

Neutralized Landscapes and Critical Spaces:
An Analysis of Contemporary Landscape Photography and
Environmentalism in the Art Museum

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by

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Abstract

Critically situating my thesis within the discourse of photographic history, I maintain that landscape photography presents an ideological way of seeing, based on cultural and social values, and that its location in the museum directly influences the interpretation of the work. My study includes an analysis of two exhibitions of landscape photography that took very different approaches. The first, *New Topographics: Photographs of a 'Man-Altered' Landscape* (1975), helped to naturalize the interpretation of landscape photography as stylistically neutral and aesthetically modernist. The more recent exhibition, *Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate* (2005-ongoing), presents landscape photographs as social critique. Lastly, I look to the work of photographer Edward Burtynsky to demonstrate, through analysis of his images and surrounding discourse, that landscape photography is made up of a complex layering of culturally-derived meanings that are too easily simplified by the presentation of images as solely aesthetic or documentary.

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© Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto

I am an estuary in the sea.
I am a wave of the ocean.
I am the sound of the sea.
I am a powerful ox.
I am a hawk on a cliff.
I am a dewdrop in the sun.
I am a plant of beauty.
I am a boar for valour.
I am a salmon in a pool.
I am a lake in a plain.
I am the strength of art.

— Song of Amhairghin

... ecology is arguably the most promising matrix through which to posit a history of landscape ideology for our time.

— Robin Kelsey, “Landscape as Not Belonging” in
Landscape Theory

Introduction

The presentation and interpretation of contemporary landscape photography in the art museum has been influenced by the institutional discourses of photographic history, which have promoted the photograph as both an art object and a document of truth, as well as by the dominant culture of the modern museum. By looking at exhibition practice, from the seminal exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a 'Man-Altered' Landscape* (1975) to the current *Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the*

Environmental Debate (2005), focusing in particular on the photography of Edward Burtynsky, this thesis investigates how the “man-altered” landscape has been positioned in the art museum as an aesthetically neutral document, influenced by the ideology of modernism and the historical understanding of photographic truth.

The understanding of photography as an inherently modernist medium was promoted by photographic curators and historians such as Beaumont Newhall and John Szarkowski, who were instrumental in establishing the photograph in the modern art museum. This type of modernism emphasizes a photograph's formal characteristics over its content, and strongly influenced the reading of photography as aesthetically and stylistically neutral. Photographic neutrality, influenced by the writings of high modernist curators and art theorists, proposes that an image captures what is already there in front of it, unaffected by the subjectivity of its author and is directly aligned with the values of modernist formalism.

The photographers in *New Topographics* attempted to emulate the style of photographic neutrality through the artistic language of modernist formalism, and helped to institutionalize a certain way of seeing the landscape. Yet the landscapes depicted in *New Topographics* were anything but neutral, presenting the “man-altered landscape” as a critique of the concept of nature as pristine, isolated from human action on the landscape.

In the current exhibition *Imaging a Shattering Earth*, modernism continues to influence the aesthetics and discourse of contemporary landscapes and their presentation through the style of photographic neutrality. In an attempt to represent environmentalism visually, *Imaging a Shattering Earth's* curator Claude Baillargeon presents landscape

photography as a form of social activism, and gives the images the importance of photographic truth, while ignoring the formal aesthetic influences that are integral to their reading.

In the work of photographer Edward Burtynsky, as exhibited in *Imaging a Shattering Earth*, the role of art and photographic discourse are fundamental to the understanding of his work, which straddles the divide between art and document. In his recent *China* series, represented in *Imaging a Shattering Earth*, Burtynsky displays his knowledge of and proficiency in formalist photographic neutrality. Through a close reading of his images, his words, and scholarly writing on his work, I establish the continuing importance of photographic history on the representation of landscape and the ambivalence towards social criticism, both in the art museum and in the practice of contemporary landscape photography.

Defining Landscape

The exhibitions and photographers discussed in this thesis share an interest in landscapes that challenge the divide between culture and nature, development and wilderness, aesthetics and environment. A definition of landscape, as it is used here, will give a crucial foundation for my investigation. There is another and extensive discourse on landscape outside of art history—however—a thorough discussion of this body of work is beyond the scope of this thesis. Landscape has traditionally been understood to be the representation, primarily through painting, of the natural world. More recent scholarship

has opened up the concept of landscape to include not only the physical but also the ideological “way of seeing” the land, as was first theorized by Denis Cosgrove in his 1984 book *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, reprinted in short form in the recent collection *Landscape Theory*.¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, in his influential essay “Imperial Landscape,” demonstrates the ways in which landscape has been used to naturalize social, cultural, and political values through its widespread understanding as a 'truthful' representation of a place or space. Challenging the notion that landscape art is neutral and quantifiable, Mitchell conceives of landscape not as a subject or genre but as a dynamic medium on its own, shaped by us and our viewing.² At the same time, Mitchell roots the understanding of landscape in the imperialism of European culture. Mitchell sees the contemporary domination of global resources for the purpose of progress as part of this continuing imperial conquest. Others, including the philosopher Arnold Berleant, in his book *Living in the Landscape: Towards an Aesthetic of Environment*, have proposed a definition of landscape based on the interrelatedness of environment and human culture, not as something outside of ourselves but as part of the human experience. Berleant calls for the appreciation of environment to be reconsidered from within its social, cultural, and political position.³

¹ Denis E. Cosgrove, “Introduction to Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape,” in *Landscape Theory*, ed. Rachael Ziady DeLue and James Elkins, Art seminar (New York: Routledge, 2008), 20.

² W.J.T. Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape,” in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 14-15.

³ Arnold Berleant, *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 24.

Changing Views of Photography

The historical understanding of landscape photography has been influenced by the notion of scientific progress inherent in photography's development. This technological innovation brought to viewers a new understanding of visual culture, which Martin Jay has termed "the democratization of visual experience,"⁴ and a new consciousness of the environment. During the early years of its development, photography was positioned and understood both as a method of truthful documentation and as a technological innovation, reflecting a generally held optimistic belief in progress and industrial development in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Photography was seen as the ultimate objective recorder, useful in documenting the smallest forms of nature, bacteria, to the largest undiscovered regions of the earth. From the classification of fossils to the classification of human 'types', photography was widely embraced for its mechanical representation of life.

In the nineteenth century, photography was used to document the greater world through forays into the wilderness and the frontier. Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan, in the introduction to their collection *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination*, write that "the advent of photography opened up new worlds to nineteenth-century viewers, enabling them to visualize—with unprecedented accuracy and ease—themselves, their families, their immediate surroundings, their wider communities and the world beyond their doorstep."⁵ The landscape photograph became an important form of

⁴ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 122.

⁵ Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan, "Introduction: Photography and the Geographical Imagination," in *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 5.

documentation in ordering the unknown and dominating the 'unclaimed' wilderness. Representations of landscape can be traced throughout history, influenced both by aesthetics and ideological considerations. The landscape photograph, as a result of its 'truth-to-nature' quality, has come to epitomize the conflicting views of landscape: between seeing landscape as a replica of specific time and place or as an image of an ideological state.

Photography Theory

When museums and art galleries first began collecting photographs seriously in the 1910's, the emphasis was primarily on the Pictorialist style, which effectively translated key motifs and styles from contemporary fine art painting into photographic form. Influenced by Romanticism and notions of artistic genius, curators and artists sought to define art photography in opposition to the realism of the mechanical instrument.⁶ Documentary photography coexisted with this work as a parallel practice that did not make claims to the status of art; documentary practice ranged widely from family portraits to anthropological documents to journalistic evidence. This social aspect of photography embraced the notion of indexicality or photographic truth, and was seen as opposing the photograph as 'art for art's sake'.

Much of our understanding of photography, either as an art form or recorder of

⁶ Douglas R. Nickel, "History of Photography: The State of Research," *The Art Bulletin* 83, no. 3 (September 2001): 549.

history, has been shaped by the discourse surrounding its representation of reality: its indexicality. The photograph is commonly understood to be an index, just as a footprint in the sand is said to represent the original object so does photography. Indexicality, as established in Charles Sanders Peirce's theories of semiotics and taken up by scholars such as Rosalind Krauss, reflects the status of the photograph as a direct representation of the original object. The concept of indexicality has fallen in and out of favour with photography scholars. As most recently debated in The Art Seminar volume *Photography Theory*, some scholars find fault with the literal reading of Peirce's theories,⁷ and others with its generalization of all photography.⁸ Yet there is no question that the referential ability of photography has deeply influenced the discourse of photography.

Theorist and photographer Allan Sekula has argued that the concept of photographic truth is a myth based on the idea that a photograph is an unmediated copy of the 'real' world.⁹ This myth, which operates within our culture as an ever present undercurrent of meaning, disguises the real behaviour of the photograph—its ability to convince and naturalize—which makes the reality effect so pronounced. Sekula sees the photograph as culturally contrived, reflecting both the values of realism, specifically those of social concern and reform through the so-called objective reporting of a situation, and the rhetoric of art.¹⁰ Scholar Abigail Solomon-Godeau has referred to this debate as the 'problem of realism', which is at the foundation of photography's persuasive character.¹¹

⁷ James Elkins, "The Art Seminar," *Photography Theory*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 131.

⁸ Joel Snyder, "Pointless" in *Photography Theory*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 369.

⁹ Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," in *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*, ed. Vicki Goldberg (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 454.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 472.

¹¹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Who is Speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography,"

This so-called problem asks us how a photograph, which seems to represent the facts, the incontestable evidence of the world around us, can also function as something constructed from the mind, as art.

Photography in the Museum

As photography has become more and more part of the discourse of art, the meaning of landscape photography has been shaped as much by the institutional emphasis of art galleries, museums, and curators as by the photographs themselves. In her influential essay "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View," Rosalind Krauss discusses the historical role of nineteenth-century photographers, such as Timothy O'Sullivan, who created landscape views for scientific and state purposes: geographical surveys of the newly subdued American West. Repositioned in the twentieth century by modern curators and art institutions, most importantly the Museum of Modern Art, O'Sullivan's photographs have been—according to Krauss—stripped of their original meaning and instead framed by the discourse of art. Krauss writes that, "Matted, framed, labelled, these images now enter the space of historical reconstruction through the museum."¹² Krauss argues that meaning is to be found in the intention of the work, an exploratory project for the U.S. Geological survey in the 1860's and 1870's, not in the

in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, institutions, and Practices*, Media & society (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 170.

¹² Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View," *Art Journal* 42, no.4 (Winter 1982): 313.

aesthetic interpretation of the work by art museums and curators.¹³ Influenced by the 'discovery' of the nineteenth-century photographer Timothy O'Sullivan by the Museum of Modern Art, modern curators re-interpreted early landscape photography as aesthetically neutral; the style of early landscape photography was seen as proto-modern. Robin Kelsey, in his essay "Viewing the Archive: Timothy O'Sullivan's Photographs for the Wheeler Survey, 187-74," argues that, while Krauss and others have rightly pointed out the visual biases of the modernists, we must consider both the context in which they were produced as well as the aesthetic choices of the photographer to fully understand O'Sullivan's photographs.¹⁴ The appropriation of early landscape photography within the aesthetic history of photography has been influential in more ways than one. Placing these early photographs into the discourse of art not only shaped the public's understanding of the visual culture of this period, but also greatly influenced a new generation of photographers steeped in the values of the modern museum.

The interpretation of landscape photography has changed since its inception, enlarged by the evolving discourses of photography, art, and the understanding of what constitutes landscape. The original landscape photographs of expansionism and scientific conquest have been influenced by the study of photography as art, reinterpreted by the museum, and have concurrently influenced the production of later landscape photographs through their aesthetic and ideological interpretations. This thesis seeks to demonstrate the role of the art museum in creating a specific way of seeing and interpreting landscape

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Robin E. Kelsey, "Viewing the Archive: Timothy O'Sullivan's Photographs for the Wheeler Survey, 1871-74," *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 4 (December 2003): 702.

photography, influenced by the values of the modern period and the institutional confines of the art museum.

Literature Review of Landscape Photography

There has been no broad overview of contemporary landscape photography in the art museum, but several important critical essays have explored the influence of institutional discourse on landscape photographs. In particular, Deborah Bright's essays, "Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography" and "The Machine in the Garden Revisited: American Environmentalism and Photographic Aesthetics,"¹⁵ investigate how modern art discourse and the art institution have promoted a 'neutral' reading that has deeply influenced the representation of landscape. Bright's analysis sheds light on the aesthetics of landscape photography and the cultural, social, and political role of photography from within the museum. Her brief analysis of the place of environmentalism in the museum pointed to the need for further study.

For insight into the reception of the exhibition, *New Topographics*, Deborah Bright's analysis of its social and political interpretations informed my research. Kelly Dennis' essay "Landscape and the West: Irony and Critique in New Topographic Photography," was useful in understanding the impact of this exhibition within photographic history and

¹⁵ A title inspired by the seminal book *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, written by Leo Marx, in which Marx first explored the relationship of nature and technology in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century American culture which became the basis for the environmentalist movement of the contemporary period.

the art of the 1970's. Dennis' alternative understanding of the critique of these images, rooted in conceptual practice, offered insight into the complex way that interpretation can evolve through time.

For an understanding of the issues around the presentation and interpretation of early landscape photographs, most importantly those by Timothy O'Sullivan, I looked to the writings of Rosalind Krauss, Joel Snyder, and Robin Kelsey, whose analyses form a dialogue concerning the aesthetic and cultural influences on nineteenth-century photographers. These writings look at the presentation of early landscape photography in the museum, the aesthetic traditions of the late-nineteenth century, and the complexity of understanding landscape photography as modern art.

Influential essays on modernist photography and its place in the museum from the 1980's include Douglas Crimp's seminal essay "The Museum's Old/The Library's New Subject," which looks at the evolving state of photography as an art form and the domination of modern aesthetics. "The Judgement Seat of Photography" by Christopher Phillips analyses the role of the Museum of Modern Art and its important influence on the history of photography. Doug Nickel's historiographic essay "History of Photography: The State of Research," contextualizes the role of early historical writing on photography, particularly the seminal work of art historian and curator Beaumont Newhall, who first established a systematic visual survey of photography.

Finis Dunaway's book *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform*, looks at the role of photography in creating a supporting visual culture for the environmental movement. Basing his historical research into the

environmental movement on the late-nineteenth-century values of romanticism and the spiritualism of transcendentalism, Dunaway demonstrates the role that photography has played in creating an environmental reform movement. His analysis of the social values embodied in landscape photography, in particular his discussion of Ansel Adams' role in promoting a spiritual view of landscape wilderness, was valuable to my understanding of the history of environmentalism in photography. While Dunaway's assessment does not continue into the contemporary period, his overview of the early environmental reform movement points to this need.

The important writings of the photography studies scholar Abigail Solomon-Godeau, especially those in her book *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*, offered insight into the critical and cultural value of photographs. In particular, Solomon-Godeau's theorization of critical practice in the essay "Living with Contradictions: Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-Side Aesthetics" offers an important consideration of the role of institutional critique in photographic practice.

From within the large body of scholarship on photography, Sekula's important 1975 essay "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning" was crucial to my understanding of photography's meaning as culturally derived and influenced by context. Roland Barthes' discussion of denotative and connotative meaning, in his essay "The Photographic Message" furnished ideas that reflect the importance of presentation and context on the understanding of photographic meaning.

The collection *Photography Theory*, edited by James Elkins, articulated the

continued relevance of semiotics, particularly the notion of indexicality, to photography, demonstrating, through the debates of the art seminar, its place in the cultural history of photography. The introduction to the collection *The Meaning of Photography*, edited by Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson, was valuable for outlining the state of photographic scholarship today and encouraging the continued questioning of photography's relevance and cultural value.

New Museology is an theoretical approach within a large discipline that looks at many aspects of the institution, including the representation of culture, the control of information, and the shaping of knowledge. For my purposes, I looked to the study of exhibition practice and the role of the curator from within museum studies. The essays in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, edited by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, provided insight into the many complex issues of contemporary museums. In particular, Bruce Ferguson's essay "Exhibition Rhetorics: Material Speech and Utter Sense" was useful for its theorization of the exhibition as a representation of institutional, social, cultural and personal values. In particular, Mieke Bal's essay "The Discourse of the Museum" outlines the important way that museums and art institutions function as discourses in their own right, and the importance of understanding and acknowledging their systematic function.

The collection *Landscape and Power* articulates the ideological underpinning that is part of Western culture's landscape history. In it, W.J.T. Mitchell brings together a series of essays which address the concept of landscape as it is constructed through the notions of ideology, power, and the expansion of progress. Mitchell's own essay, outlined earlier in

this introduction, theorizes the representation of landscape as ideologically driven and calls for a greater awareness of the medium's naturalizing of power structures.

The Art Seminar collection, *Landscape Theory*, edited by James Elkins and Rachel Ziady Delue, assembles contemporary theoretical approaches to landscape. In particular, responses by Robin Kelsey and Allan Wallach influenced my reading of landscape as ideologically driven.

The philosopher of environmental aesthetics Arnold Berleant has written extensively about art and the environment, and informed my view of the phenomenological understanding of landscape. Works such as *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment*, and a more recent collection of essays edited by Berleant, *Environment and the Arts*, have attempted to articulate the relationship of aesthetics and environment and their mutual depiction in art. Finis Dunaway's appraisal of the relationship between photography and social reform, art and emotion, in *Natural Visions*, is equally valuable in establishing the close connection that exists between aesthetics and the environment.

Methodology and Theoretical Approach

Due to the centrality of exhibition and curatorial practice to my thesis, I have relied on exhibitions and their catalogues as primary documents of investigation. For my study of *New Topographics*, I drew on photographic images of the exhibition, provided by George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, and the influential writings of curator William Jenkins. In Chapter One, William Jenkins' "Introduction" to

the *New Topographics* catalogue led me to investigate and analyse the underlying discourses of photographic modernism and look at other important writings that influenced this movement, including essays by John Szarkowski and Nathan Lyons.

In Chapter Two, the exhibition itself proved to be a useful source for aesthetic and cultural investigation. The analysis of layout, design, and curatorial emphasis were integral to my interpretation of the exhibition, revealing how important presentation can be to the interpretation of an artwork. The catalogue, *Imaging a Shattering Earth* by Claude Baillargeon, and the supporting exhibition material, including the website designed in conjunction with University of Oakland students, was helpful to my reading of the exhibition.

In the third chapter, Edward Burtynsky's images from the *Imaging a Shattering Earth* exhibition, the *China* publication, and the documentary film *Manufactured Landscapes* by Jennifer Baichwal, were important components in my analysis of the photographer's work. Interviews, essays and catalogues regarding Burtynsky's work also informed my approach and helped to position the photographer within the discourses of photography and art.

The theoretical approaches that have influenced my thesis, including Marxism, semiotics and post-structuralism, are best represented in *The Contest of Meaning*, edited by Richard Bolton. This collection and its social, political, and ideological critique of meaning in photography has been fundamental to my approach. Relying on the work of photography scholars such as Douglas Crimp, Christopher Phillips, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Rosalind Krauss, and Deborah Bright, among others, I have sought to establish

the ideological underpinnings of contemporary landscape photography from within the contemporary art museum.

I draw on a number of disciplines—art history, photography theory, cultural geography, environmental aesthetics, and museum studies—in order to analyse these exhibitions as visual culture representing a specific time and place. Recent interdisciplinary scholarship has opened up new ways of considering art and visual culture, including landscape photography, as functioning not only as art objects but also as insight into the social, cultural and political ideology of a time and place. This cultural opening up has facilitated the examination of art and visual culture from a combination of disciplinary perspectives, practices, and methodologies.

Chapter Breakdown

In Chapter One, entitled “The Museum in the Garden: The Discourse of Photographic Landscapes in *New Topographics*: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape,” I analyse the institutional emphasis of the exhibition and demonstrate how it is rooted in the visual rhetoric of modernist formalism, which continues today to shape the aesthetics and discourse of photography. In considering the works of the ten landscape photographers included in the exhibition, especially focusing on those by Bernd and Hilla Becher, I present an alternative interpretation of these images and demonstrate the way in which photographic meaning, and our understanding of landscape, is often shaped by the art institution. The works in *New Topographics* were presented in a way which emphasized

their stylistic properties, their objectivity in the tradition of scientific photography, and their modernist aesthetic approach. At the time of the exhibition, the photographers and the curator, William Jenkins, maintained that the work was about style. In particular, a photographic style that was meant to be neutral both conceptually and aesthetically, in keeping with the values of Greenbergian modernism prominent at the time, which were translated into photographic terms. In the years since, the interpretation of the exhibition has changed as *New Topographics* has come to be valued as the first exhibition to explore issues of environmentalism and social critique in the landscape. I argue that the dominance of stylistic neutrality and formal aesthetics, limits the understanding of *New Topographics* photography as social critique and questions the understanding of landscape as neutral, even as the exhibition attempted to promote a way of seeing the landscape that claimed to be objective. This chapter will, accordingly, provide a context for the next chapters from within the context of art and photographic history.

