

US Topographics: Imaging National Landscapes

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In 1975, the exhibition “New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape,” organised by William Jenkins, at George Eastman House, changed the scope and aesthetics of American landscape photography. Ostensibly pared-back and banal, these black-and-white images formally presented the United States as a series of streets, suburban new builds, industrial sites and warehouses. None bigger than 11x4 or 13x13 inches, the photographs were also small and unassuming, refusing the grandness and potential sublimity of previous evocations of the US landscape. Rather than present the United States as a series of locations marked by regional and economic differences, photographers such as Robert Adams, Frank Gohlke, Lewis Baltz and Bernd and Hilla Becher now focused on an increasing homogeneity across terrains, terrains often indeterminable in terms of actual locations, and more often than not, eerily devoid of human presence. In Neil Campbell’s words, the images were “unemotional, flat and appeared everyday, aspiring to ‘neutrality’ with a ‘disembodied eye.’”¹ The “New Topographics”—according to such readings—differed from earlier depictions of the United States, moving away from the documentary focus on agrarian poverty and urban slums as seen during the Depression, as well as the humanist vision of post-war photographers such as Robert Frank. As William Jenkins put it in the original introduction to the exhibition, “New Topographics” was a study more “anthropological than critical”, one that would re-centre everyday lived experience—not as a collection of individualised narratives—but as a cultural landscape marked by commercial interests above all.²

¹ Neil Campbell, *The Cultures of the American New West* (Chicago and London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000), 71.

² William Jenkins, “Introduction” in *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* (Rochester: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975), n.p.

The visual representation of the United States presented in “New Topographics” nearly half a century ago is both interrogated and extended in this special issue, which we have entitled “US Topographics.” While the novelty of the 1975 exhibition owed itself to the departure from a focus on the panorama, the vista, the imposing drama of forests, mountains and deserts, “US Topographics” takes as its cue the exhibition’s focus on “inhabited nature, suburban growth, and interactive landscapes.”³ As such, while the “New Topographics” exhibition both responded to the aestheticising drive of much US landscape photography in the twentieth century and sought to interrogate it, it also responded to a perceived documentary tradition of the pre-war era, one in which political critique was emphatically linked to documenting the displacement and temporary habitations of so many Americans. Contrary to this, as Jenkins noted in the original exhibition catalogue for the “New Topographics”, the time had now come for “images reduced to an essentially typographic state, conveying substantial amounts of visual information, but eschewing … beauty, emotion, opinion.”⁴ Using many of the tropes of serialisation and abstraction, together with pop art’s embrace of signage and advertising, the “New Topographics” took the tools of nineteenth century photography, the gravitas of survey and expeditionary photography and combined them with the ideals and aspirations of a burgeoning art scene in the 1960s and 70s. By eliminating “beauty, emotion, and opinion” the parking lots, gas stations, billboards, and endless rows of suburban houses and vacant freeways exhibited were now ostensibly infused with a minimalism in which the avoidance of *apparent* aesthetic or sentimental value prevailed.

In historical terms, the idea of a photographic form of realism able to escape simple aestheticism was of course nothing new. In fact, “New Topographics” not only entered into dialogue with nineteenth-century photographers of the American Civil War such as Matthew

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Brady, Timothy O’Sullivan and Alexander Gardner, they also shared an interest in cataloguing and documenting the landscape for the nation at large. William L. Fox argues that O’Sullivan’s landscape photographs have “no pretense to being pretty or romantic”—a lingering effect, perhaps, of his Civil War images—and instead are made “with an eye fixed firmly on the underlying forces and structures of the region,” that is, its geology and geography.⁵ In other words, Fox gestures to the way that O’Sullivan’s photographic practice has one foot in the door of documentary image-making and one foot in the door of scientific surveyance. The “New Topographics”, in its emphasis on the human impact on so-called “natural” landscapes, not only shares much with O’Sullivan’s dispassionate and “objective” gaze, but it continues and complicates a much longer trajectory of American image-making in which the “man-altered” aspect of topographic practice is paramount.

