Geography

Topography

and

Cultural Landscape

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art Program at Vermont College of Fine Arts

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July 18, 2016

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Acknowledgements

It is difficult to acknowledge properly all of my intellectual debts. I owe so much to so many.

All of this would not be possible without the ever present support and insight provided by my much loved wife, Ruth Dresdner. Our brilliant children, Gideon and Maya, are the joy of my life and a constant inspiration.

If you asked Cornell Capa if he thought photography was an art, he would first look at you quizzically and then in his boisterous Hungarian manner he would howl. That was the end of that question. Cornell, who I loved dearly, identified much more closely with Louis Hine, the great social-activist photographer, who famously said, "I wanted to show the things that had to be corrected. I wanted to show the things that had to be appreciated". Hine also said, "In the last analysis, good photography is a question of art". [1]

Cornell once told me that the experiences I had while working for him at the International Center of Photography in the 1970s would be important for the rest of my life. He was right.

From my first visit to the Vermont College of Fine Art (VCFA) I was blown away by the quality and intelligence of the faculty. So articulate, so willing to engage, so concerned about providing their best. To call out single members of the faculty is contrary to the collaborative character of VCFA, but as Faculty Advisors, Humberto Ramirez, Dalida Maria Benfield, Michael Cloud and Luis Jacob have been super-supportive in guiding my research. Artist-Teachers; Pradeep Dalal, Cecilia Dougherty, Deborah Bright and Norbert Wiesneth have all been wonderfully encouraging supporters of my studio work.

I owe a dept to my fellow classmates that will graduate in the summer of 2016 along with the entire student body at VCFA. They are all smart and caring artists.

INTRODUCTION

> *I came to regard cities and their urbanizing regions as consisting of time as well as materials, and forever changing. ... Each landscape and townscape is an intricately organized expression of causes and effects, of challenges and responses, of continuity and, therefore, of coherence. It all hangs together, makes sense, fits one way or another— for good or bad, loosely or tightly. ... It reveals patterns and relationships forming and re-forming.*[2]
>
> Grady Clay
> Close-up: How to Read the American City

This paper will attempt to contemplate a deeper understanding of the subject matter, that I am drawn to as an artist: the cultural landscape, that is, the natural world as it has been changed by people.

The title, "Geography, Topography and Cultural Landscape," reflects on a breadth of topics. Each of these words: *geography, topography, cultural* and *landscape* relates to ideas evolving in my artistic practice.

Let's start with unpacking the title.

The Greek etymology of geography is 'earth writing'. It is a science concerned with describing the surface of our planet in its present state.[3] People have been describing our planet for a long time. Carl O. Sauer, the influential twentieth century American geographer considers Strabo, who lived in the first century B.C., to be the most renowned geographer in antiquity. Strabo wrote careful descriptions of his observations from the regions he traveled, including Egypt, Ethiopia and Tuscany. [4]

Geography today can be broadly divided into two fields: Physical Geography, a natural science that uses mathematics and statistics to describe the Earth's surface, principally through cartography and Human Geography, a social science focused on the study of how human beings shape and change the otherwise 'natural' world. In academia today, Human Geography, with its emphasis on the phenomenology of culture, economics and politics dominates the field. [5]

Topography, as defined by Webster's online dictionary, is, "the art or practice of graphic delineation in detail usually on maps or charts of natural and man-made features of a place or region especially in a way to show their relative positions and elevations." [6]

This definition does not suggest any political or social implications. Topography used in making maps is 'just' a graphic delineation, with an assumption of accuracy. However, as Denis Wood states, in *The Power of Maps*, "The map doesn't let us *see* anything, but it does let us know what others have seen or found out or discovered ... the things they learned piled up in layer on top of layer so that to study even the simplest looking image [map] is to peer back through ages of cultural acquisition."[7] As man-made objects, maps are created with social, political and cultural agendas that then reinforce and modify those very same (and other) social, political and cultural institutions. Topographical maps therefore bridge Physical Geography with Human Geography.

Photographs, particularly aerial and satellite views, are now used by cartographers to make maps. Like maps, photographs and landscape paintings can be interpreted from a factual point of view. They can provide abstracted geographic information about what a place looks like.

"Landscape," can mean either the physical and visible features of an area of land, either in an untouched wilderness or in an altered place, like a landscaped garden, or, to a genre of art that includes no less than a horizon line as part of its subject matter. In landscape art, artists can use topography, not unlike using photography, in that it is a way to abstract nature and/or built features of a real place.

At times, landscape art and maps are 'real' representations that are useful as practical tools; at other times, they are entirely imaginary vistas. Although they might be made without a conscious or purposeful socio-political position, they always have a political agenda.

Landscape art, both 'real' and imagined, like maps and like photographs are of a moment ... a slice of time that reflects or considers cultural codes, historical intent and memory at a particular in-between instant.

In the title, the word 'cultural' modifies the word 'landscape'. The combination, 'cultural landscape', is bantered about, referencing broad social or political issues and ideas. However, in the field of geography, it has a specific meaning.

Carl O. Sauer is sometimes attributed with coining the term, 'cultural landscape' but he acknowledged that it was first used by a German geographer, Otto Schlüter. Schlüter, was following the founders of modern geography, Carl Ritter and Alexander von Humboldt[8], when he first used the term Kulturlandschaft [cultural landscape] in 1908.[9]

In his seminal 1925 essay, *The Morphology of Landscape*, Sauer redefined the primary subject of geography as an academic field when he said that geography is "the study of areal or habitat differentiation of the earth, or chorology".[10] 'Areal' study means a study of a particular region or place, and 'chorology' the study of

the relationships between geographical phenomena and the people who live in a particular place.

At the time of Sauer's essay, a prominent theory of geography was environmental determinism, meaning that people do not have free will, and our cultures are formed principally by the outside forces of the physical landscape. Environmental determinism, later associated with racism and Orientalism, was debunked by Sauer. He said, "Geographic morphology does not deny determinism, nor does it require adhesion to that particular faith in order to qualify in the profession." [11]

Sauer redefined the field of geography and gave it a subject matter shared by no other discipline. Geography became the study of 'original' landscape - before humanity changed it, and 'cultural' landscape, the result of human interaction with the land. As a human geographer, Sauer was much more concerned with the latter, when he said, "The cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result." [12]

Sauer believed that culture is the agent acting upon nature, which then forms the cultural landscape. Today, in the anthropocene, the cultural landscape is an interactive place formed by human decisions as well by how nature affects the way we live. My work stems from the belief that cultural landscape is iterative, still chorological, but more cause-effect-cause-effect without one being more dominant than the other.