The second chapter, “The Environment in the Museum: the Rhetoric of Photographic Landscapes in Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate” looks at the current photographic representation of landscape in the museum. In comparing this recent exhibition to the influential *New Topographics* exhibition, I demonstrate how contemporary curatorial practice, emphasizing the didactic representation of the values of environmentalism and political engagement, has focused on the context and content of photography at the cost of aesthetics. By doing so, the modernist values of formalist aesthetics and stylistic neutrality, which continue to be important to the understanding of the photographs in the show, have become naturalized.

as photographic truth.

In Chapter Three, “The Burtynsky Landscape in Context: Formal Aesthetics versus Social Critique,” I focus on Edward Burtynsky's photographs from his *China* series, a selection of which were included in *Imaging a Shattering Earth* exhibition. Burtynsky is an important case study, as his photographic work has become internationally renowned for its representation of the 'man-altered' landscape and for its balance between formal aesthetics and social criticism. I argue that his work represents a way of seeing landscape that is rooted both in the discourse of art and photographic history, and the rigid requirements of the art institution. To further the aim of understanding how the embedded social critique and aesthetics function in his work, I analyse public statements made by the photographer. As a way to gain insight into the current discourses around landscape photography, I look at how his work has been positioned in the art institution and how his own words and photographs reflect the art historical ambivalence to social critique in art.

Chapter One

The Museum in the Garden: The Discourse of Photographic Landscapes in *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*

In 1975, George Eastman House International Museum of Photography, in Rochester, New York, held an exhibition which helped to reposition landscape photography, traditionally understood as documentary in purpose, within the discourse of modern art. *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* introduced an understanding of landscape photography founded on the formal qualities of the photograph while minimizing its historical and representational qualities. Bringing together ten photographers working in landscape formats, the exhibition reflected the dominant curatorial interpretation surrounding photography and its place within the modern art lexicon.

At the time of the exhibition, the modern art movement was the dominant paradigm in art historical and curatorial practice, not to mention art production, and still continues to exert a major influence today. The interpretation and presentation of the *New Topographics* exhibition was deeply influenced by the formalist principles promoted by Clement Greenberg and translated into photographic terms by John Szarkowski.¹⁶ Modern art, while embracing a number of aesthetic, cultural, and social values, was deeply

¹⁶ Sabine T. Kreibel, "Theories of Photography" in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins, The Art Seminar (New York: Routledge, 2007), 16.

influenced by formalism, which placed its emphasis on the structural qualities of an artwork, rather than its content or context. This thesis seeks to demonstrate the role of the art institution in creating a specific way of seeing and interpreting the photographed landscape: through the visual culture of the twentieth-century modern art movement.

This chapter will investigate *New Topographics* from within the discourse of modernist photography. I will argue that the exhibition promoted an understanding of landscape based, not on the values of early scientific photography as promoted by its curator, but on the aesthetics of modernism. Cited as a “new movement in landscape photography” and as “revolutionary”¹⁷ by later curators and photographers, much has been made about the supposed neutrality of the images. Articulated by both the curator, William Jenkins, and by the photographers themselves, the stylistic neutrality of the images reflected the belief that photography should represent its subject objectively and scientifically. As curator, Jenkins rejected any understanding of photography as influenced by social values or cultural context. The photographers themselves, caught up in the dominant way of seeing, participated in the visual hegemony of modernism by disengaging themselves from any political message in their work. This chapter argues that meaning in photography is created less by the photographer or the subject represented, but rather by the institutionally dominant values of the larger cultural framework. In order to contextualize *New Topographics'* aesthetization, I will provide a discussion of modernism in photography history and its role in influencing the interpretation of landscape.

¹⁷ Kato Norihiro, “The End of the Landscape,” in *Critical Landscapes* (Tokyo, Japan: Tokyo Metropolitan Culture Foundation, 1993), 22.

Photography and Modernism

In the 1930's, the Museum of Modern Art sought to claim photography as the vision of modernity. In 1937, the most influential book on photography of the modern period was published and provided the first accessible methodology for interpreting photographs. *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day* was the first cohesive history of the medium and accompanied the first photographic exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Written by Beaumont Newhall, the American photography curator and scholar, *The History of Photography* sought to emphasize the formal and aesthetic qualities of the photograph and create a new language for discussing and interpreting the medium.¹⁸ *The History of Photography* has been reprinted five times since, most recently in 1982, and clearly emphasizes the photographic works of the modern period.¹⁹ This large survey text, illustrated throughout with the works deemed most important in the history of photography, creates a chronological and narrative history of photography beginning with the medium's invention and ending with the quintessential modern style of photography: straight photography. It is there, at what was considered the apex of the medium, that the qualities of the photograph itself—its tonality, sharpness, and objectivity—were understood to be the highest form of the art. Placing photography within the context of high art was not new, but Newhall's chronological account of photography's progression, from handmaid of art to an independent aesthetic with its own role in the history of art,

¹⁸ Christopher Phillips, "The Judgement Seat of Photography," *October* 22 (Autumn 1982): 34.

¹⁹ Douglas R. Nickel, "History of Photography: The State of Research" *The Art Bulletin* 83. no. 3 (September 2001): 550.

firmly established photography as a medium that had come into its own in the modern era. By explicitly linking photographic vision to the progress of the medium, Newhall placed photography at the centre of a teleological model that privileged modern techniques and aesthetic concerns over those of the past. Newhall attempted to emphasize what he saw as constants in photography, its “Basic Laws,” by universalizing the qualities of “detail” and “mass” in the photograph.²⁰ Douglas R. Nickel, analysing Newhall's approach to photographic scholarship, writes that, “function, intention, authorship, the history of technique per se are all secondary to this master concept, whose pedagogical aim was not strictly historical but institutional.”²¹ It is through this institutionalizing of photographic history and interpretation, specifically the formal qualities of the photograph, that Newhall helped to bring about a new understanding of the photograph.

Newhall had a long career in museums, beginning at the MoMA, from 1935 to 1948, as librarian and then as the director of photography, and later as curator at the George Eastman House of International Museum of Photography, where he became director until 1971. Newhall played a pivotal role in creating a modernist vision for photography and his influence can be seen today in the way museums, especially in North America, present and interpret photographs. Newhall's collecting practice at GEH established the standards of taste for his generation and influenced those to come. The project of creating an archive of photographic art history was seen as an important way of giving legitimacy to the medium, which had been given little attention in major museums

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.: 551.

up to this point. His influence at MoMA and GEH set the tone for the continuing project of creating a history of photography and helped to establish the dominant understanding of photography. Of the influential text that is *The History of Photography*, Nickel writes:

the important things for us to consider about this, the urtext for most photo history to follow, is its lack of novelty, its pronounced aesthetic bias, the model of historical causation that drives it, and its essential untenability as a self-sufficient explanatory framework.²²

In retrospect, as articulated by Nickel in detailed critique of the book, Newhall's attempt to position photography in its own unique historical framework was extremely problematic as it was based on documented historical and aesthetic bias. Yet the success of this text demonstrates the need for an authority, such as Newhall, to bring photography to a larger audience.

During the 1950's and '60's, as Clement Greenberg and others were championing American painting as *the* medium of the twentieth-century, photography was also laying claim to that status. While Greenberg's writing, from his early ideas about avant-garde in the 1930's to his later writings about abstraction, influenced much of what we popularly understand about modern art, it is his interest in the *self-consciousness of a medium* that makes modernism relevant to photography. The language established to discuss the new form of painting that critics were championing, abstract expressionism, has much in common with that used to discuss photography. To what extent these two mediums influenced each other, and their discourses, will not be addressed here, but the emphasis

²² Ibid.

on formalism, as articulated by Greenberg and closely associated with him, is integral to this discussion.

Early in his influential 1960 essay, “Modern Painting,” Greenberg writes, “the essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.”²³ In Greenberg's understanding of modernism—one of many—it is the “essential” qualities of a medium, its technical limitations and advantages, which render it truly unique and therefore worthy of exploration. This assumption relies heavily on the notion that a painter, or a photographer, is neutral in his act of creating, unencumbered by personal or political intentions. The critical fault with this perspective rests in the question: who will be the one to decide what is essential or pure in a medium? Who has the authority?

In 1962, John Szarkowski, the photographer and curator, was handpicked to become MoMA's curator of photography by Newhall's successor, the photographer Edward Steichen. During his tenure, Szarkowski produced a number of influential exhibitions and wrote several important essays on photography. In 1963, Szarkowski published a catalogue to the MoMA exhibition entitled *The Photographer and The American Landscape* that brought together the work of many of America's best known photographers, presented chronologically from Timothy O'Sullivan to Ansel Adams. Clearly developing a trajectory of photo-making, a canon of its great masters, Szarkowski

²³ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Modern Art and Modernism*, ed. Francis Frascina, Charles Harrison, and Deirdre Paul (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 5.

mythologizes these landscape photographers as visionaries who were attempting to reach a certain truth about their surrounding, struggling in the face of technical difficulties and popular misunderstandings of the medium. Writing of the photographs by the Civil War and survey photographer Timothy O'Sullivan (figure 1), Szarkowski uses the language of modernism to describe the photographer's intentions when he writes: "He was true to the essential character of his medium."²⁴ Szarkowski links the modernist notion of the essential state of a medium to the essential state of the landscape. Describing the photographers included in this show, he concludes:

each has attempted to define what the earth is like. Among them they have peeled away, layer by layer, the dry wrapper of habitual seeing, and have presented new discoveries concerning the structure of our habitat. These men have recorded, and have in part defined, our changing concept of the natural site.²⁵

Szarkowski privileges the artist's vision of nature, of the camera, and of photographic history, while never acknowledging his own influences or privileging of modernism.

Szarkowski's most influential work on photography may be *The Photographer's Eye* (1966), based on a 1964 MoMA exhibition. In the essay which accompanied a selection of photographs, Szarkowski sought to describe the new visual language of photography: one that did not attempt to meet the old requirements of art but sought new ways to make meaning. In his introduction, Szarkowski writes:

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 5.

The invention of photography provided a radically new picture-making process—a process based not on synthesis but on selection. The difference was a basic one. Paintings were *made*—constructed from a storehouse of traditional schemes and skills and attitudes—but photographs, as the man on the street put it, were *taken*. [author's emphasis]²⁶

This essay places photography in opposition to the visual techniques of painting and, it must be noted, much of the early photography which had attempted to emulate the techniques of painting. Szarkowski promotes an understanding of photography, based on formal composition and the decision to snap the shutter, as in Cartier-Bresson's theory of the decisive moment, that denies the construction of the image. Szarkowski describes a way of looking at photography which is easily accessible to viewers and which promotes the “formulation of a vocabulary and a critical perspective more fully responsive to the unique phenomena of photography.”²⁷ By doing so, Szarkowski continues in the footsteps of Newhall and contributes greatly to the understanding of photography as modern.

Within this influential essay, Szarkowski introduces five categories for looking at photographs, as a way of creating a universal understanding and interpretation of the photograph. These categories, which Szarkowski describes as elements that make up the language of photography, bore such elusive titles as “The Thing Itself,” referring to photography's mimetic nature, “The Detail,” photography's documentary ability, “The Frame,” referring to the selection by the photographer, “Time,” photography's reference to past and future, and “Vantage Point,” photography's ability to capture unexpected perspectives. Szarkowski refers to this shared language as inherent to the medium. In

²⁶ John Szarkowski, “Introduction,” in *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), n.p.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

discussing the photographs included in the book, he writes: “these pictures are unmistakably photographs. The vision they share belongs to no school or aesthetic theory, but to photography itself.”²⁸ Playing down the concept of style in these photographs, Szarkowski nevertheless establishes a way of seeing photography that is in keeping with the discourse of modern art. Szarkowski ends by asserting that, “the history of photography has been less a journey than a growth... . Like an organism, photography was born whole. It is in our progressive discovery of it that its history lies.”²⁹ The privileging of photography's uniqueness, while perhaps necessary to establish a reputation for photography within the art museum, also positioned the medium to be interpreted as quintessentially modern: a product of the modern age.

In 1967, Nathan Lyons, then a curator at George Eastman House, mounted the exhibition *Towards a Social Landscape*, which brought together five modern photographers: Bruce Davidson, Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand, Danny Lyon, and Duane Michals, reflected a broad understanding of landscape. In his accompanying catalogue introduction, Lyons created an influential contribution to the discussion of contemporary photography. What is most relevant to this discussion is Lyons' use of the term 'landscape' to describe the representation of humans in their environments. Lyons asks the difficult question: “do evidences of a natural landscape have greater aesthetic value than evidences of what we might term a man-made landscape?”³⁰ In this document on social landscape, the changing understanding of landscape, from untouched wilderness

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Nathan Lyons, “Introduction,” *Toward a Social Landscape*, (New York: Horizon Press), 5.

to socially constructed 'man-altered' space, is made apparent. The social landscape was to become the dominant form of landscape photography, demonstrated by the *New Topographics* exhibition a decade later.

In his attempt to redefine landscape in the context of photography, Lyons draws attention to the discourse surrounding photography, including such loaded words and phrases as 'social realism', 'documentary', and 'natural'. Lyons gets to the heart of the matter when he points out that culturally, "we have pictured so many aspects and objects of our environment in the form of photographs (motion pictures and television) that the composite of these representations has assumed the proportions and identity of an actual environment."³¹ Lyons attempts to distance these photographs from the discussions and debates of photographic history and instead emphasizes, "that we should not overlook how we have been conditioned to look at and understand pictures."³² Lyons unavoidably relies on his own conditioning to discuss these works by looking towards the 'snapshot,' the concept of capturing a candid moment in time and place, as a way to understand these works. What is absent from Lyons' discussion of social landscapes is the actual content of the images, which included the subject of race, poverty, and counter-culture, and the implications of these images. Hidden behind Lyons' rhetoric, the photographs are left to speak for themselves, privileged as formal elements combined to speak solely about the photograph itself, and unburdened by discussions about the social meaning inherent in the images.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 7.

'New Topographics' Considered

In 1975, George Eastman House presented *New Topographics: Photography of the Man-Altered Landscape*, an exhibition that brought together ten photographers working with landscape: Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, and Henry Wessel Jr. The images shared a focus on subjects such as roadside motels, new housing developments and subdivisions, industrial buildings, construction sites, and small town streets. Curated by William Jenkins, the exhibition marked a new approach to documenting the landscape, one that acknowledged the presence of human intervention, in all its banality. Subtitled “Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape,” the images in *New Topographics* were presented as documentation of landscapes formed by human intervention but isolated from the people who inhabit the spaces pictured. In this sense, they aligned themselves with the tradition of scientific photography that saw photography as documentary evidence, unencumbered by effects or altered by the photographer's personal vision. Working primarily in black and white, all the photographers claimed to represent this 'contemporary' landscape without judgement or political intent. This fiction of neutrality, understood as such by the curator and the photographers involved, was meant as a deliberate attempt to present landscape in a manner utterly devoid of romanticization.³³

While the photographers in the exhibition may have taken a scientific approach in creating

³³ Kim Sichel, *From Icon to Irony: German and American Industrial Photography* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 10.

these 'new' landscapes, there is no question that these photographs functioned in more ways than was acknowledged at the time.

The New Topographers were working both in response to and against the traditions of the past. Their focus on the human impact on the landscape was in direct opposition to the art photography of earlier twentieth-century landscape photographers, exemplified by Ansel Adams, who saw wilderness and landscape as synonymous with pristine nature, untouched by humankind and full of majestic beauty. Adams (figure 2), whose Romantic post-card and calendar conventions of landscape photography had become closely associated with Sierra Club environmentalism, sought to protect nature from the enemy of development by glorifying its wild beauty.³⁴ In contrast to Adams' deliberate avoidance of any sign of human activity in his pristine landscapes, the New Topographers, attempted to create a new way of envisioning the landscape. Picturing the landscape of human development, the New Topographers returned to an earlier form of landscape photography that had been rediscovered, ironically, by Adams himself: the survey photographs of the American West by Timothy O'Sullivan.³⁵

In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, William Jenkins defines topography, a term used as a deliberate acknowledgement of the nineteenth-century survey photography of O'Sullivan and others, as “the detailed and accurate description of a particular place, city, town, district, state, parish or tract of land.”³⁶ He emphasizes the

³⁴ Finis Dunaway, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 121.

³⁵ Joel Snyder, “Territorial Photography,” in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 193.

³⁶ Jenkins, “Introduction,” 5.

word *description* as being central to the function of photography and the exhibition. Based on the concept of early landscape photographs meant for scientific, commercial and state use, Jenkins positioned the exhibition as part of the trajectory of photographic history, with O'Sullivan's survey photographs located at the beginning. *New Topographics* sought to engage with the newly legitimated landscape photography of the past, courtesy of Newhall, Szarkowski and the MoMA, who promoted the nineteenth-century landscape as a prototype of modernist aesthetic. Looking back to O'Sullivan, who is cited as an important influence by several of the photographers in the show,³⁷ one could easily say that the focus of the exhibition was to elevate the photographs beyond the basics of representation to become aesthetic commentary on both the history of photography and the landscape itself. Jenkins' modernist interpretation is clearly articulated in his understanding of the images as about photography first and foremost, before the content or social message of the work.

New Topographics was a large exhibition: each photographer was represented by twenty individual works, with the exception of the Bechers, whose images are regularly presented in series (see figures 3 and 4). By contemporary standards, none of the images would be considered large (ranging from Robert Adams' 15.1 x 19.1 cm to Frank Gohlke's works 33.3 x 33.3 cm) and only Stephen Shore worked in colour, yet the impact of the exhibition has been significant. Establishing the fame of its photographers, who came to be known as the New Topographers, the influence this show cannot be quantified.³⁸

³⁷ Ibid., 7.

³⁸ Gretchen Garner, *Disappearing Witness: Change in Twentieth-Century American Photography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 167.

The exhibition was remarkable for the self-stated purpose of both the photographers and the curator. The photographers in the exhibition claimed to photograph only what was already present in the landscape. Quoted in the introduction, Robert Adams describes the nature of his photographs as he sees them (see figure 5):

By interstate 70: a dog skeleton, a vacuum cleaner, TV dinners, a doll, a pie, rolls of carpet Later, next to the South Platte River: algae, broken concrete, jet contrails, the smell of crude oil What I hope to document, though not at the expense of surface detail, is the Form that underlies this apparent chaos.³⁹

The “Form” that Adams sees at the heart of the contemporary landscape is fundamental to the modern ideology of the exhibition, superseding the more obvious content of “surface detail,” as he so carefully calls the actual subject of the photograph. It is evident that, for Adams, “Form” is the primary subject while the objects depicted act only as traces of this greater meaning. What is troubling about this claim is the way that all these photographs clearly depict the role of development and industrialization in shaping the landscape, often in subversive and critical ways. This cultural interpretation was disavowed by both the curator and the photographers, who sought to be taken seriously as artists rather than be seen as social campaigners or documentarians. The emphasis was placed firmly on the formal qualities of the photograph, and much of the presentation of the works, in the exhibition and the catalogue, attempted to downplay any other interpretation.

The titling of their works, as didactic descriptions of places that were photographed, was one technique used by all the New Topographers to create a deliberate

³⁹ Jenkins, “Introduction”, 7.

sense of neutrality and connect their photographs to the larger movement in modern art. There was nothing expressive or poetic in the titles of the works. John Schott (figure 6), Joe Deal (figure 7), and Henry Wessel Jr. (figure 8) chose to leave their works untitled. Using as little information as possible to differentiate between images, Schott used only a series title and date, Deal used the series title and a numbering system, and, in the case of Wessel Jr., no information was provided beyond the material and dimensions. Echoing the titling techniques of abstract modern painting, such as Franz Kline's *Painting No. 7* from 1952, the photographers clearly connected their works to the culture of modern art. The majority of the works were titled in a more descriptive manners, example Stephen Shore's *Church and Second Streets, Easton, Pennsylvania, June 20, 1974* (figure 9). These titles functioned as geographical descriptors, such as would be used by map makers or navigators, rather than as evocative titles meant to create greater meaning. But how much information did they really convey? To someone who has never been to Easton, Pennsylvania, its name gives very little value to the photograph. What these titles really did was to create a sense of distance between the image and the viewer. By using a straightforward and 'neutral' title, the New Topographers attempted to align their work with a tradition of scientific documentation and to keep the viewer from receiving or reading any greater meaning into the context of the works.

