Changing Views

Photography and Environmental Action

UNIVERSITY of VIRGINIA

Changing Views

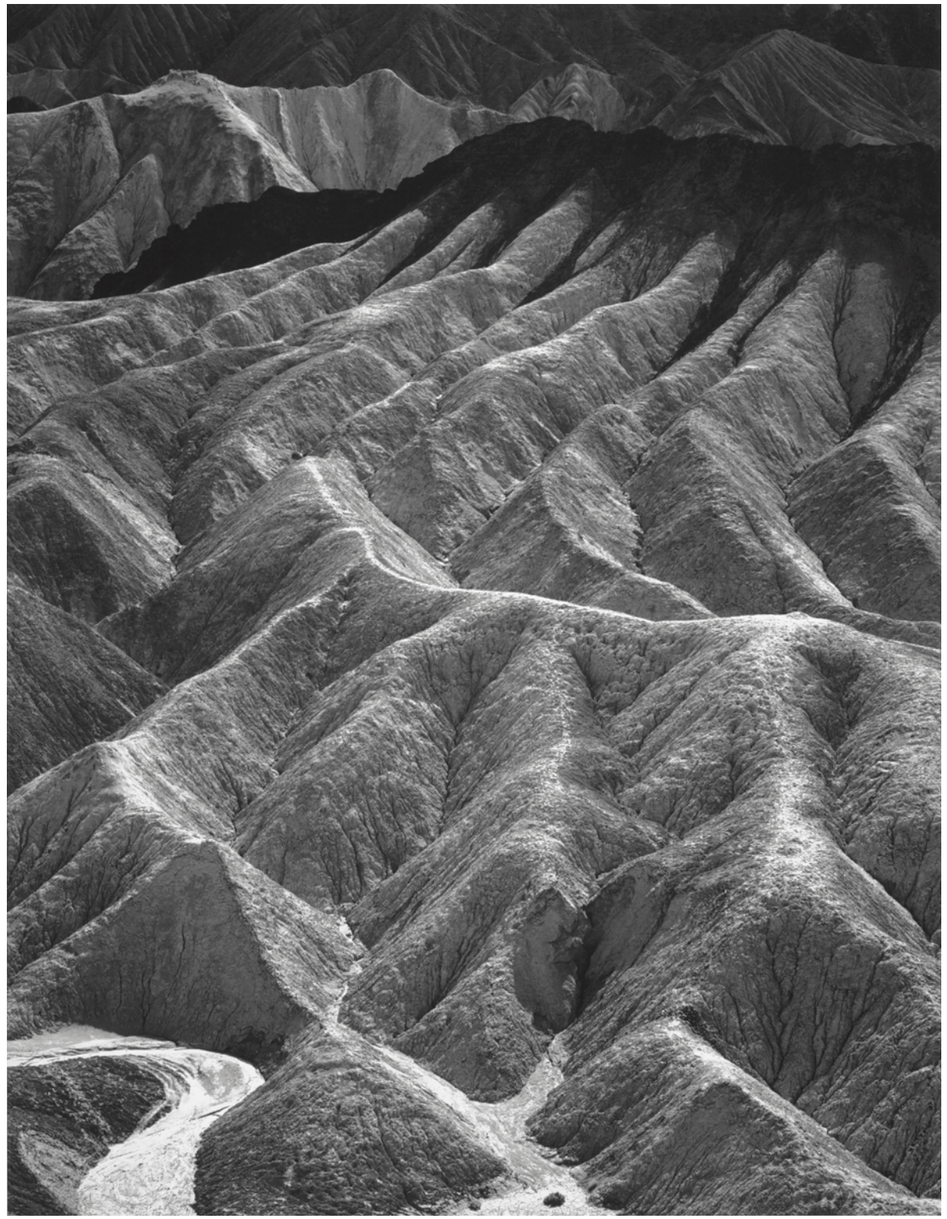
Photography and Environmental Action

OpenGrounds Forum Publication

OpenGrounds . Office of the Vice President for Research . University of Virginia

opposite

Ansel Adams
American, 1902–1984
Clearing Winter Storm, Yosemite National Park, California, 1940
Gelatin silver print,
15⅝ x 19 in, 39.69 x 48.26 cm
Collection of Lynn and Tom Meredith, 1.78.024
Courtesy of Center for Creative Photography



opposite

Ansel Adams
American, 1902–1984
At Zabriskie Point, Death Valley National Monument, California, 1942
Gelatin silver print,
19.33 x 15.20 in, 49.1 x 38.6 cm
Collection of Lynn and Tom Meredith, 1.78.027
Courtesy of Center for Creative Photography

Acknowledgements

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Putting together this publication—the first of what will become a robust series from OpenGrounds Forums—has truly been a collaborative effort. We are deeply grateful to all who have helped us make it possible.

We extend special thanks to the authors and artists who contributed their time, energy, and work to this publication: To Finis Dunaway, whose research interests so perfectly aligned with our project and who was able to provide an essay despite our tight schedule and his own research obligations; we are thrilled to have his vital participation in this publication and the forum. To Brian Richter, who helped guide and shape the development of this publication and the related forum since we first began discussing the ideas. To Julie Bargmann, who challenges us to confront our choices and assumptions in everything we do. And finally, to the artists in the exhibition and publication, Mike Osborne, Terri Weifenbach, Robert Adams, Lois Conner, Michael Lundgren, Mark Ruwedel, and Joni Sternbach, for providing the substance for discussions and ideas that blossomed into the forum and publication.

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Finally, we would like to thank Lynn and Tom Meredith, the lenders of the storied collection of Ansel Adams photographs that served as the catalyst for a series of programs exploring the relationship between photography and environmental conservation, including two photography exhibits, an OpenGrounds forum and publication, a photography challenge, and student scholarships. This incredible collection of Adams's images, gathered by the Friends of Photography under Adams's leadership, has given us the opportunity to reach into the university, the community, and beyond. We hope that this publication and the related programs will serve as a model for future cross-disciplinary projects that develop ongoing dialogues around the most pressing challenges we face today.

Introduction

The stillness of a photograph is deceptive. Terms associated with the medium—frame, freeze, fix, mask, capture, shoot—imply a stoppage of time, removal from context, isolation from the flow of life, and yet the photograph carries with it a set of contingencies that render it inescapably incomplete. Photographs are contingent on a place and time that has been, an intent to isolate a particular view or moment, and a cultural context of viewing that is ever changing. The physical/mechanical connection between the mind/eye/instrument/site distinguishes the photograph from all other art forms. Its development parallels the trajectory of modernity, tied to both accelerating technological change and an evolving cultural narrative, constantly adjusting the dynamic conversation between the artist, the audience, the tool, and the world.

In the mid-20th century, the by-products of modern technology began to catch up with the imperative for progress as authors, artists, critics, and practitioners who recognized the destructive dimensions of modernity found a voice. This generation, including Ansel Adams, Rachel Carson, Ian McHarg, and others, used their forms of practice to send a signal of what we were losing, and to shift the balance of values. Words, photographs, and design practices called for new mental maps upon which the culture might base its actions. As in any moment of transition, these first cries for attention contained paradoxes and interpretations of the challenges that would soon be superseded. The persistent human-nature dichotomy, in which human actions destabilized a pristine arcadia, would be brought into question. The concept of conservation would shift from a moral cause to a tactical negotiation for coexistence. The tension between economic and ethical values would move from the streets to the courts. The concept of the landscape would evolve from extractable resource to protectable wilderness, and beyond to a globally interconnected network of processes.

In this arc of changing understanding, photography's role has likewise evolved, the conversation at its core in constant, dynamic intersubjectivity. The essential act of isolating specific moments in the flux applies not only to creating a photograph, but to reading the work as well. Ansel Adams's photographs continue to move us—their compositional control, technical accomplishment, and idealization of a longed-for arcadia tap into deeply-rooted mental constructs. They are timeless monuments to the power of nature and at the same time highly

opposite

Ansel Adams
American, 1902–1984
Pine Forest in Snow, Yosemite National Park, California, 1933
Gelatin silver print,
13 x 10⅜ in, 33.02 x 26.35 cm
Collection of Lynn and Tom Meredith, 1.78.027
Courtesy of Center for Creative Photography

opposite

Ansel Adams
American, 1902–1984
Golden Gate Headlands from Lincoln Park, San Francisco, California, 1952
Gelatin silver print,
15 x 18¾ in, 38.1 x 47.63 cm
Collection of Lynn and Tom Meredith, 1.78.005
Courtesy of Center for Creative Photography

contingent on a particular moment—perhaps the last gasp of nature as desired other, screaming for a place in the anthropocene era (even before the word was coined). Had Adams's work been solely anchored in its service to the environmental cause, it would have vanished in the heap of propaganda art. There is something else, however, that sustains its value for subsequent generations, and this is where the multiple contingencies of photography matter. Adams's work did not simply depict an idealized nature, but re-presented a deeper, more complex nature that allows its forms and flows to be recognized as if for the first time. The photographs are products of discovery driven by a focused passion and contain the freshness of new perception within them for the viewer. Technical mastery in the creation of the work is essential but not sufficient unto itself; what persists is the captured moment of light, texture, pattern, and space that causes one to see anew the world beyond the frame. This is a challenging path to follow, so it is inevitable that one dimension of the legacy is the necessity of a different perspective.

A number of contemporary landscape photographers have created an alternative path that relies on the invocation of a different contingency, one that connects the photograph to an emerging understanding of the inseparability of human acts and natural processes. The subject of the photograph shifts to the nature of the relationship, the inseparable interdependence, between the constructed and inherited world. No place is exempt—those roads, vehicles, and people so carefully cropped reassert themselves as questions in which we are all complicit. There is no true wilderness in a world where even the air is a human construct. The camera rotates to render the by-products of modernity with the compositional force, sublime beauty, and precision of an Adams landscape. The possibility of perfection is challenged by the choice of medium, refusing to engage the possibility of technical perfection with a return to the exquisite uncertainty of an earlier technique. The traces of human life, particularly the unromantic, pragmatic, mechanical reproduction and dissolution of roads, tracks, and small-town buildings reveal the operating, rather than idealized, conception of the sites we inhabit. Toxic and terrifying landscapes are unmasked from their hiding place behind the gloss of consumption they make possible.

