

# Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men

*An Inquiry Into the Cultural Meanings  
of Landscape Photography*

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*I suspect no landscape, vernacular or otherwise, can be comprehended  
unless we perceive it as an organization of space; unless we ask ourselves  
who owns or uses the spaces, how they were created and how they change.<sup>1</sup>*

J.B. Jackson

Landscape photography has been enjoying a spectacular resurgence in the coffee table/art book press. During 1984 alone, glossy tomes such as *Landscape As Photograph*, *Edward Weston's California Landscapes*, *The Essential Landscape*, *Second View*, and *An American Field Guide* piled off the presses and into the bookstores. In addition, the spring 1985 issue of *Aperture* was given over to the topic "Western Spaces." Why landscape now? A few conjectures come to mind: it is certainly true that among educated, middle-class audiences, landscape is generally conceived of as an upbeat and wholesome sort of subject which, like mom and apple pie, stands indisputably beyond politics and ideology and appeals to 'timeless values.' This would sit well in our current conservative climate where images of the land (conceptual, historical, literary) from lakes Tahoe to Wobegon are being used to evoke the universal constancy of a geological and mythic American seemingly beyond present vicissitudes.

But this is too simple. Images of landscape cannot be perceived simply as an antidote to politics, as a pastoral fantasy lulling us back to some primordial sense of our own insignificance. Nor should landscape images be regarded simply as the occasion for aesthetic pleasure in arrangements of material objects in ironic constellations, found "happenings" for the lens whose references to the worlds beyond the frame rivet all attention on the sensibility of the artist.

These two prevalent constructions of landscape remind us that landscape as a subject of visual representation is a distinctly modern phenomenon. The taxonomic term "landscape" comes from European art history and refers to a genre of painterly practice that gathered momentum and prestige only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the aristocratic classical tradition of painting, landscapes were principally fields for noble action—carefully cultivated gardens suited to the gods and heroes who populated them. With the rise in the seventeenth century of the merchant bourgeoisie in Holland, a new sort of landscaper emerged—a seemingly more natural landscape that celebrated property

ownership: the working water- or windmill, the merchant ship at anchor, the farmer's field, the burgher's estate. English landscape painting in the eighteenth century followed the Dutch model, though it supplanted the formulaic quality of earlier genre painting with scientific accuracy that reflected the increasing prestige and achievements of empirical science and its offspring, technology. The world *landscape*, in English, initially referred specifically to Dutch paintings and only later denoted the broader idea of a view or prospect.<sup>2</sup>

Whether noble, picturesque, sublime or mundane, the landscape image bears the imprint of its cultural pedigree. It is a selected and constructed text, and while the formal choices of what has been included and excluded have been the focus of most art-historical criticism to date, the historical and social significance of those choices has rarely been addressed and even intentionally avoided.

To take an example, the "small-town American" landscape of mass circulation graphic illustration signifies more than a generic place idealized by Norman Rockwell. It also connotes a semi-rural golden age, a psychological center from which a ruling middle class minority draws its symbolic identity and nationalistic context—its ideology:

*In this generalized image Main Street is the seat of a business culture of property-minded, law-abiding citizens devoted to "free enterprise" and "social morality," a community of sober, sensible, practical people. The Chamber of Commerce and the Protestant churches are naturally linked in support of "progress" and "improvement." For many people over many decades of our national life this is the landscape of "small town virtues," the "backbone of America," the "real America."<sup>3</sup>*

Despite its cultural dominance, this is a landscape in which the major portion of the nation's populace—its urban natives and refugees (including blacks, Latinos, queers, Jews)—finds no positive reflection but instead repression.