The Curatorial Approach

In his introductory essay, Jenkins quotes several of the photographers on their perspective on photography, statements which are carefully edited to present a united front of modern intellectual discourse. All are expressive and intelligent articulations of the nature of photography, demonstrating an understanding of photographic history, discourse, and the larger concerns in contemporary art. In an attempt to address the nature of photography and, in particular, the conflict between the fictional qualities of photography and the documentary ability of the camera, Nicholas Nixon and Lewis Baltz both call attention to what they refer to as the “paradox” of photography. Baltz writes:

To function as documents at all they [the photographs] must first persuade us that they describe their subject accurately and objectively; in fact, their initial task is to convince their audience that they are truly documents, that the photographer has fully exercised his powers of observation and description and has set aside his imaginings and prejudices.⁴⁰

In using this approach, Baltz and the other New Topographers attempt to reduce the presence of the author and the subjective nature of art-making. The concept of authorship comes up again, in the artist's statements of both Lewis Baltz, who is quoted as writing, “the ideal photographic document would appear to be without author or art,”⁴¹ and Joe Deal, who writes that his series in the exhibition:

⁴⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁴¹ Ibid.

... had to do with denying the uniqueness in the subject matter or in one exposure as opposed to another in the belief that the most extraordinary images might be the most prosaic, with a minimum of interference (i.e. personal preference, moral judgement) by the photographer.⁴²

This important affectation on the part of Baltz and Deal, that a photograph has more truth in its unaltered state, refers back to the work of social documentarians, such as Walker Evans, whose photographs were promoted by early modern curators for their neutral style,⁴³ and to the geographical landscape photography of O'Sullivan. What is understood, by both the curator and photographers, is the impossibility of creating a photograph that does not reflect the values of its photographer. Nevertheless, the aim of the New Topographers was to attempt this neutrality and to promote a certain vision for the medium and the landscape. The artists' statements functioned to illustrate the focus of the exhibition and to demonstrate the unity of approaches of the photographers and curator.

Jenkins attempts to explain this way of working, under the deception of neutrality, as a stylistic decision. In the introduction to the catalogue Jenkins writes that: "the viewpoint ... is analytical rather than critical, scientific rather than artistic."⁴⁴ The division in this statement reveals Jenkins' modernist leanings: he privileges the notion of neutrality as essential to photographic purpose by denying the subjective role of the photographer. Ultimately, no matter how much Jenkins attempts to connect the New Topographers with the scientific history of photography, the style of the *New Topographics* exhibition emphasizes the aesthetic decisions of the photographers, as does the placement of these

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Douglas R. Nickel, "'American Photographs' Revisited," *American Art* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 92.

⁴⁴ Jenkins, "Introduction," 7.

works in the institution and within the discourse of photographic art history. Jenkins tries to justify his balancing act between the scientific/historical understanding of the photographs and the formal/aesthetic emphasis when he writes, “to elect to make pictures that look a certain way is a stylistic decision, even if the effort is to subdue the intrusion of style in the picture.”⁴⁵ But does this work really subdue its style? How does the work of these photographers both represent a style and remain neutral and non-judgmental? What exactly was there to judge?

The work of Bernd and Hilla Becher is an excellent place to start addressing some of these questions (figure 10). Since 1959, until the death of Bernd Becher in 2007, the couple worked as a team, capturing the industrial buildings and structures of the landscape in photographs, which are then displayed serially to create what they refer to as “typologies of form.”⁴⁶ The Bechers deliberately downplayed the location of their shoots, which could be anywhere in Europe or North America, and the individual identities of the buildings represented, in favour of a formal comparison of structural attributes. The Bechers utilize a strict and singular photographic approach that has never changed in the decades they have been working. The primary feeling one gets from looking at the Bechers' work is one of cool, technical style. Shot straight on, not from above or below, the 'neutrality' of the camera's gaze can be understood as an attempt to minimize the subjective viewpoint.⁴⁷ Jenkins refers to this as a *passive* frame. He writes, in the *New Topographics* catalogue, that “rather than the picture having been created by the frame,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁶ Susanne Lange, *Bernd and Hilla Becher: Life and Work* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007), 72.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 65.

there is a sense of the frame having been laid on an existing scene without interpreting it very much.”⁴⁸ Of the Bechers' work, Jenkins states that, while their photographs form a kind of formal analysis, they “do not culminate in conclusion or judgement.”⁴⁹ The formal quality of their work, concerned with tone and volume and architectural shape, suggests an aestheticizing impulse on the part of the artists and a disavowal of deeper meaning.

Yet from another perspective, their aesthetization of the industrial form can be seen as a comment on the past: both the photographic past and the industrial one. Alluding to the work of photographers such as August Sander, whose project *People of the Twentieth Century* sought to document archetypes of social spheres and create typologies of people, the Bechers' work addresses the utopian impulses of the modern period.⁵⁰ Blake Stimson has described their work as a “vision of an architecture free of the burden of culture, free of the burden of identity, free of the burden of eternity.”⁵¹ Susanne Lange, the established Becher scholar, writes that the Bechers are interested in the narrative quality of the objects removed from their reality.⁵² These interpretations of the Bechers' photographs, as expressive rather than objective, can be seen in direct opposition to the claims of Jenkins, and the New Topographers themselves, who denied their work any greater meaning (figure 11). These multiple and contradictory interpretations raise the question: what other meanings can be found below the surface of this work and beyond the curatorial interpretation?

⁴⁸ Jenkins. “Introduction,” 5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁰ Lange, *Bernd and Hilla Becher*, 82.

⁵¹ Blake Stimson, *Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006), 157.

⁵² Lange, *Bernd and Hilla Becher*, 77.

Lewis Baltz is another of the New Topographers whose work must be looked at from multiple perspectives. While the discourse of modernism and photographic practice in the 1970's was dominated by questions of style, aesthetics, and neutrality, today Baltz's series *Industrial Parks* can be seen to function both from within and beyond these formal parameters. In images such as *East Wall*, *Western Carpet Mills*, *1231 Warner*, *Tustin* from 1974 (figure 12), a black and white image of a generic factory building stretches horizontally across the frame, two long bands of tone, unbroken by architectural detail. On each side of the building, electricity poles connect wiring to the building and cars park underneath. In front, a field of uncut grass gone to seed blows in the wind. At the very bottom, a gravel road just barely fits into the frame, its uneven surface echoing the undulating seed heads. The aesthetic appeal of this image is undeniable and wars with the banality of the subject, a landscape with which any North American would be intimately familiar. Familiarity, in this case, breeds contempt, acting to create a tension between the aesthetic appeal of the image and the repulsion felt at the natural beauty of the landscape marred by the necessity of contemporary industrial life. The much discussed neutrality of Baltz's work, expressed in the frontal composition, the framing, *the neutral gaze*, falls away when confronted with the poetic/romantic beauty of both the subject and the photographer's concept: the visual conflict between nature and culture.

Current Interpretations

Since the mid-1980's, the *New Topographics* exhibition has come to be understood as an indictment of development and the negative effect of industry on the landscape: the exhibition, and its photographs, have become emblematic of a new critical landscape.⁵³ The New Topographers have been described as being “interested in the relationship between man and nature,”⁵⁴ while others have argued that they attempted to “collect images of a dying species, to store and archive for historical posterity.”⁵⁵ The seemingly objective gaze of the photographers, so much a part of the curatorial interpretation and focus, can be understood to function as a self-referential device on the part of the photographers, allowing distance from the meaning in their work while, at the same time, drawing attention to the deliberate act. While none of the photographers acknowledged any social intention to their work in 1975, clearly, for all their denial, some further meaning is present. Ironically, it is the ideological undercurrent of social meaning that has become the major way of understanding and remembering this significant exhibition.⁵⁶

An important critical interpretation of *New Topographics* comes from Deborah Bright in her 1984 essay, “Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into the

⁵³ Kato Norihiro, “The End of the Landscape,” in *Critical Landscapes* (Tokyo, Japan: Tokyo Metropolitan Culture Foundation, 1993), 22.

⁵⁴ Michiko Kasahara, “Critical Landscapes,” in *Critical Landscapes* (Tokyo, Japan: Tokyo Metropolitan Culture Foundation, 1993), 39.

⁵⁵ Sichel, *From Icon to Irony*, 10.

⁵⁶ Deborah Bright, “The Machine in the Garden Revisited: American Environmentalism and Photographic Aesthetics,” *Art Journal* 51, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 65.

Cultural Meaning of Landscape Photography.”⁵⁷ Bright, an art historian and landscape photographer, argues that the New Topographers were complicit in the negation of meaning in their work by embracing the institutional emphasis of the exhibition. As for the photographs themselves, Bright laments that this formal and careful work is what has come to be understood as social critique. In discussing Robert Adams, Bright writes:

[T]he paradoxical fact that many critics and photographers regard the work of the New Topographers as moving beyond formalist to social critique has more to do, I think, with the impoverished expectations of what passes for social criticism in art than with any theoretical positions assumed by the artist in question.⁵⁸

To Bright, *New Topographics* failed to fulfill the promise of social concern by hiding behind the aesthetic discourse of art.⁵⁹ Rather than embracing their social message, which placed the disappointment of the modern dream of industrialism and utopia firmly at its heart, the New Topographers participated in the museum's modernist project to universalize art's language and discourse.

Kelly Dennis, in an essay from 2005, takes a different perspective on the social purpose of the New Topographers by underscoring the ironic and conceptual emphasis of the photographs. She explains that the irony of these photographs “is that they are of landscape but about the discursive construction of landscape and the literal destruction of the land.”⁶⁰ Dennis sees the sidestepping of this irony, by critics such as Bright, as rooted

⁵⁷ Reprinted in, Deborah Bright, “Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography” in *The Contest of Meaning*, Richard Bolton ed. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989).

⁵⁸ Deborah Bright, “Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography,” 134.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁶⁰ Kelly Dennis, “Landscape and the West: Irony and Critique in New Topographic Photography,” *Cultural*

in the way photography has been understood to function as a documentation of truth, rather than within the discourse of conceptual art. She writes:

While New Topographic photographs appear to be of western landscapes, trees, deserts, houses, roads, and construction, they are nonetheless about the aesthetic discourse of landscape photography, and about ... the American myths of the West, suburban expansion, the myth of the American dream, and the exploitation and destruction of natural resources.⁶¹

Dennis argues that the ambivalence of the New Topographers towards a greater meaning in their work does not preclude us from considering this message for ourselves. Dennis expresses the role of this exhibition by asking, “Might not the ethical ambiguity of the works themselves function as a critical tool, as many have argued about Conceptual and post-modern art, and thus more firmly implicate us in their critique of ideology?”⁶² This question is at the centre of the debate around photography and its ability to raise critical response. How much is the conceptual understanding of landscape—“the discursive construction of landscape” as Dennis writes—communicated to the viewer unless one is trained to recognize it? The positioning of photographic 'truth' as ironic is very post-modern, yet has this 'critique of ideology', as Dennis refers to the work in *New Topographics*, actually functioned as such? Or is this perspective only the most recent ideological interpretation of landscape?

Landscapes in the 21st Century, Forum Unesco University and Heritage 10th International Seminar, New Castle-upon-Tyne, 11-16 April, 2005, 4.

⁶¹ Dennis, “Landscape and the West,” 3.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 6.

As I have argued in this chapter, the *New Topographics* exhibition raises many questions about the role of photography in creating an ideological understanding of landscape, both formally, through the discourse of photographic modernism, and conceptually, in its emphasis on the critical implications of human development of the landscape. Influenced by the dominant values of the time, William Jenkins and the George Eastman House guided their viewers to a modernist interpretation of landscape, which promoted aesthetic over social meaning. In doing so, they entrenched a pattern of interpretation within the discourse of photographic history and, in particular, within the interpretation and reception of the photographic landscape.

The understanding of *New Topographics* has changed dramatically over the years since 1975, as the work has moved away from the curatorial biases of modernism and gained agency independent of the institution. The tension in this work, between a constructed neutrality, and a sophisticated discursive relationship to art and photographic history, has mired any understanding of this exhibition in debates about the role of the curator, the art institution, and the photographer in communicating meaning. Most importantly, this deliberate ambiguity of message, whether modernist or post-modernist in purpose, has deeply influenced the generations of landscape photographers who followed. What is so remarkable about this exhibition, and the work itself, lies within its relationship to the larger issues of photographic history, modernism, environmentalism, and the rise of photography as the major medium of the late-twentieth century.

Chapter Two

The Environment in the Museum: the Rhetoric of Photographic Landscapes in

Imaging a Shattering Earth:

Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate

In 2004, a joint exhibition between CONTACT, the annual contemporary photography festival in Toronto, and the Meadow Brook Art Gallery/University of Oakland, in Rochester, Michigan, offered a contemporary interpretation on the “man-altered landscape.” The exhibition was conceived as a focal point of the University of Oakland’s year-long theme of *Environmental Explorations* in 2004-2005, a cross-humanities project to foster debate and awareness about the cultural, social, and scientific conditions which affect the environment from within the academic institution.⁶³ Curated by Claude Baillargeon, *Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate* is positioned in a strongly polemical way: challenging the perception of landscape photography as purely aesthetic. As announced in its title, *Imaging a Shattering Earth* takes a position of protest against the continued destruction of the environment and seeks to convince through its images. Shown in several locations across North America since its inception, the exhibition addresses the many aspects of landscape photography today: its use as a ‘truth document’, its relationship to photographic

⁶³ Meadow Brook Art Gallery/Oakland University, “Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate - Home Page,” <http://www2.oakland.edu/shatteringearth/index.cfm>, accessed November 12th, 2008.

history, and its place in the art world. The success of the show, which continues in touring format, rests on its ability to communicate a strong message of concern while embracing the aesthetic conventions of landscape photography.

In this chapter I will explore the practice and representation of the “man-altered landscape” through the analysis of *Imaging a Shattering Earth*. By analysing the curatorial approach of Claude Baillargeon, I will establish the current state of socially motivated landscape photography in the museum. By investigating the similarities and differences between *Imaging a Shattering Earth* and the influential *New Topographics* exhibition, I will elucidate the changes that have occurred, both in the curatorial approach to social criticism in photography and in the evolving representation of environment. As concern for ecological sustainability has become a global issue, its visual representation has become prominent in the art institution. The underlying question that remains to be answered is: how have the changing attitudes towards social meaning in photography coincided with a larger photographic movement exploring these issues?

In his influential essay, “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” Allan Sekula looks at the complicated relationship between art and documentary to address the problematic idea of “photographic meaning.” Sekula writes that, “the photograph, as it stands alone presents merely the *possibility* of meaning [author's emphasis]. Only by its embeddedness in a concrete discourse situation can the photograph yield a clear semantic outcome.”⁶⁴ The appropriation, as Sekula calls it, of a photograph by any number of

⁶⁴ Allan Sekula, “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” in *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*, ed. Vicki Goldberg (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 457.

rhetorical discourses can generate its own reading just as much as intention on the part of the photographer or art institution. Sekula conceives of photography as a message deeply rooted in its cultural context and connotative meaning. For Sekula, context and intention are integral considerations for understanding the message of a photograph. To understand the meaning of a photograph, Sekula asks the question: “what is the original rhetorical function of the photograph?”⁶⁵

This chapter functions as a bridge between the discussion of modernist photography in Chapter One and the role of aesthetics and social meaning in exhibition practice. In Chapter One, I established that the *New Topographics* exhibition was influenced by the dominant formalist aesthetic. In an attempt to legitimize photography as art, any social-critical interpretation was restricted in favour of its stylistic qualities. In this chapter, my purpose is to show how current interpretations of landscape photography, demonstrated by the curatorial approach of Claude Baillargeon, have reversed this institutional emphasis. Instead of looking to the aesthetic history of photography for curatorial guidance, as did the curator of *New Topographics*, Baillargeon has rooted the understanding of the exhibition in the history of social reform. By embracing a post-modernist approach to curation, in which content and context take a more important role than connoisseurship and aesthetics, Baillargeon has reduced the exhibition and its works to a didactic and educational reading. More importantly, the focus on social criticism places the aesthetics of photography in the same position that it once occupied: relegated to photographic history rather than as part of the greater understanding of photography.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 453.

*Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and
the Environmental Debate*

Imaging a Shattering Earth brings together twelve photographers working with the landscape: Edward Burtynsky, John Ganis, Peter Goin, Emmet Gowin, David T. Hanson, Johnathan Long, David Maisal, David McMillan, Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison, John Pfahl, and Mark Ruwedel. Many of these photographers, including Burtynsky, Ganis, Goin, Gowin, Hanson, McMillan, Pfahl, and Ruwedel, have been working with the landscape for decades. Others, such as Maisal and the ParkeHarrisons are in mid-career, while Johnathan Long is only just emerging as an landscape photographer. All are working with the same subject, “the man-altered landscape,” but strategies and approaches vary in a way that minimizes the visual and formal cohesion of the exhibition. Baillargeon has written that “collectively, they argue for the necessity of concerted actions against the progressive shattering of the earth.”⁶⁶ The uniting force of the exhibition is its conceptual framework, constructed by the curator, in which the context of each photograph is emphasized to unite the numerous technical and visual differences amongst the works.

When exhibited at the National Gallery of Canada in 2008, under the aegis of the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, the photographs were displayed in such a way as to create coherence amongst a disparate group of works. Framing, layout, and textual support were designed to create an overarching connection between the content

⁶⁶ Claude Baillargeon, *Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate* (Rochester, MI: Meadow Brook Art Gallery, 2005), 25.

and the installation concept. On first entering the gallery, the viewer was presented with a main room, where each wall was devoted to a single photographer (figure 13). This pattern continued into the next room, which was divided in two, creating a more intimate space for the smaller works. Beginning in the main room, the viewer was presented with photographs by Burtynsky, Maisel, and the ParkeHarrisons. These were, arguably, the most visually arresting and unusual works in the exhibition in terms of scale (the images by Burtynsky and Maisel both measured over four feet in length) as well as technical approach (in the case of the ParkeHarrisons their use of the photogravure printing process is unique in the exhibition). Each photographer's work, whether represented by only three images, as was the case for Maisel, or ten, for Emmet Gowin, had its own framing system, colour co-ordinated frames were used to unite the individual images of each photographer and to create a larger pattern of display to the exhibition (figure 14). At the beginning of each photographer's work, there was a large wall panel introducing them to the viewers and describing their history of photo-making within the context of the "environmental debate" (see figure 15). From large to small, colour to toned gelatin silver, the photographs in *Imaging a Shattering Earth* were exhibited in a manner that attempts to overcome the great formal and technical differences amongst the works, by privileging their subject matter to the greater benefit of the exhibition concept.

Unlike the exhibition *New Topographics*, which was, with the exception of the Bechers' work, formally united, Baillargeon has deliberately brought together a number of photographers whose works demonstrate formal and technical differences. Baillargeon has explained away this difference by writing that: "ranging in scale from diminutive to

colossal, each print exemplifies its maker's reliance upon a synthetic, outward-looking vision. Yet for all the remoteness of their imaging strategies, these works aim to engage viewers in a collective process of soul-searching.”⁶⁷ Baillargeon attempts to connect the photographers in the exhibition, who come from different generations and points in their careers, and who employ many different techniques of photography, by calling on the language of the artist as oracle, an understanding of artists as truth-seekers for the larger culture. Words such as “vision” and “soul-searching” place these photographers in an elevated position, one which gives them the voice to speak for the world in a universalizing manner, rather than the subjective voice that most artists and photographers today acknowledge. Baillargeon gives the photographers involved the status of keepers of a collective vision without addressing the differences of approach amongst the photographers, or the subjective nature of photography itself.

Another way that Baillargeon addresses his choice to include such vastly different approaches to the photographic landscape is by structuring the exhibition into what he calls “three recurring preoccupations,”⁶⁸ explained both in the catalogue and in wall-mounted text panels. The first, referred to as “The Marks We Make,” is the scarring of the surface by human activities, and describes the works in the show by David Maisal and Emmet Gowin, works that utilize the abstract qualities of landscape. The second category is “Resource Industries,” described by Baillargeon as “the exploitation and management of natural resources,” and represented by John Pfahl's smoke stack images and Edward

⁶⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 27.

Burtynsky's *China* series. The third is titled "Exclusion Zones," referring to the state of sites so damaged by ecological disaster that they are uninhabitable, as seen in the works of David T. Hansen and David McMillan, who has for many years documented the abandoned nuclear site of Chernobyl as it degrades.⁶⁹ Baillargeon's use of didactic categories to focus the viewer's understanding is forced, as the subtlety of meaning in each photograph is subsumed below an overarching thematic convention which articulates only the focus of "environmental debate." In fact, the variation of photographic practice that has come about since the freeing of photography from modernism's universalizing project is here replaced by a theme equalling that simplifying approach.