These images represent a trajectory of the project of photography that remains open-ended. Ideas are cumulative and resilient rather than sequential and brittle. Wilderness will reassert itself, in both concept and form, at another scale and time, compromised but with force. Human brutality and banality will coexist with moments of exquisite beauty. The creation of a photograph is an optimistic act—an implicit argument that the world could be other than that which we know. The ultimate contingency implicit in the photograph is the nature of the future. By framing a precisely constructed fragment of what is and setting it in relation to what is known, the medium demands a speculation on what might be. The original displacement of time can only be resolved in time. The artist and the viewer are complicit in an asynchronous conversation that asks, softly or forcefully, what's next? —WS, WW

Beyond Ansel Adams

Landscape Photography in an Age of Environmental Crisis

Finis Dunaway
Associate Professor of History, Trent University

Landscape photography has long been praised as a technology that enhances human vision, rendering visible previously unseen places or portraying familiar scenes in a particularly stunning and stirring manner. "The creations of man or nature never have more grandeur than in an Ansel Adams photograph," an advertisement for one of his books proclaims, "and his image can seize the viewer with more force than the natural object from which it was made." Yet the very power of Ansel Adams's images—and the long shadow he cast over the field of landscape photography—became suspect in the 1970s, as a new generation of artists sought to challenge his hyper-real depictions of the American wilderness. As the photographer Robert Adams (no relation to Ansel) observed in 1978, "More people currently know the appearance of Yosemite Valley and [the] Grand Canyon from looking at photographic books than from looking at the places themselves; conservation publishing has defined for most of us the outstanding features of the wilderness aesthetic. Unfortunately…the same spectacular pictures have also been widely accepted as a definition of nature, and the implication has been circulated that what is not wild is not natural." According to Robert Adams, landscape photography too often acted as a technology of exclusion: Obscuring more than it revealed, the genre upheld a static ideal of pure, pristine wilderness that worked to alienate viewers from the more modest, ordinary landscapes in which they lived and worked. "Nature photographers," he concluded, "particularly need to widen their subject matter if they are to help us find again the affection for life that is the only sure motive for continuing the struggle toward a decent environment."[1]

Ansel Adams's most famous photographs rely on a panoramic approach to present Yosemite and other national parks in an expansive, romantic fashion. A longtime member of the Sierra Club, Adams believed that landscape photography could stir audience emotions and thereby galvanize support for wilderness preservation. By mobilizing the sublime aesthetic, Adams and the Sierra Club used photography as an instrument of environmental reform and framed the wilderness as a place apart from human society.

Beginning in the 1960s, Ansel Adams and his successors all recognized that they were living in an age of environmental crisis, a period marked by pollution and other escalating threats to human health and ecosystems. Yet they offered markedly different responses to these problems. While Ansel Adams continued to celebrate the wilderness as a soothing refuge, an untouched realm set apart from the pressures of daily life, other landscape photographers, including Robert Adams, Terry Evans, and Subhankar Banerjee, have critiqued and complicated the nature-culture dualism. Rather than accepting the absolute division between pristine wilderness and profane society, they have instead explored cities, suburbs, and other entangled environments and sought, as Robert Adams puts it, "to reconcile us to half wilderness." As we will see, their work has involved much more than merely depicting spaces other than the wilderness; it has also linked landscape photography's technology of seeing to a broader intellectual transformation, an ongoing project to rethink the human place in nature.[2]

In 1960, Ansel Adams and the writer Nancy Newhall published *This Is the American Earth,* the first title in the Sierra Club's Exhibit Format series of coffee table books. Lavishly produced, the Exhibit Format books extolled the purity of wild nature and promoted federal protection of wilderness areas. Nevertheless, even as they embraced the ideal of untouched nature, Sierra Club photographers and writers occasionally grappled with signs of ecological peril. As he worked on *This Is the American Earth,* Adams worried about the danger of nuclear apocalypse. "The world is in a state of horror or sublimity," he wrote to Newhall. "Frankly, the fireball can do away with thee and me at any moment…. [A]ll that ages have accomplished may melt in a millionth of a second." To ward off nuclear fear, Adams presented the wilderness as a realm of therapeutic escape, a sacred space shielded from the destructive technologies of modern civilization. Through his long, panoramic views of Yosemite and other national parks, his technical orchestration of dramatic tonal contrast, and his focus on sublime features of the landscape, Adams encouraged viewers of *This Is the American Earth* to find solace in his awe-inspiring pictures of the American West. Likewise, Newhall's text addressed an array of environmental problems—including suburban sprawl, air and water pollution, and pesticide proliferation—to convey a widespread, ever worsening sense of ecological danger. The book closed, though, with a paean to the wilderness, a place, Newhall claimed, where one can "walk where only the wind has walked before." As these words suggest, Newhall and Adams concluded with a fantasy of discovery: *This Is the American Earth* presented the wilderness as a place of grace uncorrupted by modern society.[3]

In contrast to Ansel Adams's emphasis on Yosemite and other monumental sites, Eliot Porter used color photography to evoke a sense of awe and wonder in more modest settings. Moving beyond the usual bounds of the sublime, his contributions to the Exhibit Format series, including *"In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World"* (1962), sought to portray beauty in the quotidian. Porter's photographs focused on fragments of nature. Rather than offering panoramic views of national parks, he concentrated on minute details, ecological processes, and seasonal changes. Through his technical control over the dye-transfer process, Porter harnessed the representational power of color to celebrate the subtle spectacles of the natural world. By making the familiar seem unfamiliar, he encouraged viewers to find awe in the diminutive, to seek wonder in the everyday.[4]

"In Wildness" transcended the familiar mode of the sublime, but Porter and other Sierra Club photographers still reinforced the nature-culture dualism. Emerging as part of a campaign to pass new federal wilderness legislation, the Exhibit Format series adhered to the notion of wilderness as a pure space apart from modern society. The campaign led to the passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964, which defined the wilderness "as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." Similarly, Sierra Club photographers maintained the boundaries between pristine nature and corrupt society. Erasing any signs of human presence, Sierra Club imagery depicted wilderness as a place where people are visitors who do not remain.[5]

For many subsequent photographers, this dualistic view of pure nature and profane society no longer seemed tenable. Some artists deployed a sense of postmodern playfulness or surrealistic satire to question Ansel Adams's grip over the American environmental imagination. In 1973, for example, Jerry Uelsmann superimposed the face of Ansel Adams on the face of Half Dome, suggesting that when Americans look at Yosemite, they are merely seeing what the legendary photographer taught them to see. Rather than a sacred realm detached from culture, nature appears in this image to be produced by culture—defined, in particular, by the representational power of landscape photography.

To a certain extent, Robert Adams followed Eliot Porter's example in seeking out places other than the majestic and the monumental. Yet, while Porter's Sierra Club photography excluded signs of human culture, Adams challenged the wilderness ideal by focusing on the blurred boundaries between people and nature. His approach to landscape photography developed in tandem with the growth of popular environmentalism during the late 1960s and 1970s. Even as the Sierra Club and other conservation groups emphasized the therapeutic value of wild nature, the new environmentalism struggled to ameliorate ecological problems in cities, suburbs, and other everyday landscapes. *This Is the American Earth* had anticipated this concern about an all-encompassing environmental crisis, but still presented the sublime wonders of the American West as an antidote to the denatured, fallen world of human society. In upholding the nature-culture dualism, the wilderness aesthetic enshrined the fragments of beauty set apart from human society but devalued the ordinary spaces marked by the presence of people.

Robert Adams believed that landscape photographers should strive to ennoble these mixed, hybrid worlds. "[A]ll land," he observed, "no matter what has happened to it, has over it a grace, an absolutely persistent beauty." Adams followed other American photographers in imbuing the landscape with sacred meaning. Yet while Ansel Adams found spiritual qualities in mountains, waterfalls, and other quintessentially sublime features, Robert Adams glimpsed divinity permeating the land in the form of light, illuminating and sacralizing with its holy presence. "Towns, many now suggest, are intrusions on sacred landscapes," he explained, "and who can deny it, looking at the squalor we have laid across America? But even as we see the harm of our work and determine to correct it, we all see that nothing can, in the last analysis, intrude. Nothing permanently diminishes the affirmation of the sun. Pictures remind us of this."[6]

In *The New West* (1974) and other projects, Robert Adams developed a nuanced approach to landscape photography that fused condemnation with celebration, that revealed both encroaching despair and enduring beauty in the contemporary landscape. Focusing on suburban sprawl in and around Denver and along the Colorado Front Range, his work often combined, in a single image, the repellent and attractive features of altered environments. His photographs of suburban expansion bemoan the fragmentation of ecological communities, decry the monotony of tract housing, and indict the increasing petro-dependency of automobile-centered landscapes. Yet, even as Adams protested these environmental changes,

he also sought to nurture appreciation for spaces inhabited and modified by people. By recognizing the persistent beauty of nature even in these altered environments, Adams contemplated the complex interweaving of nature and culture. In an age of environmental crisis, he wanted to foster a sense of stewardship for places other than the wilderness.

Exhibited as part of the influential *New Topographics* show in 1975, Robert Adams's work played a crucial role in transforming the field of American landscape photography. In the aftermath of *New Topographics,* prominent landscape photographers—including Terry Evans, Richard Misrach, and Robert Dawson—focused on entangled environments. Rather than imagining the American West as untouched nature, they depicted agricultural landscapes, nuclear wastelands, and bureaucratically managed and manipulated waterways. For example, in a series of projects, Evans portrayed the Midwestern prairies and plains in multiple ecological forms: from a vibrant landscape of perennial flowers and grasses to the industrialized fields of monoculture to the militarized ruins of the Cold War. Through both on-the-ground and aerial views of the prairies, she revealed patterns of human use and sought to encourage concern and public responsibility for these inhabited spaces. Like Robert Adams, Evans fused despair with hope, documenting environmental loss but also depicting the prospect of ecological restoration.

