clark Gallery at the Eastman House, where, as one visitor stated, Shore's photographs broke up what she perceived as the "monotony" of the black and white

⁵ Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, and Robert Venturi, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972). For their "theory of ugly and ordinary," see especially Part II.

work.⁶ That Shore's work functioned as a breath of fresh air for some viewers is supported by William Wilson's review of the West Coast iteration of *New Topographics*, where he wrote rather nostalgically that Shore's prints "immediately sing with an obvious and gentle affection in contrast to the others... the color of Shore's pictures warms their bored detachment to an appreciation of serenity and peace. Little gas stations, houses and Ma and Pa stores become oases of humanity in a world that can still smile."⁷ But not all those who visited *New Topographics* were so generous, as one viewer at the Eastman House declared: "If this were a slide that I had taken, I would have thrown it away. What's to see?"⁸ Her allusion to a hypothetical scenario where she made the photograph instead reveals her linkage of the work with amateurism. It also points to a common type of experience the average visitor to *New Topographics* had in 1975, and may have drawn from in trying to interpret Shore's prints: that of encountering color photographs in the form of small slides, perhaps in a carousel of family snapshots.

Another way to account for the viewer's bafflement would be to point out that color photography was also then still largely associated with commercial contexts.⁹ As Shore's fellow color photographer Joel Sternfeld has recollected of this time, color was

⁶ Excerpt from tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

⁷ William Wilson, "Camera Artists: Truth in Focus," *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 1976, E10.

⁸ Excerpt from tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

⁹ Three recent accounts of the history of color photography include: Kate Bussard and Lisa Hostetler, *Color Rush: American Color Photography from Stieglitz to Sherman* (New York: Aperture, 2013); John Rohrbach, *Color: American Photography Transformed* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013); and Kevin Moore, *Starburst: Color Photography in America, 1970-1980* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2010). The first color photography exhibition to broadly survey color photography produced since the 1970s was *The New Color Photography* in 1981. See Sally Euclaire, *The New Color Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981).

“a pariah in the community of aesthetic imagery.”¹⁰ However, in 1976, one critic observed that Shore’s 8x10 prints only resembled something like postcards “at first glance” – likely referring to factors like Shore’s rigorous craft and non-monumental subjects, which distanced his photographs from that common type of color picture.¹¹ In the handful of responses we have from audiences in this period, such as guest books from Shore’s exhibitions at LIGHT Gallery or the interviews that Joe Deal’s student conducted in the Eastman House galleries, people do not actually compare Shore’s photographs to postcards or advertisements.¹² While their experiences encountering color photography primarily through the forms of commercial imagery or family snapshots almost certainly impacted their individual responses to the work (and postcards were also a conceptual reference for Shore), people expressed their confusion in more abstract terms: “I think the intention was to just show everyday life, or something... I don’t know, middle-class America or something like that. But if that’s so, then what about it?... It doesn’t seem to make a statement one way or the other...there doesn’t seem to be a theme except everyday life.”¹³ Their comments are layered and complex. For those who found Shore’s work hard to interpret, the issue was not necessarily that his prints were in color; it had more to do with elements that people found difficult in *New Topographics* more broadly,

¹⁰ Joel Sternfeld, “Focus: Holden Street, North Adams, Massachusetts, July 13, 1974,” in *Joel Sternfeld, Stephen Shore (Contemporary Artists)* (London: Phaidon, 2008), 117-121 (117).

¹¹ Gene Thornton, “Formalists Who Flirt With Banality,” *New York Times*, November 14, 1976, 34.

¹² Critics taking stock of the period, too, emphasized the gulf between these kinds of pictures; in 1981, Sally Euclaire wrote that where it concerned the relation between fine art color photography and snapshots, the two classes of pictures were “as similar as Abstract Expressionist paintings are to oil spills.” Euclaire 7.

¹³ Excerpt from tape-recorded interviews conducted by Bess Abel, a photography student of Joe Deal, on December 13 and 14, 1975. Tape and transcripts, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

and with which color intersected: commonplace subject matter, the absence of conventional signs of photographic expressivity, and something that might best be described as the work's resolute contemporaneity.

From the standpoint of today, it is almost inevitable that we look at Shore's images and see "the Seventies" – not least because of the way the color of his prints tends to shift. But as photographer Tim Davis has observed in writing about Shore's work: "It wasn't "the 70s" when he made those pictures, it was NOW."¹⁴ And paired with subject matter that viewers typically glanced at rather than gazed at for a prolonged period of time, color underscored this "nowness," and had the potential to feel insufficiently different from everyday seeing. Sternfeld rationalizes it thus: "We have never seen the world in black and white except in in photographs or in film. To encounter a black and white photograph is to encounter something instantly abstract. It is removed from the turgid, chromatic play of life, and this removal may instantly impart a certain transcendence."¹⁵ As the critical reception of key color photography exhibitions in the 1970s demonstrated, it was often difficult for color photographs to achieve this kind of transcendence, or to convince viewers why "now," in color, deserved their serious attention. Consider Hilton Kramer reviewing William Eggleston at MoMA in 1976, parodying curator John Szarkowski's claim that Eggleston's photographs were "perfect": "Perfectly banal, perhaps. Perfectly boring, certainly."¹⁶ Landscapes that depicted the

¹⁴ Tim Davis, "Stephen Shore: "Pop" Artist," *Photograph Magazine* online, November 2017. <https://photographmag.com/issues/novdec-2017/feature/>

¹⁵ Sternfeld 118

¹⁶ Hilton Kramer, "Art: Focus on Photo Shows," *New York Times*, May 28, 1976: 62, and John Szarkowski, "Preface," in William Eggleston and Szarkowski, *William Eggleston's Guide* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976), 14. While Eggleston's show has garnered a reputation for being a watershed moment, it should be noted that this was not the first color photography exhibition at MoMA; in 1943, the museum staged its first color monographic show *Birds in*

built environment in color rather than black and white, especially, presented an interpretive double-whammy. Circa 1975, at the same time that viewers could claim photographs like those in *New Topographics* were not natural *enough* – because they took as their subject the altered landscape, rather than nature alone – much creative color photography was also deemed something akin to *too* natural, its color placing it in too close a proximity to ordinary, lived vision to be recognized as “authored,” or as art.

While one might be tempted, then, to say that Stephen Shore’s work figures as an outlier in *New Topographics* solely by virtue of its color, the interpretive issues arising from that fact actually rendered the work especially appropriate to include in the exhibition. Although Shore’s work still functions as a “significant outlier” in *New Topographics* – it is for another reason. That status is even more so qualified by his Pop-like curiosity about American culture, and how his photographs work to place their idealized viewer into a mode that is at the very least receptive to, rather than judgmental of, the subject matter. This may help to explain why William Jenkins mentions every photographer but Shore in his introduction to the *New Topographics* catalog. It is as if already in 1975, Jenkins viewed Shore as somewhat of an outsider whose work was in some ways tricky to situate in relation to the others’. The legacy of the exhibition has been overwhelmingly tied to Shore’s peers working in black and white. However, Shore’s work strongly conforms to the thesis of *New Topographics* in a way that enriches our understanding of the exhibition; his iteration of the “neutral” happens to position the viewer less critically than that of his peers, which underscores how this mode can be deployed for ends other than critique. In Shore’s case, it is largely in service of what has

Color: Flashlight Photographs by Eliot Porter. Color photography had been featured in a number of other previous exhibitions as well. See Bussard 11.

become a career-long inquiry into circumventing convention, which is a problem at the heart of the approach *New Topographics* sought to identify. As another reviewer of *New Topographics* stated: “Color appears only in the photographs by Stephen Shore, but his works are as transparent as the rest.”¹⁷ Such statements are useful to us not only because they reveal how individual audience members ascribed warmth or coolness to color (for this reviewer, Shore’s photographs were “transparent” *despite* being in color – hence color is warm); they also indicate that regardless of how color impacted the accessibility of the work, there were other elements of the photographs that resulted in people’s perceptions of them as neutral.

Shore has described his pursuit of landscape photography as “honing a mental craft.”¹⁸ Similar to how the picturesque entailed a way of *viewing* the landscape in a particular manner (and not just the artistic products of that vision), the photographer’s iteration of neutrality extended from his habits of seeing – although these involved turning the picturesque on its head by deliberately selecting for un-picturesque subjects. This ambition marked Shore’s earliest serious work, where in 1970, for example, he set himself the task of walking up the Avenue of the Americas in New York and taking a photograph on every block from 42nd Street to 59th Street (**fig. 4.2**).¹⁹ By self-imposing this arbitrary constraint, he created the conditions to make pictures that his conscious,

¹⁷ Robert W. Woolard, “Man-Shaped Landscapes,” *Artweek* Vol. 7, No. 13 (March 27, 1976): 12.

¹⁸ Quoted in David Campamy, “Ways of Making Pictures” (Stephen Shore in conversation with David Campamy), in *Stephen Shore: Survey* (Aperture/Fundación MAPFRE, 2014), 23-55 (46).

¹⁹ Shore used infrared film for the piece. He reflected in 2017: “There was some Conceptual photography being done at the time that tended to treat the photograph as a record of the idea, but not as a piece of real information in itself. And I wanted to produce images that had visual content, that existed as images as well as parts of a conceptual framework. And so, with this work, I chose to use infrared film, which makes things glow in this particular way. And I don’t even remember why I chose that; I’m glad I did.” Quoted in the audio tour for Shore’s 2017 MoMA retrospective. Transcript available at: <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/45/707>

rational mind may have overlooked. Continuing through *Uncommon Places* (the series that several of his *New Topographics* prints came from, 1973-82), this way of seeing yielded pictures that trained viewers' attention on the banal, which could prompt interpretive discomfort. If viewers were able to overcome their aversion to prolonged looking at such ordinary subject matter, however, they could share the photographer's fascination towards culture as it is embedded in architectural form. Shore reasoned: "I can't photograph a cultural force; I can only photograph things that become visible in the world. And one of the ways they become visible is in architecture."²⁰

In the wake of Shore's 2017 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, Tim Davis made the provocative claim that the photographer should be considered a "Pop" artist.²¹ It is true that like Andy Warhol, Shore elevates the "low" through rigorous means that nevertheless undermine the viewer's sense of the artist's subjectivity, because of their association with commercial production contexts. Shore also appropriated found imagery as source material in several of his early projects. With the term "Pop," however, Davis wanted to convey an idea having to do with perception, following from how Shore himself will often say that an image "pops." Davis elaborates:

This popping is the visual equivalent of a sonic boom, the quality a picture has when it breaks the barrier between the ground and the ground glass, between something you overlook and something seen... There is a challenge in any Stephen Shore photograph, a steely-eyed dare, to look at *this, this, this*, despite there not being anything obvious or conventional to look at.²²

What is "Pop" about Shore's work is its consistency with the Warholian notion that the

²⁰ Quoted in the audio tour for Shore's 2017 MoMA retrospective (specifically, in the context of Shore discussing his work with Venturi for the 1976 exhibition, *Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City*). Transcript available at: <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/45/718>

²¹ Davis

²² Davis

everyday can be art, if you care to really look at it. Shore's photographs do not "abstract," Davis concludes, but rather "simulate or represent the experience of seeing."²³

As I have argued throughout this study, no photograph is without convention. All photographs are coded, even if they are coded to appear unconventional, styleless, or akin to seeing. If Shore's work is "cool" in the way this project has theorized that quality, it is because of how the photographer forged a *new* set of conventions that analogize the activity of observation, structuring his viewers' encounters with the human-altered landscape in a rigorously studied, yet non-hierarchical way. For a significant portion of his audience ca. 1975, color in fact figured as an element of interest, allure, or familiarity in the work; what felt foreign was having one's attention trained on those commonplace subjects in a prolonged way. Training attention on the ordinary is something that Shore pursued in earlier series like *American Surfaces* (1972-73), but that effort was augmented by the 8x10 format because of that camera's ability to render space and enable deep, all-over focus. Shore's rigorous means and neutral authorial stance were thus consistent with his peers in *New Topographics*, but the ends of that stance – attributing value to the built environment, and offering it as a subject for viewers' attention, rather than judgment – placed his work at odds with the critical viewership manifested in Robert Adams, Joe Deal, or Lewis Baltz's photographs. Instead, Shore's work was more in step with the philosophies of figures like John Brinckerhoff Jackson or the *Learning from Las Vegas* architects, who ascribed great value to the "vernacular" landscape – understood here in the broadest sense as instances where function drives aesthetics. In their respective projects, the subjects of study encompassed domestic, industrial, and commercial

²³ Davis

valences of that term.²⁴ “I wasn’t simply interested in documenting America; I was also interested in learning and understanding photography and perception,” Shore has said of his 1970s work.²⁵ He wanted to make pictures that formalized a way of seeing that was unencumbered by convention. By crafting a new set of formal means to analogize the activity of clear and prolonged looking, the photographs modeled a receptive attitude toward their built environment subjects.

A Factory Foundation

The social and creative company Shore sought as a young person primed him to regard these multiple cultural “vernaculars” in a curious, sympathetic way. An uncle gave him a Kodak Junior darkroom for his sixth birthday, and it was two years before he would take any of his own pictures. Meanwhile, his family owned a Brownie, and Shore developed and printed their film and snapshots.²⁶ When Shore was ten, his upstairs neighbor, who was the head of a music publishing company, gifted Shore a copy of Walker Evans’s *American Photographs*. As Shore later put it, its impact upon him went beyond influence: “When I saw his work I recognized someone who thought the way I

²⁴ In her historiographic treatment of *New Topographics*, in the context of discussing Dan Graham’s *Homes for America* in relation to ideas in the exhibition, Britt Salvesen differentiates between commercial, primitive, idealized, and industrial vernaculars, noting that these swaths of cultural production in architectural form were “celebrated” under different “rubrics” – romantic, modern, and in the case of *Learning from Las Vegas*, the postmodern. See Salvesen, “Introduction,” 23. On the “commercial” vernacular in particular, she refers to J.B. Jackson, “Urban: Circumstances,” *Design Quarterly*, No. 128 (1995): 1-3 and 5-31, and John Chase, “Unvernacular Vernacular: Contemporary American Consumerist Architecture,” *Design Quarterly*, No. 131 (1986): 1-3 and 5-32. On the “domestic” vernacular, see Denise Scott Brown, “Learning from Brinck” in Chris Wilson and Paul Groth, eds. *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies after J. B. Jackson* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 49-61.

²⁵ Company 51

²⁶ Company 23

would think if I were mature enough to think that way.”²⁷ Nevertheless, Shore’s visual maturity was recognizably advanced to the extent that Edward Steichen bought three of his black and white prints for the collection at the Museum of Modern Art when Shore was only fourteen.

In 1965, Shore met Andy Warhol and began to cut school at Columbia Grammar Prep to spend time at Warhol’s studio, the Factory, at its first location at 231 East 47th Street in Midtown Manhattan.²⁸ During some weeks, he was there nearly every day. Between 1965 and 1967 in particular, he regularly photographed Warhol and the traffic of other artists, creatives, and figures through the studio. In his recollection, there was “a lot of sitting around on couches waiting for something to happen.”²⁹ Though other visitors would simply wait until the time came to depart for evening parties, Shore intently observed Warhol making “formal decisions,”³⁰ which taught him the value of hard, persistent work and gave him a model of what a creative process could look like. Crucially, watching Warhol work also instilled Shore with a “detached pleasure in the banality of everyday things.”³¹ He later reflected: “Andy may have been more... cynical than I am. But he took pleasure in the culture. He was just amazed at how things are. It struck a chord that may have already existed in me.” After all, Shore noted of the banal, “it’s what photography deals with.”³²

Indeed, a kind of wonderment about popular culture came across in *All the Meat*

²⁷ Company 24

²⁸ See Stephen Shore, *The Velvet Years: Andy Warhol’s Factory 1965-1967* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1995)

²⁹ Sean O’Hagan, “That was Then,” *The Guardian*, November 13, 2005. Accessed at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2005/nov/13/photography.shopping>

³⁰ Company 26

³¹ O’Hagan

³² Company 27

You Can Eat, an installation Shore mounted at the 98 Greene Street Loft in November 1971 (**fig. 4.3**).³³ The project was a collaboration with Weston Naef, a curator of photography at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Shore's close friend and Amarillo, Texas native Michael Marsh, who is pictured in some of his photographs from the period.³⁴ The loft, a non-commercial art space in SoHo, was a fitting place to stage such an alternative installation opposed to the typical norms for displaying art. On the one hand, the art itself was mostly comprised of found imagery, which Shore and his companions organized into collage-like grids and tacked to the wall without any framing. The range of pictures, which spanned a century and were deliberately mixed together into disparate groups, included police photographs depicting criminals and crime scenes, night club souvenir photos, publicity stills, studio portraits, pages from interior design magazines, identification photos, advertisements, fashion photography, pornographic imagery, scenes of the 1969 moon landing, and a western landscape by Eadweard Muybridge.³⁵ Also in the mix were snapshots Shore himself had taken with his Mickey Mouse-shaped "Mick-o-Matic" camera, and color photos that he would use for his project *Greetings from Amarillo*, "Tall in Texas," a series of ten postcards that pictured familiar sites in the city like its courthouse and a beloved barbecue joint. Shore had made the Amarillo photographs with a 35-millimeter camera using color transparency film, and

³³ The show was on view from November 8-20, 1971. Started in 1969 by collectors Holly and Horace Solomon, the loft was intended as a space for showing creative work aside from the visual arts, encompassing musical performances and poetry readings. It existed for 4 years. Shore had met the Solomons at Warhol's Factory. See Quentin Bajac, "All the Meat You Can Eat," in Bajac, *Stephen Shore* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2017), 14-15.

³⁴ Marsh's family had art connections; his brother Stanley Marsh, who lived in Amarillo, commissioned an earthwork by Robert Smithson at the time. As Shore recalls, the artist John Chamberlain also "lived and crushed cars at his house for about half a year in the 70s." Haworth-Booth 45.

³⁵ Bajac, "All the Meat You Can Eat," 14

had them printed by the largest postcard printing company in America.³⁶ He later attributed his interest in postcards to how they “conveyed cultural information without the pretense of art. They seemed very direct and uninflected views of our culture.”³⁷ When the series didn’t sell at the fine art book shop Wittenborn & Co. back in New York (which was in fact downstairs from LIGHT Gallery), Shore took to surreptitiously stuffing them into actual postcard racks that he encountered on his road trips across the country. This act of mischief redoubled their slippage between aesthetic and commercial registers. Notably, however, the postcards did find a receptive audience in several well-known Pop artists in London: David Hockney, R. B. Kitaj, and Eduardo Paolozzi.³⁸

From early on, then, Shore’s practice was marked by a Pop-like penchant for leveling hierarchy, a sincere curiosity about both popular and regional culture, a fascination with commercial printing processes, and an interest in pictures that reflected different modes of authorship. The latter contributed to the disorientation visitors could feel while experiencing *All the Meat You Can Eat*, which, as its title suggested, presented a ravenous, primal buffet of pictures that could be difficult to digest. The experience of looking at a portrait differs, for example, from the evidence-seeking scanning one might perform looking at an image of a crime scene, which differs still from the acquisitive gaze that one might adopt in consuming ads. Trying to perform all of these ways of reading photographs at once could result in a feeling of image overload. In a review where he contrasted *All the Meat You Can Eat* with more admirable “academic art

³⁶ Haworth-Booth 46. The company was Dexter Press in West Nyack, New York.