Since the 1970s, writing on the “New Topographics” exhibition has begun to examine how the “man-altered” aspect of the original exhibition was less a prescription for a new school of photography and more a benchmark for how to regenerate various visual representations. Despite the profound shift of the “New Topographics”, away from a romanticised view of the landscape, Ayelet Carmi argues that the show

did not challenge the patriarchal assumptions and the intra-geographical hierarchy embedded in the canon. [...] Hilla Becher was the only woman whose work was included in the show. Their Western landscapes were coded masculine [...], and the connections and lineages between the New Topographics and early Western practitioners such as O’Sullivan were emphasised. As a result, this exhibition unintentionally strengthened the androcentric character of the American landscape

⁵ William L. Fox, *View Finder: Mark Klett, Photography and the Reinvention of Landscape* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 43, 44.

photography canon, and the mythology of the West as representative of American national identity.⁶

As such, even in its radicalism, the “New Topographics” exhibition was still locked into both patriarchal and nationalistic modes of representation, modes that have been documented amongst other places in Greg Foster-Rice and John Rhorbach’s and Frank Goehlke’s edited *Reframing the New Topographics* (2011). One of very few dedicated responses to the 1975 exhibition, this collection of essays examines the social and political contexts of landscape representation and its continuing influence on both photography and environmentalism. However, while *Reframing the New Topographics* examines the impact of the aesthetic innovations that came out of the original show, from an increased focus on aerial mapping to serial imaging and architectural form, the absence of the human form—or rather—the issue of what agency the human form might have within the wider landscape, is relatively under-explored.

One aim of this special issue is thus to foreground a more diverse range of artists and photographers who think more critically and expansively about the US landscape and its histories from the perspective of its inhabitants. From Carrie Mae Weems and Claudia Rankine to Sally Mann, Ed Ruscha and Nina Berman among others, this issue attends to a wider array of practitioners for whom the artistic interplay between form, landscape and the actual people shown in the photographs are crucial markers for a specifically American form of topographics. Whilst the photographers examined here share the unwillingness of the “original” topographic photographers to be grouped together as an actual school or movement, they differ in other respects. First and foremost, by not eschewing the potential “beauty, emotion and opinion” of

⁶ Ayelet Carmi, “Sally Mann’s American Vision of the Land,” *Journal of Art Historiography* No 17 (Dec 2017), 17

the landscapes before them, they enable a perspective that combines the documentary impetus and aestheticising gaze with a more direct form of political engagement. In this sense, the photographers investigated here should not be seen as a cohesive response to the original “New Topographics”. They may be—as this issue shows—responding to the dispassionate eye of the original “New Topographics” but in so doing they incorporate different forms of politics, different ways of seeing. If anything, the photographers investigated here share a productive self-consciousness regarding the politics of photography as always potentially emotional, always subjective.

“US Topographics: Imaging National Landscapes” is a special issue that grew out of a one-day conference at Goldsmiths, University of London in 2016. That event, containing numerous papers that explored the manifold ways that the US landscape has been depicted and mediated, led to the organisation of this publication. (Not all of the papers given that day feature here and not all of the articles here were presented that day; the issue grew out of the event’s larger questions and concerns). We intend this issue to bring visual studies into dialogue with literary studies, cultural studies and American Studies more broadly by extending the conversation beyond another “reframing” of “New Topographics” and into a more detailed consideration of what topography might mean in the context of US politics today. Ranging from the mid-twentieth to the twenty-first century, the contributors also aim to investigate the continuities and dissonances between the “Topographics” and other forms of American landscape photography. Recalling the visual potential of those practitioners, this special issue returns to what was *not* in the original show; namely the presence of marginalised figures within the landscapes documented. Whether racialised, gendered, queered and/or aestheticized in terms of their position as witnesses to the seismic changes that continue to occur to our “man-altered” landscapes, the works here are intent on moving away from the dispassionate eye of the original New Topographers.

The following six articles consider the role image-making plays in constructing national identity and whether the genre of landscape photography is exhausted and so familiar that it provides a predominantly comforting, rather than critical, look at the United States. Rod Giblett in *Photography and Landscape* (2012) argues that landscape photography is “one of the major ways in which modern, technologically savvy people relate to the land and the land is mediated to them,”⁷ and we want to extend this thought into American work specifically. Each article reflects on the mediation of landscapes—rural, urban, literary, aesthetic, ruined, militarised, racialised, gendered, and so on—to make sense of *imaging* as a national practice and pastime. While Nina Berman’s images of everyday “all-American” settings seem to harken back to a more straightforward documentary aesthetic, the sequencing of and inclusion of text in her work fundamentally alters the topography of the landscape as well. More than anything else, the inclusion of textual devices, such as the historical data in Misrach’s and Orff’s environmentally critical collaboration, the storytelling in Sally Mann’s photo-textual memoir, or the “fictional” narrations in Nina Berman’s *Homeland*, attest to a more complex awareness of the meta-textual aspects of photography itself than the original exhibition. Following in the footsteps of Ed Ruscha’s pioneering photographs of parking lots, these are also practitioners who are hyper-aware of the inter-medial, inter disciplinary potential of their projects both in terms of how they respond to previous work and signal the possibility of future ones.