Nevertheless, as the photography journal *Aperture* noted in 1990, these important shifts in artistic practice largely failed to alter the representational strategies of the Sierra Club and other mainstream conservation groups. These organizations, one writer observed, still relied on "'pinup' nature photography" that maintained "a misleading and artificial distinction between 'holy' and 'profane' lands." "The dominant style of depicting the land," *Aperture* editor Charles Hagen explained, "remains the beautiful, fully detailed large-format style of Ansel Adams, Eliot Porter, and their artistic descendants." The problem with the wilderness aesthetic, *Aperture* argued, was that its fixation on purity elevated the preservation of distant lands over less spectacular but more pressing environmental issues. "[S]uch a prettified view of the land," the editors concluded, "ignores the real threats—from chemical pollution, deforestation, nuclear contamination, and the ravages of extractive mining and drilling—that now face not only lands designated as 'wild,' but everywhere."[7]

Robert Adams and other landscape photographers participated in a broader shift in environmental thought, a move beyond purity and toward greater recognition of the interconnections between nature and culture. While Sierra Club photographers continued to reinforce the idea of a peopleless wilderness, other environmental thinkers emphasized the inextricable links between humans and the natural world. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) proved to be a crucial text in this ongoing intellectual project. Using an ecological approach that focused on interrelationships, Carson explained how the indiscriminate use of DDT and other pesticides damaged entire ecosystems, poisoning birds and other wildlife while also penetrating people's bodies and threatening human health. By rejecting the appeal to purity, landscape photographers joined Carson in seeking to encourage a more capacious respect for the natural world and to cultivate a broader sense of responsibility, not just for the distant, hallowed spaces of wilderness but also for the flawed, imperfect landscapes closer to home. As the writer Barry Lopez explained in *Aperture,* "[W]e must broaden our definition of landscape writing and landscape photography to include more than visions of wilderness and sojourns in wild lands. Such writing and photography must now convey the sense of an unbroken pattern of land and our responsibility for maintaining a commensal relationship with it."[8]

This sense of an unbroken pattern of land emerges most clearly in the recent landscape photography of Subhankar Banerjee. Traveling to Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), a place often viewed as the most remote landscape in the United States, Banerjee instead found patterns of interconnection. His photographs challenge the dueling frontier visions that have shaped the ongoing debate over oil drilling in ANWR: While drilling proponents dismiss the refuge as a frozen wasteland devoid of scenic beauty and while mainstream environmentalists celebrate it as a sacred realm of untrammeled nature, Banerjee depicts ANWR as a space connected both to local human communities and to diverse global ecologies.[9]

Banerjee reframes ANWR as inhabited space, an area where the Inuit and Gwich'in peoples have formed complex relationships to the environment. As Mark Spence and other environmental historians have demonstrated, the wilderness aesthetic often renders invisible the history of indigenous populations and their interactions with the natural world. In upholding the notion of pure nature, the wilderness ideal masks the prior histories of land use and conflict, including the forced removal of indigenous peoples from Yellowstone, Yosemite, and other national

parks. When Americans gaze at Ansel Adams's photographs, Spence argues, "[t]hey see an image of a priori wilderness, an empty, uninhabited, primordial landscape that has been preserved in the state that God first intended it to be.... What Adams's photographs obscure and what tourists, government officials, and environmentalists fail to remember is that uninhabited landscapes had to be created." By bringing humans into the picture, Banerjee challenges the amnesia that underlies the wilderness ideal.[10]

Banerjee also emphasizes the global connectedness of the refuge by portraying migratory birds and other species that depend upon its ecosystems and by considering the effects of global warming on this supposedly remote setting. While Ansel Adams and Nancy Newhall had praised the enchanted enclaves of the "American" earth, Banerjee suggests that no place is ultimately sequestered from the environmental crisis. As an environmental activist, Banerjee has contributed his photographs to anti-drilling campaigns and to the climate justice movement. Like Ansel Adams, Eliot Porter, and other Sierra Club artists, he mobilizes the wilderness aesthetic to celebrate the awe-inspiring qualities of nature. Yet he also frames the oil-drilling debate as a human rights issue, as a struggle by the Gwich'in Nation to maintain its traditional cultural practices. In this way, Banerjee draws on the wilderness tradition but also transcends familiar dualisms to reveal the links between nature and culture, indigenous people and the refuge, the Arctic and places around the globe.

From Ansel Adams to Subhankar Banerjee and beyond, American landscape photographers have used the camera to shape perceptions of nature and promote environmental reform. Even as they recognized the threats of pollution, suburban sprawl, and other environmental problems, Sierra Club photographers repeatedly turned to the wilderness as an antidote to the perils of modern life. By relinquishing the myth of purity, Robert Adams and other subsequent photographers pondered the profound interconnections between human society and the nonhuman world. In moving beyond the wilderness ideal, they depicted both despair and hope in the contemporary landscape and sought to reimagine the human place in nature.

Notes

1 New York Graphic Society advertisement in the *New York Times* (November 15, 1974) for *Ansel Adams: Images, 1923–1974.* Adams, Robert. "Inhabited Nature." *Aperture* 81 (1978), 29–32 (quotation on 29).

2 Adams, R., op.cit; 31. For an important critique of the wilderness ideal, see William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 69–90.

3 Ansel Adams to Nancy Newhall, 30 April 1954, box 3, Nancy Newhall Collection, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. Adams, Ansel, and Nancy Newhall. *This is the American Earth.* San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1960; 80. On the Exhibit Format series, see also Finis Dunaway, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), chaps. 5–7.

4 Porter, Eliot. *"In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World": Selections and Photographs by Eliot Porter.* San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1962. For more on this book and Porter's career, see Dunaway, op. cit., chap. 6; and John Rohrbach, "Envisioning the World in Color," and Rebecca Solnit, "Every Corner is Alive: Eliot Porter as an Environmentalist and an Artist," both in *Eliot Porter: The Color of Wildness* (New York: Aperture, in association with the Amon Carter Museum, 2001).

5 McCloskey, Michael. "The Wilderness Act of 1964: Its Background and Meaning." *Oregon Law Review* 45 (June 1966), 288–314. The text of the act is reprinted as the appendix to idem; 315–21 (quotation on 315).

6 Adams, Robert. *The New West: Landscapes Along the Colorado Front Range.* Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1974; xii (Introduction). See also Thomas Andrews, "On Robert Adams's New West Landscapes," in *Environmental History* 16 (October 2011), 701-14; and Finis Dunaway, "Beyond Wilderness: Robert Adams, *New Topographics,* and the Aesthetics of Ecological Citizenship," in *Reframing the New Topographics* (Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach, eds.; Chicago: Center for American Places, 2010), 13–43.

7 Lopez, Barry. "Unbounded Wilderness." *Aperture* 120 (1990), 14, 2. Hagen, Charles. "Land and Landscape." *Aperture* 120 (1990), 20. Aperture editors. "Beyond Wilderness." *Aperture* 120 (1990), 1.

8 Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962. Lopez, op. cit.; 14.

9 Banerjee, Subhankar. *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Seasons of Life and Land.* Seattle: Mountaineers Books, 2003. Banerjee, Subhankar, ed. *Arctic Voices: Resistance at the Tipping Point.* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012. See also Finis Dunaway, "Reframing the Last Frontier: Subhankar Banerjee and the Visual Politics of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge," in *American Quarterly* 58 (March 2006), 159–80.

10 Spence, Mark David. *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999; 131. See also Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

Mike Osborne
American, b. 1978

Hitchhiker, 2012
Archival Inkjet Print,
28 x 35 in, 71.12 x 88.9 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas
Originally commissioned and
produced by Artpace San Antonio.

Aria Boulevard, 2012
Archival Inkjet Print,
28 x 35 in, 71.12 x 88.9 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas
Originally commissioned and
produced by Artpace San Antonio.

Casino Worker I, 2012
Archival Inkjet Print,
28 x 35 in, 71.12 x 88.9 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas
Originally commissioned and
produced by Artpace San Antonio.
© Mike Osborne

Boy in a Ditch, 2012
Archival Inkjet Print,
28 x 35 in, 71.12 x 88.9 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas
Originally commissioned and
produced by Artpace San Antonio.
© Mike Osborne

Black Sabbath, 2012
Archival Inkjet Print,
28 x 35 in, 71.12 x 88.9 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas
Originally commissioned and
produced by Artpace San Antonio.
© Mike Osborne

Flat Tire, 2012
Archival Inkjet Print,
28 x 35 in, 71.12 x 88.9 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas
Originally commissioned and
produced by Artpace San Antonio.
© Mike Osborne

Casino Worker II, 2012
Archival Inkjet Print,
28 x 35 in, 71.12 x 88.9 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas
Originally commissioned and
produced by Artpace San Antonio.
© Mike Osborne

Scarface, 2012
Archival Inkjet Print,
28 x 35 in, 71.12 x 88.9 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas
Originally commissioned and
produced by Artpace San Antonio.
© Mike Osborne

Terri Weifenbach
American, b. 1957

Between Maple and Chestnut 30
From the *BMC* series, 2007
Type C-prints,
16 x 20 in, 40.64 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist
© Terri Weifenbach

Woods II 2010–9, 2010
Type C-prints,
20 x 16 in, 50.8 x 40.64 cm
Courtesy of the artist
© Terri Weifenbach