Curatorial Approach

It is apparent in *Imaging a Shattering Earth* that the majority of its photographs do not actually look much different than the works of landscape from over thirty years ago. In fact, many of the photographers are close in age to the New Topographers, who were born mainly in the 1940's and '50's, and a number of the works in the exhibition come from the period directly following *New Topographics*. For example, the exhibition includes John Pfahl's (b. 1939) *Smoke series* of 1988-90, for which he received much critical acclaim, and David T. Hanson's (b. 1941) *Waste Land series* from 1985-86. This demonstrates that *Imaging a Shattering Earth* is as much a historical overview of landscape photography as it is a comment on the state of the "environmental debate" today. With exceptions, most

⁶⁹ Ibid., 27-31.

notably the ParkeHarrisons, the overwhelming body of work maintains the cool, neutral style of photographic modernism's legacy and raises the question: what more is there to say today? The answer lies not in the techniques and photographs themselves but in the curatorial approach to the presentation of these powerful images.

On the surface, this exhibition asks the viewer to look at images of the environment at their most denotative level, as representations of pollution, irreversible and tragic. In choosing to ignore the issues of aesthetics, of subjectivity, and the camera's gaze, Baillargeon reinforces the presentation of these works as 'truth' documents that are more about the subject addressed than about the artistry involved in their creation. When Roland Barthes, in his essay "The Photographic Message," wrote about the use of text to connote meaning in photography he could have been referring this exhibition.⁷⁰ More like a photo essay, or coffee table book published by the Sierra Club, Baillargeon's exhibition seeks to convince, to persuade with facts rather than creative fiction. In his book *Natural Visions*, about the role of photography in the twentieth-century American environmental movement, Finis Dunaway points to a similar strategy amongst environmental photographers of the past. Dunaway writes that,

... even as they celebrated the power of the camera, they did not assume that images could speak for themselves. Instead of displaying pictures in isolation, where they could evoke many possible meanings, artists and activists paired images with texts to lead viewers to particular interpretations."⁷¹

⁷⁰ Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*, ed. Vicki Goldberg (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 529-530.

⁷¹ Finis Dunaway, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xviii.

The role of supporting text to convince and to bolster an ideological position connects the exhibition to the tradition of photographic reform. By relying on the strategies of earlier environmental photography to appeal to his audience, through the combined influence of words and images, Baillargeon prevents the photographs from speaking for themselves, or allowing the viewers to find their own interpretation.

The Documentary Debate

In his exhibition essay, Baillargeon tries to position the works in the show as objective, yet artistic, a balance often attempted in the history of photography. Yet Baillargeon keeps his distance from the category of photojournalism, as if to include commercial work would taint photography's status as art. Of all the photographers chosen by Baillargeon to represent "contemporary photography and the environmental debate," none would be considered documentary photographers or photojournalists, all are artists who function as such within the art market and the institutional system of exhibitions and promotion. Baillargeon refers to the choice not to include any photojournalism in his catalogue essay, and it is most revealing of how art photography is understood from within the institution.

He writes:

Just as there are different sorts of environmental debate, there are various types of environmental photography, as neither represents a singular universal entity. Although this exhibition does not explore photojournalistic environmental photography, this genre remains a persuasive means to raise public consciousness.⁷²

⁷² Baillargeon, *Imaging a Shattering Earth*, 27.

Baillargeon, in stating that there is a difference between art photography and journalistic photography, is drawing a line between the use of social criticism in a artistic context versus its use in a journalistic setting. But it is extremely difficult to see how, in the way the exhibition has been laid out as didactic and documentary, he can justify defining the photographers in *Imaging a Shattering Earth* as photographic artists, while presenting their work as witness to the environmental debate.

Baillargeon refers to the tradition of the environmental reform movement in the catalogue and throughout the exhibition in his use of environmental rhetoric and the positioning of the photographs and photographers within the larger history of social reform. Baillargeon takes great pains to present the works in the show as “a rallying cry against the ecological degradation of our world.”⁷³ Unlike *New Topographics* exhibition, which ignored the social and political current of meaning in the photographic works, *Imaging a Shattering Earth* attempts to use the photographs in the exhibition as examples of artful activism bringing them in line with the social documentary tradition of Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, and especially W. Eugene and Aileen Smith (who, in the 1970's, documented the terrible effects of toxic waste on the people of Minamata, Japan, to whom this catalogue is dedicated).⁷⁴ Baillargeon connects the exhibition to the environmental reform movement by connecting it to past tragedies and the emotional response these narratives produce.

⁷³ Ibid., 26.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 27.

When studying the powerful impact of environmental reform photography, Finis Dunaway emphasizes that environmentalism is equally about emotions as it is about facts. Photographers, and their supporters, attempted to win both the hearts and minds of their viewers through the power of the image. As Dunaway writes:

... investing great hopes in the camera, they [environmental photographers] believed that this machine could express their feelings to a mass audience. They encouraged spectators to feel awe-inspired not in the presence of actual landscapes but in response to visual images.⁷⁵

Here, Dunaway is writing specifically of photographers such as Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter, who produced images of nature largely untouched by human development. Yet their intention to use visual culture and its emotional response, as a way to convey social and political meaning, is central to Baillargeon's approach. At the same time that Baillargeon exhibits these works within the gallery setting, elevating them to the status of high art, he attempts to connect the photographs to a larger tradition of documentary photography and to use the techniques of the social reform movement to convince viewers of the importance of environmentalism today.

This documentary understanding of the *Imaging a Shattering Earth* photographs is made apparent throughout the exhibition by Baillargeon's use of didactic panels and curatorial support materials, including a reference library on environmental disaster and climate change at the entrance to the exhibit, which present the works, first and foremost, as social documents. The photographers are represented by a large panel explaining their

⁷⁵ Dunaway, *Natural Visions*, xix.

history of photo-making, and the details which accompany any exhibition of photographs: age of photographer, hometown, location of shoot. Instead of situating their images in the larger context of photographic and art history, Baillargeon chooses to describe the work of each photographer from within the history of environmentalism. Written by Katy McCormick, as reproduced in the catalogue, these didactic panels describe the photographers through their activism, their subjects, and the political and social implications of their works. At no point is aesthetics discussed beyond its role in creating debate around the issues of environmentalism. In response to the problematic location of beauty in an image depicting environmental damage, by Emmet Gowin, McCormick writes, “this question could be posed with any number of the artists in *Imaging a Shattering Earth*; whatever the response, one cannot ignore a thing of beauty, and when that thing points at something else, then that too must be acknowledged.”⁷⁶ This response typifies the role of beauty and aesthetics in the exhibition. Reduced to a referent that points back to the social and political criticism in the photographs, aesthetics are accepted as a tool with which to reach the viewer without questioning the greater ideological function of photography.

Style and Meaning: Post-Modern Presentation

In part, Baillargeon owes a strong debt to the criticism of photographic historians and commentators, who rose to prominence in the late 1970's and 1980's, for their institutional

⁷⁶ Baillargeon, *Imaging a Shattering Earth*, 69-70.

critique of modernism and the emphasis of aesthetics over content in museums and galleries. In their recent book, *The Meaning of Photography*, Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson outline the importance of what has been termed “the *October* moment,” a period of re-evaluation in the humanities and social sciences, and most importantly art history, brought about by the influential journal of the same name, which culminated, in 1989, with the collection *The Contest of Meaning* edited by Richard Bolton.⁷⁷ They write that, “the essays Bolton assembled, like the broader critical turn they represent for us, rejected the fashioning of a discrete history for photography and turned instead to studying its ideological functions and semiotic machinations in the world at large.”⁷⁸ The importance of this critical approach was to make viewers question the underlying ideological implications of aesthetics and the role of the museum in creating a universalizing history of photography. This turn towards the ideological functions of photography in the larger world can be seen in Baillargeon's attempt to emphasize the collective social signification of the work in *Imaging a Shattering Earth*. Baillargeon attempts to draw new purpose for photography, and its viewers, in what Kelsey and Stimson refer to as the re-evaluation of a global “sense of accountability for both the images we consume and the world they represent.”⁷⁹ Unfortunately, Baillargeon's attempt to establish a higher critical purpose for photography, in keeping with the larger turn in photographic scholarship, takes the ideological turn too far by ignoring the importance of aesthetics. By doing so, Baillargeon

⁷⁷ Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson, eds., “Introduction: Photography's Double Index (A Short History in Three Parts),” *The Meaning of Photography* (New Haven: Clark Art Institute, Yale University Press, 2008), ix.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

only perpetuates the pattern of universalizing one interpretation over another, which was the very reason behind the need for institutional critique in the first place, and calls into question the same sense of accountability that Baillargeon seeks to establish for the medium.

In keeping with the changes that have occurred in photography since 1975, especially the technological advances of cameras and printing processes, not to mention the rediscovery of early techniques and methods, the photographs in *Imaging a Shattering Earth* reflect the exploration of today's photographic practices, while never straying into territory beyond the neutral paradigm of landscape photography. From the large scale prints of Ed Burtynsky's *China* series (which will be discussed in Chapter Three) to the 360-degree panoramas of Johnathan Long, and the explorations of the historical photogravures of the ParkeHarrisons, the photographs in *Imaging a Shattering Earth* reflect the multiple techniques and ways of approaching photography today. These various techniques reflect the post-modern evaluation of photography as conceptual and self-reflective and about the history of photography as much as the subject represented.

Mark Ruwedel, in his series *the Hanford Stretch, Columbia River* (1992-1993) recreates the expedition quality of nineteenth-century geographical photography by canoeing the Columbia river with a large format camera, documenting an area seemingly untouched by human development. Printed in black and white, *The Hanford Stretch* series presents a landscape that appears largely untouched by human development, except for the occasional inclusion of the expedition members and a series of electrical lines that run across the horizon in all the images, connecting the photographs to one another. In the

photographic diptych, *Hanford Town Site/A Nez Percé Meeting Place* (1992-93) the soft tones of the gelatin-silver print process renders the landscape a soft light-filled expanse of texture and organic details, marred only by the site of two, far way electrical towers. The landscape begins at the centre of a dried river bed of smooth pebbles and continues out across the rippling water to show the viewer the two opposing river banks.

Compositionally, the diptych is sophisticated, capturing the undulating shapes of rock, water, and far off hilly banks, while centred on the hazy horizon beyond the tallest tower. To emphasize their debt to nineteenth-century photographs, Ruwedel's prints are framed and titled in hand-written pencil lettering to recreate the feel of early photographic display. *The Hanford Stretch* series maintains the neutral style of modernist photography, whether referencing the photographic work of Timothy O'Sullivan or Robert Adams, most likely both. It is only by reading the accompanying panel that the viewer learns that the Hanford Stretch is considered one of the most toxic sites in the U.S., polluted by long-term plutonium production.

In a very different way, David Maisel's photographs also reference art history, the abstract painting of the post-war years can be seen as a clear influence in his large format, colour images that make up *The Lake Project* (2001-2002). Shot from high above, Maisel's aerial photographs are a visual delight made up of what, at first glance, looks like a series of drips, crackles, and splashes of colour-saturated paint. In fact, these images represent the Owens Lake Area, now dry, that once was the Los Angeles region's primary water source. Its mineral flats, which are saturated with heavy metals, are affected by heavy winds which blow up carcinogenic dust-storms, creating patterns that can only be

seen from above. The photograph *The Lake Project #9825-5* (figure 16), a modernist entitled work which, at 121.9 x 121.9 cm, is remarkably abstract. The top half is marked by subtle cracks and discolouration, with a violet gradation from light to dark. The image, divided by a gash of bright cadmium red which transitions the surface to cream and browns, is difficult to understand as a photograph because of its reference to the conventions of abstract painting and because its vibrant colours seem unlike those found in nature. These works owe a debt to the photographs of Lewis Baltz and others, who used the landscape as a minimalist canvas, rendering the discourse of modern art in photographic form. These images do not explicitly represent a direct call to social reform. Rather, they maintain a neutrality that could be read in multiple ways, were it not for the curatorial emphasis of the exhibition making clear how these images should be understood.

The post-modern exploration of photographic history is especially present in the work of Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison. Their images are distinct in the exhibition for their use of constructed imagery, performance, and the digital techniques of photoshop, combined with the historical printing method of photogravure. Made through a process of transferring a negative image to a sensitized copper plate that is then printed in the manner of intaglio printing, photogravure is little used today. The history of photogravure is linked to both the early reproduction of photographs in books and the Pictorialist movement. The photogravure technique was embraced by proponents of art photography for its soft focus and subtle tonality. Photographers such as Peter Henry Emerson, in his development of a theory of Naturalistic Photography, believed the blurred and impressionistic quality of

photogravure most similar to the way the eye sees.⁸⁰ Alfred Stieglitz used hand-pulled photogravures to promote his aestheticized vision for art photography through the publication of his magazine *Camera Work*. The ParkeHarrisons' use of the photogravure technique demonstrates an attempt to move beyond the fallacy of photographic truth and to reference the romanticism of an earlier age.

The ParkeHarrisons' unique imagery reflects surrealist influences and fantasy elements that articulate a dystopian response to the environment. In *Reclamation* (2003), a central figure looks away from the viewer towards another figure, distant under a cloud-filled sky. Their backs to the viewer, both dressed in suit and tie, the two figures attempt to pull a massive carpet of grass over the denuded earth upon which they stand. In *Burn Season* (figure 17), the figure, the white-collared every-man (performed in this series of images by Robert ParkeHarrison) walks across a burned out field towards a perfect, straight line of fire, smoke rising above it to render the sky imperceptible through the smoke, his only defence a cascade of water-filled plastic bags, shaped like tears that are strung over his body. The soft and subtle tonality of the black and white photogravure process, adds to the dream-like quality of these images, placing them at odds with the rest of the work in the show.

Baillargeon explains his choice to include the unique work of the ParkeHarrisons. He describes the photographs of the couple, represented by their 'every-man' figure as “a metaphorical surrogate for all the photographers in the exhibition, who are committed to

⁸⁰ Douglas R. Nickel, “Peter Henry Emerson: The Mechanics of Seeing,” in *The Meaning of Photography*, ed. Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson (New Haven: Clark Art Institute, Yale University Press, 2008), 62, 64.

exposing the uncertain future of our ecological universe.”⁸¹ Baillargeon gives the photographs of the ParkeHarrisons a greater importance in the show than any of the others by elevating their images to the status of emissaries of social reform. While this decision on the part of the curator is at odds with the larger framing of the exhibition as documentary and factual, it is much in keeping with the social reform movement's desire to draw on emotions as a tool of persuasion. Baillargeon's choice to include the ParkeHarrisons in the exhibition can also be understood as an attempt to reflect the complicated state of photography today, by referencing the photo-historical debate on the place of photography in art, and by adding more traditional artistry to the exhibit.

Legacy/Legitimacy

Subtitled “Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate,” *Imaging a Shattering Earth* sets out to reflect a growing tradition of environmental activism within a greater history of photo-making. The major comparison, which becomes like a subtext to the exhibit, is made between the newer exhibition *Imaging a Shattering Earth* and the landmark *New Topographics* exhibition. In fact, *Imaging a Shattering Earth* can be seen as a direct response to the *New Topographics* exhibition. The number of photographers in the show, the inclusion of a collaborative couple whose work is unique to the show, the understanding of the natural landscape in transition through human intervention, the formal and technical elements of the photographs can all be seen to reflect *New*

⁸¹ Baillargeon, *Imaging a Shattering Earth*, 28.

Topographics exhibition and, by extension, the tradition of landscape photography now firmly rooted in the aesthetic of modernism.

Baillargeon himself makes a direct comparison to *New Topographics* when he writes in the exhibition catalogue about the *Imaging a Shattering Earth* photographers:

... taking their cue from an alternative landscape tradition that evolved in the 1970's around the landmark exhibition *The New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (GEH, 1975), they reaffirm the primacy of the acculturated landscape as a timely subject of investigation. This affinity can be seen in their shared rejection of the earlier paradigm of nature as a teleological manifestation.⁸²

Baillargeon sees the photographs in the exhibition as continuing the vision of the New Topographers by rejecting the idea of nature as wilderness in favour of the “acculturated landscape.” Acculturation refers to a process of adopting the cultural traits or social patterns of another group. In Baillargeon's understanding, it is a group of photographers who adopt the cultural traits or social patterns of another group of photographers, as the *Imaging a Shattering Earth* photographers do by referencing both the aesthetic and ideological concerns of the New Topographers. By emphasizing the traditional duality between the man-altered landscape and pure wilderness, Baillargeon promotes the view of the “acculturated landscape” as worthy of investigation by aligning it to the most important landscape photography show of the contemporary era. The idea that these works are critical of the “earlier paradigm of nature,” as embodied by the Romanticism of photographers such as Ansel Adams, is central to their functioning as polemical and active agents of ideology. This attitude also reflects the values of objectivity that *New*

⁸² Ibid., 27.

Topographics tried to embody through the promotion of a neutral way of seeing the landscape, rather than dominated by romantic conventions.

This attempt to reference the recent past of landscape photography can arguably be seen as teleological in its own way, in that it reinforces the chronological structure of history. Baillargeon is trying to give the exhibition artistic legitimacy by creating a trajectory of photographic history, a new alternative canon, that leads directly to the *Imaging a Shattering Earth* exhibition. In doing so, Baillargeon has reduced *New Topographics* to its most simplistic understanding as social critique and has ignored its important contribution to photographic modernism's development of an aesthetic and the larger complicated history of landscape photography.

It is ironic that, while Baillargeon has attempted to create a connection between the two exhibitions in the form of a trajectory of landscape photography, which functions as a canon of the great works of environmentalism, he has ignored the aesthetic connection between the two exhibitions by focusing solely on the conceptual relationship. The aesthetic style of *Imaging a Shattering Earth* refers directly to *New Topographics*, which became, as many have argued, the dominant approach to landscape photography.⁸³ Yet Baillargeon, in his attempt to bring context and content to the forefront of *Imaging a Shattering Earth*, uses the aesthetic neutrality of these images not to render meaning impartial but to present the images as a form of documentary truth.

What is apparent when viewing the works in *Imaging a Shattering Earth* is the reliance on the part of its photographers on a certain formal neutrality, which I discussed

⁸³ Garner, *Disappearing Witness*, 166.

in detail in Chapter One. In her recent survey of contemporary photography, Charlotte Cotton refers to this as “deadpan aesthetic.”⁸⁴ She points out that this aesthetic style became especially popular as a way to represent landscape and architectural subject matter and as a way to raise social and political issues carefully. Cotton writes:

Polemical narratives are raised for the viewer, but it appears as if this information is being given impartially. Deadpan photography often acts in this fact-stating mode: the personal politics of the photographers come into play in their selection of subject matter and their anticipation of the viewer's analysis of it, not in any explicit political statement through text or photographic style.⁸⁵

The photographs of Johnathan Long exemplify the “dead-pan aesthetic” of the majority of landscape photography today. Shot from a vantage point that is at eye level, Long's 360-degree panoramic works embody what *New Topographics* curator William Jenkins might have argued is an absence style.⁸⁶ Scientific in detail and method, composited of many different negatives, Long's images document the damage brought about by human activity, especially resource extraction. *Broken Trees* from 2002 (figure 18) is perfectly composed, with the sky balanced above the far distant green trees while a bog of broken trees reflects the orange hues of mining by-product residue in the foreground. The vast scale of the image renders the landscape destruction all-encompassing, while the balance of colours and shapes is harmonious. Along its length, the horizon is broken by sharp vertical tree

⁸⁴ Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, 1st ed., World of art (New York, N.Y: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 81.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 87-88.

⁸⁶ Jenkins, “Introduction,” 6.

“...to elect to make pictures that look a certain way is a stylistic decision, even if the effort is to subdue the intrusion of style in the picture.”

stumps that make the image more dynamic by introducing figure-like forms across the horizon. Long's work reflects the traditional view of landscape photography as without artifice, as a truthful document, while his process reflects the understanding of photography as a mechanical eye. So seemingly objective, the landscape appears to the viewer as perfectly natural, without raising questions about the choices that were made by the photographer to achieve these results. Long's "personal politics" are communicated by his choice to use such a technically exact method of photographing and through his choice to compose the image in such a careful and controlled way. The image, while seeming impartial, articulates the values of scientific neutrality so completely that it is difficult to read any deeper meaning. The artifice of the "dead-pan aesthetic" renders the image both aesthetically and conceptually neutral, waiting for the interpretation of greater meaning.

Landscape and Environment/Environmentalism

Central to my concern is the exploration of the evolving understanding of landscape. How has the idea of landscape changed so that it encompasses the concept of environment? In his book *Living in the Landscape*, philosopher Arnold Berleant describes the complicated and evolving understanding of the terms 'landscape' and 'environment' and 'nature'. He concludes that recent philosophical and scientific developments have challenged long held definitions and opened up these terms to scrutiny. Increasingly, "landscape aesthetics, understood most generally, may be thought of as being synonymous with the aesthetics of

environment or with the aesthetics of nature.”⁸⁷ In an attempt to define what environment is, Berleant writes that “to think of environment in the usual sense as surroundings suggests that it lies outside the person, that it is a container within which people pursue their private purposes.”⁸⁸ Berleant challenges the idea that environment is a thing that it is made up of our physical surroundings. By rejecting the dualism of this notion, Berleant argues that human and environment are inextricably interrelated. From this phenomenological position, which has become a dominant theoretical approach in the arts and humanities today, the understanding of ‘the environment’ as a separate empirical entity, no longer holds much relevance in the study of landscape. Rather, environment must be understood as a culturally formed idea, which directly informs the greater “environmental debate.”