³⁷ Shore recounts these circumstances in his audio guide for his recent 2017 MoMA retrospective. See <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/45/716>

³⁸ Haworth-Booth 46. The postcards were exhibited at Thomas Gibson Fine Art in London 1972, where they were presented on commercial postcard racks.

photography” by Wynn Bullock, Harry Callahan, and Aaron Siskind, critic Gene Thornton dismissed the installation as “plain junk,” lamenting that “Shore’s fascinating selection is a healthy, if possibly unwelcome, reminder of the part that photography really plays in the world” – presumably, code for non-art or kitsch.³⁹ Thornton was unwilling to accept the challenge that the installation intimated for its viewer, which was to see what happened when one attended to different orders of pictures with the same level of interest. In retrospect, one can frame the installation as a project about both photography and culture, and an endeavor to un-train response on the part of both Shore and his audience. It is as if in order to rid his own seeing habits of conventions, Shore had to metabolize them in the form of a broad-ranging, yet playful investigation into all the types of photographs that enter into daily life, going so far as to present his own photographs (the postcard series) as level with the rest.

Thornton had been tough on Shore before for different, yet adjacent reasons, assigning the black and white, conceptual work in his solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art earlier that year to “those desolate reaches of contemporary art where both subject matter and the artist’s feelings are suppressed, where the audience’s anticipated responses are systematically nullified, where indeed, there may be no work of art at all, but merely an idea.”⁴⁰ His primary complaint was the weakness he ascribed to Shore’s concepts, but his review is notable for how it underscores issues having to do with reception. The critic found it difficult to detect Shore’s presence in the work, and as

³⁹ Gene Thornton, “From Fine Art to Plain Junk,” *New York Times*, November 14, 1971, D38. Bullock, Callahan, and Siskind were on view at LIGHT at the same time that Shore’s installation occurred.

⁴⁰ Gene Thornton, “Is It Necessary to Ask What They Mean?” *New York Times*, March 7, 1971, D30.

a result, felt adrift as a viewer, unable to turn to usual “responses.” His interpretation was a logical outcome of the processes by which the work had been generated, however, since Shore stated outright that he was deliberately trying to make photographs that “did not show as much the artifice of visual convention.”⁴¹ In many ways, this was the content of the work, regardless of what was depicted; the series were systematic examinations of the visual world unhindered by selecting for picturesque subjects.

Four months after *All the Meat You Can Eat*, in March 1972 Shore continued this inquiry with *American Surfaces*, where he “would take essentially a screenshot of my field of vision,” he described in retrospect.⁴² He made the images with a Rollei 35 equipped with a flash, which he brought along for a series of road trips he took across the United States.⁴³ The pictures figure as a diary of “everyone I met, every meal, every toilet, every bed I slept in, the streets I walked on, the towns I visited.”⁴⁴ Included are scenes of dirty ovens, unmade beds, vacant television screens, friends and shopkeepers, placemats and parking lots. Shore generally centered these subjects in the frame, which both mimics how our eyes focus on things in our field of vision, and has the effect of offering them as nouns rather than sentences, the series in turn figuring as a list or

⁴¹ Katherine Oktober Matthews, “What Looking Looks Like: An Interview with Stephen Shore,” *Gup Magazine* online, <http://www.gupmagazine.com/articles/what-looking-looks-like-an-interview-with-stephen-shore>

⁴² Quoted in Matthews

⁴³ Regarding how Shore made a living in these years and funded these road trips, in 1974 he recalls “living off a little family money. By the end of 1974, that had gone. I was fortunate that, in 1975, I got a National Endowment for the Arts grant. I also got a commission from Robert Venturi, which really paid for the cross-country trip that year.” His work at LIGHT was selling for \$150 per print, and the gallery received half of that, and then Shore recalls having to pay taxes. “So, it was commissions that paid the bills.” Company 37-38.

⁴⁴ Quoted in “Stephen Shore in Conversation with Lynne Tillman,” in *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works* (New York: Aperture, 2004), 179. *Uncommon Places* was first published in 1982 as a book of 49 photographs.

inventory rather than a coherent narrative. In fall 1972, he exhibited the 3x5-inch Kodacolor prints at LIGHT Gallery in the form of a gridded strip three photographs high and mounted at eye-height, with the photographs tacked to the wall without any matting or framing (**fig. 4.4**). In his recollection, “there was no reverence in the presentation.”⁴⁵ Critic A.D. Coleman eviscerated the installation in the only review the show received, calling it “thin, benumbing, and banal.”⁴⁶ Underscoring his perception of the pictures as both amateurish and lacking any evidence of subjective interference, he wrote: “Historians of the future will, of course, turn to this sort of material for the purposes of visual anthropology (though with millions of people out there creating it, Shore is hardly making a distinctive contribution to the genre).”⁴⁷ Shore’s friend and *All the Meat You Can Eat* collaborator Weston Naef purchased the set from LIGHT, which he later donated to the Met.⁴⁸

Describing the authorial stance he wanted to explore in *American Surfaces*, Shore drew a parallel with writing: “I think everyone’s had the experience that when they write, they tend to use a language that’s a little more formal and stilted than when they speak, and I think there’s a visual equivalent to that. I wanted a picture that was more the visual equivalent of speaking.”⁴⁹ Rearticulated in the terms of reader response criticism, we could say that Shore wanted to make pictures that escaped the voice of the “implied

⁴⁵ Company 32

⁴⁶ A.D. Coleman, “Latent Image: American Yawn, Irish Wail,” *Village Voice*, October 5, 1972: 31. See also Coleman, “I have a Blind Spot About Color Photographs,” *New York Times*, August 19, 1971, p. D26.

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ LIGHT set the price for the set at \$500.00. As Quentin Bajac has noted, the series remained in obscurity until its “rediscovery” in 1999, which marked the exhibition of the work in Cologne and Frankfurt and an accompanying catalogue published by Schirmer/Mosel. See Quentin Bajac, “American Surfaces,” in Bajac, *Stephen Shore*, 22-23.

⁴⁹ Matthews

author.” But the dynamic he describes here is striking because typically that is the authorial entity perceived by readers, rather than authors themselves. *American Surfaces* thus offers an iteration of deskilling conceived not just as a posture of mimicking a naïve maker, but even more so performing those gestures in a quest for self-knowledge: discovering what you, the author, can see if you slough off your sophisticated self that tells you what is “picturesque,” and what is not. Shore’s exploration of this problem from approximately 1971-1973 involved turning to found imagery, postcards, and imposing arbitrary constraints on himself while photographing. Emerging on the other side of this period of rapid experimentation, he had become far more aware of the filter of sanctioned conventions that mediated his vision, and realized that the 8x10 camera could help him make pictures that analogized his newfound seeing habits.

Shore’s contribution of 8x10 color contact prints to *New Topographics* must be considered in light of what he created in the years just prior to the exhibition. Now, many of these pictures are as canonical as their maker, who in the interim has even been criticized for his “formalism.”⁵⁰ But we need to recover what they were in 1975: a next step in an ongoing inquiry into unconventional ways of both seeing and making photographs, and the products of a nimble, restless, Factory-trained artist who had a Pop-like curiosity about American culture, and enthusiastically switched between camera

⁵⁰ Quentin Bajac notes that by the early 1980s, there was a shift in criticism from describing Shore’s work as “deadpan” to “formalist.” For example, Gene Thornton first counted Shore among “the new photographic formalists” in his article “Formalists who Flirt with Banality” in late 1976. Bajac writes: “Tired of looking for meaning in the work, reviewers chose to speak of its rigorous formalism; according to some critics, the banality of the subject matter forced viewers to focus only on the formal qualities of the image.” Bajac also refers to a 1982 *Artweek* review where a critic acknowledged that some viewers considered Shore’s photographs “boring formalist exercises” and wrote that Shore “avoids social questions and retreats to an individualistic sense of harmony” (Ted Hedges, “Saturated with Actuality,” *Artweek*, January 9, 1982, 11.) See Bajac, “Deadpan,” in Bajac, *Stephen Shore*, 86.

formats that had different possibilities and limitations and were associated with varying degrees of “high” and “low.” Approaching Shore’s work in *New Topographics* as a stop in this trajectory, rather than in isolation, sets the stage to account for why his work simultaneously lends itself to the show’s thesis about style on the one hand, but also challenges the prevalent association of the exhibition with a uniformly critical view of the built environment.

Main Street, U.S.A.: *Uncommon Places* in *New Topographics*

The sequence of events that led to Shore’s inclusion in *New Topographics* are not well-documented, but generally involved both personal associations and Jenkins having seen the photographer’s work at LIGHT Gallery, which had represented Shore since 1972 and given him shows in 1972, 1973, and 1975.⁵¹ In particular, Jenkins may have seen a February-March 1975 exhibition where Shore was exhibited alongside fellow *New Topographics* photographer Frank Gohlke.⁵² Shore also already knew Nicholas Nixon, who had also introduced him to Gohlke and John Schott. When Jenkins solicited statements from the photographers about their inclusion in the show, Shore did not end up submitting one.

At the Eastman House, Shore’s contact prints were installed in the corner of the Brackett Clark Gallery furthest from where visitors entered *New Topographics*. People would have seen at least half of the show prior to arriving at his work, which likely heightened the sense of surprise from turning the corner and meeting two walls full of

⁵¹ See exhibition chronology materials in LIGHT Gallery Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG 194.

⁵² Salvesen, “Introduction,” 48

color prints. They shared the corner with John Schott's photographs depicting Route 66.⁵³ Given the association of that thoroughfare with the all-American road trip, pairing Schott and Shore in a corner made thematic sense; Shore's photographs were all products of road trips he had taken across the country between June 1974 and February 1975. Geographically, their contents spanned from Maine to California.⁵⁴

Unlike many of the other bodies of work in the show, which focused on a certain class of planned architecture like suburban sprawl or industrial parks, Shore's subjects were more diverse, "unconscious, unplanned, vernacular" – encompassing houses, office buildings, intersections, and back yards and dirt roads.⁵⁵ The buildings vary in age, and are generally much older than those in his peers' images, which tended to depict more recent construction. Upon close inspection, some of Shore's photographs even contain people, who were otherwise virtually non-existent in *New Topographics*. In terms of composition, whereas Shore had centered his subjects in the frame for *American Surfaces* and photographed them from close proximity, for this newer work he adopted much greater distance and structured each photograph with far more complexity.

This was enabled by Shore's switch in camera format. In *American Surfaces*, with the 35-millimeter camera, Shore had embraced a spontaneous, snapshot-like aesthetic,

⁵³ Like Shore's color, Schott's motel scenes felt to some people like an oasis of accessibility in an otherwise challenging show. In the interview tapes produced by Deal's student, a handful of people allude to Schott's motel scenes as possessing greater narrative potential. See interview tape and transcripts from December 13-14, 1975, Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography, AG229:10/4.

⁵⁴ Other photography associated with cross-country road trips, such as Robert Frank's 1959 book *The Americans*, could have served as interpretive comparisons for visitors to *New Topographics*. For more on road trip photography, see David Company, *The Open Road: Photography and the American Road Trip* (New York: Aperture, 2014), and Peter Wang, "The Profane and Profound: American Road Trip Photography from 1930 to the Present," PhD diss., (Temple University, 2017).

⁵⁵ Martino Stierli, "Architecture," in Bajac, *Stephen Shore*, 42-46 (42).

recording his subjects from off-kilter angles and often with flash. In summer 1973, when he began to use a 4x5-inch Crown Graphic press camera, he realized he greatly enjoyed working with a tripod and composing the image on a ground glass.⁵⁶ In 1974, after borrowing a Calumet 8x10 from Weston Naef numerous times and having been encouraged by John Szarkowski, Shore finally purchased an 8x10-inch Arca Swiss view camera.⁵⁷ The equipment, which weighed over 100 pounds, slowed down his process into a more studied, deliberate one; color sheet film was costly (\$15 per shot in the 1970s, Shore later estimated), and the tripod dictated that he carefully and thoughtfully compose the photograph on the ground glass before making the exposure. The ground glass contained a grid of lines that Shore could use to use to line up the contours of his subject matter. Equipped with the longer exposure times afforded by the tripod, the great depth of field due to being able to shoot with a smaller aperture, and much larger negatives, Shore could make structurally dense images of the places he encountered that also recorded the subtle qualities of natural light he was observing.

The work in *New Topographics* reflected these changes in his methods and materials. A now iconic photograph of a quiet intersection in Easton, Pennsylvania (**fig. 4.5**) – in fact, the first photograph Shore ever made with the 8x10⁵⁸ – showcases him beginning to use architecture as a pictorial structuring element, playing with elements parallel and perpendicular to the picture plane in order to render his photographs convincing two-dimensional “illusions” of three-dimensional space.⁵⁹ It is a hazy,

⁵⁶ Salvesen, “Introduction,” 31

⁵⁷ For a precise chronology of the cameras Shore used to make all of his photographs in this period, see Kristen Gaylord, “A Photographic Chronology,” in Bajac, *Stephen Shore*, 286-300.

⁵⁸ Darius Himes, “A Conversation with Stephen Shore,” Jun 9, 2008. See <http://www.dariushimes.com/pages/blog/photography/a-conversation-with-stephen-shore>.

⁵⁹ Shore has often spoken of this formal challenge as crafting an “illusion”: “I use those words

overcast day; the light in the photograph is remarkably even. Sandwiched between red brick buildings at the left and right sides of the frame, the viewer looks ahead to a three-story stucco building with a grid of forest green awnings. At the right, we glimpse a sliver of its neighbor, which is painted shades of soft, buttery yellow and ochre. The street ahead slopes downward towards a sharp drop-off (according to maps of Easton, a river), across which lie verdant hills populated by a handful of large houses. Otherwise dominated by warm neutrals and green foliage, the composition is interrupted – delightfully – by the presence of a cherry red Volkswagen van in the middle ground. A closer look reveals that just above the van, there is a boy sitting in the window, which also bears a sign that identifies the first floor as a dentist's office. The boy turns and gazes towards the viewer, fogging up the window with his breath, perhaps transfixed at what must have been the odd sight of Shore's figure obscured under the dark cloth.

Shore's August 1974 photograph of a busier scene in Kalispell, Montana (**fig. 4.6**) mirrors the structure of the Easton picture, but contains a great deal of text and displays an overall palette of primary colors. Again, we look ahead towards an intersection, although this time it is from a slightly more offset angle, so that what would have otherwise been a plunging orthogonal tapers off to the right side of the frame. The image is bathed in the warm glow of late afternoon – a time frame that is corroborated by the long shadows in the foreground, which serve as structuring elements in the photograph and counterbalance the dramatic storm clouds moving out of the top left corner. Signs for storefronts and other businesses arrest the viewer's attention at various points across the middle third of the image, as do the verticals in the form of parking meters, street lights,

because I'm looking at a flat piece of paper. So, it is an illusion; I'm not looking through a little window at a miniature world. I say "illusion" because it is an illusion." Campany 40.

and the accordion-like contours of the banana yellow “First Federal” bank. The cracks in the pavement intersect to form a receding grid in the manner of a rough one-point perspectival diagram, advancing the viewer’s eye toward the vanishing point of the mountains. At the right, where a pair of pedestrians stands on the corner, a street sign reads “S. Main St.,” encouraging us to regard the entire scene as not just *a* street, but *the* street in Kalispell.

The year before, in 1973, Shore had in fact considered the notion of “main” streets in relation to his overall project in a discussion with fellow *New Topographics* photographer Hilla Becher: “She suggested that I just photograph main streets across America. My reaction was that it wasn’t right for me. Thinking about her suggestion made me realize that what I was after was not a study of main streets (or gas stations, suburban houses, shopping centers, etc.) but the quintessential main street.”⁶⁰ Shore did not seek to produce a typology, but rather to record scenes that conveyed the general ideas about American culture through local, idiosyncratic particulars. The quintessential or elemental status of the Kalispell scene, for example, is subtly thematized by the sign for the “Kiddie Shop” at the photograph’s left, whose logo is comprised of three building blocks stacked on top of one another reading “A, B, C” – at once both universal symbols and a folksy graphic unique to the local business.

In decidedly less urban settings with more wide open skies, Shore exploited telephone poles and wires to an even greater degree to achieve the illusion of three-dimensional space. This is evident in the photograph he made of an intersection in a new development in the town of Dryden, Ontario – the newness of which is slyly underscored

⁶⁰ Quoted in Susanne Lange, ed. *Bernd und Hilla Becher: Festschrift: Erasmuspreis 2002* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2002), 50.

by one of the street names, “Colonization Avenue” (**fig. 4.7**). In the middle ground stands a small, newly constructed home that still lacks siding or stairs leading up to its front door. Across the evenly bright blue sky, a set of vertical and horizontal lines in the form of street lamp poles and cables that lie in between the viewer and the house cleverly (one might even say humorously) frame the structure in the shape of a square. The shadow of the nearest pole falls across the gravel in the foreground, drawing our attention to this evidence of neighborhood’s ongoing construction. “I see what you did with the light posts and telephone wires,” one visitor wrote in the guest book for Shore’s exhibition of this body of work at LIGHT Gallery in early 1975.⁶¹

Since the interview tapes made in the galleries during the run of *New Topographics* lack many comments about Shore’s work in particular, this LIGHT Gallery guest book from the spring just prior to the exhibition provides key insight into how audiences received it. Like the Eastman House, LIGHT’s focus on photography meant that it attracted a similarly specific photo-enthusiastic crowd, but its dedication to exhibiting recent work also drew visitors who were especially interested in contemporary art. Given that leaving a comment in a guest book is more private than the public performance of being interviewed, people also may have felt that they could be more candid in this format. The guest book contains a number of positive responses, including comments where visitors charitably liken aspects of Shore’s work to that of older photographers or artists they were familiar with:

“Like good home cooking!”

“These photographs could never have been made in black and white. You are really dealing with color seeing.”

⁶¹ Guest book from exhibition “The Real World,” LIGHT Gallery, spring 1975. Stephen Shore Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG40:1/4.

“You have the sense of structure of O’Sullivan...”

“Very interesting in a neo-Walker Evans way.”

“Why, does Richard Estes better!”

“Plays with Edward Hopper attitudes of vision – wondered when it would surface in photography!”

It also contains negative statements, several of which nevertheless acknowledge Shore’s technical skill:

“Modern cameras, color film, and custom laboratories... are all marvels of science. But where are the ideas and the selective eye to make a picture instead of a photograph?”

“You focus very well – sharp pictures! Now all you need are subjects and composition! A couple of courses at the New School are strongly recommended – then practice, practice, practice. Please – this is a joke (the photos)... Terrible!!!!”

“Steve – you make beautiful color prints, but the images are sterile and communicate man only in his creations.”

“Haven’t you ever heard of style?”

And finally, there are comments marked by intriguing ambivalence:

“Good color BAD photographs.”