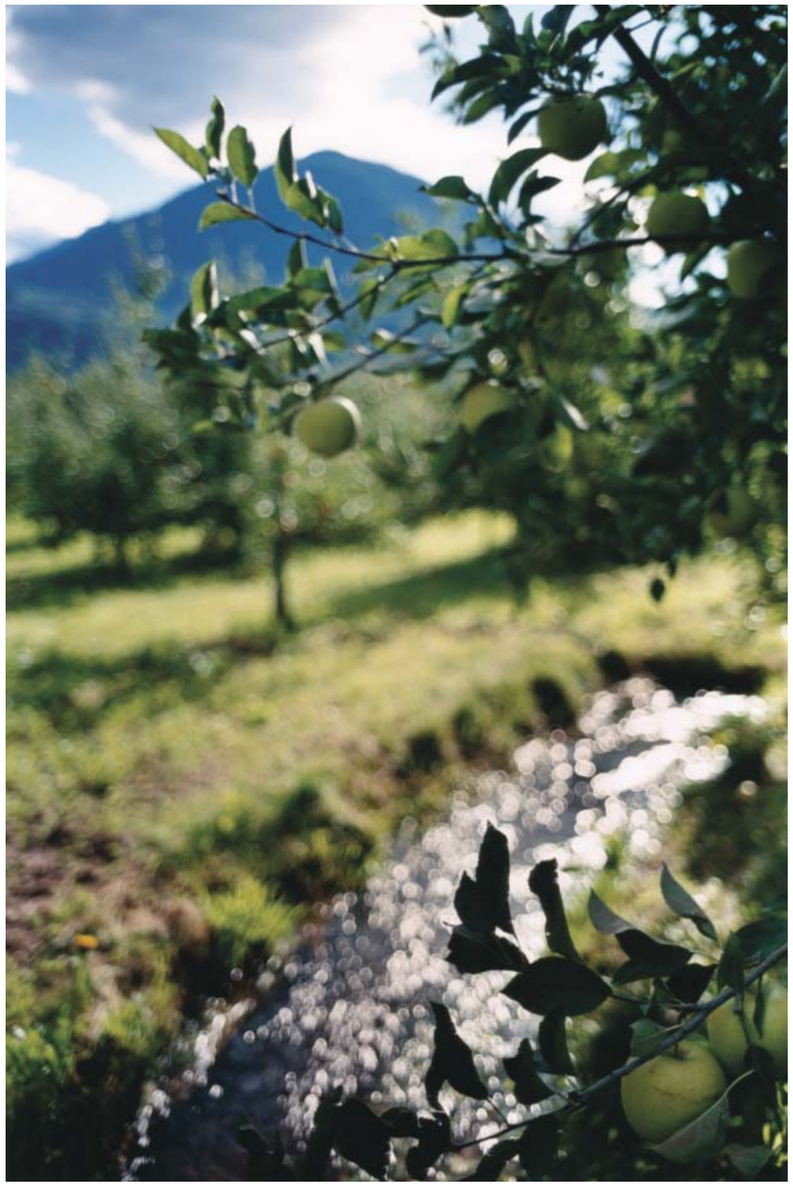
Secret 30
From the *Secret* series, 2006
Type C-prints,
40 x 30 in, 101.6 x 76.2 cm
Courtesy of the artist
© Terri Weifenbach

S.E.XIII/L66
From the *Lana* series, 2002
Type C-prints,
24 x 20 in, 60.96 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist
© Terri Weifenbach

Between Maple and Chestnut 37
From the *BMC* series, 2007
Type C-prints,
20 x 16 in, 50.8 x 40.64 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Between Maple and Chestnut 45
From the *BMC* series, 2007
Type C-prints,
16 x 20 in, 40.64 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Secret 27
From the *Secret* series, 2006
Type C-prints,
40 x 30 in, 101.6 x 76.2 cm
Courtesy of the artist
© Terri Weifenbach



S.E.XXVI/L12
From the *Lana* series, 2001
Type C-prints,
24 x 20 in, 60.96 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist
© Terri Wiefenbach

Troubled Beauty

Julie Bargmann
Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture, University of Virginia

My seminar students settle into their seats. A slide goes up, filling the screen with an amber glow, a stunning composition of earth, light, and shadow. For these devotees to the landscape, this image is heaven. They swoon—then gasp: Within the lovely image is the arresting detail of a horse's head breaching the soil. The photograph is *Dead Animals #327,* one of many in a series by Richard Misrach.[1]

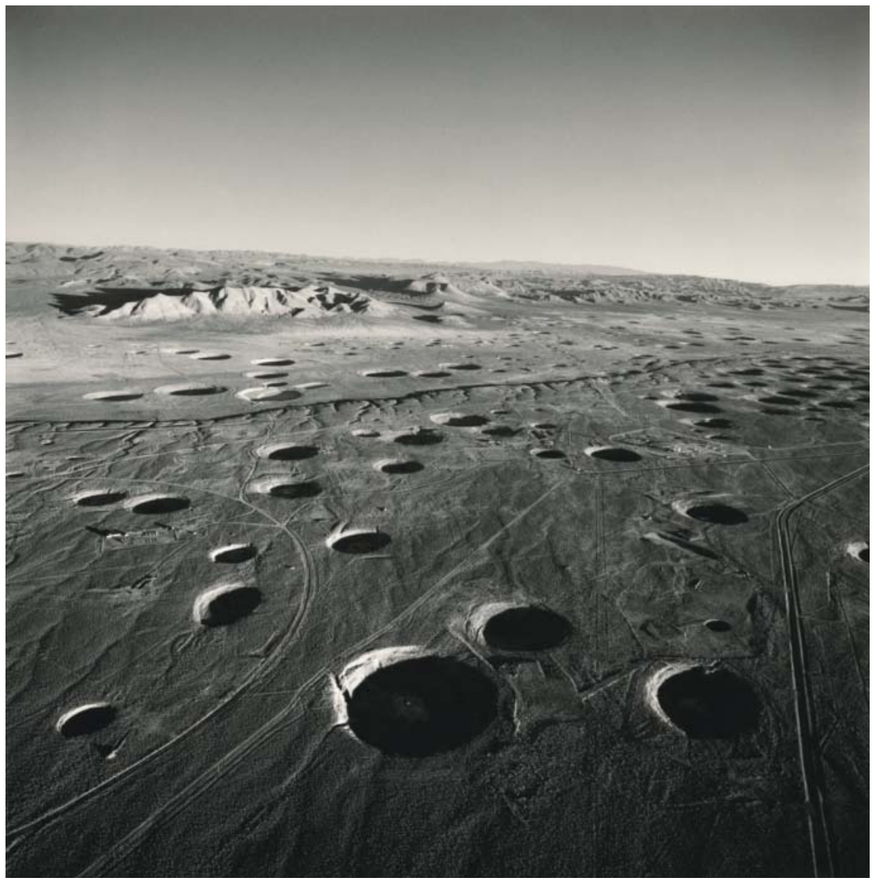
The haunting close-up is a single example of the canon of work by a generation of pioneering photographers who have been recording large-scale environmental devastation in post-industrial America. I use their pictures to my own pedagogical advantage, showing aspiring landscape architects that beguiling beauty often coexists with repulsive reality. I tell tales of super-sized awe with my own photographs of degraded land, inspired by other artists who have brought obscure derelict terrain into plain view. It's a worthy goal, for only after these landscapes enter our consciousness can we imagine a course of environmental action.

I am less impressed by photographers who dwell on wrecked landscapes for purely documentary purposes. Sure, I get it: The viewer is left to draw his or her own conclusions after viewing the decimation. But there's a reason it's called "ruin porn." It merely titillates; it does not inspire or otherwise have a redeeming value. And it tells an incomplete story, because it lacks the human element. Specifically, it does not tell the story of the people who lived or worked on that land, nor of the people who may continue to dwell there.

Unlike the voyeuristic peep shows of dereliction, the photographs taken by Misrach and his ilk reflect the conviction of serious artists who constructively raise awareness and pointedly pose critical questions about humankind's hand in the evolution of the landscape. Photographer and environmentalist Ansel Adams captured the sublime beauty of pristine nature; photographers of industrialized landscapes replace awe with revulsion, majesty with horror, inspiration with confrontation, and unspoiled scenery with tableaux of toxic beauty. The view is bigger than the frame, but the best of these works are broadly and deeply embedded with social site histories. They ask questions about the lives—human and nonhuman—that are at stake.

Misrach's series entitled *The Pit* depicts decaying livestock that have died suddenly from mysterious (read: industrial) causes, then been dumped in open burial sites spread throughout the Nevada desert. His tactic is akin to that of others whose photographs beguile us with their beauty, but then repulse us with the horror they depict.

Richard Misrach
American, b. 1949
Dead Animals #327, 1987
Pigment print/Archival pigment print, size variable



Emmet Gowin
American, b. 1941
Subsidence Craters, Looking East from Area 8, Nevada Test Site, 1996
Appears in *Changing the Earth*
Gelatin silver print,
image: 9½ x 9⅝ in, 24.13 x 24.45 cm,
paper: 14 x 11 in, 35.56 x 27.94 cm
Signed, titled, dated and annotated verso in pencil
Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

To apprehend gigantic expanses of altered terrain, Gowin captures transcendent abstractions, such as these bombsites, from the air. Like Adams broadcasting a distant America the Beautiful, contemporary photographers disseminate the remote, troubled beauty across our country, some venturing even farther to harrowing landscapes around the globe.

In fact, many contemporary artists have deliberately followed in the boot prints of Adams and his 19th- and early 20th-century predecessors. But instead of carefully cropping scenes of majestic mountains and regal valleys, the next generation disturbed their depictions of the Wild West by pushing everyday life and ordinary people to the foreground. Sometimes the pictures would not be considered "beautiful" by the traditional definition. For instance, artists included in the *Looking at the New West* exhibit contaminate their compositions with the repulsive splendor of polluted land. While Adams championed preservation of America's national treasures, the next generation of artists recognizes the landscape not as neutral territory but as contested ground. The details are rendered by human forces, not natural ones.