Thus, whatever its aesthetic merits, every representation of landscape is also a record of human values and actions imposed on the land over time. What stake do landscape photographers have in constructing such representations? A large one, I believe. Whatever the photographer's claims, landscapes as subject matter in photography can be analyzed as documents extending beyond the formally aesthetic or personally expressive. Even formal and personal choices do not emerge *sui generis*, but instead reflect collective interests and influences, whether philosophical, political, economic, or otherwise. While most art historical/curatorial scholarship has concentrated on the artistic genius of a select few (and the stake in so doing is obvious), it is time to look afresh at the cultural meanings of landscapes in order to confront issues lying beyond individual intuition and/or technical virtuosity. The sorts of questions we might ask concern what ideologies landscape photographs perpetuate; in whose interests they were conceived; why we still desire to make and consume them; and why the art of landscape photography remains so singularly identified with a masculine eye.

In the late nineteenth-century US, after the "Indian problem" had been brutally solved and the frontier ceased to exist, a veritable Cult of Wild Nature flourished, having undergone several evolutionary phases since the continent's discovery by white

Europeans. This was characterized by a nostalgia for the red-blooded rigors of a pioneer life that had become obsolete. As with many significant movements in American cultural life, this one emerged from a pragmatic alliance of liberal reform and commercial interests: the first epitomized by the Progressive Era's precept that the "nature experience" was a desirable antidote to the unhealthy urban life, and the second in the creation of a middle-class tourist market, first by the railroads and later by the automobile interests.

In the same spirit, efforts to create pockets of Arcadian nature in the cities through the institution of landscaped parks and nearby forest preserves reflected an elite cultivated taste for aestheticized nature and the conviction that such garden spots could elevate the aspirations and manners of the immigrants and workers who used them. In concert with these programs, wilderness areas began to be claimed and named as refuges of timeless order in a changing world—"God's gift to the American people"—to be preserved as a legacy for future generations.

The religious overtones in the American attitude toward these wilderness areas are unmistakable. As Kenneth Erickson has pointed out, these landscapes were and still are truly ceremonial in nature, requiring both a code of personal conduct for users (park rules and regulations) as well as ritualized expressions of devotion (pilgrimages made on certain holidays and the compulsion to take snapshots of Nature's mysteries). The role of photographs as both talismans of the original experience and as prompts to renewed inspiration seems obvious in such a context.<sup>4</sup>

In 1908, 69,000 tourists went to worship in the eleven National Parks. Twenty years later, the figure had climbed to 3 million. What kinds of landscape were these tourists so eager to gaze upon? As one historian describes it:

*They were not impressed by wilderness itself. They looked instead for the unique, the spectacular, or the sublime, drawing their standards from stereoscopic views, picture postcards, railroad advertising, magazine illustrations, Romantic literature and landscape art. Scenic beauty was an art form, and its inspiration a preconditioned experience.*<sup>5</sup>

The railroads competed ruthlessly for the nature-tourist's dollar by trumpeting the unique visual enchantments of their respective routes. The federal government published popular National Park Portfolios during the 1920s that prepared the general public for its first views of Yellowstone and Yosemite.

As automobile travel became widespread in the 1920s, the Park Service's Landscape Architecture Division engineered the wilderness to accommodate the new mobility with planned roads and numbered scenic turnoffs, sited and designed to conform to conventional pictorial standards. Nature was redesigned, we might say, for middle-class convenience and efficiency. With the active participation of government and private enterprise, wilderness scenery became good business. In this enterprise, photography rapidly surpassed other modes of graphic illustration to play a central role in merchandizing landscapes for public consumption:

*Sprawling enlargements, reminding prospective travelers of distant attractions, were spread like murals across the walls of ticket offices in smoky Eastern cities.<sup>6</sup>*

These views became the established standards against which all future visual records of these landscape-spectacles would be measured. It was these “mechanical reproductions” of the chosen shrines that lured tourists into making the journey to find the Real Thing.<sup>7</sup>