“Do you take all of your photographs on Sundays?”

“These are the kinds of pictures that... mean a lot to the artist (where you were at the time, how you felt, etc.) – but they leave the viewer blank. But I can enjoy this kind of photography.”

“I see how – I almost can see what (in some of them) / But for the life of me, I can’t see why.”

“Very 70s.”⁶²

⁶² All comments above from guest book from exhibition “The Real World,” LIGHT Gallery, spring 1975. Stephen Shore Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG40:1/4.

There is an enormous amount of information to parse in these comments, which cumulatively shed light on the factors that made Shore's photographs accessible to certain viewers in 1975, but left others hanging. They underscore how any interpretive barrier in Shore's work stemmed not necessarily from the photographs' color, but rather from their style (or perceived lack of it) – encompassing Shore's authorial stance and the position the pictures intimated for their viewers.

First of all, while some viewers could appreciate what Michael Fried has termed the “constructive intelligence” of Shore's 8x10 photographs, referring to how Shore scaffolds and articulates space in his pictures, others associated this quality with a lack of subjective presence or creative intervention.⁶³ Shore has consistently spoken about the formal challenge of translating the dimensionality of the real world into the flat, two-dimensional space of the photograph. Committing to the 8x10 camera, he had a newfound ability to convey a great degree of detail and depth of field. In order to accentuate that depth, he began to instrumentalize the vertical and horizontal elements of the built landscape in his compositions, which had the effect of making “bids” to his viewers' perception, so to speak. Like the outstretched thumb or pencil of an art student learning to draw and measure objects in their field of vision, elements in Shore's photographs like light poles, parking meters, and telephone cables serve to indicate scale, and intersect to form imaginary planes of focus. Viewed in tandem with roads and sidewalks receding into the distance, which articulate space along a plunging Z-axis, they transmit a nearly palpable sense of dimensionality. It is not just that Shore's photographs have great depth of field; the way Shore includes as many of these physical elements as

⁶³ Michael Fried, “Michael Fried in Conversation with Stephen Shore,” in Stephen Shore, et. al. *Stephen Shore* (New York: Phaidon, 2007), 20.

possible works to evoke embodied perception: how we consciously and unconsciously take stock of space, judge distance, and evaluate forms in our field of vision. Shore's photographs therefore both anticipate and analogize his viewers' perception – which is something certain audience members detected, as evidenced by the prior comment about the light posts and telephone wires.

These elements also serve as records of Shore's own bodily position and compositional activity. In order to make the photographs, he performed that back-and-forth negotiation of the space, "watching objects in the foreground change in relation to the background."⁶⁴ In the arrangement of physical forms in the photograph, one can sense the way Shore must have deliberately positioned his tripod and camera so that objects lie in very particular relation to one another, often to avoid overlapping – like the way the vertical light poles sit just under the horizontal Chevron sign in the Beverly and La Brea image (**fig. 4.1**). This is more subtly evident in an image Shore made of another Main Street in Gull Lake, Saskatchewan (**fig. 4.8**). There, he adopted the exact angle and physical distance from the intersection in order for the three street light poles in the center of the scene to appear equidistant from one another in the resulting photograph. Their arrangement is integral both to the image's bilateral symmetry and how the viewer's attention comes to rest on details that lie in between them: the soft blue grain silo on the left, and the Coca-Cola sign adorning the storefront at the right. As in all of Shore's landscapes, where skies function compositionally, the blue here serves as a "weight that balances the tonality of the bottom."⁶⁵ Compositionally taut, atmospherically clear, and vacant of people, the photograph displays several potential reasons why people

⁶⁴ Quoted in Campany, 33

⁶⁵ Campany 30

invoked the comparisons to O'Sullivan's nineteenth century geological survey photographs or Edward Hopper's paintings.⁶⁶ It also demonstrates how the precision of Shore's compositions stood in opposition to the arbitrariness that other *New Topographics* photographers sought, often through the vehicle of what Gohlke described as the "passive frame."⁶⁷ Shore, by contrast, nearly always anchored the left and right sides of his frames with vertical elements like the sides of buildings to activate his photographs' edges.

However, the fact that all of these elements near and far are presented in utterly sharp and even focus translated for some people to a diminished sense of authorial voice. As Davis has noted in the context of writing about contemporary photography that has taken up the concerns of *New Topographics*: "Small-format pictures tend to speak in the first person ("I see"), whereas large-format images expound in the third ("There is")."⁶⁸ Whereas the 35-millimeter camera Shore used in *American Surfaces* implied the photographer's own roving eye, wandering across surfaces and settling upon clearly defined subjects in the middle of the frame, the pictures in *Uncommon Places* organize space in a much more complex manner, appealing to the viewer's attention all over, all at once – which, as Shore has pointed out, is not how we actually see. Our binocular vision physically cannot focus on such a broad field simultaneously. In 1976, Maria Morris Hambourg wrote of the photographs' resultant peculiarity: "These photographs are not just facts... they are cogent as pictures: what is experientially real and disorderly

⁶⁶ The visitor who commented in the guest book was not the only one to make the Hopper connection; so did a reviewer of the show, John Russell, who added that Shore's work recalled the impressionistic feel of Walt Whitman's *Specimen Days* (1882). See John Russell, "Art: Not So Much the Glasses as the Light," *New York Times*, February 22, 1975, 23.

⁶⁷ Jenkins, "Introduction," 5.

⁶⁸ Tim Davis, "The New New Topographics," *Aperture* No. 198 (Spring 2010), 16-17.

becomes in them a coherent graphic entity, as definitive and eloquent as it is fictitious.”⁶⁹

At the same time that some viewers perceived Shore’s subjectivity in the photographs’ constructed-ness, for others, their all-over clarity felt strange and “sterile,” to borrow a word from one of the negative comments in the LIGHT guest book. One reviewer of a slightly earlier show of Shore’s work at LIGHT in 1974 had likewise ascribed the photographs a “deadpan quality,” which he connected not only to Shore’s relationship with Warhol, but also “the 8 x 10 scale, and also the sheer amount of high focus detail.”⁷⁰ Shore’s photographs are emphatically resolved, so to speak, in terms of their compositional rigor – but not in terms of where the viewer is directed to look. And as it has been established elsewhere in this analysis, this non-hierarchical way of constructing a landscape photograph in particular was alien to viewers’ expectations, because selective focus implies the subjectivity of a maker, thereby establishing a stable state of agreement between artist and viewer – the feeling of being implied, acknowledged, and anticipated as viewing subject. The critical comments in the guest book about the work lacking a “selective eye to make a picture instead of a photograph,” or rhetorically asking Shore if he had ever heard of “style,” or not being able to discern the “why” of the work, can therefore be understood in light of this reception-related issue of positioning. Unable to get past the interpretive labor imposed by the photographs’ all-over focus on all-too-familiar subject matter, they could not appreciate the subtle clues of the images’ careful construction.

Yet this way of approaching composition was compatible with the stance Shore

⁶⁹ Maria Morris Hambourg, press release for exhibition *Photographs by Stephen Shore*, Museum of Modern Art, October 8, 1976 – January 4, 1977. Accessed at: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2453>

⁷⁰ James Collins, “Stephen Shore at LIGHT Gallery,” *Artforum* Vol. 12, No. 6 (March 1974): 76.

wanted to convey, and was informed by the parameters he had explored in his earlier series. By presenting everything in focus, all at once, Shore's photographs serve as equivalents for the kind of seeing that he was increasingly committed to: one that followed from the belief that all architecture is deserving of attention, because, as he argued, it is a "physical expression of cultural forces."⁷¹ *American Surfaces* may have been an exercise in selecting for anti-picturesque subject matter, but still pointed back to Shore's subjectivity; with the 8x10, meanwhile, Shore moved beyond implying his casual "speaking voice" and approximated something even more fundamental: "the pure condition of sight itself," in Sternfeld's words, although it is the monocular sight of the camera.⁷² The photographs were products of Shore's own "heightened awareness," and aspired to enable the viewer to reach that state.⁷³

Combined with the visceral allure of the photographs' color, for a number of critics in these years, these qualities implied that Shore's attitude towards his subject matter was one of openness, interest, and acceptance. Echoing the LIGHT Gallery visitor who had referenced Richard Estes,⁷⁴ Carter Ratcliffe further elaborated the comparison of Shore's work to Photorealist painting in 1976:

[Shore's] disposition of his subject matter is closest, perhaps, to Ralph Goings', but a number of other post-Pop painters are also recalled. The difference is this: Shore has no need to enforce a slack banality. The Photo-Realists embrace the banal partly to claim that what their works are really about is the formal aspect of painting; supposedly, the subject is to be more or less transparent, a pretext.

Shore photographs ordinary scenes, but choices of angle, time of day (light) and color arrangement across the surface allow him to have it both ways: his images show formal richness – especially in playing angled surfaces out into depth – and

⁷¹ Company 34

⁷² Sternfeld 121

⁷³ Quoted in Matthews

⁷⁴ In 1973, Harold Jones had included Shore in an exhibition at LIGHT titled "Sharp-Focus Realism," another instance that linked Shore to Photorealism.

this richness turns back on his subjects, enriching them with the value implied by his close and *obviously friendly attention* [my emphasis].⁷⁵

For Ratcliffe, the way Shore imbues his subjects with his own apparent formal decision-making communicates that his attention on them comes from a curious, rather than critical, place. Commonplace architecture is not only a “pretext” for formal investigation, but also a sincere source of interest for Shore. The operation is reciprocal: at the same time that Shore’s “obviously friendly attention” enables him to value quotidian subject matter and select for it, that content is also elevated by his representation of it.

Ratcliffe goes on to argue that this had rendered Shore an outlier in *New*

Topographics the previous year:

In other of the new landscape photographers’ work, there is a tension between the high quality of vision and the dubious quality of what is seen. Shore avoids that tension with his attractive, highly “photographic” color and with the quiet attractiveness of his scenes.

Style, for most of these “topographers,” reaches beyond esthetics to offer oblique warnings. Shore offers a heavily qualified hope – the transformations he brings about by his affectionate vision seem related to Venturi and Scott Brown’s acceptance of “what is” as the proper starting-point for the redemption of the American scene.⁷⁶

By “photographic color,” Ratcliffe may have referred to how color in Shore’s pictures functions as a “descriptive, as opposed to decorative, element,” as Lewis Baltz wrote of both Shore and William Eggleston’s work.⁷⁷ Color is not a matter of happenstance; Shore actively integrates it into the massing of forms in his photographs, as with the

⁷⁵ Carter Ratcliffe, “Route 66 Revisited: The New Color Photography,” *Art in America*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (January/February 1976): 90.

⁷⁶ Ratcliffe 90

⁷⁷ Lewis Baltz, “American Photography in the 1970s: Too Old to Rock, Too Young to Die,” in *American Images: Photography 1945-1980*, ed. Peter Turner (New York: Penguin, 1985), 159. Reprinted in Lewis Baltz, *Lewis Baltz Texts*, edited by Matthew Witkovsky (Göttingen: Steidl, 2010), 47-75 (72). Baltz added that this was “despite [Shore] and Eggleston’s radical differences in style, technique, and temperament.”

compositional function of blue skies. Regarding the photographs' quietude, meanwhile, it is true that Shore's photographs depict moments that are still and devoid of moving cars. But "quiet attractiveness" also characterizes Shore's way of looking, which is prolonged – studying a scene so as to make oneself available to its formal relationships continuing to reveal themselves.

In 1977, Hambourg linked the notion of quietude to Shore's implied attitude towards his subjects: "The quietude is analogous to Shore's attitude toward his subject – one of pleasurable reflection rather than judgment."⁷⁸ Max Kozloff had expressed a similar idea in an article on color photography he published in early 1975: "If [Shore's] art *illustrates* anything, it is the theme of being *alone* in color."⁷⁹ And recall that reviewing the West Coast iteration of *New Topographics*, William Wilson had ascribed "gentle affection" to Shore's work.⁸⁰ It is worth noting that Shore's conceptual series on view at the Met in 1971 had in fact solicited similar comments, as another critic wrote on that occasion that Shore "forces the viewer to take time to walk around and discover the landscape... Whether Mr. Shore focuses in on a sidewalk on Avenue of the Americas, a car dump in the woods, a house in the country or a ranch in the Southwest, he seems to be demonstrating a valuable principle of life."⁸¹

Despite Gene Thornton's dismissiveness, then, there was otherwise a sizable contingent of critics in this moment who turned to language of softness and warmth to describe Shore's photographs, which was a far cry from how most of Shore's peers in

⁷⁸ Hambourg

⁷⁹ Kozloff 35

⁸⁰ William Wilson, "Camera Artists: Truth in Focus," *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 1976, E10

⁸¹ David L. Shirey, "Prints and Photographs On View at the Metropolitan," *New York Times*, February 24, 1971, 34.

New Topographics were received. (It is almost comical to imagine anyone likening Joe Deal or Lewis Baltz's photographs to "good home cooking."⁸²) Only the subtle, dry humor of Henry Wessel Jr.'s work drew somewhat similar comments.⁸³ And even in the context of lodging a complaint about the images in *Uncommon Places*, Thornton nevertheless expressed perceiving the attitude toward the built environment that distanced Shore from his *New Topographics* peers: "As bland and uncritical as the most ardent Chamber of Commerce booster could desire. They do not praise, perhaps, but neither do they blame."⁸⁴ Thornton may have not endorsed the work, but he could still detect the way Shore had represented the subject matter to "have equal value."⁸⁵

Shore's switch to the 8x10 for *Uncommon Places* therefore had to do with his ongoing investigation into circumventing convention (the photographic equivalent of speaking in a "stilted" manner, in his words) – an ambition in line with the claim *New Topographics* sought to make about style, especially in the context of landscape – but this went hand-in-hand with the non-judgmental way he viewed his subjects. Rather than considering the body of work in isolation, we must approach it as an outgrowth of Shore's earlier investigations into problems of conventionality, authorial posture, and the

⁸² Comment from guest book for exhibition "The Real World," LIGHT Gallery, spring 1975. Stephen Shore Archive, Center for Creative Photography. AG40:1/4.

⁸³ William Wilson wrote in the review of the West Coast iteration of *New Topographics* that "Wessel's art is touched with nostalgia and camp humor" (Wilson E10). Criticizing the show as incoherent in general, Charles Desmirais wrote that "The work of Henry Wessel Jr. is the supreme example of the distortion produced by forcing a uniquely shaped peg through the square hole of the theme... The context of the pictures saps their humor in compelling us to consider them as collected bits of information" (Desmirais, "Topographical Error," *Afterimage* Vol. 3, No. 5 (November 1975): 10-11.) And Carter Ratcliffe wrote that Wessel "One makes sense of Wessel's stylistic intensifications by supposing that something is being hidden. He skirts expressionist sensibilities in some of his images – but wisely draws back" (Ratcliffe 90).

⁸⁴ Gene Thornton, "Formalists Who Flirt With Banality," *New York Times*, November 14, 1976, 34.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

banal and quotidian. Not only was Shore's subject matter generally more historical than what else was on view in *New Topographics*, and not only was his work in color; his photographs also positioned their audience to observe – rather than judge – scenes that “by any of the usual criteria of architectural interest or civic grace... are grossly undistinguished vistas.”⁸⁶ As Fried would later put it to Shore: “You don't seem superior to the material.”⁸⁷ While deploying similar formal strategies as his *New Topographics* peers, like compositions that lacked a central focus, Shore did not seek to hit the same note of criticality. As indicated by the archival record, audiences circa 1975 perceived this to varying degrees. Before finally examining the significance of this for the manner in which “New Topographics” serves as a shorthand today, we can further situate Shore's attitude toward the built environment in light of intellectual developments around the notion of the “vernacular” in the 1970s.

The “Vernacular” in and Outside of Photography ca. 1975

In 1971, a student asked Walker Evans: “When you photograph your billboards, do you do it out of a sense of disdain or derision for them? Are you deriding them or do you consider them beautiful objects?” Evans answered: “Well, I love them, and I'm entertained by them. I feel they're stimulating and exciting and endearing.” The student followed up: “Is there a social comment there?” to which Evans responded: “Not in the least... I photograph what's in front of me and what attracts me.”⁸⁸ Here we encounter

⁸⁶ Max Kozloff, “Photography: The Coming of Age of Color,” *Artforum*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (January 1975): 30-35 (35).

⁸⁷ Fried 4

⁸⁸ “Walker Evans, Visiting Artist: A Transcript of His Discussion with the Students of the University of Michigan” (October 29, 1971), in *Photography: Essays and Images, Illustrated*

the issue of a photographer framing his career in a certain (apolitical) way in retrospect, but the affection that Evans expresses for his subject matter is significant given that Shore has spoken of feeling “very close to Evans in temperament.”⁸⁹ Evans’s influence on Shore is a productive point of departure for further elaborating the intertwined relationship of style and subject matter in Shore’s work as it comes into contact with the notion of the vernacular, and why Shore was ripe for collaboration with the authors of *Learning from Las Vegas* in 1975.

Foreshadowing the way audiences now associate Shore with the 1970s, Evans (who died the same year as *New Topographics* in 1975), served as a model of a photographer who produced a rich, lyrical, and now authoritative record of a decade (the 1930s), and whose individual images trained viewers’ interest on local architecture, main streets, and homes under the conviction that those forms revealed something about Americans and their values. Between 1935 and 1938, sponsored by the Resettlement Administration (later called the Farm Security Administration), he photographed shops, dwellings, signage, and public squares with a nuanced approach he called “documentary style” – an authorial stance where he minimized conventional signs of editorializing so as to craft the appearance of facticity, without anticipating a utilitarian function – and retaining acknowledgment of personal perception.⁹⁰ John Szarkowski was instrumental in

Readings in the History of Photography, ed. Beaumont Newhall (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 317.

⁸⁹ “Stephen Shore in conversation with Lynne Tillman,” in Stephen Shore, *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works* (New York: Aperture, 2004), 173.

⁹⁰ See Leslie Katz, “An Interview with Walker Evans” (1971), in *Photography in Print*, ed. Vicki Goldberg (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 364. The photographer John Gossage has elegantly written of Evans’s formulation and deployment of this concept: “But don’t let these photographs fool you. There is nothing simple about being this direct, nothing casual about the plainness of these scenes and, most importantly, there is nothing detached or sentimental in this quiet passion. When you start to examine the trick these photographs have

sustaining Evans's career in the last decades of his life, and through his writing about and exhibition of Evans's photographs, he advanced a thesis about both photography and culture that engaged the notion of the vernacular.