Environmentalism is both a social movement, in which people act together to protest political decisions which affect the planet, and an ideology which proposes that the interrelatedness of humanity and nature is fundamental to a moral and ethical philosophy of individuals. Today, with the concept of climate change largely accepted as valid, these issues are prominent in everyday culture through the news, television, and film as well as in scientific and artistic communities. Berleant sees the response of the public to the ethical and philosophical questions raised by pollution, the consumption of resources, and climate change as driven by the personal response to the idea of environment.⁸⁹ He writes

⁸⁷ Arnold Berleant, *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 33.

⁸⁸ Arnold Berleant, ed., “Art, Environment and Experience,” in *Environment and the Arts: Perspectives on Environmental Aesthetics* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub, 2002), 6.

⁸⁹ Berleant, *Living in the Landscape*, 1.

that, “a growing awareness of the fragility of environment and the loss of cherished landscapes has awakened many people to the transcendent values of nature.”⁹⁰

The value of nature, or environment, or landscape, rests in its importance as an irreplaceable commodity that is not quantifiable but is integral to individual human existence and quality of life. W.J.T. Mitchell has written that,

... as a medium for expressing value, it [landscape] has a semiotic structure rather like money, functioning as a special sort of commodity that plays a unique symbolic role in the system of exchange-value. Like money, landscape is good for nothing as a use-value, while serving as a theoretically limitless symbol of value at some other level.⁹¹

This value, which grows with the understanding that there are limits to the environment, that the environment is not continuously renewable, plays a role not only in our philosophical, moral, and social systems, but also in our economic system. As pictured in the photographs of *Imaging a Shattering Earth*, environment also represents a literal commodity upon which our capitalist system relies for growth. Just as humans can be understood as a commodity, embodied in a work force that functions to create wealth through production of goods in our capitalist economic system, the environment is a great source of wealth. The resources of the environment has a two-fold meaning: it is the foundation of our commodity system and it functions as an idea, a “symbolic value” that represents for humanity the health and prosperity of all.

One of the ways that this exhibition has declared its allegiance to the environmental

⁹⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁹¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape,” 14.

movement is by the inclusion of an essay by the prominent environmentalist Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. In his essay, originally published in *Vogues Hommes International* (fall/winter 2004/05), Kennedy writes, “I do not believe that we should preserve nature for nature's sake. We must preserve nature because it is the infrastructure of our communities. When we destroy nature, we destroy the basis of our economy.”⁹² In making this statement, Kennedy is addressing the “man-altered landscapes” in these images, representations of the resource-based economic system that today is global in scope. Rather than argue that nature deserves to be preserved for its own intrinsic values, as was promoted by the early environmentalists Henry David Thoreau and John Muir who saw the untouched wilderness as intrinsically beautiful and human intervention on the landscape as ugly, Kennedy appeals directly to the reality of our economic and environmental situation today.⁹³ Kennedy, in an attempt to balance the importance of nature versus economy, argues that both are intrinsically tied to each another. Positioning environmentalists as the ultimate pragmatists, who appreciate that “we cannot treat the planet as if it were a business in liquidation, squandering the birthright of all future generations,” Kennedy uses the languages of economics and investment banking to appeal to a larger audience when he writes: “we must stop invading our principal and learn to live off its abundant interest.”⁹⁴ This perspective on the environment is not politically radical or controversial. Kennedy presents the environment as a renewable economic resource

⁹² Robert F. Kennedy, “Our World is Changing,” in *Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography And the Environmental Debate*, ed. Claude Baillargeon (Rochester, MI: Meadow Brook Art Gallery, 2005), 8.

⁹³ Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2002), 5.

⁹⁴ Kennedy, “Our World is Changing,” 9.

that needs to be protected so that it can be continually drawn upon for the benefit of humankind. In this conservative understanding of environment, Kennedy attempts to appeal to the unconvinced by relying on their desire to maintain the status quo.

Baillargeon's choice to include the writings of Kennedy, a prominent environmentalist and public speaker, supports his focus on the social meaning of photography and the persuasion of words and images. Kennedy's emphasis on the value of environment is at the heart of the *Imaging a Shattering Earth* exhibition, which privileges landscapes that are seen as less than beautiful, and attempts to use the value of art to persuade viewers of the need for environmental protection.

The photographers included in *Imaging a Shattering Earth* are part of a larger movement of people who act as witnesses to the pollution and destruction of ecosystems, habitats, and communities through the acts of industry and human development. Yet, they are first and foremost artists who use the conventions of photography to create powerful images, even when their subject matter is less than desirable. Relying on techniques new and old, and formal compositional conventions that have come down from the tradition of landscape art and modern photography, the photographers of *Imaging a Shattering Earth* depict 'the environment', as characterized by the exhibition title, as spaces we should to protect. The photographs are of environments which do not conform to a traditional way of understanding nature. In understanding how the photographs in *Imaging a Shattering Earth* work to challenge traditional values about environment and beauty, it is useful to look at again environmental aesthetics. Arnold Berleant writes:

In the West it is only since the eighteenth century that landscape has been recognized as having significant aesthetic value. Since then there has been a gradual process of recognizing and preserving scenic views and areas whose importance lies apart from any industrial or commercial value they might possess.⁹⁵

Berleant equates this historical understanding of environment, which privileged the aesthetic value of parks and landscapes above other criteria, with the traditional attitude towards art. Like objects, which were once isolated in museums and placed apart based on their aesthetic values, environments were understood by Western culture as valuable for their aesthetic otherness, separate from the physical space of human beings, rather than understood as part of everyday existence.⁹⁶ The photographs in *Imaging a Shattering Earth* bring to the museum images of environments that have been primarily ignored and introduce an aesthetic appreciation for these places through the techniques of photography. The function of these photographs is both to expose the viewer to an alternate environment from the one humans regularly see and to challenge the understanding of environment as legitimate only through the privileging of pristine wilderness.

Berleant argues in defence of environments that are under-appreciated, such as “man-altered” landscapes, by re-defining the definition of what constitutes environmental appreciation and explaining the value of these places. He writes:

The aesthetics of environment must also recognize landscapes that damage us in various ways: by destroying the identity of place and our affection for places, by disrupting architectural coherence, by imposing sounds and smells that may injure as well as repel, or by making our living environment hostile and even uninhabitable from air, water or noise pollution. Part of their criticism is aesthetic: an offence to

⁹⁵Berleant, “Environment and the Arts,” 9- 10.

⁹⁶Ibid., 10.

our perceptual sensibilities and an immediate encounter with negative value. The significance of environmental appreciation thus becomes greater at the same time as its scope increases. No longer confined to the safe precincts of gardens and parks, the boundaries of the aesthetic must be redefined to encompass all of nature, city as well as countryside, factory as well as museum, desert wastes and urban wastelands as well as mountain-rimmed fjords.⁹⁷

This understanding of environment attempts to create a broader context for the appreciation of landscape and culture, and the forces which act on each, from within the broadened definition of environmental aesthetics. His call to re-evaluate the definition and understanding of environment seems particularly relevant when considering the work of the photographers in *Imaging a Shattering Earth*, who attempt to bring aesthetic consideration to landscapes that are largely overlooked by employing the conventions of photography. It is unfortunate that Baillargeon's curatorial approach largely ignores aesthetics, and the discussion of what constitutes beauty, a much needed discussion if we, as a culture, are to reconcile the ever-changing state of the environment with our expectations for the future of the planet.

In this thesis as a whole, I argue that it is the art institution, influenced by photo-historical tradition and discourse, that has defined the perception of landscape photography as we know it today. By naturalizing the aesthetic legacy of landscape photography and the understanding of photography as modernist, the art institution has shaped and influenced the cultural valuing of environment. While in recent years there has been a turn away from formalism, and the conceptual understanding of photography has become dominant, as

⁹⁷ Ibid., 13.

seen in the exhibition *Imaging a Shattering Earth*, aesthetics remain as important as ever. *Imaging a Shattering Earth* demonstrates how changing understandings of landscape and environment, not to mention aesthetics, must be interrogated, especially if the cultural understanding of current environmental transformations are to be reconciled with our expectations of nature as a continuing social, cultural and economic resource.

Chapter Three

The Burtynsky Landscape in Context: Formal Aesthetics Versus Social Critique

In the first two chapters, I explored the influence of curatorial practice on the interpretation of landscape photography. In my discussion of the most influential landscape photography exhibition of the contemporary period, *New Topographics*, and the recent photographic explorations of the environment in *Imaging a Shattering Earth*, I have analysed the institutional focus to demonstrate how a certain way of seeing the landscape has come to be prominent. With *New Topographics*, the curatorial emphasis was on the stylistic neutrality of the photographs, their aesthetic formalist function. In the case of *Imaging a Shattering Earth*, the conceptual function of the photographs, the photographic representation of environmentalism, was the main focus. Although these two ways of seeing may appear diametrically opposed to each another, what links them is their relationship to the discourses of photographic history. United by a historical understanding of landscape photography as objective, these photographs straddle the divide between truth and fiction.

While each exhibitions developed a very different thesis, the aesthetic connection between the two remains strong. The legacy of *New Topographics*, framed by the visual language of formalism, is today so prominent that it dominates the photographic landscape, even when the conceptual understanding of the environment has evolved. Why

is this so? What are the formal elements of the contemporary landscape photograph, and how do they function to naturalize this way of seeing? As landscape has come to be better understood not as something separate from human life but as intertwined, as valuable not only for aesthetic beauty but for its holistic relationship to society's values and habits, these questions have become more important than ever. One answer lies in the discursive relationship between the art institution, the subject matter, and the photographer.

In this chapter, I will explore the relationship between photographer, subject, and exhibition by focusing on the work of Edward Burtynsky. Represented in *Imaging a Shattering Earth* by four works from his *China* series, Burtynsky has become well known for his large-scale landscape photographs. In the art world, Burtynsky is internationally renowned for his technical skill and formal style but also for the social implications of his work. Depicting examples of resource extraction, industrialization, and the effects of material consumption on the planet, his photographs straddle a divide that exists in photography between art and documentary interpretation. The categorization of photography, as art or as document, raises the question of how the interpretation of photography has been, and continues to be, constructed and prompts the question: who decides the meaning of a photograph?

Found in collections all over the world, Burtynsky's images, influenced by the formalist aesthetic of *New Topographics* and other important photographic exhibitions of the modern period, are firmly entrenched in the art museum. While Burtynsky's focus is on landscapes transformed by industrial development, what is so striking about his images is their embodiment of the aesthetic values of modernist photography. Often criticized for

what can be seen as the over aesthetization of environmental disasters, the response to Burtynsky's work has been mixed. His own comments on the meaning of his photographs, influenced by the understanding of photography as objective and as personal expression, are often contradictory. Most recently, through a series of media exposures, including his 2005 TED Prize and subsequent TEDTalk, Burtynsky has become more vocal about the critical function of his work, aligning himself more with the tradition of photographer as social reformer. In this chapter, I will analyse the work of Ed Burtynsky, emphasizing his representations of China, and the discourses surrounding his images, to reveal the role of landscape photography in the museum today and to demonstrate how changing attitudes to aesthetics and social criticism in photography are reflected in his work.

Burtynsky and 'China'

Burtynsky visited China several times over a five year period, starting in 2000, and created a body of work exploring the industrialization of the fastest growing economy in the world. Visiting factories, mines, recycling centres, and shipyards, Burtynsky photographed the contemporary state of manufacturing from resource extraction to final product. These images, taken together, create a narrative, using China as a case study, which speaks about the larger global practice of industrial manufacturing. Burtynsky is represented in the *Imaging a Shattering Earth* exhibition by four chromogenic digital prints from his *China* series (figure 19). Three of the images depict massive coal piles, reservoirs used in China's steel industry, while the fourth is from the Three Gorges Dam

project. Largely monochromatic, the scale of these enormous images overwhelms the eye, depicting industrial activity on a massive scale.

In *Tanggu Port, Tianjin, China* from 2005 (figure 20), the viewer gazes from above on an expanse of coal that fills the bottom half of the frame and recedes toward the horizon, giving context to the textured mass of black rock by showing the roads and machinery used to shift and transport the enormous quantities of coal. Shot on an overcast day, the favoured lighting condition of the meticulous landscape photographer, there are no harsh shadows or bleached out spots to mar the exacting details of each lump of coal and mound of black. Back they go, spreading out from one large expanse to individual hills, out to the horizon, hazy and smudged (from coal dust or a rolling mist?), capped by a band of grey sky across the top of the image. Dotted by concrete patches peeking through, and cranes working on the horizon, the only bit of colour is found in a red van driving out of the frame, its human driver miniscule in relation to so much energy and power.

Bao Steel #7, Shanghai, China (figure 21) is shot from the ground, if indeed this is the ground not just a flattened surface of black coal artificially creating the land surface. Nestled in between two enormous mounds of coal that recede on each side out of the frame, beyond view, the camera shoots straight ahead, capturing in detail everything from a single piece of coal in the foreground all the way to the far away coal hills, reminiscent of ancient rock formations weathered by the elements. The landscape is at once familiar and alien, a cross between the arid terrain of the North American west and the surface of the moon. The only element of human presence is found in the form of a rusting metal fence, breaking the image at the centre, neatly dividing the foreground and background

and adding some colour, in the form of brown rust and red arabic numerals that measure across the black and grey of the coal-scape. The sky, a perfect neutral cloud screen of grey, resembling the white of an abstract canvas, breaking the texture and colour of the scene with its flatness.

The third image, *Bao Steel #8, Shanghai, China* (figure 22), is even more spectacular in its use of surface texture, light, and perspective. Shot from the ground, a flat surface gridded with squares leads towards the central form of the photograph: a pyramid of the blackest coal, set off against a hazy grey sky through which smoke stacks and buildings can only just be discerned. The light, a golden colour made diffuse by the hazy air produced by smoke stacks, shines off the surface of the squares that are still visible through the coal smut which has darkened the grid lines giving perfect harmony. Symmetry is central to this image; it is as balanced as any Renaissance painting. Shot from the centre of the grid, which leads the eye to the apex of the pyramid, the monumental scene is like a present-day Giza. Off to each side, separated by industrial fencing, pyramidal forms of coal recede away from the viewer, disappearing behind the central form, towards the hidden workings of the steel factory.

The fourth image differs from the others. While in China, Burtynsky gained permission to visit and photograph the Three Gorges Dam project, a billion-dollar, multi-year project to harness the hydro-electric power of China's largest river, the Yangtze. In *Three Gorges Dam Project, Dam #2, Yangtze River, China* (figure 23), we see the huge expanse of the Yangtze in the process of transformation from river to flooded expanse. In one single, panoramic image, the viewer can scan from one side of the river bank to the

other. Yet the image is not one of pastoral nature but rather shows the working progress of building the largest hydro-electric dam in the history of the world. The eye moves from the left side where the river bank has clearly been reshaped for the purpose of development, to the middle of the river where a massive concrete structure rises from the water, the beginnings of the dam itself, an artificial island riddled with trailers and electrical lines reaching forward in the composition. To the far distant right, it is just possible to make out small buildings (homes perhaps?) on the other side. This site reminds the viewer that the landscape is made by human choices and actions. There is nothing in this photograph that has not been altered by human action, except perhaps, the hazy far-away mountains that line the distant horizon and even then, they could be sites of agriculture and mining. The soft early light, hazy and diffuse, and the green and still water of the river, render the image as awe-inspiring as any nineteenth-century seascape. Instead of a ship or a flotilla at sea, the viewer sees a concrete dam and all the detritus associated with the construction of this permanent and dominant structure.

Over a number of visits, Burtynsky was able to photograph not only the industrial and infrastructural undertaking that is the Three Gorges Dam, but also the social impact of the project. In the surrounding region of the Yangtze River, where people have lived for centuries, over a million people have had to be resettled to accommodate the flood region of the dam. As part of his larger project, Burtynsky also photographed the human impact of industrial development by depicting the villages of people displaced, where they continue to work and live in the rubble of their homes, waiting for relocation. In *Three Gorges Dam Project, Dam #2, Yangtze River, China*, there is only a hint of the human

presence, as workers walk across the surface of the island and swing high on cranes, but the overall project itself is ripe with connotations of human progress, technological determinism, and the practical and devastating impact of energy on the day-to-day lives of millions of people.

These images are Burtynsky at his best: they demonstrate his great skill in composition, in the technical process of photography, and in capturing the tension between formal aesthetics and critical content. His seductive use of the conventions of western landscape art, such as an emphasis on scientific perspective, balance, and proportion, instantly strikes the viewer as familiar and gives visual legitimacy to his images. Burtynsky does not shy away from the formal language of art but embraces the aesthetic tradition at the same time playing up photography's inherently scientific qualities, using lighting, large format printing and digital technology to his advantage. The techniques of art and photography so prominent in Burtynsky's work point to the difficulties in the understanding of documentary photography today.

The most prominent conflict in Burtynsky's work arises from his great strength as an technical artist, his infusion of formal aesthetics into the documentary language echoes the methods of earlier landscape photographers. Formally, in works such as *Bao Steel #8, Shanghai, China*, the photographic approach of *New Topographics* exhibition can be observed primarily in the pretence of objectivity. There is a sense that the photographer is documenting a place *as it exists*, even if, as curator William Jenkins explained in his *New Topographics* catalogue essay, the approach of neutrality is a stylistic decision.⁹⁸ Jenkins

⁹⁸ William Jenkins, "Introduction," in *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*:

understood the photographs in *New Topographics* to be documentary in purpose, united by style and “non-judgemental connotation,”⁹⁹ reflecting the values of science rather than art, yet presented in an art museum. It is telling that he felt, at that time, the need to make clear, “... that 'New Topographics' is not an attempt to validate one category of pictures to the exclusion of others.”¹⁰⁰ While this may have been Jenkins' intention, to create an approach to landscape free of greater social or political meaning, the formation of a particular way of seeing has become a well accepted approach to landscape.

This approach stands out in Burtynsky's photography, and in the body of work shown in *Imaging a Shattering Earth* more specifically. In curating *Imaging a Shattering Earth*, Claude Baillargeon attempts to protect himself, and the photographers, from accusations of universalizing a way of seeing, as in modern photography. He notes that “maintaining the appearance of neutrality and authorial self-effacement is not a shared concern with the present group of artists,”¹⁰¹ yet he acknowledges that “the selected works (with the notable exception of those by Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison) share a propensity for objectified representation.”¹⁰² Baillargeon's careful wording demonstrates that his contemporary perspective on landscape photography, influenced by the concept of personal expression and environmental activism, remains rooted in the understanding of photography as neutral and objective. In his attempts to reject this view, Baillargeon is

Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, Henry Wessel, Jr (Rochester, N.Y: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975), 5.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Claude Baillargeon, *Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography And the Environmental Debate* (Rochester, MI: Meadow Brook Art Gallery, 2005), 27.

¹⁰² Ibid., 26.

acknowledging the central importance of objectivity to this form of photography.

Particularly, in his presentation of photographers such as Burtynsky, arguably one of the most famous disciples of *New Topographics* style, Baillargeon himself is continuing the tradition of privileging objectivity in the photograph. Over the thirty years that separate these two exhibitions, landscape photography has continued to be understood as objective and documentary in function and nature, limited or transformed by the parameters of truth.

The Documentary Question

The concepts of documentary photography, and photographic truth, are central to this study as landscape photography has always functioned, on some level, to persuade the viewer of its factuality, naturalizing a representation of place. The privileging of objectivity in photography has been explained in many ways, and I have attempted to outline some of the approaches that scholars and thinkers have used to address this culturally loaded concept. In the introduction, I outlined the historical role indexicality has played in the study of photography. In Chapter One, I explored the modernist view of photographic truth, influenced by aesthetics and the photographer's eye. I looked at the importance of cultural context and the role of semiotics in understanding photography in the second chapter. Fundamental to this discussion is the question of whether an image has the ability to document the 'facts' accurately, or whether the subjectivity of the photographer is too dominant.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau, in her essay “Who is Speaking Thus? Some Questions About Documentary Photography,” from 1986, distances photography from this debate by pointing out that the idea of 'documentary' is a historical construct, which is constantly being redefined by changing cultural values and definitions.¹⁰³ She writes that “to speak of documentary photography either as a discrete form of photographic practice or, ... as an identifiable corpus of work is to run headlong into a morass of contradiction, confusion, and ambiguity.”¹⁰⁴ To understand the grey area that is documentary, Solomon-Godeau argues for the examination of its meaning from three perspectives: as a historical construction situated within contemporary discourses, as part of a larger system of semiotic visual codes, and from its position within the mass media *and the space of the museum*. It is this 'problem of realism', which disguises the truth in photography—that photography is never neutral.¹⁰⁵

Mark Kingwell, in his essay, “The Truth in Photographs: Edward Burtynsky's Revelations of Excess,” defines the concept of documentary photography to be subjective, based on the viewer's response first and foremost. Taking exception to the view of photographic truth as being out-there somewhere, Kingwell writes, “we might wish that there were an overarching theory of truth to sort the valid from the twisted but there is—and can be—no such theory. Every image has to take its chances in visual culture.”¹⁰⁶ Kingwell disputes the conception of landscape photography as representing a

¹⁰³ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Who is Speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography,” in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 169.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 170.