PRAXIS

Reading Sauer was a revelation to me. In my studio practice I had been exploring a kind of street-photography that focused more on architecture and the built environment, and intentionally excluded people who inhabited a place.

In my third residency at VCFA I presented "Ridgewood Motor Homes". This grid of nine pictures was exciting to me because it so clearly presented how people changed their homes, in this case factory-built homes, to create a discrete individualized personality. These landscapes spoke more clearly to me about the cultural values of this community than any portrait.

Discovering that "Cultural Landscape" was a defined term with historic roots that focused on people's interactions with the natural landscape provided me with a conceptual and an academic underpinning to my work.

This work, focused on how people modified their factory-built homes, is certainly different than Sauer's interest in chorology, but both are attentive to human inspired changes to the cultural landscape.

Ridgewood Mobile Home
Venice, FL; April 2015
27°6'11" N 82°25'55" W

[excerpt: one of nine]
Archival Pigment Print
Paper Size: 17x22

© 2015 David Kutz

This grid of nine pictures included a legend in the form of a strip of images under my pictures. This legend was composed of various maps and an aerial view of Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty in Great Salt Lake, UT. The intent was to tell the viewer, using a different visual language, that since these homes were in a flood zone in Florida there was a high probability that soon, as the ocean rises, these homes will be underwater. The legend generated many questions and a great deal of critical comment. Viewers wanted to know: What did it mean? Was it necessary? Are there other more effective ways to communicate these ideas?

I continue to consider these questions.

MORE ON MAPS

Maps play a huge functional role. They help us find our way. Maps can also be used to discover "facts" from the world's great atlases, settling disputes of cadastral politics[13] or assist seafaring nations in imperialistic pursuits.

Carl O. Sauer points out that, "The literature of geography in the sense of chorology begins with parts of the earliest sagas and myths, vivid as they are with the sense of place of man's contest with nature. The most precise expression of geographic knowledge is found in the map, an immemorial symbol". [14]

To achieve scientific accuracy cartographers use one of several standard projections. In map making, projections (Mercator, Peters, sinusoidal, globe, etc[15]) are mathematical models that translate our spherical three-dimensional world onto the flat plane of a piece of paper. By definition they distort and abstract reality.

The selected projection also has a political agenda. For example, the Mercator projection (Gerardus Mercator, 1569)[16] was the standard for nautical charts during Europe's period of colonial conquest. It distorted the world by making continents north of the equator larger than southern continents. But, it presents lines of longitude and latitude as straight and perpendicular (rhumb lines) making nautical navigation easier. It makes Europe and North America look bigger, hence more important, appropriate for the cartographers in the Western world who considered themselves culturally superior and to their underwriters who where eager to map the world as a means to dominate and control it.

We generally don't pay heed to the social or political messages embedded in maps. As Denis Wood pointed out, maps are not just useful tools, they are "... political; maps exhibit and promote a political orientation. They're about something. They have agenda."[17] As maps express political power, understanding their codes and language makes them more revealing.

Arjun Appadurai, an area-studies scholar, who has written extensively on globalization said,

> ... statistics are to bodies and social types what maps are to territories: they flatten and enclose. The link between colonialism and Orientalism, therefore, is most strongly reinforced not at the loci of classification and typification but at the loci of enumeration, where bodies are counted, homogenized, and bounded in their extent. [18]

A dichotomy is exposed when one thinks about maps as part of the political apparatus. On one hand they are useful, technically accurate tools for finding your way and on the other hand they are loaded with socio-political intent. This

dichotomy between the 'natural', the 'technical', the 'accurate', and purposeful intent is an ongoing theme in this paper.

Let's consider the lines of latitude and longitude. Maps are composed of layers of information. Simplified, the base layer of a map of the world presents the lines of longitude and latitude, providing a grid of numbers and letters to identify every location on the planet. Each globally positioned coordinate, a systematic string of numbers and letters, provides a cross point or node, which appears no more important or significant than another. However today, the Prime Meridian or the 'zero' reference lined used to measure all other lines of longitude runs through Greenwich, a district in London, the capital of a once great empire.

The Prime Meridian, the dividing line between the eastern and western lines of longitude, demonstrates that even the base layer of a world map becomes a hierarchal and politically charged world view.

Having the Prime Meridian, the "zero" line of longitude, placed in Greenwich is a relatively recently global decision. By 1884[19] the British Empire was at its peak as a seafaring imperial and colonizing force. The sun never set on the British Empire and its hegemony placed it in the middle of all geographic coordinates. Greenwich = axis mundi.

The 'zero' line of latitude is the equator and hence reliant solely on a technically determined position. Latitude is relatively easy to determine by observing and measuring the angle of the sun at high noon. The unit of measure for lines of longitude is first degrees, 360 degrees making up the circumference of Earth. Each of those 360 degrees are then divided into units of minutes and seconds.

To define a location on the planet, one must have an accurate clock - and again, time is measured from the Prime Meridian in hour units greater or lesser than Greenwich Mean Time (GMT).

So we see that the world continues to pay homage to British hegemony by marking time and place using an imaginary line through Greenwich.

Maps contain other symbolic and linguistic elements including boarders, compass roses, cartouches and most importantly legends.

Many people use the term "key" to name what is in fact a legend. The key in this case is simply used to translate the visual language on the map into its apparent functional components. This is a superficial approach that does not consider the map's political power or intent.

When reading the legend as a "key", a graphic symbol, like a heavy red line on a state published road map means, "oh, that's a limited access highway". But in the legend for roads on that same map, there are thin black lines, double black lines,

green lines, and dotted lines. Each are symbols for road types, but they are hierarchically stacked and when one considers the "red line" at the top of the list, one realizes that the map, made by the state, considers the limited access highway to be more important. The state is promoting the fact that they have great, fast limited access highways and those deserve to be represented boldly - in red. If you read the legend in this manner you may wonder what symbols are not included? What aspects of the topography, of the land and its people, has the state decided are more or less important? Are the trails of the First Nation people included? It was their important pathway.

Wood addresses the legend in this manner:

> ... it is understood that the role of the legend is less to elucidate the "meaning" of this or that map element than to function as a sign in its own right ... the legend as a whole is itself a signifier. As such, the legend refers not to the map (or at least not directly to the map), but back, through a judicious selection of map elements, to that to which the map image itself refers ... *to the state*. ... the legend acts as interpreter between the unique semiological system of the individual map and the culturally universal system of language ... In translating graphic expression to linguistic expression we make the map literature and its meanings subject to literary representation and manipulation. [20]

The legend illuminates a map's hidden messages by using an additional language of text and codes. To fully understand a map's political intent you must be able to read the legend closely.