As Britt Salvesen has pointed out, Szarkowski largely derived his conception of that term from the thinker John Kouwenhoven.⁹¹ In defining the "American vernacular," Kouwenhoven himself echoed Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had proposed in 1841 that artists should "find beauty and holiness in new and necessary facts, in the field and roadside, in the shop and mill."⁹² The equivalent in Kouwenhoven's (and Evans's) era one hundred years later was locating authentic American cultural expression in responses to machine civilization and political democracy – responses distinguished by their usefulness, description, and legibility.⁹³ Kouwenhoven also emphasized the agency of individuals and those creating in an untrained manner. These ideas informed Szarkowski's *The Photographer's Eye* and other writings, where he advanced an understanding of the medium that located authenticity in photographic manifestations of these values – emphasizing formal sharpness and clarity, or makers who seemed to have been guided by intuition rather than formal training.⁹⁴ For Szarkowski, Evans was undoubtedly a modern artist because he embraced those values, and with a mixture of

played on you – inducing you to believe that the photograph presents the scene "the way it really was" – a certain complex balance begins to assert itself: intelligence and, more importantly, passion have allowed the images just the proper amount of space to complete the illusion, while at the same time being sufficiently expressive to sustain their maker." John Gossage, writing about Walker Evans's photographs in the catalog *14 American Photographers* (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 1974).

⁹¹ See Salvesen, "Introduction," 15, and John Kouwenhoven, *Made in America: The Arts in Modern Civilization* (New York: Doubleday, 1948).

⁹² Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Art," in *Essays: First Series*, 1841.

⁹³ See Kouwenhoven's elaboration of these criteria in Kouwenhoven, 169.

⁹⁴ See John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

clarity and lyricism, turned them back on representing the local and humble American scenes that had helped Kouwenhoven give articulation to the “vernacular” in the first place. Among Evans’s accomplishments, Szarkowski wrote, was “having enlarged our sense of the usable visual tradition,” and training our focus on the cultural artifacts of “billboards, junkyards, postcards, gas stations, colloquial architecture.”⁹⁵ Evans’s photographs made these things more worth looking at in the world, thereby enriching his audience’s habits of seeing. As Salvesen emphasizes, Szarkowski’s linkage of the “photographic and cultural vernaculars” was “one of [his] most dexterous moves” as a curator, and a defining feature of his thought.⁹⁶

Like the reciprocal way in which this idea operated in Evans, Shore embraced the clarity of the 8x10 in order to represent “vernacular” architectural subjects that contemporaneous theorists believed should be seen clearly, and taken seriously. Long after Evans’s exchange with the student at the University of Michigan, Shore encountered a similar situation, but provided an answer that stopped short of Evans’s totally apolitical recasting of his work. He recalled: “I remember once giving a lecture at the University of Arizona in Tucson, and one of the first questions assumed that I took a negative view of gas stations and that was why I photographed them... I understand the problem with car culture, but things are not that simple...” He continued, indirectly shedding light on the resultant interpretive dynamics of his photographs: “I didn’t want the pictures to take a political stand... I saw a complexity in what I was drawn to that could not be expressed simply in terms of ‘this is bad, this is not.’”⁹⁷ It was not total admiration that Shore felt

⁹⁵ John Szarkowski, “Walker Evans,” in *Walker Evans*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1971). This show was on view at MoMA from January 27 – April 12, 1971.

⁹⁶ Salvesen. “Introduction,” 15

⁹⁷ Fried 5

towards his subjects, nor repulsion – but something truly in between: receptivity. And this is why the 8x10, which could render space with such depth, and color with such specificity, was the answer for crafting a corresponding viewership. (David Company has said of looking at *Uncommon Places*: “I fall in and out of formal judgment,” suggesting that the viewing experience may involve moments of responding negatively or positively to certain elements in the photograph, but they ultimately balance each other out.⁹⁸) It is suggestive that on the heels of speaking about these dynamics in his own work, Shore alluded to Warhol: “Warhol had what I would call a distanced delight in culture that wasn’t exactly ironic. He thought ‘Oh, wow, isn’t this fabulous.’ But he didn’t buy into it.”⁹⁹ Transposing this idea to looking at *Uncommon Places*, something like a cherry red Volkswagen van or Coca-Cola sign could prompt a response of “delight” for the viewer, but these elements are granted equal weight with other things. They are parts of much larger scenes, and attending to what else is there tempers this “delight” into something more “distanced,” but not quite judgmental.

In addition to the diverse mix of architecture in Shore’s photographs, the van or the Coca-Cola sign are examples of things that are “not merely ordinary but represent ordinariness symbolically and stylistically,” as the architects Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour described the subjects they were interested in analyzing for their landmark study, *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972).¹⁰⁰ In 1968, they took their

⁹⁸ Company 34

⁹⁹ Fried 14

¹⁰⁰ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 1977), 130. For more on the role of signs in the landscape as vehicles of meaning, see 80. The study situated signs under the heading of “architecture of persuasion,” which functioned to appeal to consumer-drivers (9).

Yale architecture seminar to study the Las Vegas strip, which they argued was a contemporary equivalent of a Gothic cathedral or Renaissance palazzo in terms of genuinely expressing Americans' aspirations. Regarding the strip's architecture, ornament, signage, and billboards as rich with symbolism and reference, rather than vulgar or unworthy of analysis, they forged an iconography of roadside sprawl. Their innovative resulting publication (1972) juxtaposed texts about their findings with a dynamic array of imagery: aerial and street-level pictures of the Strip and its surroundings, graphs, maps, collages, charts, and even charts made of grids of photographs that occasionally bear resemblance both to Ed Ruscha's photo books of the prior decade, and the atlas-like sprawl of imagery in Shore's *All the Meat You Can Eat* (fig. 4.9).

The overall goal of *Learning from Las Vegas*, its authors said, was to "question how we look at things" and "gain insight from the commonplace."¹⁰¹ Their spirit of shifting expectations towards the built environment deeply resonated with the conceptual series Shore was pursuing at the same time, such as his self-imposed directive to photograph at intervals along the Avenue of the Americas. "Architects are out of the habit of looking nonjudgmentally at the environment," the authors explained, and the utopian and purist values of architectural modernism have made it such that they "have preferred to change the existing environment rather than enhance what is there."¹⁰² Crucially, the authors clarified of their project, "this is a study of method, not of content."¹⁰³ The Strip was the phenomenon through which they could advance this

¹⁰¹ *Learning from Las Vegas* 3

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ *Learning from Las Vegas* 4

broader claim about the need for architects to shift their collective attitude towards the commonplace.¹⁰⁴ If their peers could “accept the lessons of...vernacular architecture,” the authors reasoned, they could “lear[n] from everything.”¹⁰⁵ The stance they championed followed from that of John Brinckerhoff Jackson, who had pioneered the field of cultural landscape studies in the 1950s as it grew out of the discipline of human geography.¹⁰⁶ *Learning from Las Vegas* heeded Jackson’s call for literacy of previously ignored features of the built environment.¹⁰⁷

Though depicting scenes that generally do not share quite the level of visual or literal noise of the Strip, Shore’s *Uncommon Places* transposes this manner of regarding the built environment into photographic form. It is both at the level of authorship (Shore had to adopt the stance in order to be able to make the pictures – habits of seeing that he had cultivated since his early conceptual series) and viewership, which approximates the position advocated by the architect-theorists: one that is analytical, but remains open and receptive. This is what rendered Shore a viable collaborator for *Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City*, an exhibition that Scott Brown, Venturi, and Izenour organized for the Smithsonian’s Renwick Gallery in 1976, on the occasion of the United States’ bicentennial. Izenour had in fact seen Shore’s work at LIGHT, and experienced a feeling

¹⁰⁴ And the stakes were high: “Analysis of existing American urbanism is a socially desirable activity to the extent that it teaches us architects to be more understanding and less authoritarian in the plans we make for both inner-city renewal and new development,” 6.

¹⁰⁵ *Learning from Las Vegas* 4, 3

¹⁰⁶ See Chapter 3 for a brief overview of how the discipline evolved.

¹⁰⁷ Jackson (1909-1996) had advocated this idea in his publications since the early 1950s, but for comprehensive collections of his texts, see the later-published J.B. Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), and Jackson, *Landscape in Sight: Looking at America*, ed. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

of recognition at what he identified the photographs' sensibility of non-judgment.¹⁰⁸ The architects' firm, Venturi and Rauch, commissioned Shore and several other photographers to produce images from a list of architectural types.

During a road trip from Los Angeles to New York in summer 1975, Shore fulfilled the objective and gathered scenes of homes, gas stations, motels, fast food establishments, and main streets. The resulting show took the form of an immersive installation intended to approximate the experience of moving through the United States' vernacular built environment and reading its forms (**fig. 4.10**). Small and condensed, it was organized into three sections: The Home, The Strip, and The Street. An actual sign from a Sunoco gas station greeted visitors at the top of the Renwick's staircase, while smaller neon signs adorned other corners of the gallery space. Some portions of the installation mimicked elevation views of street scenes, with photographs of rows of houses blown up to create large tableaux, while thousands more images were presented on large backlit grids under headings such as "Motels" or "Fast Food." Architecture curator Martino Stierli notes: "While there was precedent for such an immersive use of photography in avant-garde exhibitions from the late 1920s on (El Lissitzky being one of the pioneers), its presence in a fine arts context proved novel – and controversial – at the time."¹⁰⁹

At the time of the *Signs of Life* commission, Shore was already primed to view the American roadside landscape – especially in the West – with the fresh eyes the architects advocated, because he was a city kid. Somewhat recalling Swiss-born Robert Frank's outsider relationship to his subjects in his landmark book *The Americans* (1959), Shore

¹⁰⁸ Martino Stierli, "Signs of life," in Bajac, *Stephen Shore*, 214-217 (214).

¹⁰⁹ Stierli 214

was in fact better traveled in Europe by this point than his native United States: “I had been to Europe every year of my life – London, Paris, Madrid, Seville, Rome – but I’d seen very little of America... when I began to photograph America, I was in many ways a foreigner. And I loved it, immediately.”¹¹⁰ The latter statement harkens back to Evans’s comment to the Michigan student about the affection he felt towards his subject matter. Similarly, when asked: “Are the things that you photograph a consequence of the pictorial problems that you decide to put before yourself?” Shore answered in the affirmative, but added: “I’m not picking places just for formal reasons, because those reasons can’t be separated from your feeling for the place. I was *connecting* with those landscapes, feeling what it was like to be there.”¹¹¹ And that, after all, is what the authors of *Learning from Las Vegas* were asking their fellow architects to do.

Conclusion

Ultimately, as it did for Evans, vernacular architecture functioned for Shore as both zeitgeist and structuring principle: a subject through which to examine American cultural habits, values, and aspirations, *and* to explore formal problems. As interpreted by Szarkowski, Evans’s “documentary style” in the context of his mid-1930s FSA work photographically manifested values equivalent to those that thinkers like Kouwenhoven ascribed to the cultural vernacular, such as clarity and intuition. Following Kouwenhoven’s linkage of those qualities to authenticity, Szarkowski did the same as he elaborated a set of evaluative criteria for photographs that was based on how they

¹¹⁰ Company 29. It should be noted that Frank had a far more critical relationship to his subject matter. See Sarah Greenough, *Looking In: Robert Frank’s The Americans* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2009).

¹¹¹ Company 43

performed what the medium did “best.”¹¹²

In declaring himself in line with Evans’s “temperament,” Shore expressed how he, too, cultivated a way of making photographs that was inextricably tied to a way of seeing: one distinguished by receptivity towards commonplace subject matter, rather than judgment. The communication of this receptivity on Shore’s part as an author, and the ability for his implied viewers to inhabit that same stance, hinged upon formal strategies he could achieve with the 8x10 camera: clear, all-over focus, the ability to adopt more physical distance from his subject matter to craft broader and more expansive scenes, and the capacity to record subtle qualities of daylight passing across his subjects’ colorful surfaces. As Max Kozloff wrote of the importance of Shore’s equipment for his prints: “They are highly endowed and privileged artifacts that bestow upon the sensations they frame a physical dignity and refinement that would not have been arrested in a more modest format.”¹¹³ At the level of reception, the effect was one of looking at subjects that appeared imbued with and worthy of prolonged attention, rather than only deserving of a mere glance, as one might perform in the flow of daily experience.

Coupled with select inscriptions from the LIGHT Gallery guest book and the commentary that Shore’s work garnered from critics in the mid-1970s, the fact that Shore proved to be a viable collaborator for the *Learning from Las Vegas* architect-theorists illuminates how audiences in this moment perceived his work as displaying a curious and receptive attitude towards the architectural “vernaculars” that populated his photographs, both domestic and commercial. This is not how they interpreted the work of Adams, Deal, or Baltz, whose images were not overtly polemical, but did position viewers to

¹¹² See Szarkowski, *The Photographer’s Eye*.

¹¹³ Kozloff 35

regard the domestic and commercial built landscape more critically, amounting – as Ratcliffe put it – as “oblique warnings.”¹¹⁴

It is this quality of Shore’s work – not necessarily his prints’ color, but how they positioned viewers to regard commonplace architecture with open-mindedness – that renders him a “significant outlier” in *New Topographics*. On the one hand, Shore pursued an iteration of the “neutral” in the form of his endeavor to create photographs that analogized something like pure observation or topographical description; though he produced new conventions in place of the ones he eschewed, this was consistent both with the exhibition’s thesis and the ambitions of his peers. But the non-judgmental stance that this pursuit yielded in his work indicates that “neutral” ca. 1975 did not have to become synonymous with “critical.” Today, *New Topographics* is often associated with a uniformly critical view of the human-altered landscape, but as the example of Shore’s reception attests, this association is over-simplifying, and it provides the opportunity to examine how the style the exhibition sought to codify could take other forms than critique.

Shore’s body of work in *New Topographics* also provides a compelling case study of the role of color in the emotional temperature of photography in this period. As we have seen, for many viewers and critics ca. 1975, it in fact figured as an element of warmth in his work. One audience member may have likened Shore’s work to a slide they would have “thrown away,” but as this analysis has endeavored to show, we cannot attribute such comments only to the factor of color, but rather to a more complex set of issues having to do with the interpretive challenge brought by being made to look in a

¹¹⁴ Ratcliffe 90

prolonged manner at the everyday.¹¹⁵ In hindsight, it is remarkable that one of the LIGHT Gallery visitors wrote in the guest book: “Very 70s.” This deceptively simple comment in fact provocatively articulates a very complex viewership: one of self-conscious contemporaneity, understood as a paradoxical position of being both within and outside of time, caught in the flow of the present but also capable of seeing that present as if from above, anticipating its future historical status. Roland Barthes would articulate this as photography’s ability to prompt the psychological response of the future anterior, or the sense of “this will have been.”¹¹⁶ It was, in fact, an idea Shore considered while making the work, and one he took from Evans.¹¹⁷

Writing about the Eastman House exhibition in a review titled “Topographical Error,” Charles Desmarais explored why certain of the *New Topographics* photographers stood out from the others. Arriving at Shore, he first discusses the matter of color:

Photographs in color have the potential of being the most “accurate” type of still picture, in terms of faithful physical description of the object under study. Our perception of color, however, is tied to connotations and nuances of meaning which make its use as a pictorial element subject to a great amount of emotional variation and manipulation. Stephen Shore makes use of this quality, sometimes as an extra layer of content, at other times as the substance of the picture itself.¹¹⁸

But then Desmarais turns to what he ultimately articulates as an “impressionistic” quality

¹¹⁵ This brings to mind Shore’s fellow 70s color photographer William Eggleston’s characterization of his project as being “at war with the obvious.” Quoted in “Afterword: William Eggleston in Conversation with Mark Holborn (Greenwood, Mississippi, February 1988),” in *The Democratic Forest* (New York, Doubleday, 1989).

¹¹⁶ See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

¹¹⁷ This comes up where Shore discusses the role of cars in his work: “I would say there was a consciousness about how pictures change in time, which I had learned from Walker Evans. A car functions very specifically in a photograph because cars change faster than buildings. A building can be five hundred years old, but a car isn’t going to be more than five or ten years old... I’m thinking about how this cultural information is going to be viewed maybe fifty years hence.” Company 53.

¹¹⁸ Charles Desmarais, “Topographical Error,” *Afterimage* Vol. 3, No. 5 (November 1975): 10-11.

to the photographs:

Color as an attribute of the objects depicted is often purely incidental; what Shore seems most interested in is late-one-summer-afternoon-in-Montana gold as it rakes across a downtown intersection (*2nd Street East and South Main Street, Kalispell, Montana, 8/22/74*), of the cool, damp green of grass, house and air in a shaded front yard (*West Avenue, Great Barrington, Massachusetts, 7/12/74*). While one could argue that interpretation of the type engaged in by Shore gives us what is ultimately the most comprehensive impression of a place, the price we have to pay is a reliance on his interpretations and impressions.¹¹⁹

In addition to the subtle pleasure suggested by Desmarais's language in describing the conditions of light and atmosphere he observes (the reader can draw from her own experience to imagine the pleasant late afternoon light he describes), what is significant here is that for this critic, the moments in Shore's photographs read as particular: they are records of Shore, seeing. Far from the monochrome overcast or "perpetual noon" that haunts Lewis Baltz's or Robert Adams's work, respectively, for Desmarais the specificity of these conditions in color imply Shore's subjective presence as an author – a specificity that renders the scenes "impressions," serving as a salient example of why, in *New Topographics*, "the pictures simply do not bear out this contention of unity."¹²⁰

Coda: There and Back Again

Though the June 1975 photograph of the intersection of Beverly and LaBrea (**fig. 4.1**) has become iconic in Shore's output, the photographer was in fact dissatisfied with it as early as a day after he made it. He explains:

When I was making the photograph at Beverly and LaBrea, as I was figuring out where precisely to position my camera to make sense of all the visual relationships I was trying to coordinate, I realized that while I was grappling with the visual facts in front of me, I was imposing a truly classical pictorial organization upon them. It brought to my mind the landscapes of Claude

¹¹⁹ Ibid

¹²⁰ Ibid

Lorrain... which often have one-point perspective and include vertical objects near the sides to give tension to the edges and activate the illusion of space.

This troubled me. I was imposing a seventeenth-century solution to a twentieth-century problem. It was an elegant formal solution, but it didn't express the form and pressure of this age... I was aware that I was imposing an organization that came from me and from what I had learned; it was not really an outgrowth of the scene in front of me.¹²¹

In the aftermath of this realization, Shore decided to return to the same intersection the next day and try again, this time tossing aside the metaphorical Claude glass. He recounts his thought process when he made the new image:

As I approached the intersection for a second time, I asked myself if I could organize the information I wanted to include *without* relying on an overriding structural principle, as I'd done the day before. Could I structure the picture in a way that communicated my experience of standing there, taking in the scene in front of me? Sometimes I have the sense that form contains an almost philosophical communication – that as form becomes more invisible, transparent, it begins to express an artist's understanding of the structure of experience.¹²²

The resultant photo (**fig. 4.11**) – with the camera pointed ever so slightly more downward toward the ground, and at an oblique angle to the street – resembles that of a traffic camera. This picture was for Shore himself: a maker striving to rid both his eyes and his photographs of picturesque inheritance. It matters that he made this second image, even if his compositional strategies merely amounted to a new set of codes that Shore associated with the “structure of experience.” The exercise perfectly encapsulates Shore's lifetime project – literally and metaphorically – as engaging matters of perspective. And where it concerned his inclusion in *New Topographics* later that fall, what could be more neutral than this aspiration to create photographs that analogize – simply – attention?