¹⁰⁶ Mark Kingwell, “The Truth in Photographs: Edward Burtynsky's Revelations of Excess,” in *China: The*

specific place and space but rather sees photography “as a machine for making worlds.”¹⁰⁷ He writes that:

photographs are not multiple depictions of some single reality, waiting out there to be cornered and cropped, and somehow regulating, even in the cornering and cropping, how/what the image means. Rather photographs offer multiple meanings. The presented image is not a reflection, or even an interpretation, of singular reality. It is, instead, the creation of a world.¹⁰⁸

Kingwell sees the ontological instability of the documentary image, and of Burtynsky's photography especially, as the only larger 'truth' available to the viewer.¹⁰⁹

The 'truth' in Burtynsky's photographs, which are at once stylistically documentary and artistically subjective, is that they confront the viewer with multiple meanings. Based on an self-referentially that is subtle, his images are often read without taking into account context, historical and contemporary discourses and the visual layering of meanings both connoted and denoted. It is exactly this naturalized artistry, the implication that the photographer was without deliberate skill, just in the right place at the right time without any true control over the scene, that confounds the reading of Burtynsky's images as either artistic landscapes or social documents. It is also this 'ontological instability' that has made Burtynsky's photographs so attractive to the art world.

By the 1990's, a time when Burtynsky's work first started to garner major attention, the documentary photograph was undergoing a major resurgence in art museums and galleries all over the world. In the wake of the popularity of constructed images, such as

Photographs of Edward Burtynsky, 1st ed. (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005), 17.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

Jeff Wall's tableaux, when photography was seen as reflecting a process of creation, both mediated and performative, the documentary photograph gained ground as an art object. Informed by the ideas of art photography and the use of the 'document' in conceptual practice, documentary images absorbed many of the ideas of the constructed image. Frits Grierstberg, in his essay, "From Realism to Reality? Documentary Photography in the Age of Post-Media," writes that through the shift from print media to exhibition space, the documentary photograph became autonomous of its meaning.¹¹⁰ With the development of new technology and printing techniques, large format colour images were produced as 'real art objects', framed and presented to an audience as isolated from their social relevance and transformed into spectacle.¹¹¹ The documentary photography of that period, as well as today, was large in scale and characterized by extreme sharpness; it was photography both as reality and as spectacle. Grierstberg points out that placing these images into a discourse of documentary obscures the great difference between this work and the social documentary photography from the period before.¹¹² He writes that "attempts ... were being made during this period ... to detach the documentary image from the tradition of narrativity and direct engagement in a different way, namely by placing certain works and oeuvres in the art historical tradition of the tableaux."¹¹³ Influenced by both the art historical canon, not to mention the art market, and the discourse of a new photographic artificiality, it would seem that by this time the original concept of social

¹¹⁰ Frits Gierstberg, "From Realism to Reality? Documentary Photography in the Age of 'Post-media'," in *Documentary Now!: Contemporary Strategies in Photography, Film and the Visual Arts*, Reflect (Rotterdam, Netherlands) (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2005), 127.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 128.

¹¹² Ibid., 129.

¹¹³ Ibid.

documentary photography was displaced by the demand, of the art institution and the buyer, for a new kind of image—one that Burtynsky's style and subject matter was well suited to create.

Landscape Art and Legacy

When discussing the way that Burtynsky's work has been constructed within the discourse of photography and the art institution, the notion of artist's legacy—the notion of the artist genius that emphasizes a natural and original way of seeing—must be considered; Burtynsky's personal vision is part of his legacy. In exhibition catalogues and reviews, Burtynsky's images are often placed in a historical relationship to earlier landscape artists as a way to demonstrate the artistic merit of his work.¹¹⁴ Comparisons are often made to nineteenth-century British Romantic painter J.W.M. Turner who, viewers are told, was responding to the transformation of a traditional society brought about by the industrial revolution.¹¹⁵ The mythologizing of Burtynsky's work, by creating a legacy based on an art historical progression, places Burtynsky's photography within the art canon and solidifies his importance in the history of art.

Yet there is some truth to the claims that Burtynsky's images share certain formal values with nineteenth-century landscape art as his works emphasize, through scale and composition, the monumental aspect of environment, whether the majesty of the tire pile

¹¹⁴ Jonathan Bordo, "The Wasteland – An Essay on Manufactured Landscapes," *Material Culture Review* 63, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 92.

¹¹⁵ Christopher Young, *Industry and Entropy: Edward Burtynsky, Mark Ruwedel, Robert Smithson* (Reading, PA: Freedman Gallery, Albright College, 2003), 4.

or the asymmetrical elegance of the nickel tailings stream. These images reference much of what is familiar in landscape art, embodied by the eighteenth-century conceptualizations of picturesque and sublime, and, in doing so, help the viewer enter into an image and subject that would be less than appealing to most. It also makes his work very easy to write about, as every art historian and critic—steeped in the study of the Romantic landscape as we are today—has easy access to the language and forms of such work. This discursive legacy is no coincidence: Burtynsky is doing exactly what other landscape photographers have done before, looking to the history of art and photography for inspiration and articulating the self-reflexivity of the contemporary artist.

Burtynsky on Burtynsky

Burtynsky's legacy has been bolstered by the many speaking engagements and interviews he has given about his work. Acting as his own best advocate, Burtynsky promotes his work as part of the history of photography by tailoring his talks to suit the audience; on one hand, using the same discourse and language of modernism that has been part of the dominant way of understanding photography and, on the other, employing the discourse of social reform and environmentalism to articulate the function of his work.¹¹⁶ It is in the straddling of these two traditions in photography that one begins to understand the way that photography, and photographers, today remain burdened by institutional discourses

¹¹⁶ Edward Burtynsky, "Edward Burtynsky: TED Prize wish: Share the story of Earth's manufactured landscapes," http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/edward_burtynsky_on_manufactured_landscapes.html, February 2005, http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/edward_burtynsky_on_manufactured_landscapes.html accessed March 3rd, 2009.

and historical ways of seeing.

Without placing undue emphasis on the artist's intention, because of the many factors that influence meaning in a photograph, including curatorial presentation, it is valuable to interrogate the photographer's personal values, as a way to understand the implications of these values on the interpretation of photographs today. In an interview with the art writer John K. Grande, published in 2007, Burtynsky displays a very complicated relationship to the aesthetic and environmental implications of his work. When Grande connects Burtynsky's work to nineteenth-century landscape photography of Timothy O'Sullivan, and others, Burtynsky responds by saying: "Those early travel photographers were not pretentious or mannerist, just openly reacting to stimuli and capturing their subjects as they were."¹¹⁷ About his own work, specifically the series *Densified Scrap Metal*, from 1997, Burtynsky says:

When I first began the series it was more like a pure documentary project, but as I worked through the process, I noticed that at certain distances, the object's usage remained apparent, an oil drum or a filter ... yet it also resonated with an abstract quality that made an intriguing visual statement as well, without losing sight of its origins.¹¹⁸

Between these two quotes, it is clear that Burtynsky sees his own work in contrast to the documentary style of earlier photographers who were just "capturing their subjects as they were." Burtynsky echoes the modernist belief that being untrained in art somehow made the earlier photographers images more 'pure.' John Szarkowski, in *The*

¹¹⁷ John K Grande, "Manufactured Landscapes: Edward Burtynsky," in *Dialogues in Diversity: Art from Marginal to Mainstream* (Pari: Pari Publishing, 2007), 82.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

Photographer's Eye, refers to these nineteenth-century photographic amateurs as “artistically ignorant.” Szarkowski develops a mythic legacy for these early practitioners when he writes that, “if photography was a new artistic problem, such men had the advantage of having nothing to unlearn.”¹¹⁹ This modernist view, of the neutrality of the early photographic tradition, as promoted by John Szarkowski and others, falls within the language and beliefs of modernism which emphasized the formal element of photography above its cultural context, in this case the photographer's exposure to art. In articulating the pure documentary project as formed by a reaction to stimuli, Burtynsky is aligning his work with the modernist view of photography. Yet, Burtynsky takes this modernist analysis further by treating his subject simultaneously with both a documentary and formalist view, echoing the view of photography that was promoted by the New Topographers, such as Robert Adams,¹²⁰ who emphasized the abstraction of his compositions, their form, over 'The Thing Itself'.

For Szarkowski, writing in *The Photographer's Eye*, 'The Thing Itself' marks the ontological meaning of the photograph. Szarkowski describes 'The Thing Itself' as some kind of Promethean struggle between photographer and photography, in which the photographer must come to terms with “the actual.”¹²¹ This learning process aims to see the world as an artist and to anticipate and clarify its greatest works. According to Szarkowski, the photographer “learned also that the factuality of his pictures, no matter

¹¹⁹ John Szarkowski, “Introduction,” in *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), u.p.

¹²⁰ see Chapter 1, page 19 for quotation by Adams & nbsp; Jenkins, “Introduction,” 7.

¹²¹ Szarkowski, “Introduction,” n.p.

how convincing and unarguable, was a different thing than the reality itself.”¹²² Burtynsky acknowledges that the factuality of his pictures, tempered by his personal vision, is different than reality. In the keeping with Szarkowski's understanding of photography, Burtynsky seems to be suggesting that he, as an artist, both reacts to his surroundings, as an untrained nineteenth-century photographer might, *and* constructs his images based on aesthetic decisions, for instance “an abstract quality” in composition. This interview demonstrates the important legacy of modernist photographic discourse on Burtynsky and his understanding of photography as rooted in a personal vision based on interpretation and selection.

Burtynsky's response to his larger subject, the environment, reveals much about his relationship to his work's social meaning. In the same interview Burtynsky tells Grande that:

ultimately, as artists, we are involved in some form of communication. I am always interested in keeping the channels of communication open, so it is not hermetically sealed, not so coded that you have to have the inside track to understand what it is. Making it so that it is challenging our normal perceptions of the landscape. A way to say: Here is a new landscape.¹²³

In this statement about his work, Burtynsky seems to be suggesting that he wants his work to communicate, but also to remain free of a specific meaning, to act as a general challenge to tradition, a new way of seeing landscape, rather than communicate a particular message. When asked if it is liberating to express ideas, Burtynsky replies:

¹²² Ibid., n.p.

¹²³ Grande, “Manufactured Landscapes,” 78.

Art does not provide an answer. It is far more complex than that. It is political. It is scientific. It is a whole series of layered meanings. What art can now do is present an individual perception of what is actually going on. One actually begins to see things and understand the world in a way that clarifies in ways that words cannot. The object is not to be “liberated” it is to simply show what exists.¹²⁴

Burtynsky, in interpreting his images, remains firmly and carefully located in the language of photographic modernism. The articulation of his objective cannot be more clear.

Burtynsky wishes to “show what exists” filtered through this own personal interpretation. By suggesting that his work claims the status of photographic truth as well as being a personal vision of an artist, it appears that Burtynsky's construction of himself as art photographer is at odds with communicating a specific message in his work. Just as nineteenth-century landscape photography was later positioned by modernist discourse both as a neutral document and aesthetic object, Burtynsky wants to be understood as an artist concerned first of all with truth and beauty before a message of social activism. Yet, by looking at his recent artist statement for *China: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*, a different position can be discerned: it reveals Burtynsky the environmentalist, who has a parallel practice of social activism, dominant within the discourse of environmental reform.

In recent talks about his work, including his 2005 TED Prize acceptance speech, Burtynsky has presented himself as an environmentalist concerned with issues of global sustainability.¹²⁵ In his 2005 essay on Burtynsky's *China* series, Mark Kingwell wrote that, “his newest works, and the discourse offered alongside them, strike a much more obvious

¹²⁴ Ibid., 80.

¹²⁵ TED.com, “Edward Burtynsky: Ted Prize wish: Share the story of Earth's manufactured landscapes,” http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/edward_burtynsky_on_manufactured_landscapes.html, March 9, 2009.

political note; he has put his environmental-activist cards on the table.”¹²⁶ In his artist statement for the book *China*, Burtynsky articulates a more socially concerned analysis of his work, one that addresses the ecological impact of the subject depicted, and its global implications, rather than one focused on artistic subjectivity or aesthetics. He writes of the five years of shooting in China:

The voyages and resulting images I made during these years were as much about my personal need to understand the ecological events unfolding on our planet as they were about the powerful force China is now bringing to bear upon how the world does its business. In my view, China is the most recent participant to be seduced by western ideals—the hollow promise of fulfillment and happiness through material gain. The troubling downside of this is something that I am only too aware of from my experience of life in a developed nation. The mass consumerism these ideals ignite and the resulting degradation of our environment intrinsic to the process of making things should be of deep concern to all. I no longer see my world as delineated by countries, with borders, or language, but as 6.5 billion humans living off a precariously balanced, finite planet.¹²⁷

This statement is at odds with Burtynsky's earlier commentaries about his work. In this serious description of the ecological effects of global development, Burtynsky makes a moral and ethical criticism of China's continued “western ... material gain.” From this statement alone, it would be easy to come to the conclusion that the photographer, in his personal quest to understand, is a social documentarian, seeking to educate and enlighten through his work. The earnest appeal to a global consciousness and morality is in keeping with the work of social reformers of the past, who sought to engage with their audience in communicating a specific message of concern for the environment. Ironically, Burtynsky's

¹²⁶ Kingwell, “The Truth in Photographs,” 18.

¹²⁷ Edward Burtynsky, “Artist Statement,” in *China: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*, 1st ed. (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005), 7.

interview with John K. Grande, quoted earlier in this chapter, took place just after the book *China*, with this artist statement, were published.¹²⁸ Contradictions suddenly appear in Burtynsky's self-identification as an artist on one hand, in his interview by an art critic, and as an environmentalist on the other, in his artist statement published in a book for general distribution (granted, as an art book). Just as presentational context and curatorial interpretation influence the apparent meaning of a photograph, Burtynsky's self-identification as an artist or a documentarian is affected by the context in which his work is discussed. Why cannot these two aspects of photography be reconciled? What is at the root of the tension between the role of artist and social reformer that is made so apparent in the words and work of Edward Burtynsky?

Critical Practice or Political Act?

In her 1989 essay "Living with Contradictions: Critical Practices in the Age of Supplside Aesthetics," Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes about the complex relationship between photography, the art market, and political activism. Solomon-Godeau uses the term "critical practice," rather than *political or social practice*, as the identifier for post-modern photography, such as Sherri Levine's photographic appropriation or Cindy Sherman's use of the iconic film still, that attempts to subvert the artistic status-quo from within the institution and discourse of art. Critical practice is understood to refer to art practices that

¹²⁸Grande, "Manufactured Landscapes," 76.

“work to actively break down the notion of aesthetic autonomy and to rejoin art and life.”¹²⁹ Rooted in conceptual art practice and the critique of bourgeois culture, this form of social criticism is directed at the art institution and an understanding that the critique of art is also an attack on life.¹³⁰ Of this form of art practice, so prevalent in post-modern art, Solomon-Godeau writes that:

... few contemporary artists concerned with critical practice are comfortable with the appellation political: first, because to be thus defined is almost inevitably to be ghettoized within a (tiny) art world preserve; second, because the use of the term as a label implies that all other art is not political; and third, because the term tends to suggest a politics of content and to minimize, if not efface, the politics of form.¹³¹

The importance of the “politics of form” in contemporary art is essentially modern; it is a concern with the materiality of art, its place in society, and its discursive history. It is also a prominent part of post-modern practice, often taking the place of a deeper critique of content.

Burtynsky's photographic practice can be seen within Solomon-Godeau's understanding of critical practice. His approach to photography goes no further than necessary in politicizing his subject so as to maintain the balance between content and form, which is so integral to the modern understanding of landscape photography. The politicizing of photography, as Solomon-Godeau describes it, remains more concerned with the politicizing of art discourse in general, through the critique of history and

¹²⁹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Living with Contradictions: Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-Side Aesthetics,” *Social Text*, no. 21 (1989): 196-197.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 206.

aesthetics, rather than with its content. Instead of addressing the deeply political content of his photographs, Burtynsky's work acts as a form of critical practice, addressing the history of photography, modernist formalism, the self-referential practice of post-modern art, the social reform movement, but always from within the safety of the art institution. Even when he addresses the moral and ethical concerns of environmentalism directly, the viewer can become confused by the interplay of art historical conceptualization that is found in his work, and its presentation and interpretation in the art museum. This ambiguity towards direct political engagement, in both Burtynsky's work and, as Solomon-Godeau points out, in the larger photographic practice of contemporary photography, points to a disillusionment with the tradition of documentary.

Gierstberg places the rejection of social meaning and function in documentary within the larger cultural context of the contemporary period. He points to the new developments in media technology, including the popularity of television and the decline of photographic magazines, and the end of large-scale government funded photographic commissions. At the centre of this change is the "public's waning interest in political and social issues at the time of the 'me-generation' in the late Seventies and early Eighties. Popular forms of documentary photography that stated an opinion and were critical or informative appeared to be past their prime."¹³² Gierstberg sees the resurgence of documentary in the 1990's, which continues today, as divided between the theoretical critical postmodernist movement, as described by Solomon-Godeau, and the more traditional documentary style. These traditional photographers were "seeking new

¹³² Gierstberg, "From Realism to Reality?," 126.

platforms for their work as well as new forms of presentation within the art circuit. It is within the realm of art (the gallery exhibition space, the art centre, the biennial or the art museum) that they find the most freedom of movement to experiment, as well as a largely new audience."¹³³ These more traditional photographers looked to the work of photographic history for legitimacy and away from social or political content, "hoping for and counting on a 'new engagement' on the part of the art institutions."¹³⁴

Burtynsky's photographs can be understood from within this disengagement from political content and influenced by the self-conscious and critical methods of post-modernism. The freedom to experiment with scale, composition, and aesthetics—essentially to be an artist, and access new and appreciative audiences and markets outside the traditional purview of the documentary photographer—must have been exciting and rewarding for photographers like Burtynsky, whose images conformed to the new demand for spectacle and conceptualization in photography yet remained, in aesthetic and conception, very traditional. Burtynsky's success can be measured not only by his established place in the gallery and museum but also through the more popular form of photographic display: newspapers, books, and films.

¹³³ Ibid., 128.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

The Context of Photography: Burtynsky in Media

On Saturday, January 26th, 2008, Burtynsky's work was featured in *The Globe and Mail*, where his photographs were used to introduce a week-long series about the oil boom in the Alberta tar sands and the environmental cost of economic prosperity on the region, as well as the wider global impact of oil production on the world. While Burtynsky was introduced by *The Globe and Mail* as a successful art photographer, and given a considerable amount of promotion for his work, including the Saturday front page of a nationally syndicated Canadian newspaper, his images were supported by captioning which significantly alter their more ambiguous meaning in favour of a fully articulated social message of documentary photography. Illustrating an investigation into the oil industry, a subject on which he has previously exhibited in art galleries and museums, Burtynsky's photographs, presented outside the art space, read more as journalistic images in support of a point of view and less as works of art meant to communicate a "new landscape." Captions such as: "The road ahead: The making of Canada—or its undoing?"¹³⁵ act to emphasize the environmental message in his photographs and proclaim Burtynsky's work as documentary. These photographs, many in black and white instead of the colour Burtynsky usually employs, had a more didactic function than if they were viewed in a gallery through the discourse of the art institution. Advertised on the front page of the newspaper was a web-based slideshow of Burtynsky's photographs from this

¹³⁵ Jerry Johnson, ed., "Shifting Sands: How Alberta's Oil Boom is Changing Canada Forever," *The Globe and Mail*, January 26, 2008, Ottawa edition, sec. F, F12.

series, narrated by the artist.¹³⁶ Upon listening to the talk, it became clear that Burtynsky was not discussing his photographs as the personal expression of an artist but as representations of the oil fields themselves. There is no discussion of technique, or aesthetic decisions, such as lighting or composition, only a description of what was going on below the photographer as he worked, capturing what he saw. In this context of a daily newspaper, and a feature article on environmental issues, Burtynsky's work is positioned much differently than in the art gallery. Burtynsky downplays aesthetics in favour of a more ecologically focused message by placing his work outside the art venue and into the public arena, where the ambiguity of a more artistic interpretation would be out of place.