This body of work gained significant attention in the mid-1970s through the exhibit *New Topographics: Photographs of Man-Altered Landscapes.*[2] The featured photos reflected a range in tactics and motivations. Some were considered cool and detached, almost scientific in their documentation of the landscape. Others were seen as anthropological rather than critical, oblique in terms of their judgments or opinions. In any case, the pictures all had (and still have) moral and political implications, whether overt or obscure. The work, which coincided with the proliferation of environmental-protection legislation, visualized the environmental crisis, which was still invisible to many—or, at least, unacknowledged by some who were unwilling to see their place in these sometimes horrifying landscape portraits. "The issues of landscape extend beyond the frame," according to Misrach. "The landscape photograph is not an autonomous aesthetic object to be understood on the basis of formal innovation, visceral power, or conceptual insight—it also carries weighty cultural baggage than can no longer be ignored."[3]

Unsurprisingly, given the number of photographers involved, the points of view were widely varied. Inspired by the exhibit's way of thinking about the world through photography, Emmet Gowin took to the air to apprehend vast expanses of altered terrain. Advantageous abstraction of the land seen from great heights lures viewers into thinking the artificial patterns and manmade formations are perhaps part of the native geomorphology. But the viewer forms an entirely different opinion with the realization that such things as nuclear bombs and mine tailings have altered the terrain. If beauty is a strategy of persuasion, then these landscape photographers' attention to environmental awareness may be as convincing as Adams's photos were for the previous era's conservation movement.

At lower elevations, contemporary landscape photographers have broken with the Adams tradition of carefully cropping their portrayals of America the Beautiful, editing impurities from

Peter Goin
American, b. 1951
Orchard Site, 1988, from the book *Nuclear Landscapes,* 1991
Gelatin silver print,
15⅝ x 19 in, 39.69 x 48.26 cm
Courtesy of the artist
© Peter Goin

Goin exposes invisible causes of destruction by accompanying his *Nuclear Landscape* series with captions that spell out the insidiousness of radiation. The superimposed text of this site's productive history is coupled with his reporting of its significant contamination as part of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, filling the gap between what we see and what we know.

the supposedly pristine scene. In the catalog of another significant landscape photography exhibit, *Between Home and Heaven,* the renowned scientist and natural historian Stephen Jay Gould wrote, "The great images in the romantic age of 'big' nature (dwarfing tiny culture) showed vast landscapes either entirely untainted by human presence or...with the subtlest, smallest, even invisible signs of human activity to show the scale of contrast."[4]

The modern-day realists take the opposite tactic. Their scenery includes us, residing uncomfortably close to belching super-sized industries. The viewer is confronted with an involuntary "'yes' in my backyard." Artist David Hanson's juxtaposition of modest company houses with a gigantic power plant makes you wonder if Erin Brockovich is somewhere in that picture interviewing the next-door neighbors.

Hanson is joined by other photographers, like Peter Goin, who disclose the invisibility of pollution by accompanying images with disturbing captions. Some photos portray innocuous-looking objects and perplexing structures in the vast Western plains. They make you cock your head and wonder. Text that supplements the pictures spells out plain facts about the menacing remains of industrial activity. Other descriptions include sinister statistics and explanations of why the psychedelic colors aren't really that pretty. [5]

Ansel Adam cropped views of extraordinary natural scenery, but another generation of photographers, like Hanson, fills frames with everyday life in the foreground of polluting industrial tableaux. The uncomfortable juxtapositions implicate us all, whether or not we live downwind or downstream.

David T. Hanson
American, b. 1948
Coal Strip Mine, Power Plant and Waste Ponds, 1984
From the series *Colstrip, Montana,* 1982–85
Ektacolor print,
9 x 11 in, 22.86 x 27.94 cm
Courtesy of the artist
© David T. Hanson

Similarly, artists like Edward Burtynsky frame giant heaps of stuff that at first glance look like grand landforms. Closer inspection reveals distinctly unnatural scenes: a mountain of tires, the geology of consumption.[6] This tactic of unmasking the environmental consequences and cultural implications of a still frame effectively puts suspect processes into question. Fast-forward to the present: An ever increasing amount of accessible scientific evidence, written exposés, and visualized data charts the industrial flows of the past that are seeping into the future.[7] Like it or not, we are no longer innocent bystanders.

My media-blasted students, born head-on into the environmental crisis, may cling to the memory of a family vacation to Yosemite, yet they also take the polluted earth as a given. As I continue to project images of that difficult certainty, I see their attraction-turned-to-repulsion trigger a range of reactions, from a resigned shrug of the shoulders to a boiling-mad look on their faces. My ploy as a teacher may emulate environmentalist author Terry Tempest Williams, writing about the work of Gowin, who pointedly asks: "Do we now dare to look ourselves in the eye and begin the necessary work of repentance and restoration?"[8]

Edward Burtynsky
Canadian, b. 1955
Oxford Tire Pile #8, Westley, California.
In *Manufactured Landscapes,* 2003
Chromogenic color print,
48 x 60 in, 121.92 x 152.4 cm
Courtesy of Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto/Howard Greenberg & Bryce Wolkowitz, New York
© Edward Burtynsky

Fast-forwarding from the vast scale of Ansel Adams's picturesque Nature to the present-day industrial sublime, Burtynsky aims his camera toward the monstrous impact of our earthly desires, whose consequences manufacture otherworldly landscapes. Poignant bodies of photographic work by intrepid modern-day artists frame compelling compositions of consumerism.

But I—and I suspect some of these photographers—am not ready to force anyone into a confessional. Certainly owning up to our role in ecological devastation and its social penalties is warranted, but how we ask for forgiveness is up for debate. Surely restoration is imperative for the toxic landscapes that are poisoning us. But is there another version, a spin, albeit perverse, on the land-conservation movement championed by Adams? Are these photographers presenting us with an industrial legacy to be internalized, in order to recalibrate our idea of nature? Do the photographs that capture environmental consequences allow us time to contemplate how we may coexist with the troublesome version of our nature? Again, Stephen Jay Gould draws lessons from these photographs: "We have managed to intrude upon nature to the point where an aesthetic of romantic wilderness simply will not do as a philosophy of landscape. But she can wait us out until we do ourselves in.... Let us repay the favor both in our practical dealings and in our search for a new aesthetic. With special good fortune, a successful aesthetic may even inspire due respect in our practices."[9]

We are indebted to the intrepid photographers who are looking to the new west, as well as to the rust belts and contaminated corridors east of the Mississippi, for adjusting our rearview mirrors forward. For venturing around the globe to expose toxic terrain, to portray distant victims of our consumerist demands and unconscious desires with ingeniously crafted images of sublime horror. We can keep these photographs of troubled beauty in their frames, at a distance. Or we can look closer and with peripheral vision, and wonder: What have we done, and what do we do next?

Notes

1 Misrach, Richard. *Desert Cantos.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987.

2 *New Topographics: Photographs of Man-Altered Landscapes.* Exhibition at the International Museum of Photography, Rochester, NY; January 1975.

3 Brochure for *Between Home and Heaven: Contemporary American Landscape Photography*. Exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution, 1992.

4 Gould, Stephen Jay. *Between Home and Heaven.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992; 77.

5 Ibid. See also Peter Goin, *Nuclear Landscapes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

6 Pauli, Lori, et.al. *Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky.* New Haven: Yale University Press, in association with the National Gallery of Canada, 2003.

7 For one example of integrating photography with analytical diagrams and text, see *Petrochemical America,* the collaborative work of photographer Richard Misrach and landscape architect Kate Orff (New York: Aperture, 2012.)

8 Williams, Terry Tempest. "The Earth Stares Back," in *Emmett Gowin: Changing the Earth* by Jock Reynolds (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 83.

9 Gould, Stephen Jay, op. cit.; 131.

Looking at the New West

Contemporary Landscape Photography

The Fralin Museum of Art
University of Virgnia
June 7 – December 15, 2013

Curated by
William Wylie
Adjunct Curator of Photography, The Fralin Museum of Art and Associate Chair for Studio Art, McIntire Department of Art, University of Virginia

The exhibition *Looking at the New West* features the work of six photographers: Joni Sternbach, Mike Osborne, Lois Conner, Mark Ruwedel, Robert Adams, and Michael Lundgren. All of these artists work in the landscape of the American West and come to this subject matter many years after Ansel Adams created the seminal work that comprises the concurrent exhibit *Ansel Adams: A Legacy.* While the process of making a photograph remains much the same for these six artists as it was in Adams's time, both the view and the motivation have changed.

All photographs can be seen as forms of acceptance. Despite our desires to expose what should be changed, at their best landscape photographs simply show us what a particular place looked like at a particular moment in time, in a particular light, and from a particular point of view. Following the grand display of wildness and pristine nature that Ansel Adams's best known works so often convey, the artists in *Looking at the New West* chose to consider another America, one equally spectacular and sublime but full of human interventions and sometimes recklessness. They sought to find a way to tell the truth about these places and to illuminate what the poet Theodore Roethke referred to when he wrote, "we have not lived up to our geography."

These artists invite us to look at the West as if for the first time; to view even those marginal places with a sense of discernment, leaving room for both admiration and revulsion, and to see that any real conservation effort will require that we acknowledge where we stand now, surrounded by our follies, and hope that all landscapes hold the possibility of redemption.

The Fralin Museum of Art's programming is made possible by the generous support of The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation.

The exhibition is made possible through the generous support of the PBR Lecture Series at UVA, *albemarle* magazine, and Ivy Publications LLC's *Charlottesville Welcome Book.*

Robert Adams
American, b. 1937
Quarried Mesa Top, Pueblo County, Colorado, 1978, printed 1990
Gelatin silver print,
11 x 14 in, 27.94 x 35.56 cm
Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

Lois Conner
American, b. 1951
Bluff, Utah, Navajo Reservation, 1996
Platinum print, edition 3/10,
19¼ x 16¼ in, 48.9 x 41.91 cm
Courtesy of the artist, NR96107

Michael Lundgren
American, b. 1974
River Valley, 2003
Gelatin silver print,
32 x 40 in, 81.28 x 101.6 cm
Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt

Mike Osborne
American, b. 1978
Vertellus (Peak), 2012
Archival inkjet print,
28 x 35 in, 71.12 x 88.9 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas
Originally commissioned and
produced by Artpace San Antonio.