¹²¹ Shore, “Form and Pressure,” 48

¹²² Ibid

Epilogue

The Matter with Fact: Bernd and Hilla Becher and the Düsseldorf School

The question if this is a work of art or not is not very interesting for us. Probably it is situated in between the established categories. Anyway, the audience which is interested in art would be the most open-minded and willing to think about it.

-Hilla Becher¹

We react very differently to situations we know to be art than to situations we believe to represent “the facts.” That seems obvious. What is less obvious is that the discrimination we make between “art” and “facts” is itself an aesthetic discrimination.

-William Wilson²

In the years following *New Topographics*, many of its photographers went on to become teachers. Henry Wessel had in fact already been teaching photography at the San Francisco Art Institute since 1973, and remained on the faculty there for forty years. Joe Deal went to the University of California-Riverside, where he was instrumental in founding the California Museum of Photography, and later served as Dean of the School of Art at Washington University in St. Louis, then as Provost of the Rhode Island School of Design. Frank Gohlke and Nicholas Nixon taught at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, John Schott was a professor at Carleton College in Minnesota, and Stephen Shore continues to teach at Bard College in upstate New York. Perhaps none of the photographers have come to be thought of as so “influential” upon their students,

¹ Quoted in Carl Andre, “A Note on Bernd and Hilla Becher,” *Artforum*, Vol. 11. No. 4 (December 1972): 59-61 (59).

² William Wilson, “Camera Artists: Truth in Focus,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 1976, E10.

however, as Bernd and Hilla Becher at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Their impact upon a younger generation of photographers in Germany whose work emerged onto the international art market in the 1990s provides a site to begin tracking the influence of *New Topographics* – if not of the discrete event itself, then many of the ideas it represented – abroad and into the last several decades.

Between Document and Concept: the Typology as “Neutral”

In 1970, Kynaston McShine included the Bechers in the exhibition *Information* at the Museum of Modern Art, to which the couple contributed a twenty-part “typology” of cooling towers. The cornerstone of their practice, the term “typology” referred to the Bechers’ photographic grids, which were the products of a particular method that the pair developed to document industrial structures in Germany, and later, internationally. The formal qualities of the Bechers’ typologies, their serial presentation, and the manner in which the couple spoke about their work led period audiences to understand their project as documentary in orientation, but also as conceptual art. Examining the reception of the Bechers’ work in the 1970s reveals how by this decade, the same formal cues that audiences interpreted as signifying objectivity in a photograph could also register as indicators of the work having been generated in a conceptual manner – indeed, in both cases, as *information*. The Bechers claimed they were not particularly interested in whether or not their practice was art, and crafted their iteration of a “neutral” posture in service of documenting their subjects as accurately as possible, without error or embellishment.³ But as William Wilson pointed out in his review of *New Topographics*

³ Hilla wrote of the historical ambition of their work: “Getting used to technology is so difficult because technology itself changes more quickly than can human consciousness. A historical

on the west coast, the way in which viewers sort “art” from “fact” (in other words, discern the circumstances of an image’s authorship) still involves “aesthetic discrimination.”⁴ It is this interpretive activity that *New Topographics* (and *Information*) thematized, and also arises in the reception of the work of the Bechers’ students.

In his early twenties, Bernd Becher studied under Karl Rössing, a member of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity). This movement “brought an almost scientifically categorizing gaze” to “the aesthetics of the everyday” and “the representation of industry and technology.”⁵ By 1957, Bernd was taking photographs of industrial buildings in West Germany with the intention to use them as source imagery for drawings and paintings. When he and Hilla (née Wobeser) connected that same year, she had already trained in commercial photography and had been working in advertising, but wanted to extend her education, and enrolled at the Kunstakademie. She had also been photographing similar subjects as Bernd in the Hamburg harbor. The pair began to collaborate in 1959, seeking out the anonymous, disappearing infrastructure of Germany’s waning coal and steel industries, primarily in the Siegerland region and the Ruhr district to the north of Düsseldorf. Eventually they worked abroad, as with the case of the images from Pennsylvania and Canada that appeared in the seven grids that they contributed to *New Topographics* in 1975 (**fig. 5.1**).⁶

approach is made difficult for similar reasons. Historians are used to addressing eras and phenomena that are over. Retroactively recording something as changeable (and on-going) as industrialization will scarcely be possible, in particular because of its lack of any claim to be everlasting. As such nothing remains other than to document today such images of industry as exist and even point to the future.” Hilla Becher’s unpublished notes, 1971, quoted in Susanne Lange, *Bernd and Hilla Becher, Life and Work*, translated by Jeremy Gaines. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

⁴ Wilson

⁵ Lange 16

⁶ In 1974, the Bechers had photographed sites in New Jersey, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and

The Bechers' goal, they stated, was to "record the objects as precisely as possible," and they developed a rigorous approach.⁷ Employing an 8x10 camera and low-sensitivity Agfa sheet film, they used an average exposure time of ten seconds and an aperture of f.45 to produce grainless gelatin silver prints on Agfa Record Rapid or comparable types of paper.⁸ The couple deliberately photographed on overcast days in order to capture their subjects in even light conditions, and virtually no clouds, shadows, smoke from chimneys, or workers appear in their images. Shooting the structures from straight-on, and often from elevated vantage points, they crafted a consistent perspective for all of their photographs.⁹ They furthermore adopted a consistent distance from each structure so that no matter its size, the structures appeared to be the same scale in print. As critic Andy Grundberg has described, "their prints are descriptive, finely detailed and finished in a glossy surface," with "a commercial, assembly-line feel, which is actually a sign of the Bechers' accomplished craft."¹⁰

For presentation, the Bechers grouped their prints according to structure type and displayed them in the aforementioned gridded form they called a "typology" – a term that

southern Ontario – coal mines, steel mills, and grain elevators. The typologies they chose for *New Topographics* included three depicting coal breakers, two pit heads, one salt mine, and one house. Salvesen, "New Topographics," 48.

⁷ Interview with Bernd and Hilla Becher by Michael Köhler in Düsseldorf, May 1989. *Künstler: Kritisches Lexikon der Gegenwartskunst*, ed. Lothar Romain and Detlef Bluemler, no. 7 (Munich: WB Verlag, 1989), 14-15. Reprinted in Lange, 187-191 (189).

⁸ Lange 31-33

⁹ Bernd called this the "most impressive optical view," one he came to know in his childhood when viewing the Hainer Hütte mine from a hill. "I always took note of how the image of the mine changed with the increasing height from which I saw it," he reflected. Sometimes he and Hilla had to go to great lengths to achieve this vantage point of a particular structure, from constructing scaffolding to standing on roofs, to asking strangers in neighboring houses if they could shoot from one of their upper windows. Interview with Bernd and Hilla Becher by Michael Köhler, in Lange 189.

¹⁰ Andy Grundberg, "Seeking the Human Qualities in Industrial Forms," *New York Times*, January 7, 1990: 33, 35.

in scientific contexts refers to “the scientific description and classification of a domain of objects by group according to uniform complexes of characteristics.”¹¹ Each grid did not necessarily have the same number of prints; the number and orientation of images followed from concerns having to do with both aesthetics and other circumstances, such as the object’s shape or geographical location. Susanne Lange elaborates:

The selection and order of the images is driven initially by the objects’ functional and structural properties, which can be organized in different work groups, such as the groups of winding towers, blast furnaces, gasometers, or cooling towers. Within these groups, the photographic prints are ordered to form object families aligned by the construction material used, such as wood, concrete, steel, or a mixture.¹²

They further subdivided these selections of images according to the structures’ shapes, and also by “local identity, which could be termed ethnographical subdivision.”¹³ In 1971, Hilla wrote in reference to mining equipment in particular, providing insight into the pair’s considerations: “The economic structure of a region, the way minerals are deposited, and the kind of mineral involved, as well as the working conditions that result from this all culminate in the “style” of the structure.”¹⁴ Juxtaposed in grid form, the similarities and differences between individual structures are thrown into relief, forming a “morphology” of sorts that encourages the viewer to read the buildings as permutations of one another.¹⁵ The “look” the typologies imply is therefore one of sequential analytical comparison, which is underscored by the extended title of the Bechers’ landmark 1970 book, *Anonyme Skulpturen: Formvergleiche industrieller Bauten* – comparisons of form

¹¹ Unpublished notes of Hilla Becher, 1971. Quoted in Lange, 51.

¹² Lange 51

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Unpublished notes of Hilla Becher, 1971. Quoted in Lange, 51.

¹⁵ This is the term that Eastman House curator Robert Sobieszek used to describe the Bechers’ typologies. See Robert Sobieszek, “Two Books of Ultra-Topography,” *Image*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (September 1971), 11-13 (12).

in industrial buildings.¹⁶ By referring to their subjects as “anonymous sculptures,” the pair furthermore nodded to Marcel Duchamp’s notion of the readymade and primed their audience to attend to the buildings as something akin to found objects.¹⁷

An important component of the Bechers’ process was to conduct research and “collect data on the objects.”¹⁸ They assembled information about the structures’ architecture and engineering on location, studied topographical maps, and gathered anonymous photographs that they often found on site at structures slated for demolition; the latter is how they came to know the work of amateur photographer Peter Weller (1868-1940), who anticipated the Bechers’ practice by documenting the mines, iron and steel plants, railways, houses of Siegerland.¹⁹ In their personal library, they accumulated materials related to technological and economic history, forming “an anthology of the manner in which industry was portrayed and accepted.”²⁰ In terms of more canonical photographic history, as early as 1957, Bernd had acquired August Sander’s 1927 publication *Antlitz der Zeit* (Face of our Time), and in 1961, the couple obtained a book of Eugène Atget’s photographs.²¹ Later, they collected volumes on the work of Charles Sheeler, and the New Objectivity photographers Albert Renger-Patzsch and Karl

¹⁶ The book contained photographs taken from 1961-1970, and was published by Art-Press Verlag in Düsseldorf and distributed by Wittenborn & Co. in the United States. “Anonyme Skulpturen” was also the title of an exhibition of the pair’s work in 1969 at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf.

¹⁷ In 1990, the Bechers in fact received an award at the Venice Biennale not for photography, but rather for sculpture. See “Who are Hilla and Bernd Becher?” Tate Modern online: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/bernd-becher-and-hilla-becher-718/who-are-bechers>

¹⁸ Unpublished notes of Hilla Becher, 1971, quoted in Lange, 30.

¹⁹ Lange 75

²⁰ Lange 75

²¹ Lange 76. See August Sander and Alfred Döblin, *Antlitz der Zeit. Sechzig Aufnahmen Deutscher Menschen Des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Face of our time: Sixty portraits of twentieth-century Germans). (Munich: Transmare Verlag, 1929).

Blossfeldt. Notably, it was Sol LeWitt who introduced the Bechers to the work of Walker Evans by giving them a copy of Evans's 1938 book *American Photographs* in 1969.²²

As the couple prepared *Anonyme Skulpturen* for publication, the appropriation of their typologies into a conceptual art framework was swift. Addressing these circumstances in retrospect, Bernd ventured: "As this was the period of Concept art, we just happened to fall into this context – for better or worse."²³ Lange determines that "the link to these new currents in art was first forged" in 1969, when the Bechers participated in *Konzeption-conception*, an exhibition organized by Rolf Wedewer and the artist and gallerist Konrad Fischer that addressed the "trend away from...subjective image worlds" in favor of the concept and objectivity.²⁴ In 1970, McShine exhibited their typologies in *Information* alongside artists like Douglas Huebler, Sol LeWitt, and Lawrence Weiner, and in 1971, they were shown alongside Marcel Broodthaers, Hanne Darboven, Gilbert & George, and Robert Smithson at the second Nuremberg Biennial.²⁵

The year 1972 was particularly momentous. On the one hand, Harald Szeeman invited the Bechers to participate in documenta 5 in Kassel, where Fischer and Klaus

²² Lange 76. In 1986, the pair even made an homage to Evans's iconic photograph of a cemetery in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania while traveling through the same town.

²³ Bernd made this statement in response to being asked about whether he and Hilla had any thoughts on why their work was taken up by art museums at this moment. He elaborated on additional factors: "We can only hazard a guess today...A lot happened during that time. There was Pop Art with its everyday iconography, the objective tradition of classical Modernism such as New Objectivity... was rediscovered, August Sander was discovered and people began to take photography seriously again. After all, here in Düsseldorf there was even an exhibition entitled "Machine Culture." All this must have given people a keener sense for the importance of our "anonymous sculptures." Moreover, at the end of the 1960s there was a certain ennui with art... In this situation museums were very open to things which dealt with the aesthetic problems of Modernism in an unconventional way." Interview with Bernd and Hilla Becher by Michael Köhler, in Lange 191.

²⁴ Lange 66. See *Konzeption-conception: Dokumentation einer heutigen Kunstrichtung*. Exh. cat. Städtisches Museum Leverkusen Schloss Morsbroich, February 28 – 13 April 13, 1969.

²⁵ Lange 66

Honnef placed them into the “Ideas” section, sharing a room with Mel Bochner and John Baldessari.²⁶ Across the Atlantic, meanwhile, the Bechers secured representation at Sonnabend Gallery in New York. Thanks to Fischer introducing them, Ileana Sonnabend and Antonio Homem had first visited the pair in Düsseldorf in 1971.²⁷ At the time, the gallery already exhibited several artists working with photography, including John Baldessari, William Wegman, and Christian Boltanski. Sonnabend gave the Bechers their first solo show in the United States in 1972, where the couple presented several typologies depicting winding towers (a type of structure used in the context of mining) in sets of nine, water towers, silos, and gas storage tanks. It was either at this exhibition or another in 1974 at Sonnabend that William Jenkins first encountered the Bechers’ work; we at least do know that it was the gallery’s director, Ealon Wingate, who suggested to Jenkins that the pair be included in *New Topographics*.²⁸

That same year marked the publication of Carl Andre’s essay about the Bechers’ work in *Artforum*. As Lange discerns, this event “inaugurated the international discussion of their work in the art world.”²⁹ Andre’s piece was primarily informative in tone, as opposed to critical or analytical. He began by concisely describing the Bechers’ photographs as “similar views of different structures built to serve the same purpose.”³⁰ It

²⁶ Lange emphasizes that in turn, it was through Fischer that Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, Gilbert & George, Richard Long, and Robert Smithson were integrated into the Düsseldorf art scene. Lange 66.

²⁷ Jeffrey Ladd, “On the Reception of Bernd and Hilla Becher’s Work in the United States, 1968-1991,” in Werner Lippert and Christoph Schaden, eds. *Der Rote Bulli: Stephen Shore and the New Düsseldorf Photography* (Düsseldorf: NRW-Forum Kultur und Wirtschaft, 2010), 73-89 (79).

²⁸ Bill Jenkins interviewed by Britt Salvesen, June 30, 2006. Center for Creative Photography, Oral History Collection, VOP06:018. Jenkins furthermore elaborates in this interview that John Baldessari had also encouraged him to look at the Bechers’ work.

²⁹ Lange 66

³⁰ Andre 59

followed that the theme of their work as interpreted by Andre was “variations within limits determined by function.” After covering biographical information about the couple and the locations where they have worked, Andre momentarily alluded to some social context by noting that “when these structures no longer serve their purposes efficiently they are abandoned.”³¹ Echoing Hilla’s observation about how the structures’ purpose yields their “style,” Andre nevertheless brought matters back to a formal domain by saying that the Bechers’ photographs therefore “record the transient existence of purely functional structures and reveal the degree to which form is determined by the invariant requirements of function.” He thoroughly and methodically listed the kinds of structures one finds in their typologies: ones “with the same function... with the same function but with different shapes... structures with the same function and shape but built with different materials...”³² Andre noted that as part of their process, the Bechers “record the dimensions, dates, and construction details of the structures they photograph.”³³ He ended his one-page text with Hilla Becher’s statement quoted at the beginning of this epilogue, where she claimed that she and Bernd did not particularly care whether their practice qualified as art, but that an art viewing context was likely to draw an audience that was interested in that question.

Andre’s precise and economical tone in his essay resonated with some of the qualities he observed (and appeared to appreciate and consider novel) in the Bechers’ work: its lucid description of the industrial structures, its consistency, and its comprehensive, thorough display of visual and contextual information. He offered no

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

commentary on the potential relation of the Bechers' project to art historical precedents. In a follow-up piece in *Artforum* in 1973, critic Joseph Masheck responded to Andre, citing at the outset how "one creative function of art history is to draw on the memory banks of culture to claim for contemporary artists the traditions to which they may unknowingly contribute."³⁴ He laid out several points of reference that he argued could enrich our understanding of the pair's project, from the history of architectural photography to the classic slide comparison in art historical pedagogy, and materials like architectural guide books for travelers interested in industrial heritage. "Nowadays, tracking down Becher-type material has become a not uncommon hobby in Britain," Masheck observed. "Handy guidebooks are published for devotees, such as the field guides of the British Archaeological Research Group and even a six-penny booklet put out by London Transport."³⁵ For Masheck, the "blunt, mute view" and "anonymity of effect" the Bechers had developed, and the studious, comparative gaze that their typologies activated in turn, had roots in a wide range of visual materials. "It is concerned with rationalistic and utilitarian materials," Masheck concluded of the Bechers' project, "but even on that score it shares in a specifically German tradition of "hard" or puritanical Romanticism that goes back as far as the 18th century."³⁶

With his rebuttal to Andre, then, Masheck proposed a rich pre-history to the posture the Bechers adopted in their photographs, and how contradictory it was for any critic to "deny their artistic content in a pseudo-avant-garde way on one page while

³⁴ Joseph Masheck, "Unconscious Formalism: A Response to Andre's Note on the Bechers," *Artforum* Vol. 11, No. 7 (March 1973): 75

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

asserting it on the next.”³⁷ Eliding “the question of authorship,” in Masheck’s view, was to miss the meaningful ways in which the Bechers’ project intersected with historical precedents – ones that impacted the work’s reception and contributed to what this analysis would call the “horizon of expectations” for the work’s 1970s audience. Lange has more recently stressed: “Although the Bechers do not reject that there are points of contact between their work and Concept or Minimal Art, their objectives and method developed independently of the discussion on contemporary criteria for art.”³⁸ Regardless of what the Bechers themselves thought about the issue, this debate illuminates how in making sense of the pair’s work, audiences’ points of reference were far-reaching, and could be marshaled in service of arguing for the work’s documentary conventionality on the one hand, or its conceptual strength on the other. By the early 1970s, the same formal qualities of the work could read as “neutral” to viewers with different motivations, and to very different ends.

For some critics, the Bechers’ typologies possessed “aesthetic distance” even when immediately regarded as conceptual art. In 1977, the couple was included in *Europe in the Seventies* at the Art Institute of Chicago. In a review of the exhibition titled “Intentionally Starving the Eye,” Hilton Kramer began: “The art of the 1970s is going to present future art historians with some very knotty problems.”³⁹ He went on to lament:

...there are now whole areas of art – or what, in our reluctance to impose restrictive definitions, we agree to call art even if we do not always experience it as such – that are very far both in conception and execution from anything the art historian has ever had to face in the past... What we actually see, what occupies the space of a gallery or a museum, is obviously – and deliberately – of so little

³⁷ Ibid. Masheck elaborates that he is not specifically targeting Andre here, whose “reticence” in the *Artforum* piece Masheck says “saves him from falling into [that] trap,” but rather art critic and museum administrator Wend Fischer.