The advent of motion pictures, particularly the Western, created a public taste for spectacular scenery used as a backdrop for thrilling dramas. The cowboy movie was firmly established as a genre by the 1920s and succeeded as no other form in masculinizing the western landscape. “Away up in the Canadian Rockies, amid the mighty forces of Nature, a man must be a man even to survive,” read the press release for James Oliver Curwood’s *The Valley of Silent Men* (1922).<sup>8</sup> Another of Curwood’s press releases touted a film as “A Supreme Test of Manhood That Shows What Real Character Is. It Surpasses Belief and Overwhelms Our Sense of the Beautiful!”<sup>9</sup> These larger-than-life celluloid worlds were mirrored at a humbler level in the roadside attractions of Western tourist landscapes and became a winning marketing strategy for selling everything from cigarettes to Presidents. Like Philip Morris’s Marlboro Man, we watched a white-hatted Ronald Reagan ride his horse and chop wood for the camera on his Santa Barbara ranch, a rugged individualist drawn up to specs by Central Casting.

In the American consciousness, then, the western landscape has become a complex construct. It is the locus of the visually spectacular, culled from the total sum of geographic possibilities and marketed for tourist consumption. For liberal conservationists, it represents the romantic dream of a pure unsullied wilderness where communion with nature can transpire without technological mediation, a dream that has been effectively engineered out of modern experience. Once considered the essential ingredient in character formation, Nature has become commodified, its benefits bought and sold in the form of camping fees, trail passes, equipment, and vacation packages at wilderness resorts. As geographer J.B. Jackson has pointed out, we come in contact with Nature on a tight, highly structured schedule—holidays and weekends—which is determined not by the change of seasons, but by the routines of urban work.<sup>10</sup> This Nature has been designed to help us absorb its benefits as efficiently as possible: tourist literature and park displays ensure that we are exposed to the peak experiences at the site (sight).

For others, the western landscape is the repository of the vestiges of the frontier with its mythical freedom from the rules and strictures of “civilization”—a place where social Darwinism and free enterprise can still operate untrammelled, where tract houses can sprout in the waterless desert. As one pundit put it, “For Americans, true freedom is not the choice at the ballot box but the opportunity to create a new world out of nothing: a Beverly Hills, a Disneyland, a Dallas, a Tranquility Base.”<sup>11</sup>

Repressed or unexpressed among these mythical landscapes that commercial photography and Hollywood cinema has served so well is a landscape that cannot be apprehended strictly in terms of geographical or aesthetic categories. The sort of landscape I am referring to, and which I think photographers have a stake in revealing, is that landscape which J.B. Jackson has called ‘a field of perpetual conflict and compromise between what is established by authority and what the vernacular insists on preferring.’<sup>12</sup> This is a landscape, in other words, whose organization in the interests of

authoritative institutions is made explicit—indeed, is made the very subject of the photographic investigation.

Beauty, preservation, development, exploitation, regulation: these are historical matters in flux, not essential conditions of landscapes. The political interests that landscape organization reveals are subjects that the practice of landscape photography has not clearly addressed. Before I discuss strategies photographers might use to so, it would be useful to assess some of the shortcomings of traditional approaches of art photographers.

The dominant landscape aesthetic in US art photography developed from the American School of “straight photography” pioneered by Paul Strand and Alfred Stieglitz in the years of the First World War. Borrowing from Symbolism, forms in Nature were seen to be expressive of the photographer’s emotions at the instant of exposure, an idea perfected in Edward Weston’s notion of previsualization and carried into mid-century by Ansel Adams’ popular influence. Adams’ consistent interpretation of the American landscape as a primordial Eden was well suited to the conservative political climate of the 1940s and 50s. The nation was reveling in its reborn Manifest Destiny as the Cold War leader of the “free world.” Popular Sierra Club publications illustrated with images by Adams, Eliot Porter, and others celebrated this same sanitized and spectacularized conception of the natural world also promoted by Walt Disney in his wildlife films and which served as the setting for the period’s ubiquitous TV westerns.

