



Timothy O'Sullivan, 'Tufa Domes,
Pyramid Lake', Nevada, 1868.

Land Matters

Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity

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LANDSCAPE

TIME, SPACE, PLACE, AESTHETICS



Peter Kennard, 'Hay Wain with Cruise Missiles', 1980. Published in *Camerawork*, London, July 1980 to illustrate an essay by E.P. Thompson on 'The State of the Nation'.

The point of art has never been to make something synonymous with life ... but to make something of reduced complexity that is nonetheless analogous to life and that can thereby clarify it.

(Robert Adams, 1996: 68)¹

Stories are the perfect skin of time.

(Victor Masayesva, 2002)²

History turns space into place. This simple statement masks a complexity of ideological processes associated with the relation of humankind and our environment. For a start, we need to take into account the symbiotic inter-relation of nature and culture. Where nature might once have been viewed as 'timeless', self-regenerating, and somehow 'outside' of culture, we are now increasingly aware of the ecological implications of technological change. Furthermore, our perception of nature is filtered through cultural understandings.

There are few regions in the world that remain untouched by human presence. Indeed, most people live in regions with long histories of human habitation – even if, in some cases, sparsely populated. Traces of previous human tenancy mark the lands we inhabit. As Doreen Massey has argued, space becomes meaningful through histories told (Massey, 2005). This is a fluid definitional process with new stories – those yet to come – further adding to or shifting our sense of the character of particular places. Histories articulate differing discourses and material forces, often forming terrains of contestation as stories may be recounted from different points of view. The purpose of historical investigation may be to find new materials that enhance – or unseat – previous understandings of place and circumstances. Human action contours the landscape, and stories told give meaning to it.

major research project, *Second View* (1984).²⁰ In examining the photographic construction of land as landscape, Mark Klett and associates spent much of the 1970s collecting nineteenth-century photographs of the American West, noting dates, determining time of year, visiting sites, seeking the original viewpoints and rephotographing. *Third View*, completed in 2000, involved a further set of visits to more than 110 sites, using audiotapes and digital video as well as still photography. Sound and video offer a further sense of how earlier occupants may have experienced places. The overall project (still ongoing) marries interest in social change with investigation of photo-histories, particularly the technical history of photography and the integral emergence of a distinctive photographic aesthetic. The research explores issues such as accessibility, movement of light and effects of weather that influenced and limited the achievements of our predecessors; also ways in which light and shade lent drama to the original images. Technical limitations had played a part. Nineteenth-century photographers usually photographed at midday, as available light meant that length of exposure could be reduced (unlike in early morning or late evening light). This in part accounts for strong contrasts and compressed shadows in many such examples. The work involved in *Second* and *Third View* was extensive, and painstaking in terms of method; it can be a long wait until shadows replicate the 'correct' time of day! It follows from this that in introductions to publications associated with the project concern with image construction can seem to be given priority over consideration of social change (as implied in image content). This focus is perhaps inevitable as analysis of form is integral to rephotography as method, especially in this instance wherein re-appraisal of how photographers operated historically is one central objective. In effect, form is a part of the fulcrum via which the project explores aesthetic issues and photographic histories and methods alongside topographies of social, geographic and geological change.

Photographs indicate manifest changes, as well as continuities, but photography cannot *account* for social developments. Some *Second View* examples are surprising. For example, where we might have expected increased human habitation we may find the opposite. In some cases, despite repeated attempts, the research team found themselves unable to reproduce the original image due, presumably, to slow geological shifts and to climate change. William Henry Jackson's famous 1873 crucifix of snow (Mountain of the Holy Cross, Colorado) refused to reappear, despite attempts to rephotograph it on two consecutive years!²¹



a) 9:50 am

b) 10:20 am



c) 11:08 am

d) 11:50 am



e) 12:20 pm

f) 12:54 pm

Mark Klett for the Rephotographic Survey Project, 1978. Six views of Monument Rock, Canyon de Chelly, AZ.



Robert Dawson, 'Party with Rainbow at Hot Springs', the Needles, Pyramid Lake, Nevada, 1989, from *A Doubtful River*.

As mentioned, Terry Evans was also one of twelve photographers, all based in the USA, included in the 2001 exhibition, *In Response to Place*.³⁴ They were invited to photograph in areas maintained by the Nature Conservancy and defined as 'last great places'.³⁵ Curator Andy Grundberg invited the photographers to respond to a 'last great place' of their choice. 'I wanted to investigate new ways of thinking about how the camera could depict our relationships to the land, to beauty, and to nature in general' (Exhibition website). He added that 'There is a cultural and historical need to find new ways to describe our place in the natural world, and this need is a matter of importance not only for photography, or for art as a whole, but also for our lives. A landscape may show us

what is worth saving, but it does not always reveal what the stakes are in human terms' (ibid.). Grundberg explicitly supports an integrated model of the inter-relation of humankind and the natural world, resisting the legacy of Enlightenment notions of a nature/culture binary.

The work included in the exhibition was quite diverse in theme, method and aesthetics; indeed, the signature style of each photographer was evident. For instance, William Wegman photographed his Weimaraner dogs in Cobscook, Maine. Karen Halverson pictured oak trees in the Cosumnes River valley, California; this river is the last free-flowing river on the west slopes of the Sierra Nevada. Farming references such as a hosepipe, a house in the distance, or a cylindrical tank indicate human presence and the oaks and grasses suggest the fertility of the valley. Richard Misrach made large-scale pictures of the movement of light and shadows on the surface of Pyramid Lake in the Wetlands area, Nevada. Misrach's series includes images captioned 'Battleground Point'. He comments that the work he does often has political connotations but that in this instance he was simply intent on exploring light and water. However, given the scarcity of water as a resource in the West and the tensions and battles that have emerged, celebration of water in the desert is hardly neutral. Water plays a double role. On the one hand, political tensions become articulated around questions of access to water; on the other hand, water crucially contributes to shaping the environment, creating the visual forms that fascinate photographers. Lee Friedlander made a return visit to southern Arizona for this project. As he comments:

I don't go looking for twisty and sprawling images, but I find them. I guess it suits my personality. When there's not much water available, plants will fight to grow, and all hell breaks loose. I like that. It is all so different from Olympia, Washington, where I come from, which is just the opposite, almost like a rain forest.