³⁸ Lange 66

³⁹ Hilton Kramer, “Intentionally Starving the Eye,” *New York Times*, October 9, 1977, D35.

visual interest that we know at once that the real center of this art, its gravity so to speak, lies elsewhere, in some realm outside the boundaries of visual experience.⁴⁰

Kramer cited *Information* as one such recent exhibition. After listing some of the artists in the Art Institute show, Kramer arrived at the Bechers, noting that they “prefer the use of photography” – the phrasing of which is suggestive in terms of how Kramer saw them engaging with the notion of medium. “From these photographic sets we are expected, I gather, to glean some intelligence about process and structure,” Kramer continued. “The pictures themselves are not intended to exert an esthetic appeal, and in fact they have no esthetic appeal. They look like the sort of pictures one sees in a real estate office.”⁴¹

Unable to appreciate the Bechers’ print craft, for Kramer, the photographs not only looked as if they could have come from a commercial context; their manner of address (and that of the other works on display in the exhibition) also projected an off-putting attitude of indifference towards the viewer.

For Eastman House curator Robert Sobieszek, meanwhile, it was true that “when viewed singularly, the photographs are nullified of their purpose and meaning and become little more than single real estate photos in an agency’s window,” but they nevertheless resonated with historical precedents in architectural photography.⁴² Indeed, when Jenkins included the couple in *New Topographics* in 1975, they were not strangers to the Eastman House; in 1972, they had been exhibited in a show called *Morphologies and Anonymous Sculptures* along with Lewis Baltz’s *Tract Houses* (curated by Sobieszek and Jenkins, respectively). Reviewing *Anonyme Skulpturen* for the Eastman House’s

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sobieszek 12

journal *Image* in 1974, Sobieszek wrote: “The similarity of the structures, the layout of the volume, and the sameness of the style all contribute to a monotonic effect. But it is a monotony that is surprisingly refreshing.”⁴³ He proposed that the photographs engage the viewer by appealing to their proclivity for comparison: “the similitude of the plates somehow draws the reader into a closer observation of the particulars.”⁴⁴ Sobieszek then situated them in relation to the Mission héliographique and Ed Ruscha’s books – two disparate sources that emblemized an impulse to inventory, but the latter in a tongue-in-cheek fashion.⁴⁵ The curator concluded, arguing that the Bechers’ project explored problems both properly “photographic” and otherwise:

Their context is very much their significance; the rhythms and repetitions very much the idea of the work. But the fact that the single image is so minimal reduces the construction of the aesthetic framework to a basic ingredient: its serialism. Below this level lies the photograph, complete with its data, its information and immediacy. A dual experience of this kind is exclusively the domain of “straight” photography, yet the only exposure the Bechers have received in this country was in Kynaston L. McShine’s “Information” show at the Modern.⁴⁶

Sobieszek’s recognition of this disjunction anticipated how Jenkins would feel in retrospect about including the Bechers in *New Topographics*. In 2006, when he acknowledged wishing that he had included Ruscha in the exhibition, it was in fact in the context of discussing the Bechers’ presence in the show. For Jenkins, the couple’s typologies represented the “part of the show that was not quite so photographic,” and including Ruscha’s photo books “wouldn’t have made the Bechers seem so out of

⁴³ Sobieszek 12

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ This was a survey that the French government sponsored to photograph significant architectural sites in France. The agency that commissioned it was the Commission des Monuments Historiques.

⁴⁶ Sobieszek 11.

place.”⁴⁷

A New Generation of “Cool”: the Düsseldorf School of Photography

Bernd Becher began teaching his photography course at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in 1977, and by 1996 had supervised a total of 87 students.⁴⁸ As Lange emphasizes, the class “emerged as a cornerstone of the avant-garde art scene” in Germany, at an institution already associated with artists such as Gerhard Richter and Joseph Beuys.⁴⁹ Among the students were Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Thomas Ruff, and Thomas Struth, now major figures in contemporary art whose names are synonymous with the “Düsseldorf School of Photography.”⁵⁰ Following from the working process they had developed, the Bechers’ pedagogy emphasized working serially and with predetermined subjects, which Bernd identified in a 1989 interview as a “cool” approach.⁵¹ While rooted in that foundation, the practices that many of the students developed moved away from their teachers’ documentary ambitions and took on a variety of subject matter. Nearly all of them also worked in color. Nevertheless, what the students’ bodies of work share is a posture of authorial detachment that manifests at

⁴⁷ Bill Jenkins interviewed by Britt Salvesen, June 30, 2006. Center for Creative Photography, Oral History Collection, VOP06:018.

⁴⁸ *Der Rote Bulli* 13. It was Bernd who had the official appointment with the institution, but Hilla was a regular and important fixture in the class.

⁴⁹ Lange 16

⁵⁰ For more information on all of their work, see Stefan Gronert, *The Düsseldorf School of Photography* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2017).

⁵¹ This comment came in the context of trying to speak to why their work was taken up into the context of conceptual art: “Of course the fact that our work is systematically created... played a role here, and the fact that our perspective is “cool” and gets by without the subjective expression of the artists, and the fact that the individual works have an underlying framework and are arranged in series and sequences, etc. But this relationship with the methods of Concept Art was somewhat exaggerated at the time. But perhaps this was also because there was no other art movement which we could be assigned to.” Interview with Bernd and Hilla Becher by Michael Köhler, quoted in Lange, 191.

the level of viewer response. This common denominator connects them not only to the ideas at play in *New Topographics*, but also other “cool” precedents in photographic and broader art history.

In terms of the photographers from *New Topographics*, as Christoph Schaden has determined, Stephen Shore was “*the American inspiration*” for the class, figuring as a model for how to craft an authorial mode similar to that of their teachers’, but in color.⁵² The students associated Shore not as much with *New Topographics*, however, as they did with the New Color Photography coming out of the United States, which also included William Eggleston, Joel Sternfeld, and Joel Meyerowitz.⁵³ When Bernd began teaching at the Kunstakademie, black and white photography still dominated postwar German photography, as did Otto Steinert’s philosophy of *subjektive fotografie*. But the Bechers exposed their students to the possibility of working in color largely via Shore’s work. “We liked Stephen Shore from the very start,” Hilla later recalled. “We bought his book *Uncommon Places* immediately after it came out. His basic attitude was simply brilliant. Bernd constantly waved his work under the students’ noses; he virtually bombarded them with it.”⁵⁴ Shore published *Uncommon Places* in 1982, but Hilla had already been friends with him since 1973, and Shore’s and the Bechers’ work had also been exhibited together several times.⁵⁵

⁵² Christoph Schaden, “On the Reception of Stephen Shore’s work in Germany, 1972-1995,” in *Der Rote Bulli*, 29-71 (29).

⁵³ See Lippert and Schaden, eds. *Der Rote Bulli*, and Sally Euclaire, *The New Color Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981).

⁵⁴ Quoted in Thomas Honickel, “Der Becher-Effekt: Interview mit Hilla Becher,” in *Photonews* Vol. 4 (2010): 8.

⁵⁵ Exhibitions that exhibited Shore and the Bechers together included *23 Photographers, 23 Directions* at the Waker Art Gallery in Liverpool (1978), and curator Weston Naef’s *Counterparts: Form and Emotion in Photographs* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1982). Thomas Weski wrote of the potential motivating factors for the Bechers acquiring the Easton

The Bechers also owned several prints by Shore and displayed them in their studio, which Hilla claimed “had a certain influence” on their students.⁵⁶ In 1974, they had traveled throughout the northeastern United States and Canada in a red Volkswagen bus just like the one in Shore’s photograph from Easton, Pennsylvania. Back in Germany, sometime before 1977 they purchased a print of that image, as well as Shore’s photograph of the intersection of Beverly and La Brea in Los Angeles, and kept them on view for studio visitors to see.⁵⁷ They had obtained the prints from Rudolf Kicken’s gallery in Aachen, Galerie Lichttropfen.⁵⁸ Indeed, in another transatlantic connection, Kicken had in fact attended the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester and studied with Nathan Lyons. Upon returning to Germany, he founded his gallery and began to show Shore’s work by way of correspondence with Harold Jones at LIGHT Gallery.⁵⁹ In 1977, just as Bernd assumed his teaching post, Galerie Lichttropfen provided approximately 60 of Shore’s pictures from *Uncommon Places* for the photographer’s first solo show in

print: “Did the Bechers recognize in this color photograph, although rare in art photography at that time, an intent similar to their own, a conceptually based intent similar to their own, a conceptually based intent they refer to as “the highest common denominator”?” Thomas Weski, “Church Street and Second Street, Easton, Pennsylvania, June 20, 1974,” in Annette and Rudolf Kicken and Simon Förster, eds. *Points of View: Masterpieces of Photography and their Stories* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2007), 59.

⁵⁶ Hilla said: “We had acquired a small series in color by Stephen Shore – bought or exchanged – and the photographs hung here, for all our visitors to see. That had a certain influence.” Schaden, “On the Reception of Stephen Shore’s Work in Germany,” 47.

⁵⁷ Schaden mentions that Weski has claimed that the pair acquired these prints “in the early 1980s,” but this chronology does not match up with how the Bechers then supposedly lent these same prints to documenta 6 in Kassel in 1977. Christoph Schaden, “The Boy at the Window,” in *Der Rote Bulli* 19-27 (19), and Schaden, “On the Reception of Stephen Shore’s Work in Germany,” 35.

⁵⁸ Kicken founded the gallery in 1974. The Bechers had come into contact with Kicken’s gallery through Klaus Honnef. See Schaden, “The Boy at the Window,” 23, and Schaden, “On the Reception of Stephen Shore’s work in Germany,” 33.

⁵⁹ Kicken’s gallery was eventually called “Kicken & Schürmann.” See Schaden, “On the Reception of Stephen Shore’s Work in Germany,” 33, 35.

Europe at the Kunsthalle.⁶⁰ A review of the exhibition noted both Shore's "distanced viewpoint" and "sunlight-infused colors."⁶¹

Shortly thereafter, the Bechers lent their Shore prints to documenta 6, which went on view in Kassel on June 24, 1977. Throughout the remainder of the 1970s, Shore's work was exhibited in multiple gallery exhibitions across Germany, to the extent that in 1978, half of his sales were to German collectors.⁶² This was to Shore's surprise, since he was unable to travel to Europe in these years and was only peripherally aware of these developments.⁶³ With the publication of Sally Euclaire's *The New Color Photography* for the International Center for Photography in 1981, the younger generation of photographers enrolled in Bernd Becher's class had access to an overview of a movement they already admired vis-à-vis Shore's work; Andreas Gursky would refer to Euclaire's book as "my Bible."⁶⁴ As a result of the students' enthusiasm for Shore's and his New Color peers' work, in 1983, the Kunstakademie procured color developing equipment for the Becher class.⁶⁵

The multifaceted points of view that the Bechers' students developed in the early years of their careers evidence their indebtedness both to their teachers and models like Shore. Thomas Struth (born in 1954), who graduated from the Kunstakademie in 1980,

⁶⁰ Notably, the Kunsthalle had exhibited Walker Evans the year before. Schaden notes that Shore's earlier conceptual series had also been exhibited as early as autumn 1972 in a show called Bilderschauen (Picture Shows) at the photokina in Cologne. See Schaden, "On the Reception of Stephen Shore's Work in Germany," 31.

⁶¹ Helga Meister, "Colville war längst überfällig. Kunsthalle eröffnet mit vier Ausstellungen," *Düsseldorfer Nachrichten*, April 20, 1977, 13.

⁶² Schaden, "Reception of Stephen Shore in Germany," 43. See also Tony Hiss, "The Framing of Stephen Shore," in *American Photographer* Vol. 2 (1979), 28.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Schaden, "On the Reception of Stephen Shore's Work in Germany," 51

⁶⁵ Matthias Winzen, ed. *Thomas Ruff: Fotografien 1979-heute* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung König, 2001), 254.

said of the kind of approach he favored: “I’m impressed by photographs without a personal signature.”⁶⁶ As an homage to Shore’s *Uncommon Places*, he titled his first book *Unconscious Places*.⁶⁷ For this series, Struth made black and white pictures of urban streets in Düsseldorf, Munich, London, and New York, and almost exclusively composed them with one-point perspective. The photographs appear eerily vacant of people, projecting a sense of quietude and stillness that resonates with how Struth’s formal choices downplay the conventional sense of a subjective presence behind the camera. In 2004, a critic argued that in this portion of Struth’s output, one could trace a lineage back to Atget and Evans vis-à-vis the influence of Shore.⁶⁸

Vacant space is also a theme in Candida Höfer’s work (born in 1944; graduated from the Kunstakademie in 1982). Her large-scale color photographs picture expansive spaces that play an important role in cultural life or preserve cultural heritage, such as museums, libraries, theaters, and opera houses, but in moments where they are empty of human presence. Höfer often composes her images with some major element in the scene in the center, so as to render the photographs rigorously symmetrical. The photographs of Axel Hütte (born in 1951; graduated in 1981), meanwhile, carry forward this preoccupation with spaces devoid of people, but they more directly engage with landscape. One of the photographer’s galleries has characterized his style as “cold,” adding that “his gaze is as neutral and disaffected as possible, and his flat and technically impeccable images are rich in details.”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Quoted in *Der Rote Bulli*, 49

⁶⁷ See Thomas Struth, *Unbewusste Orte* (Münster: Landschaftsverband Westfalen-Lippe, 1987).

⁶⁸ Aaron Schuman, “An Autobiography of Seeing,” *Modern Painters* (January 2004), 78.

⁶⁹ Artist page for “Axel Hütte,” Galería Helga de Alvear.

<http://www.helgadealvear.com/web/index.php/axel-hutte-4/?lang=en>

This assessment also describes the monumentally-scaled portraits of Thomas Ruff (born in 1958; graduated from the Kunstakademie in 1985). Already interested in photographers like Atget and Evans, in 1981 Ruff began a series that initially grew out of his practice of making head shots for punk bands. This expanded into a body of work where Ruff positioned sitters – primarily friends and art school colleagues – in front of a white background, and photographed them frontally at close range, as if in the manner of a passport photo. Indeed, the experience of viewing these photographs inevitably draws upon the viewer's likely familiarity with that type of picture. The function of a passport photo is not to convey personality, but rather to represent likeness as accurately as possible in order to confirm a person's identity. The strength with which Ruff draws upon its conventions encourages his viewer to inhabit a similar stance of scrutiny. Indeed, in approaching the problem of how to make neutral pictures of people, Struth turned to strategies of placing his sitters in front of a blank background, photographing them in a uniform manner, and instructing them to not make facial expressions – but he also anticipated the element of his photographs' reception, letting convention do its work. Blown up to monumental scale, the photographs beg for the viewer to inspect the fine details of the sitters' faces down to their pores, encouraging an even greater level of scrutiny than an agent would perform at a security checkpoint. The effect is one of looking at individuals that we can only know in a superficial manner, through pure surface appearance.

Finally, perhaps the most well-known student of the Bechers on an international scale is Andreas Gursky (born in 1955; graduated in 1987), who photographs spectacular spaces that speak to the social effects of globalization. Initially Gursky pursued an

approach that was closer to his teachers', such as a series where he photographed receptionists and security guards in corporate buildings. In the past few decades, however, he shifted to panoramic views of the interiors and exteriors of densely packed grocery stores and apartment complexes, cavernous hotel lobbies, sprawling parking lots, factories, and stock exchanges. Similar to many of his Düsseldorf School peers, Gursky prints these photographs at a large, tableau-like scale, such that the viewer toggles between registering fine detail and the "bigger picture," so to speak, both literally and metaphorically. Taking stock of individual cereal boxes in the grocery store, cars in the parking lot, or doors to apartment units, we are moved to consider how these grand-scale spaces that facilitate diverse forms of exchange are comprised of individuals and particulars. The photographs amount to a "mapping of contemporary life governed by forces that are not possible to see from a position within a crowd," hence the reason why the distanced vantage point Gursky adopts is key; "we are not part of the action at all, but detached, critical viewers."⁷⁰ Gursky furthermore manipulates his photographs using digital technology in order to augment the sense of parts dissolving into a whole.

In the work of the Bechers' students, then, many of the same formal qualities and parameters appear as the ones that marked their teachers' work and *New Topographics*: predetermined subject matter, uniformly frontal (and often physically removed) vantage points, sharp and precise focus, flat and clinical lighting conditions, and richly detailed, expansive fields of vision that disperse the viewer's attention across the picture plane. The choice to represent spaces marked to a greater degree by age and use resonates,

⁷⁰ Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 84.

especially, with Shore's gravitation to older architecture.⁷¹ The absence of people in much of the work also functions to block narrative or direct attention to human presence as indicated by the built environment. Cumulatively, these elements translate to what a great deal of criticism is often content to call "cool," or any number of synonyms for that term: detached, distanced, or dispassionate, as well as deadpan or banal. In her 2004 survey of contemporary photography, for example, Charlotte Cotton defines the "deadpan" as a "cool, detached, and keenly sharp type of photography" marked by "seeming emotional detachment" and "seeming neutrality."⁷² Identifying the deadpan as a major stylistic tendency in contemporary photography with the Düsseldorf School as its origin, she traces the influence of the Bechers to practitioners like Ed Burtynsky (born 1955), Rineke Dijkstra (born 1959), Simone Nieweg (born 1962), and many others.⁷³

⁷¹ Michael Fried is one of the few scholars who has examined Düsseldorf School photography through the lens of reception. This theme of spaces marked by use figures prominently in his treatment of the work of Thomas Demand and Candida Höfer. See Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), especially Chapter 9, "Thomas Demand's Allegories of Intention; "Exclusion" in Candida Höfer, Hiroshi Sugimoto, and Thomas Struth," 261-302.

⁷² Cotton 81

⁷³ See Cotton, Chapter 3: "Deadpan," 81-113. It should be noted that in a way, the categorical difficulty of the Bechers' work has filtered down into how the work of their students and other contemporary photographers is handled in the art market and institutionally. The budgets of photography departments in museums often do not match those of contemporary art departments, so an object like a Gursky print may be acquired by the latter rather than the former. The way that the photographers have positioned themselves has also impacted these circumstances, as Thomas Weski notes: "For reasons pertaining to marketing strategy, they would for a long time heedfully avoid such attempts at categorizing them in the history of photography" (Thomas Weski, "Interlude: Joachim Brohm's Ohio Photographs," in Joachim Brohm, *Ohio* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2009), 15). The Bechers' simultaneous inclusion in *New Topographics* and 1970s exhibitions of conceptual art attests to how the couple had a foot in the photography and broader art worlds alike; audiences, critics, and curators in the 1970s interpreted their work as belonging to both. Even as those worlds became more porous in the wake of the "Photo Boom" and the rise of photography as a tool for conceptual art practice, however, a division between them remains – for example, in the form of the real logistical considerations museums face when they collect the work of the Bechers' students, or other contemporary photographs that are monumental in both physical scale and price.