PRAXIS

In my first semester at VCFA, before reading Woods, Appadurai, Deleuze or Sauer, I was curious about the relationship between photographs and maps. Without understanding the heavy political content found in all maps I created a body of work that I called "Image Maps".

For many years I had thought about the question of how people locate themselves in the world. How do we know where we are? What visual representations, data and technologies do we use to identify a place?

Image Map # 1 combined photographs I had made since 2001 during many trips abroad. They were interwoven and blended with GPS data, historic maps and screen captured images from Google Street Views and Google Maps.

I thought that the work would raise to the viewer, with some clarity, the questions I had been asking myself. How do we identify a place? What do these different systems mean? Instead the work was overwhelming in its complexity.

Excerpt of Image Map #1; 17-inches by 40-feet; Archival Pigment Print
X-McDonalds, Brooklyn; E 40°40'30" N 73°59'4" W; © 2014 David Kutz

I made many individual image maps, from many different places. They were then compiled into a single forty-foot long print, assembled in longitudinal order from West to East.

Ideally a viewer would walk along a forty-foot wall and experience my representation of my world. But, to accommodate the amount of exhibition space available to a student, a device was built that allowed the viewer to scroll through the 'map'.

Installation photograph showing the rolling devise for Image Map #1.

The devise was a pragmatic solution, but it raised a number of unintended responses: Did it make the viewing experience even more complex?

The viewers need to turn the cranks to see the work. Did I want them to have a physical interactive experience with the work?

Did I understand the history of scrolls as an artistic format? In the East, scrolls are a prominent format. Did I want my work informed by traditional landscapes from the East? Did anyone consider the two rolls of the scroll, with the legible part in between, a kind of Jewish Torah?

All good questions, which raised my consciousness regarding how meaning changes and is dependent on how a work is shown in a gallery or distributed in other ways.

ON TRAVEL

Our cultural baggage becomes more evident when traveling. This is especially true when we go to a different country, but occurs even when traveling in our own. It is essential to acknowledge that when you travel there is always a cultural exchange. Your culture, and the culture of wherever you are, affect each other.

It is relevant that the reader know something of my cultural baggage. I am a privileged man, of European descent, and live economically comfortably in the United States, one of the wealthiest countries in the world. I have witnessed extreme poverty, but only as an outsider. Except through self-motivated travel, I have no personal experience with culturally displacement. I have experienced a minimum of anti-Semitism, but never any personally directed racism or sexism that I was aware of. I have never witnessed war, only some of the results.

For me, photography (my art making medium), like geography, is wrapped up in a desire to understand the world through observation and exploration, which requires travel. There is a tremendous amount of literature on the topic of travel which cannot be addressed in this paper. But some consideration helps to frame the relationship between art, geography and my passion to explore the world.

Travel writing includes early sagas and myths; scientific, anthropological ethnographies, and natural history reports; sensational adventure stories, and contemporary travel guides. Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes, Travel Writing and Transculturation* considers travel literature through the lens of political power and imperialism. Her book provides a profound critique of colonialism and political intent. In comparing eighteenth and nineteenth century explorers who traveled to expand scientific knowledge about distant lands and those that provided a description of the people who lived in a different place, she notes,

> The normalizing, generalizing voice of the ethnographic manners-and-customs portraits is distinct from, but complementary to, the landscape narrator. ... one produces land as landscape and territory, scanning for prospects; the other produces the indigenous inhabitants as bodyscapes, scanned also for prospects. Together they dismantle the socioecological web that preceded them and install a Euro-colonial discursive order whose territorial and visual forms of authority are those of the modern state. Abstracted away from the landscape that is under contention, indigenous peoples are abstracted away from the history that is being made - a history into which Europeans intend to reinsert them as an exploited labor pool. [21]

Pratt focuses her attention on state or corporate sponsored travel that was motivated by a desire to colonize, control and reap the economic rewards of

worldly knowledge. Even when scientists traveled to study and record the natural history of a place, the information gathered ultimately found its way into the West's imperialistic colonizing machine.

Edward Said's, core thesis in his book *Orientalism*, is that white Western men, through aggressive imperialistic hegemony, have exoticised, appropriated, sublimated and suppressed Eastern cultures. Exoticising the East assisted the West's imperialistic appropriations. Said builds his theory with a wonderfully detailed critique and comparative analysis of the Western literature about the East. In the chapter titled, *Imaginative Geography and Its Representations*, he says,

> But one big division, as between West and Orient, leads to other smaller ones, especially as the normal enterprises of civilization provoke such outgoing activities as travel, conquest, new experiences. ... From at least the second century B.C. on, it was lost on no traveler or eastward-looking and ambitious Western potentate that Herodotus - historian, traveler, inexhaustibly curious chronicler - and Alexander - king warrior, scientific conqueror - had been in the Orient before. The Orient was therefore subdivided into realms previously known, visited, conquered, by Herodotus and Alexander visited, conquered. [22]

Here Said is saying that Herodotus, the non-violent historian and 'curious chronicler', as well as, Alexander, the warrior, conquered the distant lands they traveled to, even if their methods were different. Both approaches – just observing or leading an armed force – lead to a conquering hegemony. But, being a traveler is a two way experience. Yes, your cultural baggage influences how you see, but those that see you are also influenced. If there is no conscious or unconscious hegemony or exoticising there is less dominance and less conquering. But there is a cross cultural exchange in all things transnational.

Tourism, as defined by Webster's Online Dictionary, is "traveling to a place for pleasure".[23] Tourism leans more toward the world view of Herodotus, but Appadurai reiterates that one cannot ignore the fact that tourism has socio-political and cultural implications. He considers tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, and guest workers as significantly influencing the ethnoscape of a place. Appadurai considers all travelers to be primary players in the cultural irregularities found in our globalizing world. [24] Those that acquire cultural ideas from the traveling stranger do not accept, nor could they internalize in whole cloth, the culture of the traveler. Likewise, vice a versa.

It is hard to know for sure which side of this cultural exchange gains the most; the tourist buying a Coke-Cola in Istanbul or the Turk who runs the soda shop. Or, the Turk that invents and sells their own localized brand of Coke. This analogy can be carried much further when considering what it means to live a 'middle-

class' life in a consumer society, how TV (and other media) looks and functions in different countries, and what people build.

Some may be concerned that this interactive transfer of culture flattens diversity, which it does to some degree. Cultural exchange can bring people closer together, idealistically, and in theory only, it can mitigate exoticising, xenophobia, hegemony and suppression. Unfortunately, sometimes it amplifies these human ills.

Let's consider other thoughts on traveling as a tourist.