Put another way, “US Topographics”—in this context—becomes those aesthetic means by which various landscapes are both shaped and depicted. A topography is both the literal place and its depiction (or description), and topographics are those formalised means by which the literal and figurative play out in the cultural realm. That is, if a topography could be the map *and* the territory, topographics—particularly US topographics—are photographic and

⁷ Rod Giblett and Juha Tolonen, *Photography and Landscape* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2012), 15.

artistic methods of capturing that duality. As theoretical and aesthetic modes, US topographics point to the entangling of landscape and its *a priori* mediation. This special issue does not seek to offer a fully comprehensive or exhaustive account of US topographics of landscape photography, but rather points to a variety of particular artists' work (and their contexts) to think through how a national topographics might be theorized and understood. Moreover, while the title “US topographics” might point merely to a national context, the individual articles here gesture consistently to particular US landscapes, especially at the local and regional level. From Louisiana to Los Angeles parking lots, the photographic projects explored delineate certain places with detail. This is not to say that the works do not have national, international, or even planetary co-ordinates, but that the particular textures and nuance of certain places in the United States are of interest. Regardless of what particular region forms the backdrop or starting point, these photographers are thus committed to the re-exploration of various spaces and landscape more widely as a staging area for experimentation as well.

For Sally Mann, the compression and expansion of vision becomes a way to re-focus on things potentially forgotten and neglected, whilst for Paul Graham re-focusing becomes a way to remind viewers of those citizens on the periphery of American society often seen, but not necessarily noticed. For both Rankine and Graham – for instance – the difference between visible urbanization and suburban life allows certain narratives to be set up; narratives in which the mundane or the habitual can be disrupted and in some cases, retold from a genuinely subversive perspective. And for Weems, re-focusing histories of race and nation enables her to establish anticolonial and antiracist visions, rooted in physical and artistic landscapes. Again, if the “original” new topographers appeared to deliberately employ a detached eye, one capable of avoiding longstanding landscape paradigms of the picturesque, the pastoral, and the sublime, several of the photographers here embrace these paradigms as a noticeable part of a new aesthetic as well as a new politics.

Moreover, to frame this issue in another political (politicised) way, we should note that in an era when climate change is accelerating and ever in-view, images of landscape dominate our television, cinema, and phone screens. Yet, American artists are investing (as much as ever) in the ways that the landscape can be conjured, shaped, mediated, enhanced or obliterated by the camera lens. Carmi argues, glossing Deborah Bright, that “the timing of … [the New Topographics exhibition] close to the founding of Earth Day and the burgeoning environmental movement, gave it an almost self-evident context and set of political meanings: critiquing the erosion of the landscape by industrial and urban development.”⁸ In similar ways, this issue will argue that the erosion of our landscape is both physical and more insidious in the way that it marginalises people. Since his first days in office, Donald Trump has steadily and systematically opened up federal lands to the energy industry. In 2016, Barack Obama created the Bears Ears National Monument in Utah, and by December 2017 Trump had reduced that territory by 85%. While some locals may have welcomed the move, the removal of federal protection of US land by the Trump administration is just one example of how his presidency at large has indicated its lack of concern for national landscapes and the planet at large. While only one article in this issue thinks closely about energy and extraction in the United States, the precarious ecologies and environments in the contemporary moment haunt the project of “US topographics.” In other words, while climate change is not explicitly discussed in the majority of the articles, the sense of an eroding national landscape—in all senses—is visible.

As this issue came together, more and more connections and overlaps emerged between the articles. While Ed Ruscha, Paul Graham, Carrie Mae Weems, Claudia Rankine, Nina Berman, Sally Mann, Richard Misrach and Kate Orff seem like a very discrete and disconnected range of practitioners (writers, artists, photographers, architects), the following six articles speak to one another about what it means to depict and imagine a whole range of

⁸ Carmi, 15.

US landscapes: physical, geographical, emotional, historical, ecological, industrial, and so on. There are recurring tropes of roads, crossings, pathways, and routes; there is consistent engagement with race, gender, sexuality and other intersectional identities; there are repeated configurations of what history and memory mean for the nation; and there are urban and rural landscapes, and those in-between the binary, from the east coast to the west. We hope that this issue will bring renewed attention to the “New Topographics” as well as that exhibition’s legacies in visual practice. But we also intend “US Topographics: Imagining National Landscapes” to energise conversations in American Studies around the methods of depicting and mediating US topographies today and on into the future.