As this study has endeavored to show through the case of *New Topographics*, however, this style of photography does not have to remain so ineffably resistant to analysis. Just as critic Joseph Masheck sought to demonstrate about the Bechers' work in his response to Carl Andre in *Artforum* in 1973, by considering the photographs from the standpoint of their reception, and examining the conventions they invoke from other kinds of images and materials from our broader culture that are associated with varying degrees of authorship and expressivity (such as passport photos, industrial heritage guide books, or real estate photography), we can better account for *why* a photograph reads as “cool” in the first place. This approach throws both viewers' interpretive agency and the cultural embeddedness of the act of viewing into relief.

Land's End: the “Cool” Beyond Genre or Medium

This epilogue has not endeavored to determine the precise extent of *New Topographics*'s influence upon photography since 1975, but rather to clarify the nature of that influence – when we recognize and declare it – as having to do with authorial posture and viewer response. Whether or not Jenkins realized it, the ideas he laid out in his introduction to the *New Topographics* catalog in 1975 went beyond landscape as a genre or subject matter. They talked about how we know a “neutral” photograph when we see one, as well as how viewers ascribe meaning to “cool” works of art more broadly. This is why, in retrospect, the show had a certain kinship with the ambitions of McShine's *Information*.

When we call photographs “cool” or “neutral” (let alone “documentary” or “conceptual”), we are expressing something about the response they provoke in us, which

this dissertation has argued is a core component of style. Redefined in this way, style becomes a more dynamic art historical tool. For example, by identifying the common denominator between *New Topographics* and the “Düsseldorf School” as the “cool” way in which the photographs position us as viewers, our understanding of the style that those terms denote becomes both more precise and less monolithic, adaptable to different subject matter. In 2001, Stephen Shore commented that the younger generation of photographers who studied with the Bechers “pursues a standpoint that is related to mine.”⁷⁴ Even if they did not all depict the “vernacular” built environment, the Düsseldorf School photographers’ pictures adopted a similar style, understood in the terms that this project has advanced.

Regarding the significance of *New Topographics* for the study of style more broadly, it is telling that audiences have seldom even considered the Bechers’ photographs “landscapes.” In his critical review of *New Topographics*, Charles Desmarais argued that “while there are certainly elements of topography in the Bechers’ pictures, the main concern seems to be for subjects as representative of class rather than as unique sites needing examination.”⁷⁵ Taking a cue instead from how the pair called their industrial subjects “anonymous sculptures,” art historian Germano Celant made sense of their work in relation to minimalism: “The chief interest of the Bechers’ work is in the flat and minimal use of the photographic documentation, the fixity and utter simplicity of which brings them close to the work of Flavin, LeWitt, Andre, Judd, and Morris. They share the impulse to choose the visual entity rather than to work upon it.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Stephen Shore, quoted in “Faszinierende Blicke auf das anonyme Amerika, Interview mit Stephen Shore,” *Rheinische Post*, April 14, 2001.

⁷⁵ Desmarais 10

⁷⁶ Germano Celant, “Hilla and Bernd Becher: Archaeological-Industrial Monuments and the

These circumstances of the Bechers' reception in these years demonstrate that across genre and media, "neutrality" is matter of convention. The references people turned to in order to contextualize the Bechers' work in the 1970s are also valid touchstones for interpreting the work of their students: from the work of figures like Atget, Sander, Sheeler, and Evans, to 19th century survey photography like that of the Mission héliographique or U.S. geological surveys, to the work of artist peers working in serial and conceptual modes like Ruscha, and even anonymous materials like industrial heritage pamphlets, real estate photographs, and passport photos. Taken together, all of these sources comprise the "horizon of expectations" that informed the reception of the Bechers' work in the 1970s, that of *New Topographics*, and the work of contemporary practitioners who cite them as influences today. They comprise a lineage for the "cool" in art based not on subject matter or form alone, but also on viewer response. This dissertation has sought to demonstrate why, when faced with the task of accounting for work that audiences have historically found difficult to interpret, it helps to begin by taking its temperature.

Perception of Anonymous Sculpture," in *Bernd and Hilla Becher*, exh. cat. La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, February 23-March 31, 1974.

Figures

Introduction

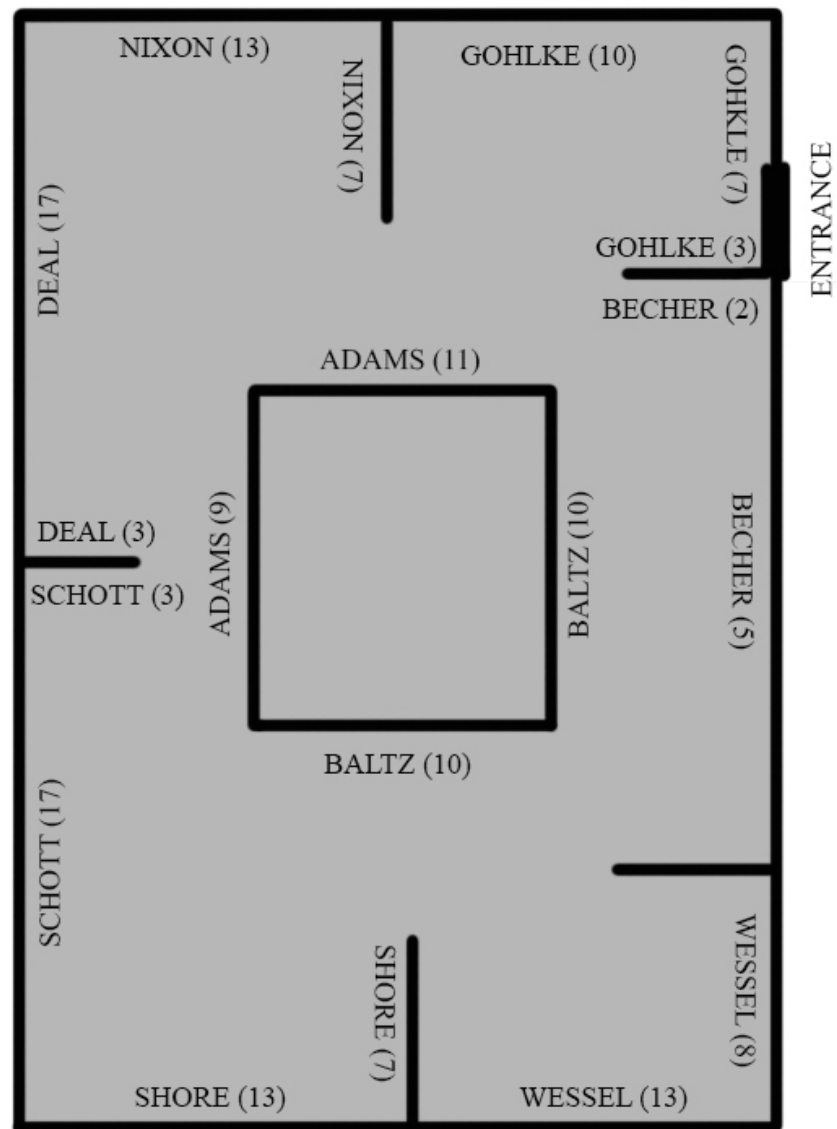


Fig. 0.1

Author's reconstruction of the layout of *New Topographics* at the George Eastman House in 1975 (not to precise scale).

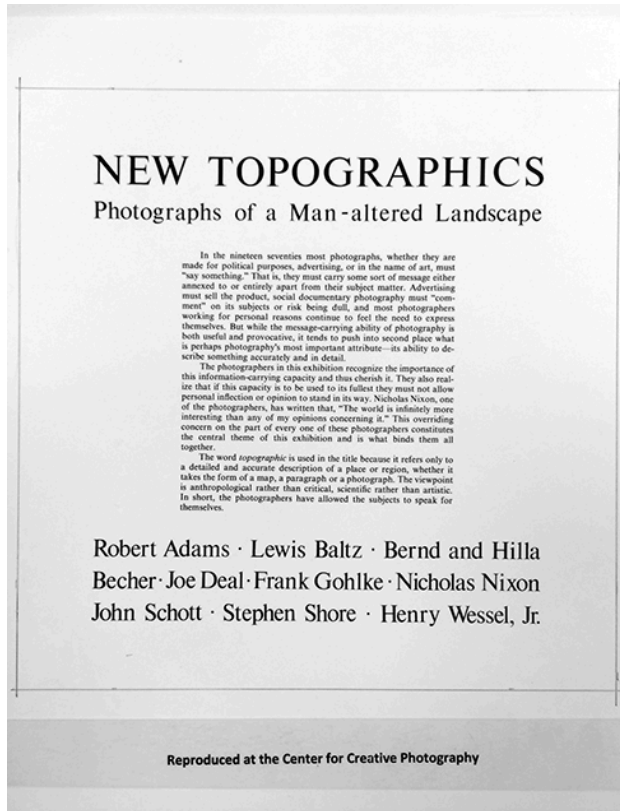


Fig. 0.2

Mock-up of introductory wall text for exhibition. Joe Deal Archive, Center for Creative Photography.

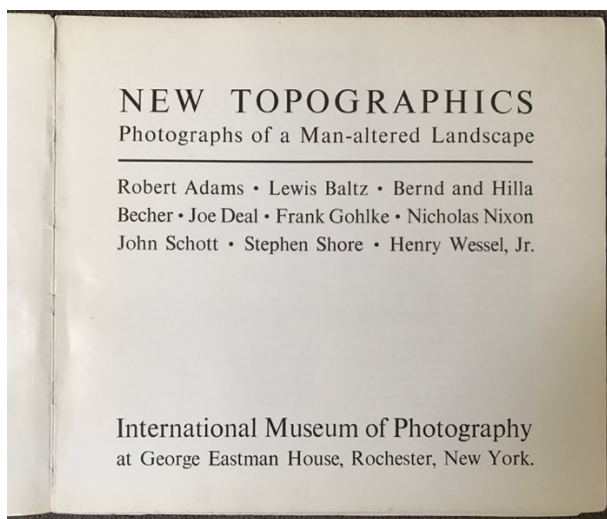


Fig. 0.3

Original *New Topographics* catalog, published in an edition of 2,500 by Pentacle Press in 1975.

Chapter 1

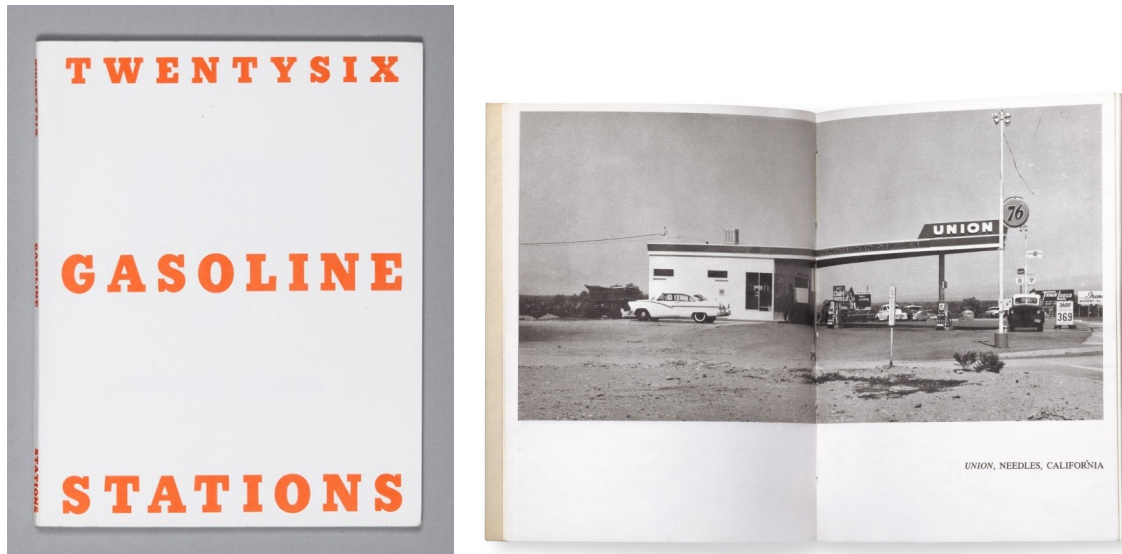


Fig. 1.1

Ed Ruscha, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1963. Self-published book, offset lithograph.

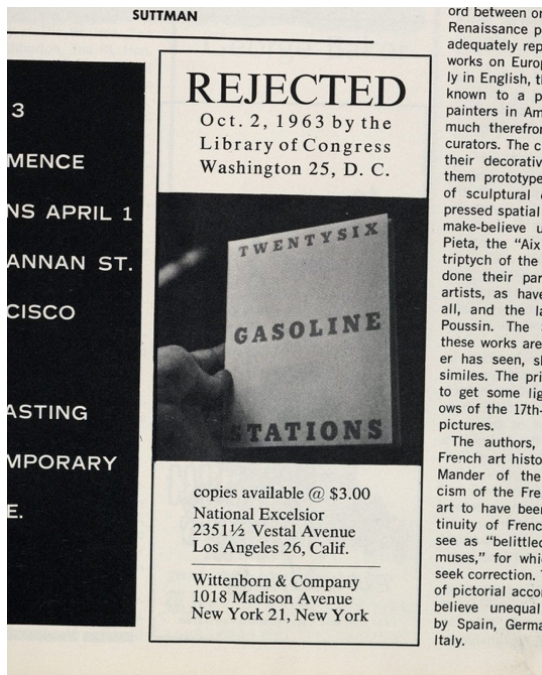


Fig. 1.2

Ed Ruscha, advertisement in *Artforum*, Vol. 2, No. 9 (March 1964): 55.



Fig. 1.3

Ed Ruscha, *OOF*, 1962 (reworked 1963). Oil on canvas. 71.5 x 67 inches. The Museum of Modern Art 256.1988.



Fig. 1.4

Jack Kirby (illustrator) and Artie Simek (letterer), "Stagecoach to Shotgun Gap!" in "Rawhide Kid" no. 17 (1955), published by Marvel in August 1960.



Fig. 1.5
Real estate advertisement in *Real Estate Today*, p.61, August 1975. Accessed via Britt Salvesen, “Real Estate Opportunities: Commercial Photography as Conceptual Source in *New Topographics*, in *Reframing the New Topographics*, ed. Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach (Chicago: Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2010), 71-86 (82).



Fig. 1.6
Ed Ruscha, *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, 1965. Self-published book, offset lithograph.
7 1/16 x 5 5/8 inches. Photo: author's own.

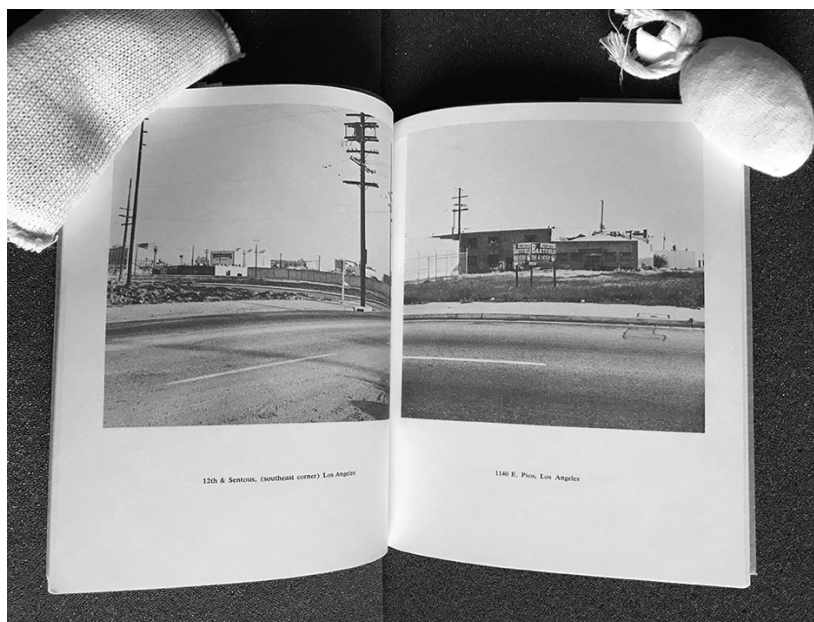


Fig. 1.7

Ed Ruscha, *Real Estate Opportunities*, 1970. Self-published book, offset lithograph. 7 1/16 x 5 5/8 inches. Photo: author's own.

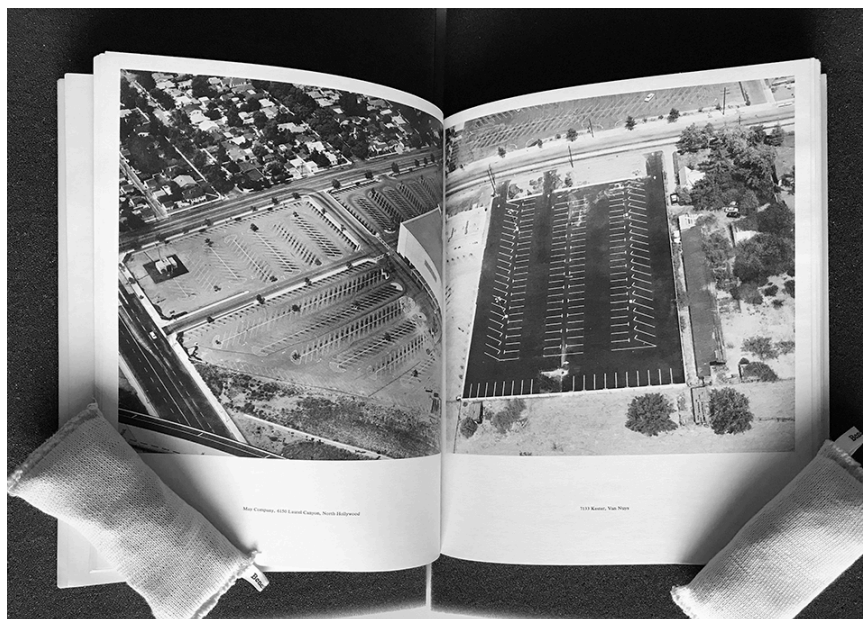


Fig. 1.8

Ed Ruscha, *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles*, 1967. Self-published book, offset lithograph. 9 15/16 x 7 15/16 inches. Photo: author's own.

Chapter 2



Fig 2.1

Robert Adams, *Tract house, Longmont, Colorado*, 1973. Gelatin silver print. 15.3 x 19.2 centimeters.





Fig. 2.2
Installation views, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*, 1975, George Eastman House.



Fig. 2.3
Robert Adams, *Tract house, Boulder County, Colorado*, 1973. Gelatin silver print. 15.2 x 19.4 centimeters.



Fig. 2.4

Robert Adams, *Subdivision street, South Denver, Colorado*, 1973. Gelatin silver print.
15.2 x 19.8 centimeters.



Fig. 2.5

Robert Adams, *Mobile Homes, Jefferson County, Colorado*, 1973. Gelatin silver print.
15.2 x 18.8 centimeters.