J.B. Jackson, notes in one of his many essays, *Learning About Landscapes*, "At the risk of exaggerating, I would say that the inspiration of tourism is a desire to know more about the world in order to know more about ourselves". [25]

Jackson goes on to quote Michel de Montaigne, who said,

> .... Traveling through the world produces a marvelous clarity in the judgment of men. We are all of us confined and enclosed within ourselves, and see no farther than the end of our nose. ... There are so many different tempers, so many different points of view, judgments, opinions, laws and customs to teach us to judge wisely on our own, and to teach our judgment to recognize its imperfection and natural weakness. [26]

Jackson's statement focuses principally on the tourist's opportunity to gain self-knowledge. Montaigne points out that the circumstances are more complex. We mostly live in a small universe, not seeing, appreciating or understanding what attitudes and ideas others may have. We are trapped in our cultural baggage. If one travels to accomplish Jackson's self-knowledge, which is my motivation, one must look beyond, "the end of our nose". Montaigne says that by seeing and contemplating different cultures, we gain not only self-awareness by becoming conscious of our own imperfections and weaknesses, but also learn how others manage the issues of life, which leads to better decisions; this is wisdom.

On Photography, by Susan Sontag discusses how tourism situates people in strange, unusual, or for them, exotic places. Sontag describes how photography helps tourists "take possession of space in which they are insecure." She suggests that the camera is a way to experience travel, first by separating the tourist from reality by placing a box with a lens between them and the physical world. It makes it easier for people to manage their displacement - and provides evidentiary proof, in the form of a photograph, that the trip actually took place. [27]

Any alert traveler has witnessed what Sontag pointed out. People walk through an extraordinary museum taking a snapshot of each work of art without stopping

to look and without any contemplation. It is a mystifying and disappointing observation. Sontag's tourist with a camera is not open and willing to observe and learn from the opportunity of a cultural exchange. Her tourist uses the camera to do precisely what Montaigne was concerned with. It's hard to see beyond the end of your nose, when there's a camera jammed into your face.

I don't use my camera in this manner. I generally don't make many 'tourist' pictures. I do not use the camera to try to record every moment of everyday. It is a much more contemplative experience. Further, the camera does not help me manage my insecurity when traveling. In fact, I'm more self-conscious and ill at ease when I use my camera. I have learned that one can have a deeper experience when they just look, see and remember. Sometimes, memory can be a better, or, at least, a preferred lens.

For me, traveling as a tourist is a path to understanding the world and a way to supplement a process of self-discovery. It also quenches my deep curiosity about how other people live; what they build, what they eat, how they behave. It is an endless wonder. Leaving home also breaks me away from my own 'end of my nose' routines. Responsibilities and priorities shift making it possible to see more.

Like all good travelers, I need to be conscious and alert to the pitfalls of exoticizing the Other. As Montaigne said, by experiencing other places I will gain some wisdom about how to live my life. And, that wisdom will find its way into my art.

PRAXIS

In a critique during my second residency, visiting artist Michael Cloud said, in paraphrase, "In tourism, you never actually arrive in a place in a satisfying way. Such as, at the right time of day, with the right weather or light." [28]

During my recent nine-week stay in Berlin, I reflected on this fact. By being in a place as a 'longer term' tourist, I was able to return to certain subjects repeatedly. "The Stranger's Path", the piece shown during my graduation exhibit at VCFA required five trips to the location. I studied the track of the sun and closely followed the constantly changing Berlin weather for weeks to arrive when the light and the weather was best.

Considering the preceding discussion in this paper on travel, I can say that breaking the routine of home life resulted in a super-productive artistic time. I felt more free to look, see and to make pictures. I saw and made many.

Wisdom is harder to quantify. Did I come back from Berlin a wiser man? Do I now have a better or richer life? I learned a great deal and notched many good memories. It's too soon to know if I am any wiser.

A BRIEF ON CULTURAL LANDSCAPE AS ART

Historians and archeologists don't agree on when the first topographical landscape, a work of art that represents a real place at a particular moment in time, was made. Suffice it to say that as Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens evolved, as people began to develop agriculture and to live in settled communities, a social and political need to represent both natural places and man-made structures, with drawings or paintings as 'landscapes' or maps, also evolved.

Many have made similar observations. Deborah Bright said in her essay, *Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry Into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography*:

> ... every representation of landscape is also a record of human values and actions imposed on the land over time. What stake do landscape photographers have in constructing such representations? A large one, I believe. Whatever the photographer's claims, landscapes as subject matter in photography can be analyzed as documents extending beyond the formally aesthetic or personally expressive. Even formal and personal choices do not emerge *sui generis*, but instead reflect collective interests and influences, whether philosophical, political, economic, or otherwise. [29]

The term 'landscape' as a genre of painting whose primary subject was the physical landscape, without for example a portrait in the foreground, began with the rise of the merchant bourgeoisie class in Holland in the seventeenth century.[30] This group, with expanding wealth and frequently with secular attitudes, commissioned not only portraits, but also pictures of their property. The burgher's estate, the merchant ship at anchor, the farmer's field all become subjects for this new genre of painting.[31] This desire of the wealthy class to record their physical achievements spread rapidly throughout Europe.

Landscape art evolved simultaneously in places where nationalistic identities were expressed through imperialism. In China, Japan, Europe and North America, as nationalism grew, with some engaged in colonial conquests, they created representations of 'their land' in pictures. W.J.T. Mitchell in his book *Landscape and Power*, considers the socio-political power of landscape art when he states, landscape art,

> ... must be the focus of a historical, political, and (yes) aesthetic alertness to the violence and evil written on the land, projected there by the gazing eye. ... the violence of this evil eye is inextricably connected with imperialism and nationalism. What we know now is that landscape itself is

> the medium by which this evil is veiled and naturalized. Whether this knowledge gives us any power is another question altogether. [32]

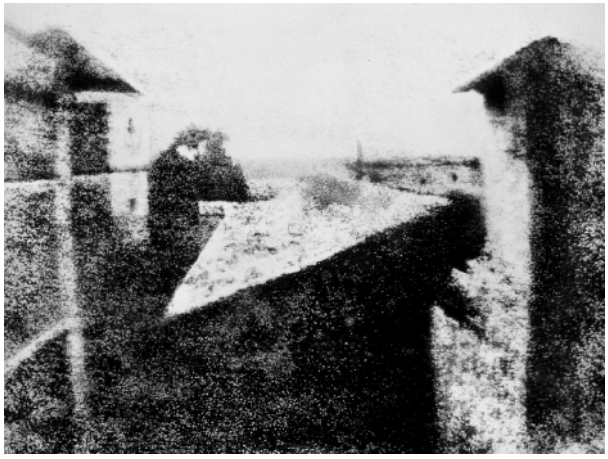
In the North American New World, the artists that formed the Hudson River School movement, although heavily influenced by the aesthetics of their European mentors, produced what might be considered the first truly American art. While the Europeans painted their great ancient monuments, Americans painted their monuments: the extraordinary natural American landscape. This practice took off in the 1840s, along with U.S. imperialism, expressed through the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and simultaneously with the development of photography.