Mark Ruwedel
American/Canadian, b. 1954

Top row, left to right
Bullfrog and Goldfield #3, 1997
Tonopah and Tidewater #10, 2001
Pioche Pacific #4, 2001
Tonopah and Tidewater #8, 2001
Toned silver prints,
7½ x 9½ in, 19.1 x 24.13 cm
Collection of the artist, courtesy of
Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica

Middle row, left to right
St. John and Ophir #8, 2001
Ludlow and Southern #7, 2002
Tonopah and Tidewater #23, 2002
Great Northern #7, 2005
Toned silver prints,
7½ x 9½ in, 19.1 x 24.13 cm
Collection of the artist, courtesy of
Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica

Bottom row, left to right
Nez Perce and Idaho #1, 2005
Denver and Rio Grande Western #43, 2003
Mohave and Milltown #3, 2004
Caliente and Pioche #1, 2002
Toned silver prints,
7½ x 9½ in, 19.1 x 24.13 cm
Collection of the artist, courtesy of
Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica

Joni Sternbach
American, b. 1953
10.09.30 #1 Tracks, c. 2010
Unique wet collodion tintype on steel,
8 x 10 in, 20.32 x 25.4 cm
Courtesy of the artist
© Joni Sternbach

The Fralin Museum of Art,
University of Virginia

Exhibition Checklist

Robert Adams
American, b. 1937

Quarried Mesa Top, Pueblo County, Colorado, 1978, printed 1990
Gelatin silver print,
8 x 10 in, 20.32 x 25.4 cm
Courtesy of William Wylie

South Table Mountain, above Golden, Colorado, 1975–83
Gelatin silver print,
11 x 14 in, 27.94 x 35.56 cm
Courtesy of William Wylie

Alkali Lake, Albany County, Wyoming, 1975–83
Gelatin silver print,
11 x 14 in, 27.94 x 35.56 cm
Courtesy of William Wylie

Overlooking Long Beach, on Signal Hill, 1978–83
Gelatin silver print,
16 x 20 in, 40.64 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of William Wylie

Untitled, from *Prairie,* 1965–73
Gelatin silver print,
8 x 10 in, 20.32 x 25.4 cm
Courtesy of William Wylie

Untitled, from *Prairie,* 1965–73
Gelatin silver print,
8 x 10 in, 20.32 x 25.4 cm
Courtesy of William Wylie

Lois Conner
American, b. 1951

Bluff, Utah, Navajo Reservation, 1996
Platinum print, edition 4/10,
16½ x 26 in, 41.91 x 66.04 cm
Courtesy of the artist, NR96104

Tuba City, Arizona, Navajo Reservation, 1995
Platinum print, edition 5/10,
17 x 7 in, 43.18 x 17.78 cm
Courtesy of the artist, NR95238

Bluff, Utah, Navajo Reservation, 1996
Platinum print, edition 3/10,
19¼ x 16½ in, 48.9 x 41.91 cm
Courtesy of the artist, NR96107

Canyon de Chelley, Arizona, Navajo Reservation, 1996
Platinum print, edition 2/10,
17 x 13 in, 43.18 x 33.02 cm
Courtesy of the artist, NR96176

Mexican Hat, Utah, Navajo Reservation, 1992
Platinum print, edition 2/10,
7 x 34 in, 17.78 x 86.36 cm
Courtesy of the artist, NR92318

Michael Lundgren
American, b. 1974

River Valley, 2003
Gelatin silver print,
32 x 40 in, 81.28 x 101.6 cm
Museum Purchase with
Curriculum Support Funds, 2013.1

Basin, 2005
Gelatin silver print, edition 1/5,
32 x 40 in, 81.28 x 101.6 cm
Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt

Untitled, 2003
Gelatin silver print, edition 1/5,
32 x 40 in, 81.28 x 101.6 cm
Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt

Untitled (Water), 2001
Gelatin silver print, edition 1/5,
32 x 40 in, 81.28 x 101.6 cm
Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt

Mike Osborne
American, b. 1978

Vertellus (Valley I), 2012
Archival inkjet print,
28 x 35 in, 71.12 x 88.9 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas
Originally commissioned and produced by Artpace San Antonio.

Vertellus (Valley II), 2012
Archival inkjet print,
28 x 35 in, 71.12 x 88.9 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas
Originally commissioned and produced by Artpace San Antonio.

Vertellus (Valley III), 2012
Archival inkjet print,
28 x 35 in, 71.12 x 88.9 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas
Originally commissioned and produced by Artpace San Antonio.

Vertellus (Peak), 2012
Archival inkjet print,
28 x 35 in, 71.12 x 88.9 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas
Originally commissioned and produced by Artpace San Antonio.

Mark Ruwedel
American/Canadian, b. 1954

Bullfrog and Goldfield #3, 1997
Toned silver print,
16 x 20 in, 40.64 x 50.8 cm
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16 x 20 in, 40.64 x 50.8 cm
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Pioche Pacific #4, 2001
Toned silver print,
16 x 20 in, 40.64 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica

Tonopah and Tidewater #8, 2001
Toned silver print,
16 x 20 in, 40.64 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
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St. John and Ophir #8, 2001
Toned silver print,
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Toned silver print,
16 x 20 in, 40.64 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica

Tonopah and Tidewater #23, 2002
Toned silver print,
16 x 20 in, 40.64 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica

Great Northern #7, 2005
Toned silver print,
16 x 20 in, 40.64 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica

Nez Perce and Idaho #1, 2005
Toned silver print,
16 x 20 in, 40.64 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica

Denver and Rio Grande Western #43, 2003
Toned silver print,
16 x 20 in, 40.64 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica

Mohave and Milltown #3, 2004
Toned silver print,
16 x 20 in, 40.64 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica

Caliente and Pioche #1, 2002
Toned silver print,
16 x 20 in, 40.64 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica

Joni Sternbach
American, b. 1953

10.09.30 #1 Tracks, c. 2010
Unique wet collodion tintype on steel, 8 x 10 in, 20.32 x 25.4 cm
Courtesy of the artist

10.10.02 #2 Lucin Lost Train, 2010
Unique wet collodion tintype on steel, 8 x 10 in, 20.32 x 25.4 cm
Courtesy of the artist

10.10.06 #1 Tracks, Looking the Other Direction, 2010
Unique wet collodion tintype on steel, 8 x 10 in, 20.32 x 25.4 cm
Courtesy of the artist

10.10.06 #7 Intrepid Potash, 2010
Unique wet collodion tintype on steel, 8 x 10 in, 20.32 x 25.4 cm
Courtesy of the artist

08.04.13 #7 Pilot Peak, 2008
Unique wet collodion tintype on aluminum, 8 x 10 in, 20.32 x 25.4 cm
Courtesy of the artist

08.04.10 #2 Breakers, 2008
Unique wet collodion tintype on aluminum, 8 x 10 in, 20.32 x 25.4 cm
Courtesy of the artist

08.04.18 #4 Cave, 2008
Unique wet collodion tintype on aluminum, 8 x 10 in, 20.32 x 25.4 cm
Courtesy of the artist

08.04.17 #6 Observation Rock, 2008
Unique wet collodion tintype on aluminum, 8 x 10 in, 20.32 x 25.4 cm
Courtesy of the artist

08.04.17 #8 Rock and Snow, 2008
Unique wet collodion tintype on aluminum, 8 x 10 in, 20.32 x 25.4 cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Changing Emulsion of Conservation

Brian Richter
Director of
Global Freshwater Strategies,
The Nature Conservancy

Last fall, after a hiatus of more than 30 years, I returned to Yosemite. During my late teens I spent a good deal of time in the park, climbing its granite walls and peaks and wandering its backcountry trails in search of myself. I had figured that ground walked by John Muir was as good a place to look as any. How had I stayed away so long from a landscape that had so shaped me?

I approached the park from the west along Highway 140, my car ascending slowly from the agricultural expanse of California's Central Valley into the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. The grasses blanketing the foothills had turned golden brown. Daydreaming out the car window, I imagined in the humpy shapes of the foothills the furrowed, tawny backs of grizzly bears, the long-lost kings of this oak-savanna ecosystem. I could only imagine them, as the last of the California grizzlies was killed just south of this spot in 1922.

For me, the real entrance to Yosemite comes some six miles beyond the El Portal entrance gate, when I emerge from the Ahwahnee Tunnel and suddenly the full panorama of the great Yosemite Valley comes into view. On this brilliant autumn day, the valley was awash in color and light. But at this point, for me, the landscape transformed into shades of gray.

Ansel Adams taught me to see Yosemite in this way.

The Beauty of Gray

As a student of nature photography in San Diego in the 1970s, I'd learned that Adams, with his colleague Fred Archer at the Art Center School in Los Angeles, had invented a technique of manipulating a photographic exposure such that the photograph can capture the desired range of light and dark values. Adams called it the "Zone System," assigning numbers from zero through ten to different brightness values, known as zones, with zero representing black, five middle gray, and ten pure white. In Adams's photographs, we realized that black-and-white film could yield a tonality spectrum we had never imagined.

I very well remember the moment I first set eyes on an Adams print. I was on one of my frequent mountaineering trips to Yosemite in the late 1970s, and I had stopped at the Ansel Adams Gallery, housed in a historic structure built in the heart of the valley floor in 1902. As I stood in front of *Mount Williamson,* Adams's gorgeous photo of late-afternoon sunbeams arcing across the eastern flank of the Sierra Nevada, I was awestruck at the realization that someone could produce something so magically beautiful with a camera. Adams's Zone 9 whites glistened, and even in the dark shadows of his Zone 2 blacks he hadn't lost detail. His prints seemed as impossible as climbing Mount Everest without supplemental oxygen.