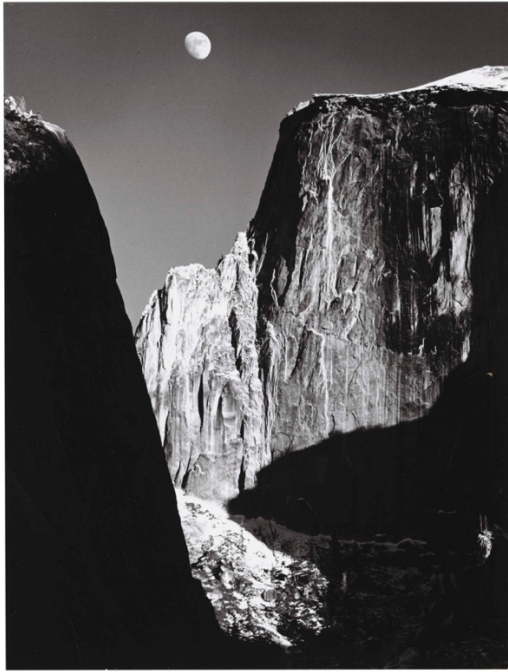


Fig. 2.6
Ansel Adams, *Moon and Half Dome, Yosemite National Park*, 1960. Gelatin silver print.



Fig. 2.7
Ansel Adams, *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*, 1941. Gelatin silver print.



Fig. 2.8
Ansel Adams, *The Tetons and the Snake River, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming*, 1942. Gelatin silver print.



Fig. 2.9
Ansel Adams, *Maroon Bells near Aspen, Colorado*, 1951. Gelatin silver print.



Fig. 2.10

Robert Adams, *Farmland at the north edge of Denver, Colorado*, 1973. Gelatin silver print. 15.2 x 19.4 centimeters.



Fig. 2.11

Robert Adams, *Remodeled tract house, Thornton, Colorado*, 1973. Gelatin silver print. 15.2 x 19.3 centimeters.



Fig. 2.12

Timothy O'Sullivan, *Tufa Domes, Pyramid Lake, Nevada*, 1867. Albumen print.



Fig. 2.13

Timothy O'Sullivan, *Black Canyon, Looking Below Near Camp 8, Colorado River, Arizona*, 1971. Albumen print.



Fig. 2.14

Timothy O'Sullivan, *Karnak, Montezuma Range, Nevada*, 1871. Albumen print.



Fig. 2.15

Timothy O'Sullivan, *Contorted Limestone, Wright's Cañon, Nevada*, 1867. Albumen print.



Fig. 2.16

Robert Adams, *Tract house and vegetable garden, Longmont, Colorado*, 1973. Gelatin silver print. 15.3 x 19.2 centimeters.



Fig. 2.17

Robert Adams, *Tract housing, North Glenn and Thornton, Colorado*, 1973. Gelatin silver print. 15.3 x 19.5 centimeters.



Fig. 2.18

John Constable, *Rainstorm over the Sea [Seascape Study with Raincloud]*, ca. 1824-28. Oil on paper laid on canvas, 9 ¼ x 12 13/16 inches. Royal Academy of Arts, London. Given by Isabel Constable, 1888 (03/1390).



Fig. 2.19

Robert Adams, *Colorado Springs, Colorado*, 1970. Gelatin silver print.

Chapter 3



Fig. 3.1
Installation views, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*, 1975,
George Eastman House.



Fig. 3.2

Joe Deal, *Untitled View (Albuquerque)*, 1973. Gelatin silver print. 33.3 x 32.4 centimeters.



Fig. 3.3

Joe Deal, *Untitled View (Albuquerque)*, 1974. Gelatin silver print. 33.3 x 32.4 centimeters.

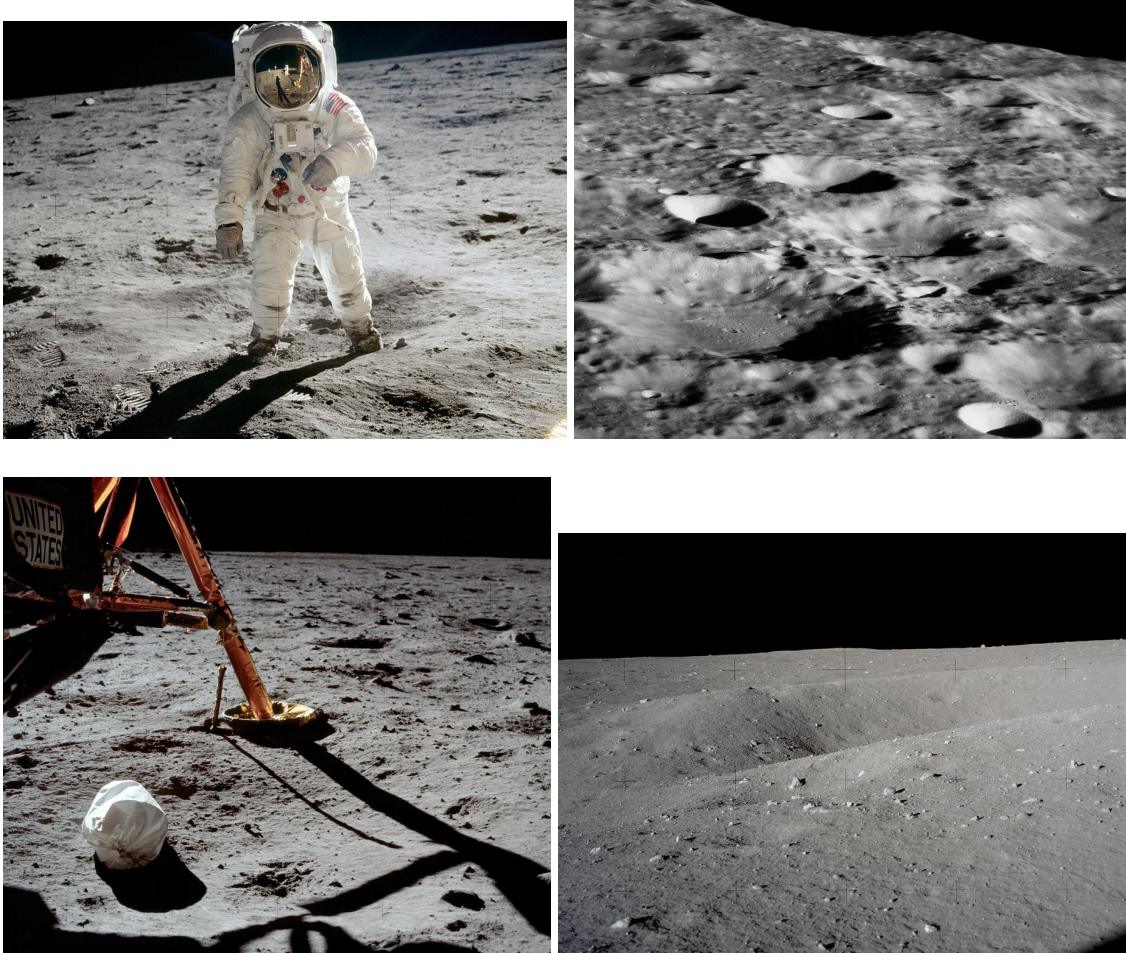


Fig. 3.4

NASA, Photographs of the 1969 moon landing. From top to bottom, and left to right:

- 1) Astronaut Buzz Aldrin walking on the surface of the moon during Apollo 11 extravehicular activity on July 20, 1969. This photograph was taken by fellow astronaut Neil Armstrong, who used a 70-millimeter lunar surface camera.
- 2) Photograph taken when reaching lunar orbit.
- 3) The first photograph Neil Armstrong made after setting foot on the moon, July 20, 1969.
- 4) Shallow crater on moon's surface.

Images courtesy of NASA; accessed in Alan Taylor, "The Year Men Walked on the Moon," *The Atlantic*, July 15, 2014.



Fig. 3.5

Joe Deal, *Untitled View (Albuquerque)*, 1973. Gelatin silver print. 33.3 x 32.4 centimeters.



Fig. 3.6

Joe Deal, *Untitled View (Albuquerque)*, 1974. Gelatin silver print. 33.3 x 32.4 centimeters.



Fig. 3.7
Joe Deal, *Untitled View (Albuquerque)*, 1974. Gelatin silver print. 33.3 x 32.4 centimeters.



Fig. 3.8
Joe Deal, *Untitled View (Albuquerque)*, 1974. Gelatin silver print. 33.3 x 32.4 centimeters.



Fig. 3.9
Joe Deal, *Untitled View (Albuquerque)*, 1973. Gelatin silver print. 33.3 x 32.4 centimeters.





Fig. 3.10

Installation views, “The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California,” Castelli Gallery, New York, November 29 – December 20, 1975. Leo Castelli Gallery records, ca. 1880-2000, bulk 1957-1999, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.





Fig. 3.11

Installation views, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*, 1975, George Eastman House.

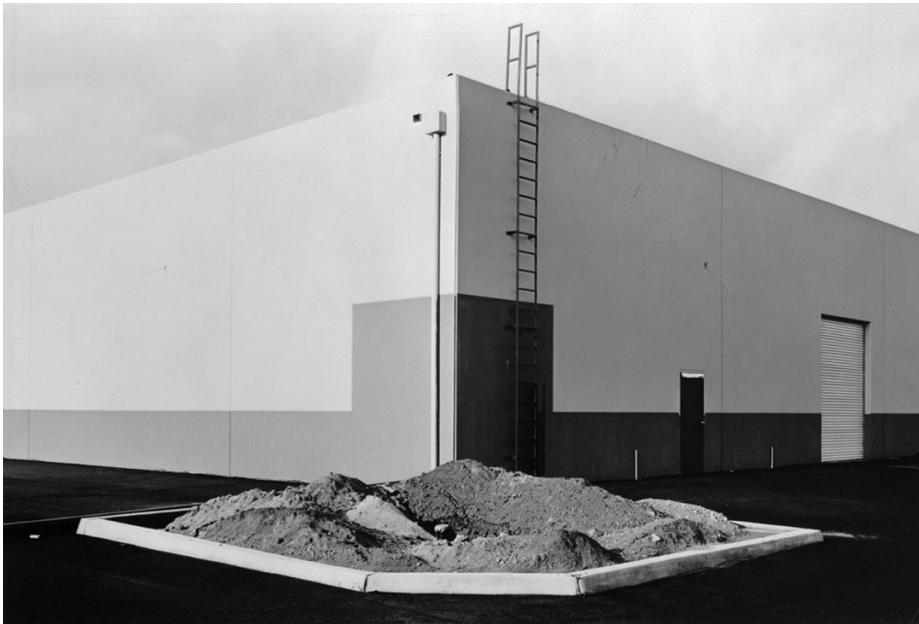


Fig. 3.12

Lewis Baltz, *South Corner, Riccar America*, 3184 Pullman, Costa Mesa, 1974. Gelatin silver print. 15.1 x 22.8 centimeters.



Fig. 3.13
Lewis Baltz, *Milliken Road, between Gates and DuBridge Roads, looking East*, 1974.
Gelatin silver print. 15.1 x 22.8 centimeters.



Fig. 3.14
Lewis Baltz, *East Wall, Western Carpet Mills, 1231 Warner, Tustin*, 1974. Gelatin silver
print. 15.1 x 22.8 centimeters.

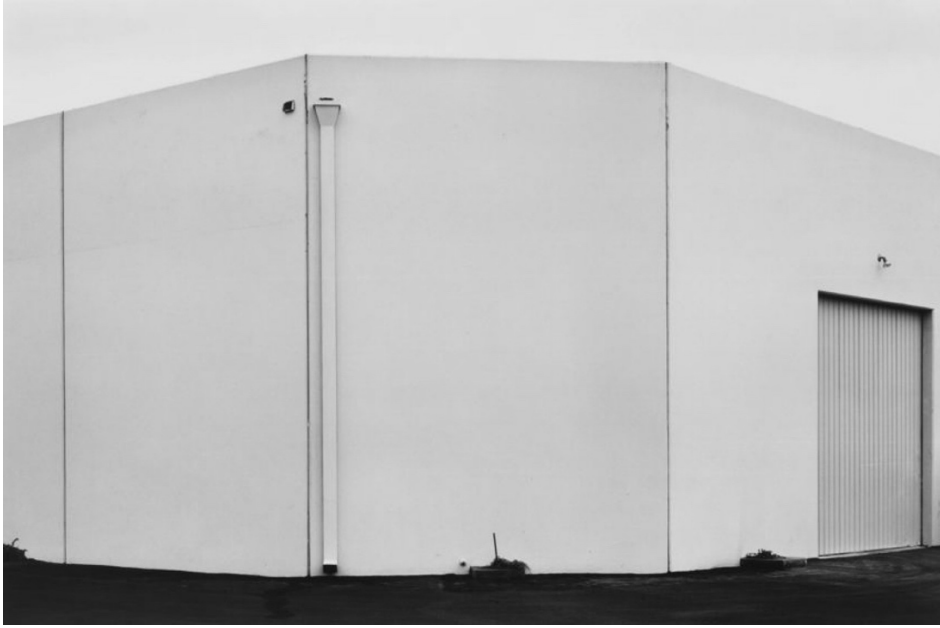


Fig. 3.15
Lewis Baltz, *East Wall, Nees Turf Company, 38T Pullman, Costa Mesa*, 1974. Gelatin silver print. 15.1 x 22.8 centimeters.



Fig. 3.16
Ansel Adams, *Maroon Bells near Aspen, Colorado*, 1951. Gelatin silver print.



Fig. 3.17

Lewis Baltz, *South Wall, Mazda Motors, 2121 East Main Street, Irvine, 1974*. Gelatin silver print. 15.1 x 22.8 centimeters.



Fig. 3.18

Installation view, *The Tract Houses*, Leo Castelli Gallery, December 18, 1971 – January 15, 1972.



Fig. 3.19
Lewis Baltz, *Unoccupied Warehouse, Santa Ana*, 1974. Gelatin silver print. 15.1 x 22.8 centimeters.

Chapter 4



Fig. 4.1
Stephen Shore, *Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California, June 21, 1975*, 1975. Chromogenic color print.

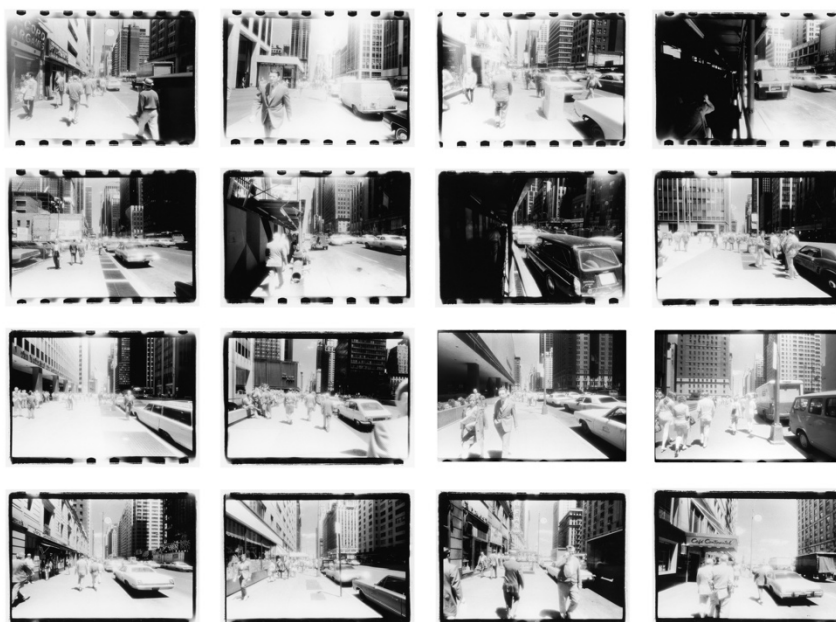


Fig. 4.2
Stephen Shore, *Avenue of the Americas, June 17, 1970, 1970*. Gelatin silver prints.





Fig. 4.3

Stephen Shore and Weston Naef, *All the Meat You Can Eat* (flyer and installation photo including Shore's Amarillo postcards), 98 Greene Street Loft, November 8 – 20, 1971.





Fig. 4.4

Re-staging of installation of *American Surfaces* (originally at LIGHT Gallery) at MoMA, 2017. Photos: author's own.



Fig. 4.5

Stephen Shore, *Church Street and 2nd Street, Easton, Pennsylvania, June 20, 1974*, 1974. Chromogenic color print. 19.5 x 24.6 centimeters.



Fig. 4.6

Stephen Shore, *2nd Steet East and South Main Street, Kalispell, Montana, August 22, 1974, 1974*. Chromogenic color print. 19.5 x 24.6 centimeters.



Fig. 4.7

Stephen Shore, *Wilde Street and Colonization Avenue, Dryden, Ontario, August 15, 1974, 1974*. Chromogenic color print. 19.5 x 24.6 centimeters.



Fig. 4.8

Stephen Shore, *Main Street, Gull Lake, Saskatchewan, August 18, 1974, 1974*.
Chromogenic color print. 19.5 x 24.6 centimeters.

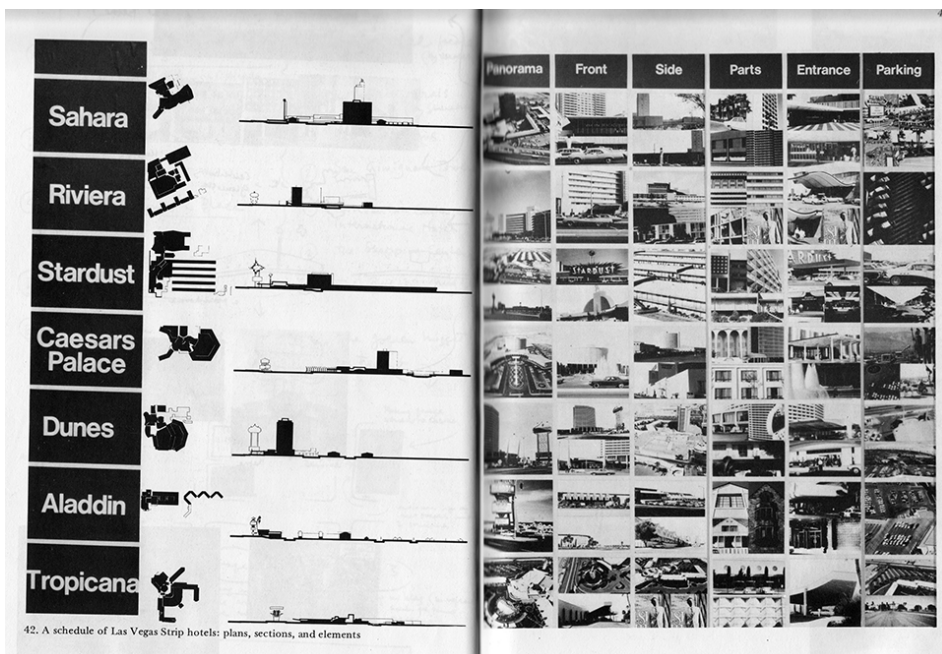




Fig. 4.10

Installation views, *Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City*, Renwick Gallery, Washington, D.C., 1976



Fig. 4.11

Stephen Shore, untitled photograph taken at Beverly and La Brea Avenues in Los Angeles, June 22, 1975. Chromogenic color print.

Epilogue



Fig. 5.1

Installation view, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*, 1975, George Eastman House.