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The Panorama and Vernacular Cultural Landscapes

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Abstract

The preponderance of the great painted panoramas of the 19th-century that were presented to a paying audience portrayed historic battle scenes, great views of important cities or scenes of extraordinary natural beauty. Most contemporary panoramic photography typically does the same by showing dramatic natural scenes. This paper presents how an artist has focused on the everyday, with large scale and highly detailed panoramic photographs which are informed by research in urban design and planning, psychogeography, landscape architecture, map making and the field of geography (human & physical) with a particularly focus on the causal relationships between people and place. In geography, this is framed as ‘chorology’ or the study of ‘cultural landscapes.’ This paper provides a brief review of the research and the trajectory of an artist who makes panoramic vernacular cultural landscape photographs.

Keywords

cultural landscape, panorama, panoramic photograph, vernacular landscape, J.B. Jackson, Carl O. Sauer, landscape

Opening

This paper is derived from an artist’s talk I presented to the International Panoramic Council at their 2017 conference at the Queens Museum in New York City in October 2017.

Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of artist’s talks. One is when the artist presents the trajectory of their work. The second is when the artist wants the audience to understand certain core concepts and ideas — things that might be helpful or enriching for the audience to learn. This paper is a hybrid in that it will show the trajectory of my work that lead up to my panoramic picture making practice. And, it will share some of the academic research that provides an underpinning to this work.

Defining Terms

Beyond considering what other artists and art historians have said about the meaning and function of landscape art, there is value in considering the work of people who have written from the point of view of other disciplines, including urban design and planning, psychogeography, landscape architecture, map making and the field of geography.

The expression, ‘cultural landscape’ — not unlike the word ‘panorama’ is bantered about, and used in many

different disciplines. However, in the field of geography, it has a specific meaning. [1]

Carl O. Sauer was a prominent American professor of geography in the first half of the 20th-century. He is sometimes attributed to having coined the term, ‘cultural landscape’ but he acknowledged that it was first used by the German geographer, Otto Schlüter. Schlüter, was following in the footsteps of the founders of modern geography, Carl Ritter and Alexander von Humboldt when he first used the term Kulturlandschaft [cultural landscape] in 1908. [2] [3]

In Sauer’s 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.” [4] Chorology is the study of the relationships between geographical phenomena and the people who live in a particular place. 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 interactions with the land. Sauer who focused on cultural landscape 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.” [5]

Today, in the Anthropocene, the cultural landscape is an interactive place formed by how human decisions have affected the environment. My work stems from the belief that cultural landscape is hysteretic, an iterative interaction of cause and effect between people and place.

Let us consider the modifier ‘vernacular.’ In linguistics, vernacular is plainly spoken language — the language of ordinary people in everyday use. In architecture, it is a style exemplified by the most common techniques, materials and decorative features. Vernacular architecture is concerned with ordinary and functional buildings rather than the essentially monumental. [6][7]

J.B. Jackson, one of America’s great scholars of human geography, focused his attention on what he called “vernacular landscapes,” or the everyday built environment. Jackson, published a magazine from 1951 to 1968 called *Landscape: Magazine of Human Geography*. [8] This magazine and his writing influenced the conceptual artist Edward Ruscha, the land artist Robert Smithson, the landscape painter Rackstraw Downes, the early 1970s

photographers that formed the New Topographics movement, and my own thinking. [9]

A key takeaway of the New Topographic photographic movement was that it naturalized the vernacular landscape, raising pictures of places found at the edges of highways, industrial zones or pictures of suburban sprawl to be relevant and meaningful subject matter for artists. [10] This was a significant break from the earlier sublime photographic landscape subject matter of people like Carleton E Watkins, Ansel Adams, and Paul Caponigro.

Jackson focused on the vernacular. He thought landscape art preserved and presented in a permanent manner 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. [11]

Presumably, the reader of this paper already knows something about the historic development of the panoramic form and hence this term need not be defined. However, for a painting of the late 18th-century and early 19th-century to be considered a panorama, it had to show a 360-degree vista. The form evolved over time and like some panoramic artists, starting in the mid-19th-century, I have no issues considering pictures that are less than 360 degrees to be panoramic views.

An Artist's Trajectory

Let us now trace the trajectory of how I came to make panoramic cultural landscape photographs.