Minor White, the influential teacher and editor of *Aperture* in the 1950s and 60s revived Stieglitz’s idea of the Equivalent, that a photograph is a visual metaphor for the feeling of the artist rather than a record of the subject. But as Andy Grundberg has noted,

*For all its virtues in making us engage photographs more closely and complexly, the aesthetic of the Equivalent...has one major shortcoming: after asserting that an apparently transparent image of the world is imbued with individual vision or feeling, it has difficulty defining what that vision or feeling is. Used as a critical instrument, the theory of Equivalence is unable to determine any intended meaning in a photograph. But as a credo, it has served as the dominant aesthetic of American photographic modernist practice.”<sup>13</sup>*

For Minor White, Ansel Adams, and their followers, intuition and expression were the central issues, not visual style. Thus *Aperture* could routinely publish portfolios as stylistically diverse as those of Robert Frank and Frederick Sommer, for “the final form of the image was of less importance than its evocative meaning.”<sup>14</sup> It was on this slippery beachhead that the *Aperture* forces were eventually challenged and overwhelmed in the late 1960s by John Szarkowski’s curatorial juggernaut.

As a landscape photographer himself and a trained art historian, Szarkowski used landscape photographs extensively in making his case for the medium’s essential character. Introducing a formalist vocabulary (“vantage point,” “time,” “frame,” “detail”) that could be applied to any photograph, Szarkowski invoked the works of selected wet-plate era landscape photographers as evidence for a transcendent theory of photographic form. The real artists of the medium were those who “intuitively” discovered the plastic possibilities of their medium without regard for prevailing aesthetic standards or any other cultural constraints.

Szarkowski lionized the plate views of the post-Civil War expeditionary photographer Timothy O'Sullivan, referring to him as "a mutant, native talent," who displayed the "kind of natural grace by which a great dancer or singer seems possessed."<sup>15</sup> These are lyrical words, to be sure, but void of any information that would shed light on how the photographer's working conditions, the expectations of his varied clients, and contemporary modes of reproduction and distribution might have informed his formal choices. Plucked from a specific historical context of contracts, commissions, conquest, stereographs, railroad financiers and government politicians, photographers like O'Sullivan are repackaged as indisputable sires of an artistic bloodline of photographers who are to be selected and legitimated by a powerful cultural institution, the Museum of Modern Art, and its provincial satellites.

Szarkowski's scholarly legacy was nowhere more evident than in the 1981 exhibition and catalogue for *Before Photography*, curated by his protégé and successor, Peter Galassi. Here was another case where landscape images culled from nineteenth-century painting and photography were taken out of context and gathered together to establish an art-historical pedigree for Szarkowski's aesthetic of "photographic seeing." As art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau noted at the time, rummaging through the archives of art history can produce evidence in support of any argument, no matter how tendentious. The routine habit of obscuring the diverse historical contexts and uses of photographic images permitted curators to promulgate a unifying theory of form that they could then claim tautologically to have "discovered."

This dismissal of history and its awkward contingencies is also a handy strategy for ignoring differences such as gender and race in matters of representation. The same year as *Before Photography*, Szarkowski published *American Landscapes*, a slender catalogue of images from the permanent collection. The introductory essay amounts to a roll call of canonical masters, beginning with the Civil War photographers and ending with the contemporary Frank Gohlke. Of the forty photographers whose work was represented, only two are female—Laura Gilpin and Dorothea Lange—both of whom were dead. Each woman was represented by a single image while male counterparts such as Edward Weston and Harry Callahan were represented by four and three pictures, respectively.