From Artistic Expression to Conservation Action

Adams inspired generations of photographers with his carefully disciplined revelations of beauty and wildness. But his work was equally if not more influential in mobilizing legions of conservationists. As his now-famous book series from the 1950s—*The Camera, The Negative,* and *The Print*—began landing in university libraries and on living-room coffee tables across the country, Americans awoke to the realization that their birthright gave them access to a wonderland of wildly beautiful places, the public lands and parks that Adams had photographed. His photographs beckoned the viewer to "come see, come see!" Visitation to Yosemite more than doubled between the 1950s and the late 1970s, when it reached 2.5 million people a year.

Adams himself had first visited Yosemite on a family trip at the age of 14, when his father gave him his first camera, a Kodak Brownie. Adams wrote of his initial view of the valley in his journal: "The splendor of Yosemite burst upon us…. There was light everywhere…." That meeting of light and camera was alchemy in Adams's hands, and he instantly became obsessive about photography, teaching himself everything he could about the art and science of film.

At age 17, Adams joined the Sierra Club, a conservation group dedicated to preserving the natural world, and he was hired as the summer caretaker of the LeConte Lodge, the Sierra Club's visitor center in Yosemite Valley. He remained a member of the organization throughout his lifetime and was elected to its board of directors at the age of 32, serving in that capacity until 1971 when he was 69.

With Adams on board, the Sierra Club suffused its glossy magazine with his glorious photographs. The organization deftly translated the photographs' "come see" allure into effective "save me" appeals. In Adams's photographs, Americans saw places that deserved to be saved, that *needed* to be saved. The Sierra Club's membership ranks grew from 16,000 in 1960 to more than 200,000 in just two decades.

I, too, became a card-carrying member of the Sierra Club when I turned 18. In that same year, inspired by Adams and his Zone System, I threw my large-format Graflex Speed Graphic camera and tripod into a knapsack and set out to photograph wild places from the California Sierras to British Columbia. On my return home from that adventure, I stopped in San Francisco for the express purpose of visiting the Sierra Club's headquarters. While meeting with the photo editor of *Sierra* magazine, I opened my knapsack, pulled out a fat notebook full of 4 x 5 inch negatives and handed it to the editor, telling him that he could use anything he liked, free of charge.

Ansel Adams had taught me the discipline of photography. And then he turned me into a lifelong conservationist.

Documenting the Changing American Landscape

During the post-World War II boom years in America, the work of the Sierra Club was becoming more relevant and important by the day. The American landscape was changing fast. The year 1950 marked the first one in which more people lived in suburbia than in cities, a trend that escalated rapidly in the 60s and 70s. As suburbs sprawled into the countryside, Americans witnessed firsthand the felling of forests and paving of grasslands at breakneck speed. My hometown of San Diego added a half million people between 1956, the year I was born, and my tenth birthday.

When I was 30, I started working for The Nature Conservancy, where I have now spent more than 25 years working to protect rivers and freshwater resources. The organization was formed in 1951 by a group of homeowners in New York concerned about a proposed subdivision and shopping center in their backyard woods, the Mianus River Gorge. They took out second mortgages on their homes to buy the gorge, saving it from the developers' maw in the nick of time. The group soon put their "just-buy-it" strategy of conservation to work at other places. Within a couple of decades, The Nature Conservancy's land-buying acumen had become legendary, and it grew to become one of the largest private landowners in the country and the proprietor of the world's largest collection of nature reserves.

Meanwhile, our federal government was filling river canyons with concrete dams to irrigate deserts, spin hydropower turbines to electrify our industrial growth, and protect the country's burgeoning cities and suburbs from floods. In the latter half of the 20th century, an average of one big dam was built in the US each day, every day, for 50 years.

The conservation movement—and conservation-oriented photography—began shifting from what needed to be saved to documenting what was being lost.

On Film, the Landscape Endures

In 1963 the photographer Eliot Porter published his requiem for a dam-drowned stretch of the Colorado River known as Glen Canyon, just upriver from the Grand Canyon, in a book that he titled *The Place No One Knew.* Beginning in the late 1950s, Porter took his camera on several boat trips down the river once he learned that the canyon was to be inundated by the filling of Lake Powell, formed behind a dam that would send electricity to southern California and Las Vegas. Georgia O'Keefe accompanied Porter on two of his trips. Porter chronicled his tours along a river that "mirrors pink rocks and cerulean sky," and described a maze of "carved walls, royal arches, glens, alcove gulches, mounds and monuments" that he called "the Colorado's masterwork." O'Keefe fixated on the nighttime constellations overhead, marveling at the "holes in the sky."

In the book's dedication, Porter wrote, "But where will the chance to know wildness be a generation from now? How much of the magic of this, the American earth, will have been dozed and paved into oblivion by the great feats of engineering that seem to come so much more readily to hand than the knack of saving something for what it is?"

Porter's eulogy of doomed Glen Canyon played no small role in inciting a dam-fighting fervor across the country and igniting the American conservation movement in new ways. David Brower, the executive director of the Sierra Club at the time, successfully led a fight to keep a new dam from being built on the Yampa River, a dam that would have flooded Dinosaur National Monument. That victory came at a high cost, however, and a very high personal price for Brower. In negotiating the agreement that prevented the building of the Echo Park Dam on the Yampa, Brower had agreed not to fight the dam in Glen Canyon. Soon after striking his Faustian bargain, Brower went to see Glen Canyon for himself. With deep sorrow—which he carried for the rest of his life—he predicted that Glen Canyon Dam would become "America's most regretted environmental mistake." In the foreword of *The Place No One Knew,* Brower wrote that "Glen Canyon died in 1963, and I was partly responsible for its death."

Brower quickly began paying for his devil's bargain with born-again passion. When a new dam was proposed in the heart of the Grand Canyon, Brower and the Sierra Club protested in June 1966 with a full-page ad, placed in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post,* whose headline read: "Should We Also Flood the Sistine Chapel So Tourists Can Get Nearer the Ceiling?" The ad sparked more than 3,000 readers to become new Sierra Club members, and the dam was stopped dead in its tracks.

Photography, it seemed, could move conservationists to both love and want to save a place they had never been to, and to decry the loss of a place they would never see

A World on Fire

From the 1960s through the 1980s, camera-bearing conservationists began focusing on fire as well as water. A timely and much-photographed subject was the Amazon Basin, where an area of forest the size of England, Scotland, and Wales combined was being slashed and burned each year, largely for the purpose of raising cattle to feed the American appetite for beef.

But it was the image of *fire on water*—specifically, on the Cuyahoga River in Ohio—that helped launch a new kind of activism in the late 1960s and early 70s. The river had caught fire repeatedly since the 1860s, but when *Time* magazine chronicled the burning river in June of 1969, it caught the country's attention like never before. The magazine described the Cuyahoga as the river that "oozes rather than flows" and in which a person "does not drown but decays." Scientists were more literal, noting that the river's surface was covered with a brown oily film several inches thick, in which debris and trash had become entwined and in which animal life did not exist.

The Cuyahoga fire, and the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* earlier in the 1960s, marked a profound shift in the motivations and concerns of the conservation-minded. The emphasis on saving wild things and places shifted with the concerns of the late 1960s, which were more attuned to saving ourselves. Cameras exposed factory pipes disgorging poisonous effluents and smokestacks spewing clouds of toxic pollutants into the air. "Conservation" was quickly evolving into "environmentalism."

In 1970, Americans celebrated the first "Earth Day." The idea for the event came to Earth Day-founder Gaylord Nelson, then a US Senator from Wisconsin, after he had witnessed the ravages of the 1969 massive oil spill in Santa Barbara, California. Photos of shorebirds cloaked in gooey oil were splattered across the media. Inspired by the student anti-war movement, Nelson realized that if he could infuse that energy with an emerging public consciousness about air and water pollution, it would force environmental protection onto the national political agenda. Senator Nelson proclaimed that Earth Day would be a "national teach-in on the environment."

On that first Earth Day, more than 20 million Americans took to the streets, parks, and auditoriums to call for a healthy and safe environment in coast-to-coast rallies. Thousands of colleges and universities organized protests against the deterioration of the environment. Groups that had been fighting against oil spills, polluting factories and power plants, raw sewage, toxic dumps, pesticides, freeways, the loss of wilderness, and the extinction of wildlife suddenly galvanized into a movement.

The newspapers were plastered the next day with photos of hippies and flower children dancing at Earth Day rallies. I remember my father remarking that he was relieved to see the protest signs change from anti-war to pro-Earth.

Finding Our Way Back to Nature

A Nature Conservancy-funded study published in 2008 found that per capita visits to US national parks have been declining since 1987, after having risen for the previous 50 years. The study researchers found a significant relationship between this decline and "videophilia," or the replacement of outdoor activities with countless hours spent playing video games and plugged into the internet. They suggested that this was "evidence of a fundamental shift away from people's appreciation of nature."

"When children choose TVs over trees, they lose touch with the physical world outside and the fundamental connection of those places to our daily lives," said Steve McCormick, The Nature Conservancy's president at the time. "A simulated waterfall can never compare with the wonder of Niagara Falls, and an electronic world cannot replicate the awe of standing at the base of Half Dome in Yosemite or watching the eruption of Old Faithful. These places aren't just part of the American experience; they're part of the human experience—something no one should miss."

In response, The Nature Conservancy created its LEAF program—Leaders in Environmental Action for the Future. The program provides summer internships to help high school students learn about nature. Joshua Carrera, who grew up in Brooklyn, was one of the program's first recruits when he was 17. Joshua says that nature opened his eyes. "I saw nature out there, and when I went back into the city I realized it was all around me."

I'm hoping that Joshua took a camera with him. The sights that inspired him are probably nothing like the landscapes that Adams photographed. But he just might show his own pictures to his friends and inspire a movement.