Florida: *Ridgewood Motor Homes*

In the spring of 2015, I took a family trip to Florida. I don't like Florida very much. It is topographically and, with few exceptions, culturally flat. I was looking at Google maps before I went and found an amazing geometric pattern of concentric circles. It turns out this interesting shape imposed on the landscape is actually the layout for a middle-class trailer park called Ridgewood Motor Homes.



Fig 1. *Google Map*, 2015, Google, Screen Capture

This map, with its circular shape and extending curvilinear road, immediately made me think of the famous work, *The Spiral Jetty*, by the land artist Robert Smithson, who was deeply interested in the study of cultural landscapes.



Fig 2. *Google Satellite View of Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty*, Google, Screen Capture

I took my camera and was startled by how people had taken these factory-made homes — these tube houses — and customized them to reflect their individual personalities. Here was a circumstance where people made their own cultural landscapes. They did not follow the design conventions found in so many gated condominium communities in Florida where every aspect of each building is determined by a co-op board.



Fig 3. *Detail, Ridgewood Motor Homes*, © 2015 David Kutz, photograph, archival pigment print

But I also know that as the sea rises, these people will have invested all of this personal creativity and work making unique homes that will likely end up underwater. The FEMA flood map makes this clear in a state that does not permit the inclusion of the term “Climate Change” in any official documents.

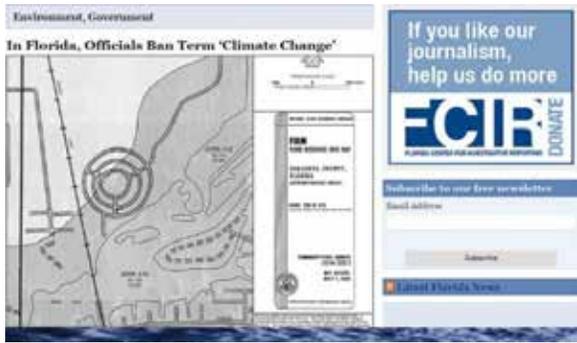


Fig 4. *Detail, Ridgewood Motor Homes*, Composite screen capture; FEMA flood map & FCIR web page, 2015

The photographs and some of the contextual reference points were assembled and presented in a grid.



Fig 5. *Ridgewood Motor Homes*, © 2015 David Kutz, photograph & screen capture, archival pigment print

It should be clear to the viewer that each of these picture is very carefully framed. A fundamental aspect of the photographic process is editing when making. What is included or excluded at the edges of the pictures must be intentional. In this work, the frame is carefully considered. The color and brightness are tightly controlled. This is a style derivative of the New Topographic photographers, but it is also characteristic of an approach to making photographic pictures going back to the earliest days of the medium.

Retro

The first photograph that did not fade in light was an abstracted cultural landscape of a courtyard by Niépce circa 1826. This abstracting of the cultural landscape was a motivation for me to exhibit in December 2016, in a gallery in New York, a series called, *RETRO*. The title clarifies to

the viewer that I understood that I was echoing a style from the past.



Fig 6. *View from the Window at Le Gras*, 1826 or 1827, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, Original captured on 20×25 cm oil-treated bitumen, Public Domain [12]

RETRO presented 27 pictures made between October 2013 and June 2016. These landscape photographs were made in many different locations around the world, and yet they have a commonality in tone, spirit and emotional weight. Like *Ridgewood Motor Homes*, they are very tightly framed and controlled.



Fig 7. *Retro*; Thasos, Greece; 40°41'31" N 24°33'18" E © 2015 David Kutz, photograph, archival pigment print



Fig 8. *Retro; Nukus, Uzbekistan; 42°27'54" N 59°36'46" E*
© 2014 David Kutz, photograph, archival pigment print



Fig 9. *Retro; Berlin, Germany; 52°26'59" N 13°26'59" E*
© 2016 David Kutz, photograph, archival pigment print

As I was making these photographs — so derivative of a long tradition — a couple of things started to happen. One, people began to populate my pictures and two, I felt like I needed to react to the very tightly controlled compositions, and almost minimalist use of color and line. I needed to react to this kind of formal minimalism.