Perhaps no exhibition and catalogue were more influential on the course of landscape photography during the 1970s and beyond than *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered [sic] Landscape*, organized by William Jenkins for the George Eastman House in 1975. Jenkins contrasted the work of the nine photographers represented to both the romantic sublime of Ansel Adams and the personal symbolism of the Minor White crowd. The *New Topographics* photographers—Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher (hurrah, a woman!), Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, and Henry Wessel, Jr.—shun visual conventions of the picturesque. Rather they work seemingly "without style," in a manner more akin to the instrumental realism of the surveyor or real estate photographer. But as Jenkins notes in his introduction, "there is little doubt that the problem at the center of this exhibition is one of style."<sup>16</sup>

In speaking for the photographers he curated, Jenkins claims that although their photographs convey "substantial amounts of visual information," they are, above all, aesthetic arrangements resisting interpretation. He quotes Robert Adams:

*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 underlines this apparent chaos.<sup>17</sup>*

But there is no “Form” outside of interpretation. Formal orders are human structures and perceptions, not given essences. Though Jenkins asserts that the photographers “take great pains to prevent the slightest trace of judgment or opinion from entering their work,” these representations (no less than those of other landscape traditions) are charged with meanings that derive from the personal identities and histories of the photographers and which, in turn, are relayed to audiences with their own social and psychic predispositions.

The paradoxical fact that many at the time saw the New Topographics photographers as moving beyond a medium-based formalism to social critique had more to do, I think, with the impoverished expectations of what passes for social criticism in the art world than with any positions claimed by the photographers themselves. In addition, these photographs entered a context in the mid-1970s when the founding of Earth Day and a potent environmentalist movement raised critical questions about the sustainability of natural resources and local economies in the face of rapid industrial and agribusiness development around the globe. This would have granted these photographs a pre-given set of meanings available to most politically liberal viewers that made aesthetic detachment all but impossible to sustain. This isn’t to say that art museums and galleries don’t do their best to subvert such readings. Modes of framing and hanging, neutral walls, minimal labeling, high rents in high-fashion retail districts, and a reverential hush provoke feelings of awe and respect before the images, even before we’ve inspected them closely.

Robert Adams presents an interesting case study in how the aesthetic discourse of the art market generates its own feedback loop to the individual photographer who then accepts its terms as sufficient to define his practice. Along with Lewis Baltz, Adams is the most articulate and complex of the New Topographics artists and made no secret of his concerns about the costs of explosive development to the existing land and culture of central Colorado, his long-time home. In a revealing passage from his collected essays, *Beauty In Photography* (1981), Adams recounts an episode where, after spending weeks on a commercial assignment photographing open-pit mines, he felt compelled to drive eighty miles out of his way to photograph a monument erected by the United Mine Workers to commemorate the infamous Ludlow Massacre where miners, their wives, and children were gunned down by the Colorado state militia during a prolonged strike.

*What I wanted and knew it was hopeless were pictures of the monument that would somehow indict the new strip mines to the north. But in most cases the miners there were uninterested in a union and were, for all I had been able to discover of their consciences, now themselves probably members of the National Guard.*

*I was left at the end of the day with a sense of the uncertainty of evil, of the ambiguity of what photography could do with it, and of the fact of my own*

*limited skills. After years with a camera I had wasted still more time trying to do what it apparently was not given me to do.*<sup>18</sup>

Adams deals with his own ambivalence about making publicity pictures for a giant mining company, a business with a bloody union-busting history, by projecting onto the miners a patronizing disappointment in their inability to share his noble outrage. Rather, he could have found common ground with the miners by acknowledging their mutual decisions to take the money and run. National Guard service finances college tuitions for kids from working-class families. Corporate commissions finance middle-class photographers. This does not preclude the development of a cogent environmentalist consciousness in either case.

But most troublesome is Adams' tautological acquiescence to his self-announced inability to make pictures "that would somehow indict the new strip mines to the north." Tellingly, he slips into the passive voice to point to a transcendent cause: "it apparently was not given me to do." *Given by whom*, one might ask. *God? Nature? John Szarkowski?* Who told Robert Adams that he could not make photographs that would indict the new strip mines to the north?

Adams' more recently published attempt to address local social realities, *Our Lives and Our Children, Photographs Taken Near the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Plant* (1984) is even more problematic in speaking to the specific material conditions of living in a military toxic waste zone and is usefully compared to John Craig Freeman's contemporary Rocky Flats billboard project, produced as his MFA Thesis at the University of Colorado. But Adams got the Aperture monograph and international museum shows while Freeman's project received little notice outside the local community. This is how the elite art world and its gate-keeping institutions ensure the silencing and self-censoring seen as necessary to keep art free of "overt politics."