To show the breath of work in this issue, we outline the articles contained therein. Sarah Garland’s “Picturing Distance: Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles Photobooks” reads Ruscha’s photobooks from the 1960s, including *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1962) and *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967), through the lens of “distance.” Arguing that these works resist affect, utilise abstraction and flatness, as well as engaging with point of view, Garland suggests the need to look beyond an aesthetics of “neutrality,” a term that overlaps clearly with the “New Topographics.” The *distance* in Ruscha’s work allows viewers to see its southern Californian landscapes in radically new ways. Paying close attention to the form and layout of both the images and the photobooks, Garland’s article closely reads aesthetics within a wider cultural and historical context.

Similarly focusing on some California (and New York) landscapes, Nicoló Giudice’s article “Paul Graham’s *American Night* and the Politics of Exposure” examines Graham’s 2003 photobook for the way it both depicts and shapes the American city. Following the book’s structure, moving from bleached-out images of roadsides (with barely discernible African American subjects) intercut with saturated pictures of suburban homes, to darker inner-city images, featuring close-ups of African Americans, Giudice thinks about Graham’s optical and

ethical strategy of “exposure.” By utilising visual techniques of exposure—what is seen, what is ignored, what stays in focus, what does not—Graham is shown to expose and illuminate the deep structural inequalities in the United States. Reading topographically, formally and phenomenologically, this article helps to reframe how landscape photography is as politically attuned as it is geographically.

Also using phenomenological criticism, among other critical frameworks, Catherine Gander’s ‘Black and White Landscapes: Topographies of Disorientation in the Works of Carrie Mae Weems and Claudia Rankine’ discusses the practice of these two black women artists in relation to “anticolonial topographics.” Deploying various meanings of topography—geographical and anatomical—Gander argues that Weems’s photography and Rankine’s utilisation of the photo-text are ultimately interested in disorientation and discomfort. Challenging white power, imbued in US landscapes (and US landscape artistic traditions), Weems and Rankine unpack racialised modes of looking and seeing. Reading these artists in tandem with one another enables Gander to theorise new ways of approaching the American past and present as it is figured through various kinds of landscapes.

Attentive also to the imbrication of race and modes of visuality, Christopher W. Clark’s ‘Re-Imagining the American Landscape: Queer Topographics in Nina Berman’s *Homeland*’ reads Berman’s 2008 book for the ways in which it (re)mediates the cultural memories of 9/11 and the War on Terror in the United States. Closely analysing Berman’s photographs—often rooted in “everyday” US spaces such as schools and churches and stadiums—alongside the “essays” that interrupt the images, Clark tracks “queer topographics”: those visual and textual modes of resistance to a heteronormativity and nationalism that flourished after the 9/11 attacks. By disturbing normativity—revealing the queerness inherent in a multitude of spaces and locations across the United States—Berman’s *Homeland* enables viewers to actively reflect on how the nation’s landscapes are depicted and constructed.

Likewise concerned with cultural memory, Christopher Lloyd's "Photo-Text Topographies: Memory and Place in Sally Mann's *Hold Still*" examines the ways in which Mann's 2015 memoir mediates and shapes various physical, memorative and aesthetic landscapes through its interplay of image and text. Focusing particularly on how Mann presents her family's story within a larger context of the US South, Lloyd thinks through the potential and problematics of the memoir's entangling of place and memory. Deploying the term "photo-text topographics," Lloyd considers how Mann invests (and/or reveals) affect in the various landscapes that she encounters in her book. Focusing largely on the figure of Gee-Gee, the Mann family's black maid, Mann—and this article—trace how the legacies of racism and slavery are embedded in various southern spaces.

Finally, in related southern locales (but with quite a different focus), Caroline Blinder's article, "Richard Misrach and Kate Orff's *Petrochemical America: Cartographies of the Picturesque*" examines Misrach's and Orff's critique of the oil industry in the context of a variety of aesthetic devices from previous centuries and traditions, in particular the use of the picturesque. Through this, and other mechanisms, the images in *Petrochemical America* become potential allegories for the paradoxical co-existence of a picturesque nature visibly affected by industrial transformation. Even though much of Misrach's work reflects the ravages and consequences of a post-industrial landscape on sites left void of human habitation and life, *Petrochemical America* also offers various solutions for a more ecologically ethical future. This paradox is reinforced in remarkable ways by Orff's use of maps, surveys, drawings and statistics to create a visual topography of America. For both Misrach and Orff, *Petrochemical America* reflects a romantic impulse towards a template, in which a palimpsest of materials, both beautiful and horrifying, come together.

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