Robert Hughes, in *American Visions*, his history of American art, points out that by the mid-eighteenth century:

> Nature became America's national myth, and the act of painting it an assertion of national identity. ... Americans saw in their wilderness the very prototype of Nature, the place where the designs of God survived in their virgin and unedited state. ... This compensated them for the lack of other signs of the Romantic sublime: old castles, crumbling Gothic chapels, the ruins of Roman aqueduct and Greek temple. By contrast, places like the Catskill Mountains [the primary subject matter of the Hudson River School] ... seemed to answer the murmur of skeptical old Europe, that Americans had nothing ancient and man-made to speak for them - because God spoke for them, through his deep architecture of the ancient earth. [33]

Concurrent with the Hudson River School, pictures of natural or made-man objects were subjects for the developing medium of photography. The very first photograph that didn't immediately begin to fade, is a cultural landscape by Nicéphore Niépce, the future partner of Louis Daguerre. [34] The fact that buildings are stationary and get a lot of sunlight certainly made it attractive subject matter.

View from the Window
at Le Gras (c. 1826)
Nicéphore Niépc



By the mid-nineteenth century, landscape photography of the American Western frontier became a dominant force. A comprehensive history of American landscape photography will not be provided in this paper, but there is value in leaping through the hundred years from c.1865 to the middle of the twentieth century by briefly considering the work of Carleton E Watkins (1829-1916), Timothy H. O'Sullivan (c. 1840-1882), William Henry Jackson (1843-1942), Ansel Adams (1902-1984) and Eliot Porter (1901–1990).

The debate on how the extraordinary natural wealth across the great expanse of the North American continent might be exploited, at the core of American's ninetieth century imperialistic mission, has been a major topic since the arrival of the first Pilgrim. As framed by J.B. Jackson,

> Jefferson held that man is more "natural" when in a rural setting, but "natural" as he used the word had little to do with "nature" - at least in its wilderness state; a "natural" man was inevitably a social or, more precisely, a political creature.

And

> Thoreau thought that the significant relationship is not that between man and man; it is the relationship between man and his environment. [35]

With Manifest Destiny this debate raged on and it continues today with our own environmental movements.

Regarding the Hudson River School, Hughes notes,

> ... It was Cole [Thomas Cole, 1801 - 1848] who introduced in painting the terms of the great debate over natural resources which has preoccupied Americans ever since. On the one hand, the landscape is an immense cornucopia, created by a providential God for men to use just as they please. ... In the opposite view - that of Cole, the American Transcendentalists, and every conservationist that followed them down to the present day - God had inscribed his being in the wilderness and to destroy it was sacrilege. [36]

How does photography fit into these circumstances?

In his seminal book, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Roland Barthes discusses how photography is completely contingent on the real - on the physical subject in front of the lens. Barthes proposes that this contingency results in photography having no essence of its own. For him, the myth of contingency is what constitutes a photograph. [37]

Joel Snyder, in his essay, *Territorial Photography*, points out that by the 1860s American photographers were well aware of the landscape painting that had preceded them, but they felt no obligation to make photographs comparable to them. Synder said,

> ... the myth of photographic contingency led to the creation of pictures that were thought to be free of all convention, perhaps wanting when judged against the standard provided by painting, but always honest, truthful, and, above all, disinterested. ... This approach was brilliantly realized by Carleton Watkins by merging a remarkable and heretofore unmatched technical virtuosity with formulas derived from, but not coextensive with, the picturesque and sublime modes of landscape depiction. [38]

Cathedral Rocks
Carleton Watkins, 1865

The dichotomy between the neutral and the intentional continues to resonate today. This rift can be extended by considering how photographs are frequently read as 'real' or 'truthful' representations of what naturally exists, but like maps and Dutch landscape paintings, they are loaded with conscious or unconscious intent.

It is also intriguing to note the name of the place captioned in the Watkins' photograph; *Cathedral Rocks*. Is it a picture of a monumental historic cultural landmark or just an amazing bit of land? Considering Hughes, it was both.

With the end of the American Civil War came a burst of U.S. imperialism. The U.S. government used the Army and the rapidly growing, subsidized railroad companies, to explore and push westward. Numerous geological and geographical teams where sent to study, record and return East with useful information - information necessary to conquer the land and the First Nation residents.

Timothy H. O'Sullivan and the younger William Henry Jackson joined these field-deployed teams as photographers. O'Sullivan is credited with having taken the first photographs of the prehistoric ruins of the Navajo weavers and pueblo villages of the Southwest.[39] Unlike Watkins, O'Sullivan's pictures, "are often populated, but he denies human figures their function in picturesque landscapes ... Figures function most often as indices of a precarious and frightful relationship between explorer and the object of exploration". [40]

Cañon near Brown's Park, Colorado,
T. H. O'Sullivan, 1872

(Detail)

William Henry Jackson with the Hudson River School landscape painter Thomas Moran, were invited to join the Hayden Geological Survey of 1871. Their works were used as documentary evidence to persuade Congress in 1872 to establish the first U.S. national park: Yellowstone National Park. [41]

The Tower of Tower Falls in Yellowstone,
Thomas Moran, 1875

Great Falls of the Yellowstone River
William Henry Jackson, 1871

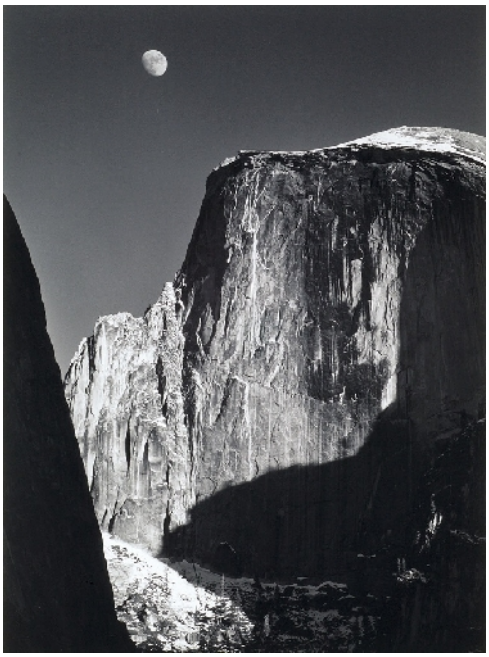
There is a long and fascinating history of how documentary photographs of poverty, war, working conditions and other social issues were (and are) used as tools by activists and propagandists. Since this paper is principally focused on landscape art and landscape photography, it will not expand on how the work of William Henry Jackson triggered the use of photographs as a tool to motivate social change through the documentation of other subject matter.