Fig 10. *Retro; Brooklyn, NY USA; 40°40'32" N 73°59'4" W*
© 2015 David Kutz, photograph, archival pigment print

Jersey Electric

While hunting and gather pictures in Newark, New Jersey, I noticed something odd. There were solar panels mounted on electric power poles everywhere. This launched my first panoramic project: *Jersey Electric*.



Fig 11. *A Preliminary Study, Jersey Electric, © 2015 David Kutz,*
photograph, archival pigment print

These pictures pushed the deployment of 174,000 solar panels, which constitutes the world's largest distributed solar electric system back into the vernacular cultural landscape.

It seemed to be appropriate to have the solar panels appear diminutive. They became a visual corollary to their negligible effect on our consumption of fossil fuels.



Fig 12. *Jersey Electric; Camden, NJ; 39°56'10" N 75°6'32" W* ©
2015 David Kutz, photograph, archival pigment print



Fig 13. *Detail, Jersey Electric; Camden, NJ*, © 2015 David Kutz, photograph, archival pigment print

These pictures also include figures. Some repeating, an effect created by taking multiple exposures. These works consider a different marking of time, changing the classic ‘captured moment’ quality of photography. This approach was also a reaction against my earlier more minimalist work. These pictures take on a more maximalist quality. Instead of “less is more,” they are saying “more is more.”



Fig 14. *Jersey Electric; Palisades Park, NJ; 40°51'23" N 73°59'31" W*, © 2015 David Kutz, photograph, archival pigment print



Fig 15. *Detail, Jersey Electric; Palisades Park, NJ*, © 2015 David Kutz, photograph, archival pigment print

Because of the wide angle of view and the process of stitching frames, it became impossible to control the precise

edges of the picture. In the field I simply could not tell exactly where the edge of the final picture would be and in the post-production process, these photographs were cropped. My work became looser, more organic and less controlled. This is a reaction against the more formalistic approach of my earlier work.

This stylistic approach to the vernacular cultural landscape I found very intriguing. I was distancing myself from several photographic conventions while looking at and showing vernacular places over a longer and more contemplative time frame.

Berlin: *Future Obsolescence*

While in Berlin last year I made a series titled *Future Obsolescence*.

As you may know, Germany is a world leader in the deployment of renewable energy systems, but Berlin is surrounded by a string of six coal-fired electric plants. This may seem ironic; however, I am confident that Germany will eventually find a way to make these plants obsolete.

Further, it was fascinating to see how these six power plants are located in the fabric of Berlin’s vernacular cultural landscape.



Fig 16. *Future Obsolescence; Heizkraftwerk Lichterfelde; 52°25'21" N 13°18'44" E*, Berlin, Germany, © 2016 David Kutz, photograph, archival pigment print



Fig 17. *Detail, Future Obsolescence; Heizkraftwerk Lichterfelde*, © 2016 David Kutz, photograph, archival pigment print

Berlin: *The Stranger’s Path*

While in Berlin, I was considering what the French anthropologist, Marc Augé called “non-places.” These are super-modern places that are typically transience spaces that do not hold enough memory to be regarded as “places.”

Augé said, “If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.” [13] And further, “Perhaps today’s artists and writers are doomed to seek beauty in ‘non-places’, to discover it by resisting the apparent obviousness of current events. They may do this by highlighting the enigmatic character of objects, of things disconnected from any exegesis or practical use.” [14]

Airports, hotel lobbies and the edges of highways are what Augé considered non-places and these everyday vernacular places aligned with certain ideas from J.B. Jackson. He said about the American highway, “Fleeting beauty, then, and occasional usefulness; how much more can be said of many other of our products? When high-minded groups vie with each other in bitter condemnation of the highway developments, devising legal and moral means of destroying them, those two glimpses come to mind. Would it not be better ... to see if the potentialities of these road-side slums cannot somehow be realized for the greater profit and pleasure of all”. [15]

In 1956, Jackson wrote an essay, called *The Stranger’s Path*. In it he describes the circumstances that a stranger would experience when traveling to any mid-size American city. The architecture, the urban design, and the feeling of these transit points would be the same, irrespective of which city the traveler arrived in. The kinds of business and activity that surround bus stations are similar *everywhere*. They are typically ringed by fast, cheap restaurants, bars, tourist shops and bordellos.