Returning to landscape, what can photographs of landscapes tell us about how we construct our sense of the world and its relations? A comparison of two bodies of landscape images made at the same time, of similar subject matter, and addressing related social anxieties shows the difference between a practice committed to questioning the conventions of landscape photography and a practice that merely perpetuates or dissolves them into a barren irony. Every critic who has reviewed John Pfahl's widely circulated portfolio, *Power Places*, has expressed a bit of confusion about the artist's motives in making such lush, large-format, drop-dead *beautiful* pictures of nuclear power plants. Even those quite at home with traditional art photography do a double take when confronted with Pfahl's Hudson River School impression of the cooling towers of Three Mile Island (TMI) reflected in the still waters of the Susquehanna River.

Exhibited without any statement to anchor his photographs for the viewer, the images collectively express a kind of romantic nostalgia for a modern Arcadia where power plants, like rock formations and ancient trees, can be appreciated as objects of a new kind of engineered beauty (or noble ruins, perhaps, as in the case of TMI). Pfahl's photographs elicit other readings as well: that energy is natural and found in every landscape; that human exploitation of energy resources is necessary, even in the most remote and picturesque settings. In the context of the hot political debates concerning



opening up new wilderness to mining, oil and gas exploration, not to mention whether to impose moratoriums on nuclear power plants given disasters such as TMI and Chernobyl, Pfahl's pictures would be more at home in the corporate reports for the giant utility corporations than in the publicity materials of Earth First! or Greenpeace.

If setting up an ironic dissonance between the drama of the landscapes and nuclear energy development was Pfahl's intention, it is undercut by the inclusion of "power places" such as hydroelectric dams that do not stir the same passionate fears. One suspects other motives at work, namely marketing strategies. It is worth recalling that Robert Freidus, Pfahl's New York dealer at the time, had stated explicitly that the "theme portfolio" was the cornerstone of his business.<sup>19</sup> By containing beautiful photographs of potentially volatile subjects within an ambiguous high-tech/political/ecological theme concept, the individual works are highly marketable without offending potential collectors who are disproportionately members of the corporate moneyed class.

In contrast, Lisa Lewenz's *Three Mile Island Calendar* (1984) uses photographs of TMI in a very consciously constructed context, wittily appropriating the popular seasonal calendar as a vehicle for her seriously considered vision. Instead of the expected Kodachrome icons of majestic mountains, we see TMI photographed in gritty black and white from the homes of nearby residents. Each month bears an image and dates important in the history of the development of atomic energy and its fiascos are noted along with the customary birthdates and holidays. Along with "Father's Day," we read, "Radioactive Iodine released by Dresden-2 reactor, Chicago, 1970," or "US Supreme Court rules: NRC can OK nuclear plant without waste study, 1983." Lewenz's framing of TMI's cooling towers by the literal framing of residents' windows makes clear the links between public and private; between the decisions of corporate, state and federal authorities and the men, women, and children who end up as "collateral damage" in the case of an accident. Rather than perpetuating the fantasy of landscapes as external to us, as things outside of ourselves, Lewenz brings them "home" as contested social terrains.

By mass-producing her calendar and selling it for an affordable six dollars instead of issuing her photographs as limited-edition art objects priced in the four and five figures, Lewenz makes her work available to larger publics, including environmental organizers and local communities. *Three Mile Island Calendar* successfully moves beyond the customary inbred market of the art world and uses sophisticated and well-composed photographs of "landscapes" (place-scapes?) to articulate a clear politics while reaching wider audiences.