Living the Art of Engagement

Art and Environmental Action

William Sherman
Founding Director, OpenGrounds, Associate Vice President for Research, and Professor of Architecture, University of Virginia

Photography is a tool for dealing with things everybody knows but isn't attending to. My photographs are intended to represent something you don't see.
—Emmet Gowin[1]

Beneath each daily choice in modern life there lies a lurking sense of unease, that this decision may have invisible, unintended consequences that are known on some level, sensed peripherally, and unconsciously suppressed. Flipping a switch to turn on the light depends on a vast energy infrastructure that can too often be traced to a toxic landscape of extraction or massive disruptions of existing ecosystems. Just beneath the surface of modern progress, a foreboding anxiety awaits; it erupts at inconvenient moments of realization, registers in the intellect, but is repressed again since the implications for change remain too consequential. Art, in its intersubjective representations of the world, offers a window into this deeper realm of uncertainty by asking challenging questions: What does this choice look like from another perspective? What is acceptable to lose? Who pays the price? What really matters? In these questions, suppressed anxieties meet cultural constructs, precisely the domain that art has explored for centuries, and where the act of representation possesses its power.

A common theme in contemporary society is that we need more scientists and engineers to design our way out of the challenges we face. Artists may be added, in the service of adding a creative spark, shifting STEM to STEAM as the acronym of choice.[2] These are both true and laudable goals. In addition to providing an outlet for the creative mind or driving innovation, however, art does more—raising questions, plumbing uncertain understandings, reframing the relationship between the individual and the world, and discovering the resonances upon which culture may form. In these roles, the act of re-presentation that is at the core of art-making reveals the distances between the models of the world that are carried in the mind of the artist or the viewer and the condition of the world itself. Art anticipates the gaps that scientists and technologists seek to explain and bridge. Whether in the perceptual

discoveries of James Turrell and Robert Irwin, later explored by psychologists and neuroscientists, or the multi-scalar density of a Jackson Pollock, subsequently understood by fractal analysis,[3] artists test boundaries of knowledge of the explainable, and have done so across the spectrum of human culture since its origins.

The link from the artist's intent to specific conclusions, calls for action, or social purpose is not so direct. At times the power of a set of images can change the basis of societal discourse, setting in motion a new set of arguments, but more often the changes resulting from art are fragmentary, cumulative, and unstable.[4] This, however, is the nature of durable, meaningful change—emerging from many sources that coalesce into a new consensus, building new models of the world from the ground up. Art builds resilience, constantly expanding the networks of shared understanding. The most powerful force for change is the internalized understanding that becomes part of the pattern of life, through both focused and distracted attention, where the studied work on the gallery wall pierces the consciousness to trigger echoes in the street. These are the works in which the contingencies of intent, perception, and context align, not fully predictable, at times simply favored by timing, often constructing unintended meaning in the dynamic interplay of context and reception.

Ansel Adams, at the height of his career, produced a body of work that shifted commonly held models of the world, realigning the cultural perception of an endangered natural wilderness. The narrative of modern progress, of growth without limits through technological invention, encountered an emerging understanding of its costs in the middle of the 20th century, as artists, writers, scientists, and public figures began to recognize the unaccounted consequences. The translation from awareness to broad-based action—to move the dominant model of the world from one of infinite capacity to one that included irretrievable loss—would require a distinctive control of a medium. Adams was a photographer first; his work is not an illustration of a polemic, but stands on its own with a great capacity to engage. His compositional skill and technical precision produced works that reveal his passion for the subject matter in a way that a lesser effort and talent could not have achieved. The exploration of light, pattern, timing, form, and framing in his early photographs created the scales that he would use to compose his major works. Through these tools he would find a deeper space of correspondence, framing a new conversation with the viewer and the world, and conveying his passion for a worldview that encompassed conservation of the wilderness.

Why then have contemporary photographers of the landscape of the American West pursued such a different vision of the same terrain? On a certain level, the broadly held cultural model had shifted. By the 1970s, the concept of progress without cost was untenable, even if self-interested actions would continue for decades in spite of this understanding. Continuing in Adams's literal footsteps would be a restatement of the known. On another level, though, the model that challenged unquestioned modernity would itself be called into question. The heroic autonomy of pristine wilderness was as much a product of the imagination as the myth of unbounded progress. The human-nature dichotomy—the balance of nature disturbed by human intervention, or the autonomy of any part of the earth's ecosystems—would be understood as an artificial projection from a particular model of the world that no longer held. The lens would shift to a more ambiguous, self-conscious perception of the landscape, finding meaning in the overlaps between constructed and inherited phenomena, strangeness in the banal, and beauty in the discarded media of the past. It is not a comforting model driving this work, in which one can be at ease in single-minded purpose; it disturbs without resolution and leaves open the question of consequence. This is a more complex model of the world, one that will demand different tools for understanding and action. The next steps are not presumed by the work—that depends on where the work stands in a complex set of relationships that define its habitat.

Complex systems, whether ecological, urban, biological, or cultural, behave in patterns that can be understood and, to a degree, anticipated. Systems, including those of cultural understanding, fluctuate constantly like a ball rolling in a basin, often returning to the center, but cyclically approaching the rim and threatening to leap to a new basin, or model of understanding.[5] In a cultural context, these cycles include the organization of new ideas, the growth of a shared consensus, conservation or resistance to change, and collapse of the paradigm, laying the groundwork for the flowering of more new ideas. This phenomenon, described with respect to art history by George Kubler in *The Shape of Time*[6] (before the

emergence of the science of complexity), and more recently regarding ecosystems in C.S. Holling's resilience theory,[7] offers a lens through which to view the changing strategies and reception of art.

While Ansel Adams's work emerged at the threshold of a fundamental system change, aligning with multiple forces to destabilize the paradigm of progress, we are perhaps today in a period of reorganization and proliferation of alternative possibilities, without consensus but with a driving anxiety that a new model is required. This anxiety, this ironic self-awareness of post-modernity, motivates contemporary artists to seek new sources, to mine untapped veins, and to engage alternative practices. From these multiple perspectives, and building on innovation in spheres of science and technology, new perceptions will arise, informed by the collected insights of their diverse origins. It is through art—photography, painting, sculpture, film, dance, music, literature, architecture—that these anxious uncertainties may be brought into light, forming a constellation of fragmentary resolution from which a new cultural, technological, behavioral model for society will emerge.

The challenge for the contemporary artist, then, is not to presume a linear path from art to action—to imitate the heroic stance of Ansel Adams, or engage in the overt art-as-illustration-of-the-problem approach of the polar bear on melting ice—but to probe the mental constructs, anxieties, assumptions, and unseen consequences of everyday decisions for the moments where recognition becomes insight. In a period of profound uncertainty, the search for a new absolute rings false. Far from a lowering of aspiration or a compromising of goals, this is instead a call to keep the questions open, to recognize the contingency of answers, to make the best of a medium that explores, rather than negates, possibilities.

In the seminal, and still potent, essay from 1936, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin makes a connection between art and architecture, distinguishing between the optical and the tactile reception of work: "For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perceptions at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation."[8] While contained within a critique of an aesthetic of power and war, this insight is still transferable to the present: The art that changes

societal perception from the ground up does so through an engagement with life's patterns, routines, banalities, and daily oversights, building a web of recognition that an alternative common purpose is possible. Through the construction of this pervasive network, art gains its power to create positive change by the formation of a shared sensibility, translating anxiety into insight, understanding into hope, and shared purpose into reason and research that leads to new choices for daily life.

The highest practice of art will always be multidimensional, not reducible to pure form or a simple call for action, but operating in ways that challenge existing thought and perception on multiple levels. The qualities that move people from passive reception to the possibility of acting on a changed perception by behaving in a new way lie in the appropriation of the insight into a way of living and thinking. In photography, as in many of the arts, this occurs in the alignment of contingencies in the intent, reception, and impact of a new perspective. From there, different questions emerge, and models of understanding evolve to create new options for our engagement with the world.

Notes

1 Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Anchor Books, 1990; 200.

2 See, for example, http://stemtosteam.org/

3 Taylor, Richard P. "Order in Pollock's Chaos." *Scientific American* (December 2002).

4 Susan Sontag points out the inherent instability of meaning in the photograph, which has implications beyond photography: "Socially concerned photographers assume that their work can convey some kind of stable meaning, can reveal truth. But partly because the photograph is, always, an object in a context, this meaning is bound to drain away; that is, the context which shapes whatever immediate—in particular, political—uses the photograph may have is inevitably succeeded by contexts in which such uses are weakened and become progressively less relevant." Sontag, op.cit.; 106.

5 Walker, Brian, and David Salt. *Resilience Thinking*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2006; 53–55.

6 Kubler, George. *The Shape of Time*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962.

7 Holling, C.S. "The Resilience of Terrestrial Ecosystems," in *Foundations of Ecological Resilience* (Lance H. Gunderson, Craig R. Allen, and C.S. Holling, eds.; Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2010), 93-96.

8 Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 240.

The OpenGrounds Forum publication complements and expands on the ideas presented by the forum participants and the two associated exhibitions at The Fralin Museum of Art:

OpenGrounds Forum
Changing Views:
Photography and Environmental Action
September 27, 2013
10 am, Dome Room of the Rotunda

Ansel Adams
A Legacy
June 7 – August 4, 2013 | Rotation I
August 16 – October 13, 2013 | Rotation II

Curated by
William Sherman, Founding Director, OpenGrounds, Associate Vice President for Research, and Professor of Architecture, University of Virginia

and
William Wylie, Adjunct Curator of Photography, The Fralin Museum of Art and Associate Chair for Studio Art, McIntire Department of Art, University of Virginia

Looking at the New West
Contemporary Landscape Photography
June 7 – December 15, 2013

Curated by
William Wylie, Adjunct Curator of Photography, The Fralin Museum of Art and Associate Chair for Studio Art, McIntire Department of Art, University of Virginia

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