Coming into the 20th-century, Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter, the former developing the Zone System to carefully control black and white tonalities and the later a specialist in using color, were ardent American conservationists and environmentalists. They continued in the western tradition of making Arcadian sublime natural landscape photographs. As Deborah Bright explains, in her essay, *The Machine in the Garden Revisited: American Environmentalism and Photographic Aesthetics*, these early eco-artists,

> ... [Adams' and Porter's] photographs would restore a lost experience of nature that had become corrupted by the postwar burgeoning of family tourism and its commercial

> amenities, rapid suburbanization, road building, and resource development. Pent-up demand from wartime rationing and the creation of a postwar culture of family consumerism (prominently featuring automotive travel and leisure activities) had created a monster. ... Adams ... dreamed of a lost organic society, where humans were imagined to have lived harmoniously with nature, found a new resonance among environmental activists. [42]

From the Road Between Blue Ridge and Newcomb, Adirondack Mountains, New York, Eliot Porter, September 30, 1963



Moon and Half Dome Yosemite, Ansel Adams, 1960

In summary, landscape art in photography and painting developed as a tool for the powerful to exert their imperialistic and colonizing power. In North America, the subject matter shifted from monumental ruins to sublime representations of an unexplored and yet unconquered West - America's monuments. These natural wonders, captured in pictures that were widely distributed, were inspirational. They triggered a desire to protect the land, or at least the most dramatic natural features, for future generations. With this the conservation movement began.

By making pictures with extraordinary detail and sublime lighting conditions, photographers remained contingent on what was "real", but that reality was quickly subsumed by the underwriters of the works.

PRAXIS

All other social concerns pale when considering the disruptive and catastrophic results of a climate warmed by our activities. The ever-expanding population, the global desire to live in a Western styled middle-class consumer society, and the unabated use of carbon fuels, is not sustainable. Life on Earth will surely survive, but Homo Sapiens may not. If there isn't a revolution in how we live on this planet, those that might persevere, will experience and witness extraordinary human pain.

My research and continuing interest in cultural landscape lead me to a belief that the vernacular (non-monumental) landscape may speak more softly, but more clearly, about who we are and what we value.

Several shifts in my attitude and hence my process took hold. First, I wanted my work to make a statement about our human condition that considered our values and conditions. Second, I needed to see a wider more inclusive landscape than the 'details' I had made earlier. Further, I could not do this if I remained reliant on the photographic contingency of a momentary reality.

This lead to the pictures I presented at VCFA during my fourth residency.

Jersey Electric; Camden, NJ; 39°56'10" N 75°6'32" W; October 2015
Paper Size: 36×92-in.; Picture Size: 28×86-in.; Archival Pigment Print; © 2015 David Kutz

And, again during my final semester in Berlin.

Future Obsolescence; Reuter West Coal Burning Power Plant, Berlin, Germany
52°32'5" N 13°14'54" E; April 2016
Picture Size: 15×40.3-inches; Not yet Printed; © 2016 David Kutz

NEW TOPOGRAPHICS - NEW LANDSCAPES

If you know the history of fine art photography, a reference to "topography" is an instant reminder of the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, curated by William Jenkins with help from photographer Joe Deal. Mounted at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House in 1975, the show included the work of Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, Henry Wessel, and the team of Bernd and Hilla Becher. There were 168 prints[43]; on average, less than twenty from each artist. It was subsequently re-mounted under the curatorial direction of Britt Salvesen at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona in 2009.

This essay will now consider how the *New Topographics* exhibition became a turning point in the trajectory of photographic history. It will consider some of the social and artistic activities that informed the participating artists and will reflect on the on-going debate between photography as an intentional artistic act and its supposed neutral role as a document.

In 1975, photography was breaking away from arguments about whether the medium qualified as a 'fine art'. It was being widely accepted as an important visual medium for artists. The same year, the Center for Creative Photography opened at the University of Arizona, the International Center of Photography in New York City had opened the prior year, and even the biggest museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art began to exhibit photographs. In this expanding universe of photographic exhibitions, academic research, and critical writing, *New Topographics* was just one more relatively small show. But it had an outsize impact on artists working with photographs and on our understanding of what qualified as acceptable subject matter in landscape art.

In the exhibition catalogue, curator William Jenkins presents an explanation for why the word 'topography' is included in the exhibition title. Jenkins writes,

> The word topography is in general use today in connection with the making of maps or with land as described by maps and it does not unduly stretch the imagination to see all photographs as maps of a sort. But for the sake of clarity a return to the original meaning may be helpful: "The detailed and accurate description of a particular place, city, town, district, state, parish or tract of land." The important word is *description* for although photography is thought to do many things to and for its subjects, what it does first and best is describe them. [44]

All of the photographs in the *New Topographics* exhibition were cultural landscapes. Most included buildings and other structures placed in the American

landscape. They are chorological studies showing the relationship between people and the land. The subject matter for the vast majority of the pictures were what J.B. Jackson would have considered vernacular - relatively banal industrial buildings, suburban developments, contemporary industrial parks, or views along the ever expanding American highway system. They were photographed in a somewhat 'distant' manner, not unlike the viewing distance of earlier European landscape painting and many seemed to simply describe or document this new American landscape without critique.

In many critical discussions about the *New Topographics* exhibition, a certain attitude about the work is expressed. It was enunciated by Jenkins in the show catalogue when he said, "The pictures were 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. Regardless of the subject matter the appearance of neutrality was strictly maintained." [45]

Why did the perspective that these photographs are dry, banal, boring, "stripped of any artistic frills", neutral, distant, without beauty or emotion, not working to express an opinion or make any kind of social statement, find its way into both the critical and public dialogue on the *New Topographics* exhibition?

One answer is how some of the artists spoke about their own work. Baltz's work, for example, makes a strong social statement about the vacuousness of the contemporary American landscape, even as he said, "I want my work to be neutral and free from aesthetic or ideological posturing."[46]

The reaction and analysis that the *New Topographics* exhibition was banal and without social meaning is absurd. The works made by the *New Topographics* photographers had important social impact even if the artists themselves did not articulate this.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, what was monumental and hence appropriate subject for American landscape art had experienced a paradigm shift. J.B. Jackson, who launched the magazine *Landscape* in 1951[47], informed the thinking of the land artists of the 1960s and the *New Topographics* artists in the 1970s.