Other kinds of subjects a contemporary landscape practice might address today include zoning, the workplace, security, neighborhood, domestic and retail spaces. Women, I think, have a special stake in documenting zones of privacy and public spaces used primarily by their sex. Most "landscapes" used by women—the home, beauty salon, shopping mall, etc.—are designed by men for maximum efficiency in the promotion of impulse buying and over-consumption. How might such spaces be critiqued and re-imagined by feminist designers and photographers for the benefit of maximizing women's potentials as social actors rather than shoppers?

Women might also recoup landscape photography for themselves in response to its long-time character as an exclusive white male preserve. The image of the lone white male photographer, like his prototypes, the great white hunter and explorer who ventures into the wild to capture a Virgin Nature endures, even if updated stylistically and

technically. Muybridge, Watkins, O'Sullivan, Strand, Weston, Adams, Porter, Caponigro, Clift, Gowin, Klett, Misrach—the list goes on. Where are the women?

As my comments above indicated, landscape photographs by women have been consistently omitted from the perennially popular surveys of landscape photography mounted by major museums. Five years ago, Lustrum Press published *Landscape: Theory* as part of its ongoing “Theory” series wherein selected photographers discuss their practice and showcase their images. From A (Adams) to W (Weston), all ten of the photographers profiled in *Landscape: Theory* were men. And the beat goes on: the Spring 1985 *Aperture* survey of Western landscape photographs featured the portfolios of eleven men, NASA (which may as well count as a twelfth!) and one woman, Marilyn Bridges. In April 1985, a major exhibition titled *A Vision of Nature* opened at the Art Institute of Chicago. The curator, David Travis, not only omitted women photographers from his survey but also in Szarkowskian fashion, created a bogus aesthetic narrative to seamlessly bind the work of the six “masters” (Stieglitz, Strand, Weston, A. Adams, White, Porter) together. No less than Marlboro Country, American landscape photography remains a reified masculine outpost—a wilderness of the mind.

Some women photographers such as Linda Connor and Gretchen Garner have noted the exclusion of women from the landscape canon while seeking to create an alternate canon of their own that is understood as woman-centered. Their approach to marking out a “women’s landscape photography” takes its impetus from ecofeminist writings of the 1970s by Carolyn Merchant and Susan Griffiths which stressed women’s more intimate and emotional relations to the environment in contrast to “man the predator” models of masculinity. Such notions of women’s essentially nurturing nature, linked to their evolutionary and reproductive biological difference from men, have had a problematic history in the history of ideas and social values in our culture. Because women were traditionally seen (by both sexes) as primarily differentiated by their reproductive capacity, it was easy to see them as nature itself. The corollary to this posited that men’s biological lack of such “natural” creativity was compensated for by the development of symbolic creativity – activities granted much higher status in most cultures. Men choose to act upon nature and bend it to their will while women simply are nature and cannot separate themselves from it.

These ideas have been pretty thoroughly debunked by feminist anthropologists<sup>20</sup> and scientists though they rear their ugly heads in the simplistic appeals to bio-evolutionary explanations for sex differences that are hyped in the popular media. But rather than trying to answer the male bias of dominant institutional constructions of “landscape” with a female-biased counterpart, it seems more productive to look outside the conventions of art history for models that might open up new possibilities for photographic practice and discourse for everybody, male and female. In fields such as cultural geography, urban planning, and landscape architecture, the environment is viewed as a terrain of social symbols and contradictions. Theorists such as architects Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown in their classic *Learning From Las Vegas*, and geographer J.B. Jackson have already exerted some influence in the photographic community. The inventive approaches of urban studies scholars like Kevin Lynch and Grady Clay who consider the city as a visual sign system that can be read or the probing essays of cultural geographer David Lowenthal on the significance of memorial

landscapes can stimulate new thinking about how to see landscapes as humanly organized spaces that are historical and dynamic rather than primordial and timeless.