As the traveler moves further away from the bus station, there are more commonalities of experience. There are the financial/business sections which have little street traffic at night or on weekends and the places on ‘the other side of the tracks’ that have industrial zones and/or communities of poor people.

These ideas; Augé’s non-places and Jackson’s thoughts on the commonality of the experiences people have in certain vernacular places inspired the making of the *The Stranger’s Path*, named in honor of J.B. Jackson’s essay. It documents the walkway, also known as the “tunnel”, at Berlin’s Schönefeld Airport.



Fig 18. *The Stranger’s Path*, Schönefeld Airport; Berlin, Germany, 52°23’22.65”N; 13°30’59.01”E, © 2016 David Kutz, photograph, archival pigment print



Fig 19. *Detail, The Stranger’s Path*, © 2016 David Kutz, photograph, archival pigment print

Brooklyn: *The Palisades*

In the fall of 2016, in my home town of Brooklyn, I made *The Palisades*. This again is a kind of non-place in that it is a view of just another urban park, with people doing what people do around the world in urban parks.



Fig 20. *The Palisades*, Brooklyn, New York; 40°41’55” N 73°59’52” W, © 2016 David Kutz, photograph, archival pigment print



Fig 21. *Detail, The Palisades*, © 2016 David Kutz, photograph, archival pigment print

This picture also reminds the viewer of the original natural landscape with its layered geology. One can observe how the original cliff side or palisade has been changed into a cultural landscape due to the consequentially impact of

human construction. This is an impressive representation of Sauer's chorology.

Truck || Stop

Starting in the spring of 2017, I've been working on a series of landscape photographs of truck stops and other places that engage truck drivers. At this juncture, as a series-in-progress, I cannot fully explain the underpinnings of this new body of work.



Fig 22. *Truck || Stop*, a series in progress, Mid-Atlantic Truck Show, Louisville, KY, 38°12'10.85" N 85°44'27.63" W, © 2017 David Kutz, photograph, digital file, 45556 x 10738 pixels

Closing

There are a number of aesthetic issues related to making large panoramic photographs.

Making panoramic landscapes freed me from a formalistic desire to tightly control the edge of the photographic frame. The in-the-field editing process that every photographer must consider became looser and less constricting. It allowed me to see and show a much wider view of my subjects — expanding the visual context beyond the work characterized by the New Topographical photographers and others.

With the multiple figures, these pictures also consider a different way of marking the passage of time and how we remember and identify ourselves in a place.

I do not see this work as being visually arresting or impressive. The pictures do not rely on dramatic lighting, but rather they are maximized, as opposed to minimalistic, and rely on the viewer working harder to see and understand our everyday world to consider what we have built as an everyday cultural landscape. They are both technically and conceptually layered.

My research into trying to understand the meaning and language of landscape art continues. As W J. T Mitchell, said, "Landscape [art] is a medium in the fullest sense of the word. It is a material 'means' (to borrow Aristotle's terminology) like language or paint, embedded in a tradition of cultural signification and communication, a body of symbolic forms capable of being invoked and reshaped to express meanings and values." [16]

Finally, what is the importance or value of an artist doing this kind of research? For me it is an underpinning and a rationalization not to make pictures of the great ruins in

Europe, the amazing natural beauty of the new world or to take photographs of important cultural landmarks. This permission slip to break photographic traditions allows me to focus my picture making work on the vernacular as a way of showing that by looking closely, these landscapes will speak softly, but clearly about who we are and what we value.

Notes

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Author Biography

After receiving a Bachelor of Fine Art from Rochester Institute of Technology, David Kutz moved to New York City and became the eleventh employee at the International Center of Photography. During his two years at ICP he hung exhibitions, participated in master class workshops, and taught photography.

David worked as a photojournalist from 1976 to 1980, with assignments from the New York Times, Life, Look, and Time magazines.

For the next three decades David worked in film and television as a director, producer, and media executive. He created the award-winning documentary, *The African Burial Ground: An American Discovery* (1994) and was a senior executive directing the worldwide launch of *VOOM-HD*.

In 2013, David returned to photography as an art form, and earned an MFA from the Vermont College of Fine Arts in 2016.

David is now actively engaged in making work and continuing his research into geography, urban planning, travel and globalization.