Jackson focused on the vernacular landscapes - the everyday built environment. He thought landscape art, like human geography, is a chorological study. It provides the opportunity for the viewer to consider relationships between people and the relationships people have with place. For Jackson, landscape art presents what are considered permanent values at a particular moment in socio-political history and by doing so the picture creates a temporal identity for the artist, patron and the viewer. [48]

The land artist, Robert Smithson, was informed by Jackson. Valuable artistic subject matter could be and in fact must be found in the vernacular, even if some consider it banal. Smithson framed this in his 1966 essay, *Entropy and the New Monuments*, when he said,

> The slurbs, urban sprawl, and the infinite number of housing developments of the postwar boom have contributed to the architecture of entropy. ... Near the super highways surrounding the city, we find the discount centers and cut-rate stores with their sterile facades. ... On the inside of such places are maze-like counters with piles of neatly stacked merchandise; rank on rank it goes into a consumer oblivion. The lugubrious complexity of these interiors has brought to art a new consciousness of the vapid and the dull. But this very vapidity and dullness is what inspires many of the more gifted artists. [49]

Just as the Europeans painted the monumental classical architecture in their backyards to bolster their cultural aspirations, and American artists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries celebrated through pictures America's extraordinary and sublime natural monuments, the *New Topographics* artists now considered through photography what was of import in their cultural landscape.

In the much-expanded catalogue of the 2009 re-mounted show, curator Britt Salvesen wrote:

> Although New Topographics has since been identified by many as a turning point in photographic history - and has given a label to a highly validated approach to landscape - neither the original viewers, nor the curator [Jenkins], nor the participating artists anticipated this outcome at the time. Its authoritatively cartographic title notwithstanding, *New Topographics* did not pretend to chart an orderly terrain. It was more like sketchy directions hastily scrawled at a gas station on a long road trip, a combination of random landmarks, personal notations, and guesswork." [50]

Further, Deborah Bright notes in her essay, *The Machine in the Garden Revisited: American Environmentalism and Photographic Aesthetics*, that "the exhibition [*New Topographics*] represented the landscape in a radically new way, rejecting earlier romantic and metaphysical paradigms and cultivating an impersonal, clinical distance from their subjects. [51]

As Lewis Baltz said, "... Our expectations of nature are conditioned by our experiences as inhabitants of a modern industrial society particularly insofar as

that society instructs us in values which we, in turn, project upon nature."[52] And Greg Foster-Rice, wrote, in his introduction to *Reframing the New Topographics*, "Where Adams and Porter defined landscape as separate from humanity, to these younger photographers [Baltz, et. al.] nature and humanity were interwoven." [53]

What we Americans have built and subsequently internationalized through our global hegemony - the highways, the dependency on the automobile, the suburban sprawl, the endless strip malls ringing our cities - all speak to what our society and culture values. The pictures may be banal, but then so are these new ways of building a cultural landscape.

These pictures prompted the viewer to consider and ask: how have we changed our cultural landscape over time? What have we wrought? And, as suggested by the study of human geography, chorology is an iterative process. People change and influence the landscape ... the landscape changes and influences the people. These photographs were forward thinking by breaking earlier landscape art conventions. They revealed through art the condition of the cultural landscape in 1975 and these conditions still resonate today.

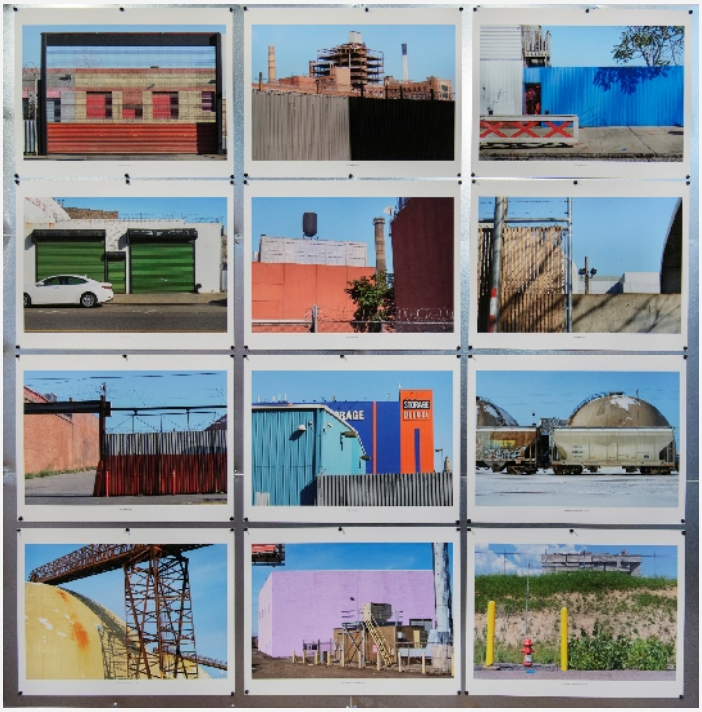
PRAXIS

In response to the photographs I submitted with my application to VCFA, Danielle Dahline, the Program Director, stated in my acceptance letter "... in the tradition of the New Topographics movement your images respect the realism of the medium ... your work moves beyond an exercise in aesthetics and begins to suggest a more complex narrative about the social history of American Industrialism."[54]

At the time, I was researching Abstract Expressionism and considered these pictures to be aesthetic studies of texture, form and color - *l'art pour l'art*. I was vaguely familiar with the some of the artists that were part of the New *Topographics* exhibition, but I had not studied the work thoroughly. I didn't see the social power or any particular cultural significance in my work. Or, for that matter, in the *New Topographics* work.

Realizing that the work I made would raise questions about our socio-political condition thundered into my thinking. These pictures allow the viewer to consider our changing post-industrial cultural landscape. And, that contemporary landscape isn't always pretty, even if the pictures are alluring. As in much of my work, it is more about asking that the viewer to contemplate the circumstance, rather than making a personal critique. There is an ideology, but no manifesto.

The photographs included in my application where shown during my first residency at VCFA.



Grid #1: Mostly Brooklyn
Archival Pigment Prints
12 prints; 17x22

© 2014 David Kutz

As presented at VCFA
July 2014

Each print included
the GPS coordinates of
the location.

AFTER NEW TOPOGRAPHICS

Cultural landscape in the science of geography is informed by areal studies and chorology. Art however is not science. Like authors of fiction and poetry and unlike scientists, artists can use their imaginations to express humor, metaphor and irony. With intent or sometimes by accident, artists can present a personal, social and/or a cultural perspective that can motivate the viewer (and the artist) to contemplate, ideally in an affective manner, the world that we live in.