China: The Photography of Edward Burtynsky (2005), published by Steidel, the major art photography publisher, includes three essays responding to the images: by philosopher Mark Kingwell, by the art curator and current director of the National Gallery of Canada—former director of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal—Marc Mayer, and by journalist Ted C. Fishman. The book itself includes a variety of images from Burtynsky's trips to China covering the range of the series from *Three Gorges Dam* to *Recycling to Steel and Coal*. Since the book was not published in support of any particular exhibition and was meant for a larger audience than the art gallery crowd, these three essays combined present an overarching picture of how Burtynsky's work has come to be perceived outside of the gallery. As someone familiar with his work, Marc Mayer takes an intimate view of the images, describing his personal response to this new body of work.

¹³⁶ Edward Burtynsky, "Shifting Sands: Paydirt," *Globe and Mail*, *Shifting Sands*, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/v5/content/features/oilsands/index.html>, accessed April 4, 2008.

Ted C. Fishman roots his response in his experience and research on China's economic boom done while living in Shanghai, and articulates a socio-economic analysis of the subject matter. Mark Kingwell, as discussed earlier in this chapter, addresses the controversy around Burtynsky's images and attempts to articulate, or legitimize, Burtynsky's work from within the discourse of photographic history and the debate surrounding photographic truth. These essays demonstrate that the characterization of Burtynsky's work, as art or as documentary, remains ambiguous. In balancing the critical material in the book between pure art critique, personal response and journalism, the publishers have perceptively articulated the common difficulties in understanding his work.

Burtynsky's participation in the documentary film *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006), by the Canadian filmmaker Jennifer Baichwal, supports the notion of his social activism as central to his artistic purpose, but also articulates the importance of aesthetics. The film shows Burtynsky and his team as they travelled to several locations in China, from the factory to the city, recreating Burtynsky's voyage but also his images, in a moving attempt to represent the photograph in film. This homage to his work, in a complementary yet distinct medium, demonstrates how far his work has succeeded in permeating contemporary popular culture and attracting supporters to both his aesthetic language and his social cause. The popular success of Burtynsky's work is ultimately demonstrated by the momentum and support that his work has gained around the world: Burtynsky's website lists eight solo and five group exhibitions in 2009 alone.¹³⁷ While a

¹³⁷ "Edward Burtynsky [Photographic Works]," *Edward Burtynsky: Photographic Works*,

film, or a photography book, or even a newspaper article, can provide a direct way to interpret the meaning of an image, supported by texts and all their connotations, it is very difficult to control an image outside of the institutional dominance of established media. What is clear is that the curator, or editor, who places the work in context has the greatest power over the image.

Viewing in Context

The problem of context is one that directly affects the reading of Burtynsky's work and highlights the importance of the art museum as a space of controlled interpretation. Mark Kingwell, in discussing the way that Burtynsky's work is affected by its context, writes that "outside the gallery setting the works can too easily slide into the background visual culture, lose their impact, become mere ghosts of themselves."¹³⁸ He asks the reader to consider the implication of seeing one of Burtynsky's images hanging in a corporate business-class departure lounge of an airport, a place that, for Kingwell, embodies the values that Burtynsky's work critiques. Responding to his own question he writes:

at this point, though not via intention, the work has become inert or even disreputable in either of two sense: as a mere wallpaper, the sort of well meaning neutering liable to overtake any work via fashionable appropriation (a problem, let it be said, hardly unique to Burtynsky's work); or also, and worse, as slyly double avoidance-ritual, such that a sop to environmental awareness is offered and then as quickly withdrawn, or set aside, by the work's surrender to an existing logic of aesthetic appreciation.¹³⁹

<http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/>, accessed March 01, 2009.

¹³⁸Kingwell, "The Truth in Photographs," 18.

¹³⁹Ibid.

Kingwell acknowledges the importance of location in establishing context and influencing the impact of the “responsible image,” as he carefully refers to Burtynsky's photographs. Yet, the ethical struggles inherent in Burtynsky's photographs, from their aestheticizing of disaster to their appropriation by the commercial market, demonstrate to Kingwell, “the final truth of the responsible image—the specific rather than generic real—is that it can serve no purpose other than being. After that, it is up to us.”¹⁴⁰

While this argument rightly acknowledges the importance of an open reading, Kingwell's belief in the viewer's agency distances the photographer from any responsibility for the image, instead expecting the viewer to take on the responsibility of contemplation and interpretation. From this point of view, Kingwell positions Burtynsky as operating as if free of direct purpose—an artist who has no responsibility beyond image-making—someone who is outside of the “visual culture” that can so diminish the interpretation of his work. The fact remains that Burtynsky and his photographs are influenced by cultural values and aesthetic appreciation as much as any viewer. As I have argued throughout this chapter, the responsibility for an image cannot be readily simplified, but lies in the complicated relationship between the photographer, the discourses of the art institution, the context of presentation, and, perhaps, at the very last, the viewer.

Burtynsky remains a fascinating and timely photographer, and the discussions around his work, often brought about by the tensions he deliberately plays upon, are rich for study.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., 19.

His interpretation of the landscape is by no means singular, but demonstrates many of the values of art, in particular, the values and discourse of modernism. Through his work and writings, Burtynsky is taking a stand as an artist above all else. His oeuvre and his career both function to position him as artist while the subject matter of his work, deliberately balanced between traditional aesthetic and documentary techniques, demonstrates Burtynsky's sophisticated knowledge of photographic history and discourses and environmental issues. This form of critical practice demonstrates how much Burtynsky relies on the politics of form to articulate his landscapes. Questions of the nature of photographic truth, while part of the overarching history of photography, remain secondary to the importance of institutional focus. The presentation of the photographs is what, ultimately, directs the interpretation of the images. The location of Burtynsky's work in the space of the art museum places the work in opposition to the work's own didactic instrumentality. At the same time, the location in which we view his work can alter our understanding of its function and message. Ultimately, the meaning of the contemporary industrial landscape, as depicted by Burtynsky and the photographers of *Imaging a Shattering Earth*, is one complicated by histories—of landscape, of photography, and of the art institution—which present to the viewer a certain way of seeing.

Conclusion

Landscape photography is influenced by cultural and social values, as is the art institution, and its presentation in the museum directly influences the viewer's understanding of the work. In this thesis, I argue that landscape photography is made up of a complex layering of culturally derived meanings that easily become distorted by the presentation of images as solely aesthetic or documentary. To support my argument, I look to specific exhibition case studies to define the key discourses found in the presentation of landscape photography and how these discourses, including modernist formalism, social reform, aesthetics and environmentalism, have been used to define and shape the photographic landscape in the space of the museum. While landscape photography's reliance on the conventions of formalism and the historic traditions of photography needs to be acknowledged, the presentation of the work and the chosen curatorial positions also must be addressed.

This thesis analyses the influence of photographic history and art historical values on both the presentation and the interpretation of images. The study of contemporary landscape photography in the art museum is important because of the insight that can be gained into the role of the museum in communicating the values of a culture. Exploring the issues around photographic history and the role of photography in the museum demonstrates how complicated the relationship between presentation and interpretation can be. Influenced by the dominant discourses of art, rather than objective and neutral as

some curators would have it believed, landscape photography is as much culturally prescribed as the practice of exhibition-making. While it is the role of the art museum to both educate and entertain, its greatest responsibility lies in maintaining a balance between the contemporary currents in curatorial practice and art history, and in exposing these underlying values in support of the greater integrity of the work and the institution.

Chapter One addressed the important role that the discourse of photographic modernism played in introducing and promoting photography in the museum. In particular, the writings of Beaumont Newhall and John Szarkowski helped to institutionalize a very specific way of looking at photographs based on the formal qualities of the image. While this has been well established in the history of photography, this chapter looked at how these values dominated the presentation and interpretation of landscape photography, in particular the influential exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*. In this exhibition, the curator William Jenkins and the ten featured photographers, who came to be known as the New Topographers, presented landscape photography as stylistically neutral. I argue that this interpretation elevated the importance of aesthetics (and, specifically, modernist aesthetics) above the content of the photographs and neutralized the greater ecological critique inherent in the images. While the contemporary understanding of the exhibition has acknowledged the criticism of development that is integral to *New Topographics* exhibition, the dominant aesthetic formalism of the photographs nevertheless became entrenched in the representation of landscape and remains so today.

In Chapter Two, I looked to the recent exhibition, *Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate* to understand how the values of formalism and photographic modernism have continued to be important influences on the photographic landscape. While *Imaging a Shattering Earth* took a very different curatorial approach to *New Topographics*, emphasizing the importance of photography in articulating the values of environmental and social reform, the images themselves owed a great deal to the work of the New Topographers, through their use of stylistic neutrality. The exhibition takes a position against the values of formal aesthetics, but fails to acknowledge the influence of this tradition on the works themselves. Communicating the role of landscape photography as documentary, yet artistically driven, curator Claude Baillargeon distances the exhibition from any discussion of aesthetics. I argue that by ignoring the importance of aesthetics in landscape photography, the exhibition narrows the meaning of the photographs to polemical and didactic illustrations rather than the rich explorations of visual cultural that they are.

In the third chapter, I analyse the work of Edward Burtynsky, and the discourses surrounding his images, to reveal the role of landscape photography in the museum and popular media, and to demonstrate how changing attitudes towards aesthetics and social criticism in photography are reflected in his work. Represented in *Imaging a Shattering Earth* by four photographs from his *China* series, which look at the massive industrial development of that nation, Burtynsky attempts to present his work simultaneously within the discourse of art history, through his sophisticated use of the conventions of landscape art and within the context of environmentalism. Rather than directly stating that his work

is political, Burtynsky engages in a form of critical practice, in which he responds to the history of photography and its place in the museum, while relying on the conventions of formalism and stylistic neutrality. I argue that this balancing act on the part of the photographer, between art and documentary practice, aesthetics and social critique, demonstrates the difficulties inherent in representing social criticism within the art museum. Ultimately, this tension only continues the tradition of privileging aesthetics and neutrality as central to the meaning of photography.

These three chapters form a cohesive whole, addressing the impact of art and photographic history, formalist aesthetics, and the discourse of documentary truth on contemporary photography. Together, they demonstrate the difficulties of freeing photographic meaning from the cultural influence of history and the museum system. While I only briefly touched on the importance of reception in photography, its impact is evident and underlies the question: who decides the meaning of a photograph? While it is easy to point to the art institution and its importance in directing the reading of a photograph, in Chapter Three I argue that this is too simplistic an answer. One must look to the discursive relationships between the photographer, the museum, and the greater history of art and photography to understand fully the way that photography promotes a specific way of seeing the landscape. It is equally simplistic to place the responsibility for an image in the hands of the viewer. Rather, all aspects of the viewing experience must be investigated to understand more clearly the complexity of meaning. In keeping with the research that has been done in the study of art history and museum studies, I argue for the importance of both aesthetics and social context in opening up the reading of landscape

photography which is, ultimately, influenced by multiple factors.

While my discussion contributes to the understanding of photographic modernism and its impact on the rise of photography from within the museum, it raises a number of questions that could not be addressed within the scope of this thesis. How has the valuing of photographic truth and stylistic neutrality hindered the understanding of landscape photography as subjective rather than documentary in purpose? How can both formal aesthetics and social content be reconciled in exhibition practice so as not to promote a single reading?

In addition, the changing understanding of landscape needs to be considered: What are the implications of the rising engagement with landscape photography in the museum for the larger social movement of environmentalism? How does landscape photography reflect the changing relationship of humans to their environment? What influence, if any, does photography have on the understanding of landscape and the environment?

Landscape photography remains as important a practice as ever before; today it is influenced by a growing and widespread concern for the changing environment, brought about by the increasing expansion of cities and industry and by advancing technology. In landscape photography, a rich practice characterized by multiple approaches, all of which could not all be addressed here, there is a dominant concern with the picturing of what is popularly known as the 'man-altered' landscape. While landscape photography, in itself, cannot explain the growing awareness of issues of sustainability, environmentalism, and land stewardship, its increasing importance in the art institution, and the deliberate emphasis of curators and museums on an environmental interpretation, speaks loudly for

landscape photography's cultural relevance and timely appraisal.

While my thesis owes a great deal to the work of scholars, such as Rosalind Krauss, Abigail Solomon-Godeau and, most importantly, Deborah Bright, who have laid the groundwork in their critical inquiries into the role of museum in shaping the interpretation of photographs, my research points to new avenues of interest for the future. In particular, this thesis demonstrates that environmentalism remains a fruitful avenue through which to explore the representation of landscapes and the values of contemporary visual culture as well as the importance of interrogating the institutional context of viewing. The growing inter-disciplinary scholarship on landscape, including cultural and human geography, architecture, environmental studies, aesthetics and urban planning, offers new insight into the study of landscapes. In summation, this thesis points to the importance of questioning the underlying ways of understanding and framing landscape photography and, more broadly, the environment at large, where photography and nature are equally part of the human visual and cultural experience.

Figures

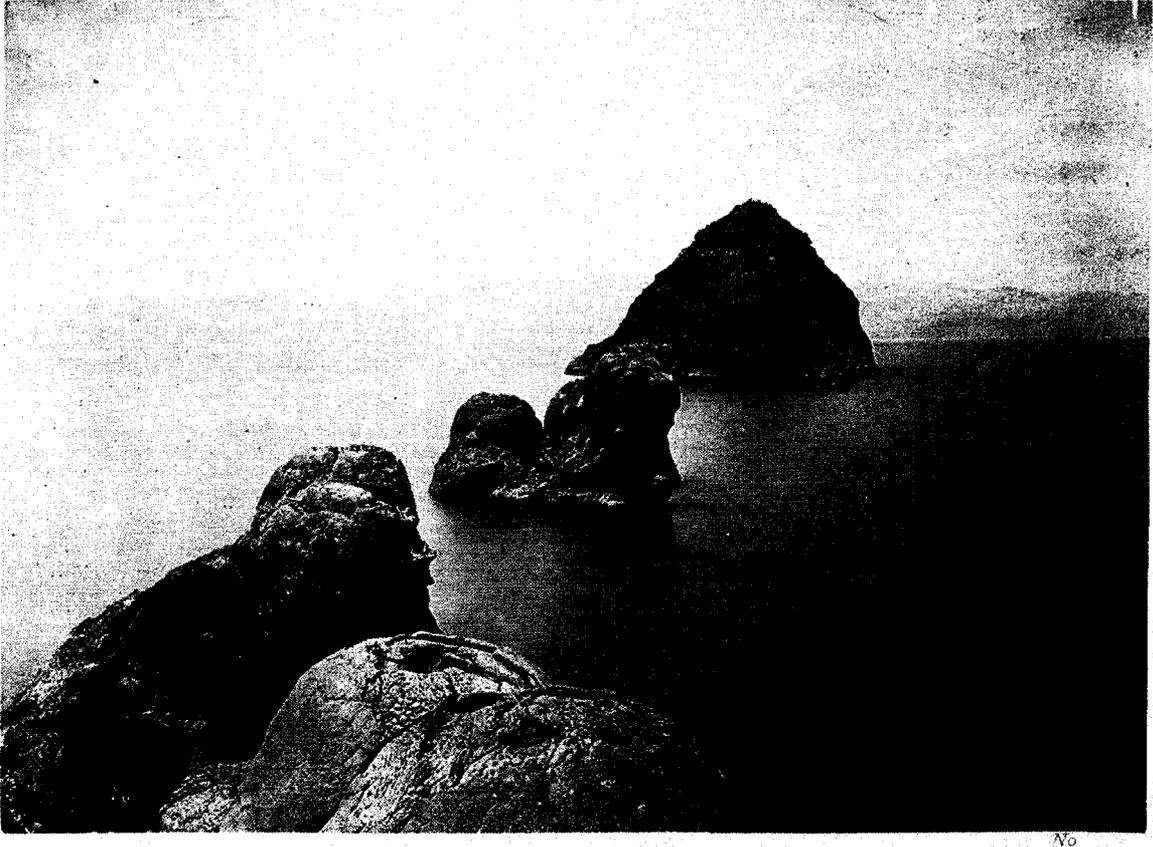


Figure 1. Timothy O'Sullivan, *Pyramid and Domes, Pyramid Lake, Nevada* (1868), Albumen Print, 19.8 x 27.0 cm, Image courtesy of George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film.



Figure 2. Ansel Adams, *The Teton Range--Snake River, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming* (1942), gelatin-silver print, 26.5 x 34.2 cm, photograph by Ansel Adams © 2009, the Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust, Image courtesy of George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film.



Figure 3. "Installation Shot, Nicholas Nixon, Frank Gohlke and Robert Adams" *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (1975), Image courtesy of George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, © Nicholas Nixon, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, © Frank Gohlke, courtesy of the artist, © Robert Adams, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.



Figure 4. "Installation Shot, Joe Deal and Nicholas Nixon," *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (1975), Image courtesy of George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, © Joe Deal, courtesy of the artist, © Nicholas Nixon, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.



Figure 5. "Installation Shot, Frank Gohlke and Robert Adams," *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (1975), Image courtesy of George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, © Frank Gohlke, courtesy of the artist, © Robert Adams, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.



Figure 6. John Schott, (Untitled), series *Route 66 Motels* (1973), gelatin-silver print, 19.2 x 24.0 cm, © John Schott, image courtesy of the artist.

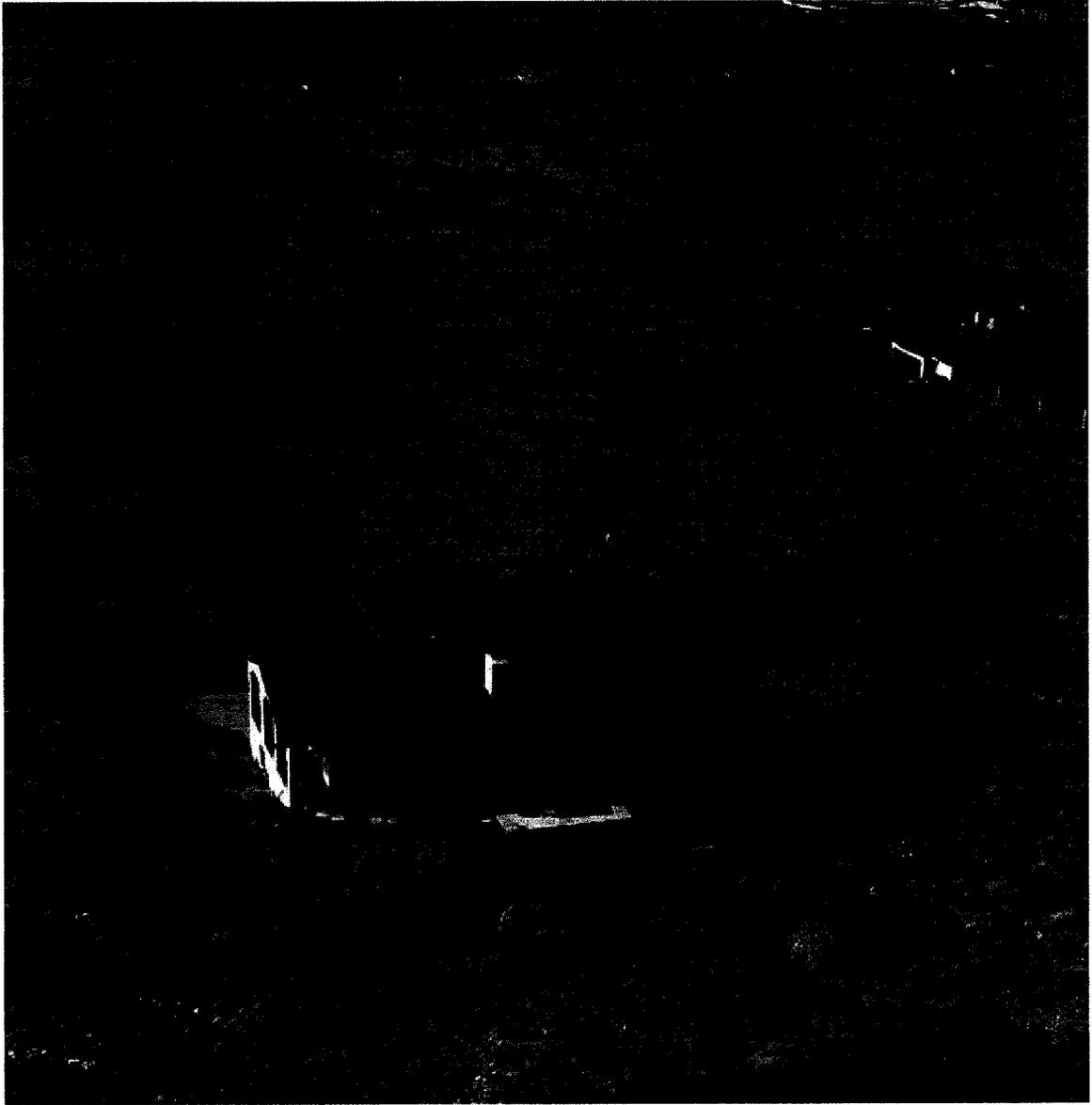


Figure 7. Joe Deal, *Untitled Views (Albuquerque, New Mexico) A1:774* (1975), gelatin-silver print, 32.4 x 32.4 cm, © Joe Deal, image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 8. "Installation Shot, Henry Wessel Jr.," *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (1975), Image courtesy of George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, © Henry Wessel Jr., courtesy of the artist.