If we are to make photographs that raise questions or make statements about what is both in and around the picture, we must first become more conscious of the ideological assumptions that structure our approaches. As part of this, we need to examine the restrictive terms of the art museum and gallery nexus and ask ourselves whether we need to seek out other markets and audiences for our work. Conversely, should the enviable state of art-market success befall a photographer who is engaged in socially committed work, s/he must be vigilant about protecting the images from being repackaged as autonomous aesthetic objects—from having their texts removed, tape recorders unplugged, sequences jumbled and atomized. It goes without saying that any issue-oriented work will inevitably become separated from its specific context by the passage of time, but this is no reason to reject the endeavor from the outset.

Landscape images are the last preserve of a nation's myths about nature, civilization and beauty. It is no accident that the genre's resurgence in both popular and highbrow art is taking place during the Reagan Revolution when multinational corporations have been given virtually free rein over the economic and physical environment. Photographs of the strong graphic lines of a blast furnace or pithead tell us nothing about the massive exporting of industries to impoverished labor markets overseas and the devastated communities left behind in South Chicago, Homestead, Youngstown, Schenectady. How shocking would it be for US Steel CEO David M. Roderick to have a Charles Sheeler or a Becher print on the office wall? Or former Interior Secretary James Watt an Eliot Porter or Richard Misrach? The regrettable truth is that most art patrons wouldn't bat an eye but instead congratulate these public officials on their eye for high-quality art—confident that art was doing its cultural work of cultivating and elevating aesthetic taste.

Landscape imagery has almost always been used to argue for the timeless virtues of a nature that transcends history—which is to say, collective social action. For many art photographers in the modern era, on the other hand, landscapes seem to be little more than stage-sets for private aesthetic experiences captured on film. As Lewis Baltz writes in a recent issue of *Aperture*,

*The landscape...seems more a set of conditions, a location where things and events might transpire rather than a given thing or event in itself; an arena or circumstance within which an open set of possibilities might be induced to play themselves out.*<sup>21</sup>

But landscapes needn't serve such meager ends. If we are to redeem landscape photography from such a narrow, self-reflexive project, why not use it to question the assumptions about nature and culture it has traditionally served? Landscape is not the ideologically neutral subject many imagine it to be. Rather, it is an historical artifact that can be viewed as a record of the material facts of our social reality and what we have chosen to make of them.

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<sup>1</sup> J.B. Jackson, "Concluding with Landscape," *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 150.

<sup>2</sup> John Stilgoe, *Common Landscapes of America, 1580 to 1845* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> D. W. Meinig, "Symbolic Landscapes," *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, ed. D.W. Meinig, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 167.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Erickson, "Ceremonial Landscapes of the American West," *Landscape* 22:1, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> Peter J. Schmitt, *Back to Nature: the Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 155.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>7</sup> See Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p. 45: "It is the mechanical reproduction phase of sacralization that is most responsible for setting the tourist in motion of his journey to find the true object."

<sup>8</sup> Schmitt, *Back to Nature*, P. 150

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>10</sup> J.B. Jackson, "A Puritan Looks at Scenery," *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, p. 63.

<sup>11</sup> Frederick Turner, "Cultivating the American Garden," *Harpers*, August 1985, p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> J. B. Jackson, "Concluding with Landscapes," p. 148.

<sup>13</sup> Andy Grundberg, "Ansel Adams: the Politics of Natural Space," *The New Criterion* (November 1984), p. 150.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Green, "Aperture in the Fifties: The Word and the Way," *American Photography: A Critical History 1945 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1984), p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> John Szarkowski, *American Landscapes* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981), p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> William Jenkins, "Introduction to *The New Topographics*," reprinted in *Reading Into Photography*, ed. Thomas Barrow et al. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), p. 51.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Adams, *Beauty in Photography* (New York: Aperture, 1981), p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> Michelle Bogre, "Robert Freidus," *American Photographer* (November 1984), p. 72.

<sup>20</sup> See Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" in *Women, Culture and Society*, ed., Rosaldo and Lamphere (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 67.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis Baltz, "Landscape Problems," *Aperture* 98 (Spring 1985).