The seventeenth century Dutch landscape painters knew this well. As framed by Ann J. Adams, "Dutch artists imaginatively removed celebrated historic monuments to hillocks safely above the level of the menacing waters. ... It visually gave this population a sense of stability through a fabricated communal history in the land." [55]

In art and in life, 'imagination' plays a huge role, which cannot be more fully addressed in this paper. However, Arjun Appadurai, when considering the social impact of contemporary globalization said,

> ... electronic mediation and mass migration mark the world of the present not as technically new forces but as ones that seem to impel (and sometimes compel) the work of the imagination. Together, they create specific irregularities because both viewers and images are in simultaneous circulation. ... What I suggest is that there has been a shift in recent decades, building on technological changes over the past century or so, in which the imagination has become a collective, social fact. This development, in turn, is the basis of the plurality of imagined worlds.[56]

Photography has always been tied to a 'black box' of technology. And as discussed earlier, photography, in the time of Roland Barthes, was straddled by the contingency of the real. Unlike Dutch painters, photographers could not easily or imaginatively move monuments to safer higher ground!

But now, STEM fields have brought forth a plethora of disrupting tools and technologies, which have profoundly influenced art and how landscapes are represented. Beyond the advances in camera sensor chips and the omnipresence of powerful desktop computers that have democratized all forms of digital production, artists have fractal geometry, data visualization, Geographic Position Systems (GPS), satellite and aerial imaging, micro and macro photography, super computers and advanced software, making it possible to digitally process the land as art.

Chris Burnett, in his essay, *New Topographics Now: Simulated Landscape and Degraded Utopia*, considers the new topographics movement not only as a major

transition in what is socially acceptable content for landscape art, but states that the downplayed (or degraded) utopic views found in the new topographics work became a foundation for the imaginary or simulated landscapes possible with digital picture making technologies. Digitally created landscapes, although imaginary and contrary to photography's reliance on the 'real,' created a discussion about contemporary social concerns - about both cultural landscape and the evolving American social condition. They riff on cultural geography, in a way that is timely and relevant.

The digital revolution has lead to a more openly utopian and idealistic landscape art movement that Burnett called in his essay *New Topographics Now*. The line between what is 'real' and what is imagined is now blurred by computer generated and manipulated imagery which although simulated can induce similar feelings in viewers as landscapes of real places. [57]

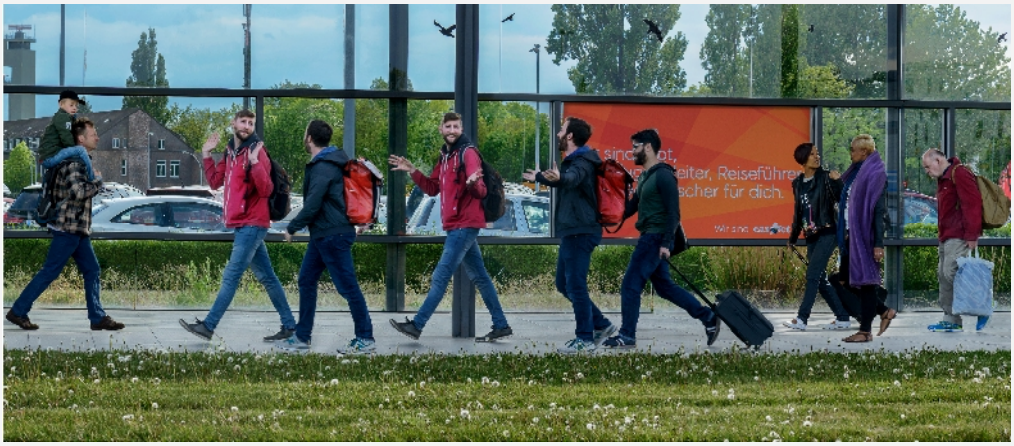
PRAXIS

Midway through my studies at VCFA, in the late summer of 2015, I decided that if I was going to explore the cultural landscape I need to 'go-wide'. I also decided that I wanted to break free of certain formal photographic conventions, principally, the single-moment temporal quality of the photograph, defined by Henri Cartier Bresson as the "decisive moment" [58], the tight compositional control formed by the edge of the frame, and Barthe's idea that photographs are entirely contingent on the reality of the subject.

I addressed these interests by making panoramic pictures using multiple exposures. I have not yet found a way to precisely control the edge of the frame when making a panoramic picture, which also requires multiple exposures over time. It may not be immediately apparent, but some of the formal conventions outlined above are no longer evident in my work.

With an interest in having viewers consider how corporate and public institutions are responding to climate change, some of my earlier panoramic cultural landscapes included diminutive solar panels or coal-fired power plants found in Berlin's inner core.

This work, "The Stranger's Path", reflects on globalization in a different manner by having viewers consider one of the endless and ever repeating non-places we experience when we travel.



Detail from "The Stranger's Path"
Berlin, Germany; 52°23'22.65"N; 13°30'59.01"E
Archival Pigment Print
36 x 256 inches
© 2016 David Kutz

CONCLUSION

How do all of these voices relate and connect to my work as a visual artist?

Photographs, like maps, are generally acknowledged and viewed as presenting some sort of truth about a particular moment in time. As sound artist, Chris DeLaurenti said during a lecture at VCFA in January 2016, "Photographs don't lie, but do tell a different kind of truth." [59]

As a visual artist who works with photographs, I continue to look for that different kind of truth.

The word praxis connotes the process of thinking and doing - of making and theorizing in an iterative path or tracing - a process. As framed by the painter, Edgar Degas, "Make a drawing, begin it again, trace it, begin it again and retrace it". [60] With changes, discoveries, and new understandings, of owning and possessing, of disowning and releasing, with thinking and making - the praxis - will change.

I have learned that making art is an iterative process, not unlike the iterative process of the cultural landscape with nature influencing people and especially now, in the anthropocene, visa versa, with people influencing nature.

Like the landscape photographers of the past, my interest is connected to environmental concerns in our consumer-capitalist and post-industrial globalized world. My curiosity of how people have altered the landscape, presented through my observations, with direct and none obtuse visual connections, can help us consider, even if for only a fleeting moment, what we value by observing what we build and what we allow to decay.

The vernacular, in all of its banality, presents a truth about our cultural position in a particular in-between historic moment. Even if that in-between space is expanded through an expression of time.

> *... photography is timeless yet anchored to a historical date; it mirrors reality but also interprets and judges it; it suffers from artful manipulation and profits from art; it estranges but arouses compassion; it is helped by accident and also by planning; it assaults reality and submits to it.*
>
> Rudolf Arnheim[61]

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