Figure 9. Stephen Shore, *Church and Second Streets, Easton, Pennsylvania, June 20, 1974* (1974-2003), C-print, 19.1 x 24.0 cm, © Stephen Shore, image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 10. "Installation Shot, Frank Gohlke and Bernd and Hilla Becher,"
New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape (1975), Image courtesy of
George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, © Frank Gohlke,
courtesy of the artist, © Hilla Becher, courtesy of the artist.

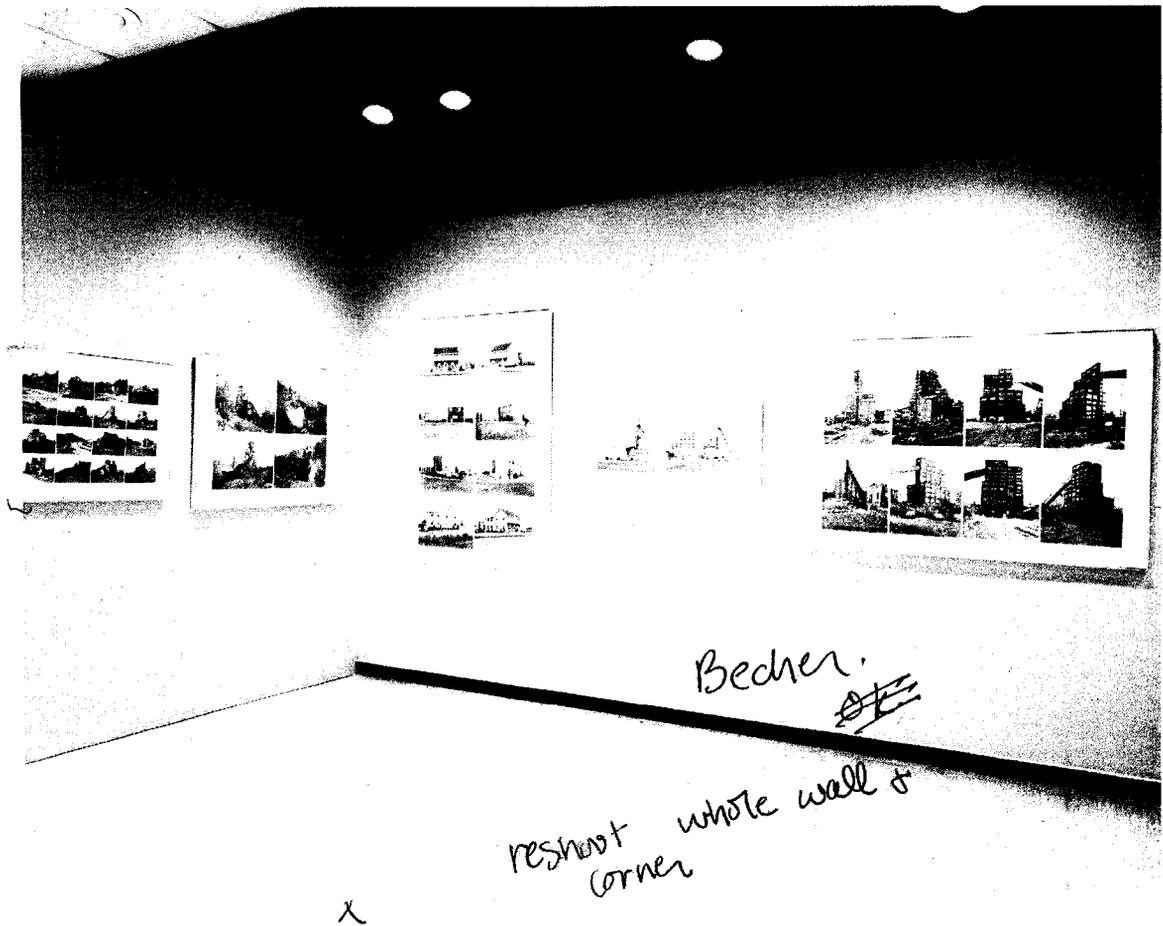


Figure 11. "Installation Shot, Bernd and Hilla Becher," *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (1975), Image courtesy of George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, © Hilla Becher, courtesy of the artist.

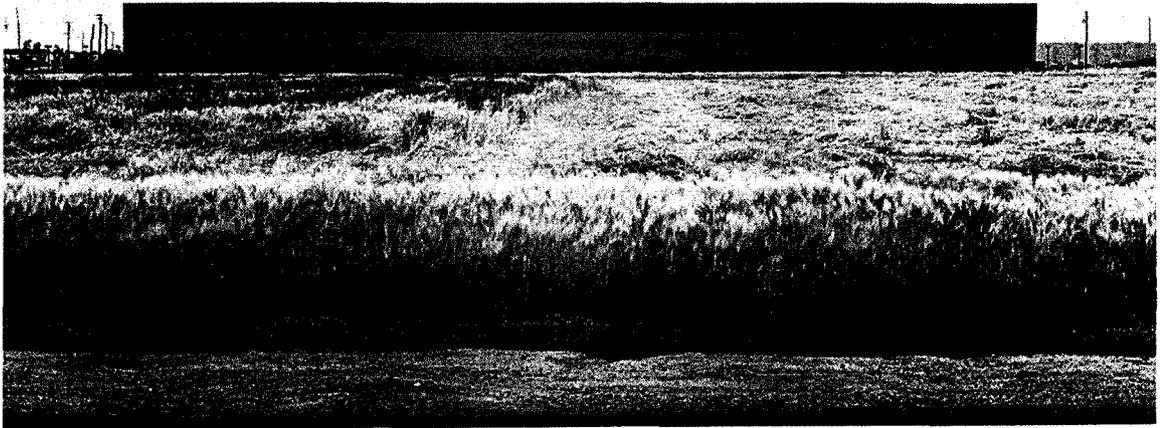


Figure 12. Lewis Baltz, *East Wall, Western Carpet Mills, 1231 Warner, Tustin* (1974), gelatin-silver print, 15.0 x 22.8 cm, Image courtesy of George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, © Lewis Baltz, courtesy of the artist.

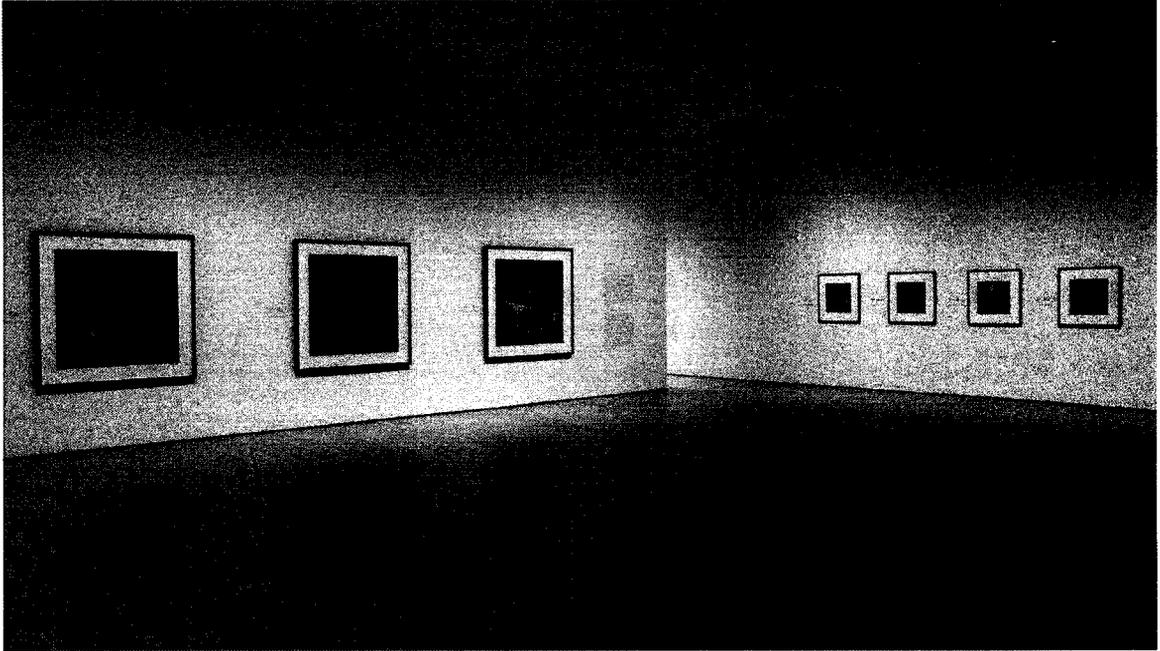


Figure 13. "Installation shot, David Maisel and John Pfahl, CMCP/National Gallery of Canada" (2008), *Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate*, © 2008 Claude Baillargeon, Exhibition Curator, all rights reserved, © David Maisel, courtesy of the artist and Von Lintel Gallery, New York, © John Pfahl, courtesy of the artist.

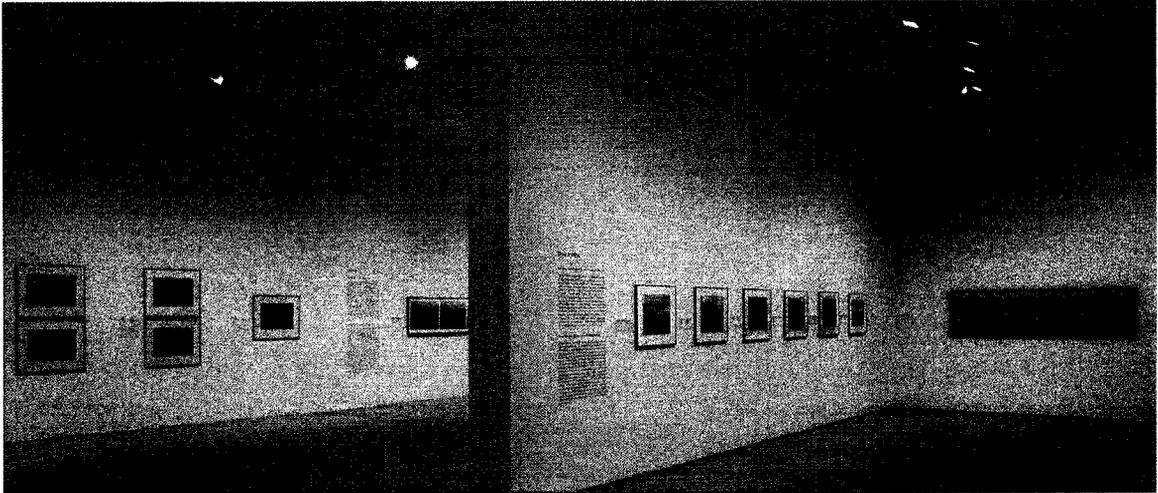


Figure 14. "Installation shot, John Ganis, Peter Goin, David McMillan, Jonathan Long, CMCP/National Gallery of Canada" (2008), *Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate*, © 2008 Claude Baillargeon, Exhibition Curator, all rights reserved, © John Ganis, © David McMillan, © Jonathan Long, courtesy of the artists.



Figure 15. “Installation shot, David T. Hanson, CMCP/National Gallery of Canada” (2008), *Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate*, © 2008 Claude Baillargeon, Exhibition Curator, all rights reserved, © David T. Hanson, courtesy of the artist.



Figure 16. David Maisel, *No. 9825-5* (2001–02), chromogenic print, 121.9 x 121.9 cm, © David Maisel, courtesy of the artist and Von Lintel Gallery, New York.



Figure 17. Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison, *Burn Season* (2003), photogravure, 50.8 x 61.0 cm, © Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison, image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 18. Jonathan Long, *Broken Trees* (2002), chromogenic print, 25.4 x 243.8 cm, © Jonathan Long, image courtesy of the artist.

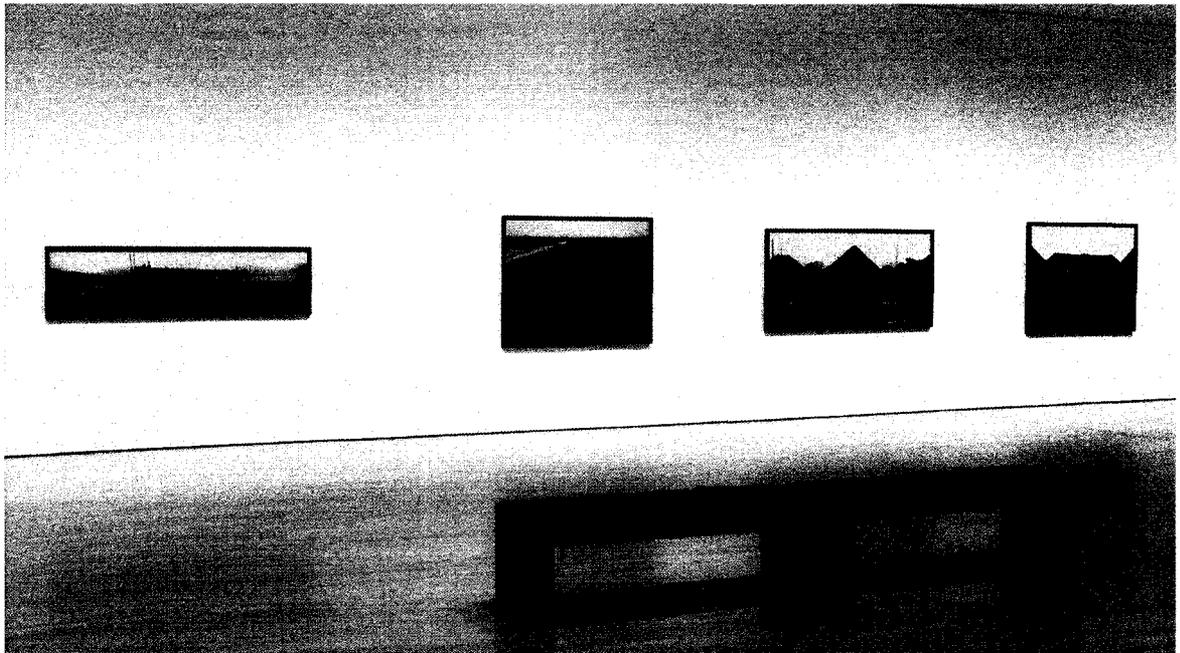


Figure 19. "Installation shot, Edward Burtynsky, CMCP/National Gallery of Canada" (2008), *Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate*, © 2008 Claude Baillargeon, Exhibition Curator, all rights reserved, © Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto.



Figure 20. Edward Burtynsky, *Tanggu Port, Tianjin*, (2005), digital chromogenic print, 121.9 x 152.4 cm, © Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto.

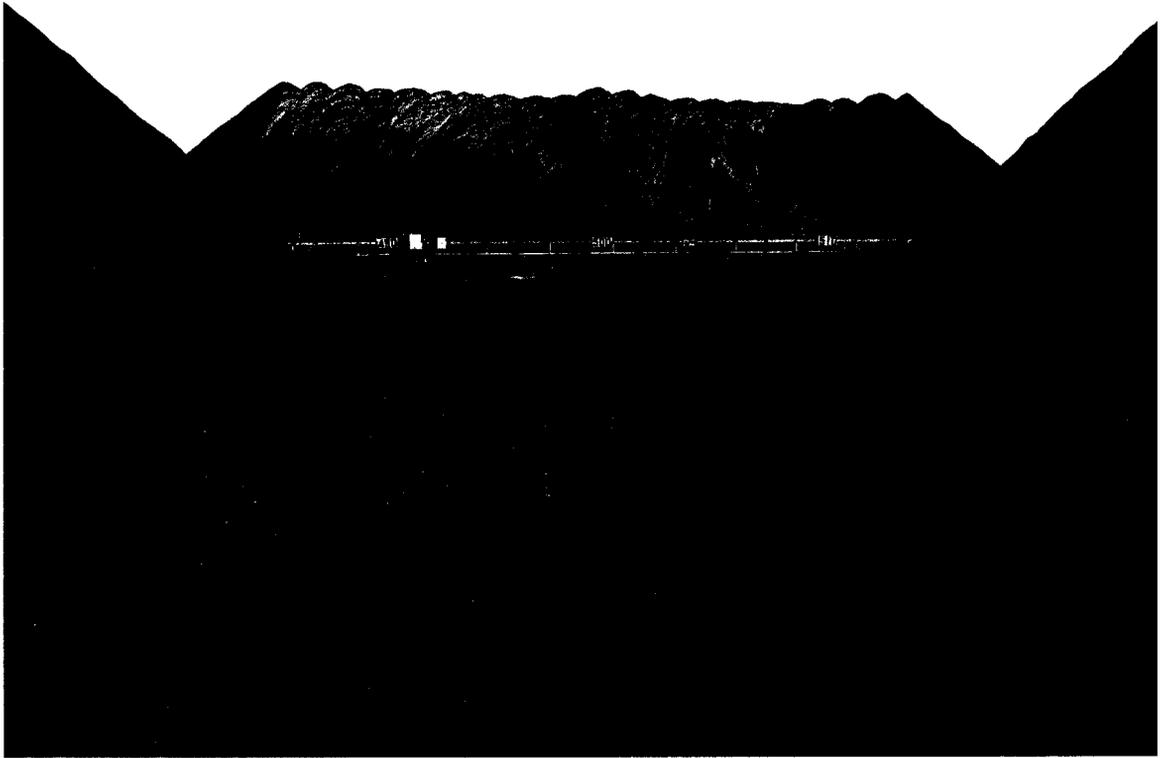


Figure 21. Edward Burtynsky, *Bao Steel #7, Shanghai*, (2005), digital chromogenic print, 121.9 x 152.4 cm, © Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto.

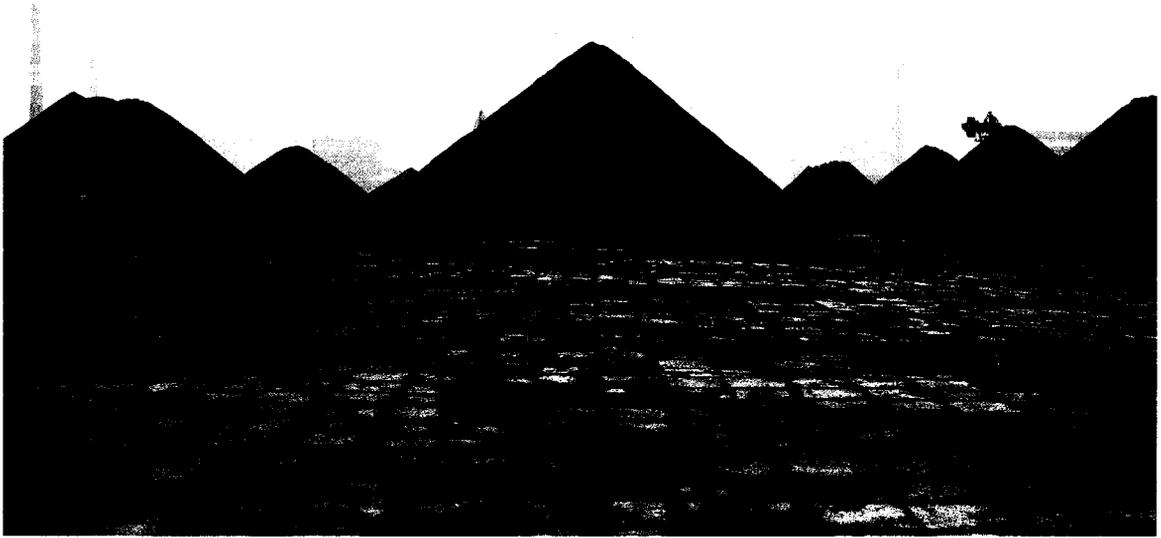


Figure 22. Edward Burtynsky, *Bao Steel #8, Shanghai*, (2005), digital chromogenic print, 101.6 x 203.2 cm, © Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto.



Figure 23. Edward Burtynsky, *Three Gorges Dam Project, Dam #2, Yangtze River, China* (2002), digital chromogenic print, 55.9 cm x 221.0 cm, © Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto.

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