(Friedlander in Grundberg, 2001: 90)

Grundberg asserts that the work commissioned for the exhibition represents a rupture with the more traditional approach to landscape, distinguishing between this and the work of those, such as Ansel Adams, in the Modern era, for whom the landscape was largely empty of human presence. In many respects it is closer to the origins of American landscape photography in the West wherein the point was to remark that which seemed exceptional. Grundberg rightly observes that American

Davies continues to work primarily in monochrome, but many of his contemporaries use colour. The 1980s witnessed a crucial turning point in the grammar of the photographic image as colour came to supersede monochrome as the new 'authentic' mode of documentation. This was not without controversy; black and white had become associated with 'serious' documentary and some viewed colour as trivialising. Debates raged.⁸ Yet we see in colour. In this respect, black and white abstracts, rather than offering naturalistic representation. That this should have become a matter of dispute testifies to the extent to which representation is a matter of convention and, therefore, mutable. This shift was only a couple of decades ago, yet colour is now taken for granted within genres such as landscape or documentary. Indeed, the speed of idiomatic change has been remarkable. Arguably, new uses of colour, along with developments in digital imaging, contributed to shifting a semiotics of black and white from implications of authenticity towards referencing the past (nostalgia, or timelessness). Now, to work in monochrome, in standard pictorial mode, out in the landscape, is to risk producing imagery that cannot be viewed as critically engaged because it seems so anchored in history.

On the other hand, the rhetoric of black and white may come to indicate continuities, not in terms of a romantic timelessness, but indicating situations or work methods that persist. James Ravilious' extensive documentation of the agricultural landscape of North Devon offers one such example. In the early 1970s he was commissioned by the Beaford Centre in North Devon to 'show the people of North Devon to themselves'. He subsequently spent 17 years documenting places, people and rural activities in the Exmoor region, producing over 80,000 photographs as well as rephotographing about 5,000 old images for the Beaford archive.⁹ This is one of the most exhaustive existing records of rural life; the criticality lies in the extent and detail of the documentation. To view a single image from this very extensive series would be to miss the point. Rather the archive acts as a social history, a visual diary of continuity and change. By contrast with Davies or with Moore, specificity of place fundamentally anchors his work, contributing to historical perception through offering a degree of insight that the more roving landscape photographer would not aspire to achieve.

Class and region are complexly inter-connected; rural land ownership, local industrial possibilities, and proximity to cities determine regional rural economies in terms of tourism, fisheries, agriculture, mining, industrial enterprise, and energy plants (nuclear or wind power), and so



James Ravilious, From the series *An English Eye*, 1974–1986.

Top: 'Archie Parkhouse in a wood near Dolton', Devon, 1974.

Middle: 'Wilfred Pengelly setting up stooks', Woolleigh Barton, Beaford, Devon, 1974.

Bottom: 'Looking southwest from Five Barrows under snow', Exmoor, 1986.

Top: 'Olive Bennett with her Red Devon cows, Cupper's Piece', near Beaford, Devon, 1979.

Middle: 'Alf Pugsley returning a lamb to its mother', Langham, Dolton, Devon, 1982.

Bottom: 'Collapsed sheds during the Great Blizzard', Millhams, Dolton, Devon, 1978.

Andrea Liggins' recent work, snapshots made with mobile phones and disposable cameras, explores the construction of 'the look' of the more traditional camera and consequent ways of seeing. The affects of pictorial framing come under scrutiny as domestic digital cameras downplay the aesthetic conventions and technical sophistication of larger formats. How we look and what we see are in question as the snapshot informality, limited depth of field and consequent priority of content



Andrea Liggins, Untitled, from the series *Uncertain Terrain*, 2003.

over form interrupt accustomed viewing experiences. For instance, in one example stalks and wild-flower heads inter-weave in the foreground – nature refusing organised geometry – while sea in the background blurs into the sky, with no detailing of contours. The technology does not allow for an imposition of organisation; it is not possible to stand further away in order to frame the flora and silhouette shapes against the movement of the sea, a clear horizon line, or to emphasise the symbolism of clouds. Liggins is interested in counteracting legacies of Romanticism, and Cartesian objectification of nature, suggesting more intimate encounters within rural and semi-rural environments, including explicitly organised spaces such as parks and gardens.

In Helen Sear's series, *Inside the View* (2005–07), Cartesian models are conceptually central. Two photographs are sandwiched together, a



Helen Sear, 'No. 13', from the series *Inside the View*, 2005–07.

loneliness, this solitude is rather a way of life, where nature – a silent substitute for direct social contact – plays an important role as partner, interlocutor and model of inspiration’ (Runólfsson, 1992: 145). The climate is tough, and survival is challenging, especially in the far north and in rural regions. Even in urban areas the shift from snow, ice and limited daylight in winter to the long days of summer is culturally deep-seated, influencing everyday pursuits. Sea, fjords, islands, mountains, woodlands, pastures, long dark winters, and the white nights of summer, all contribute to the inflection of national cultures and concerns, and, arguably, play a key role in the construction of national psyches.

Situated on the edge of Europe, Norway has a relatively low population with a concentration of people in the south, especially around Oslo, Bergen and Stavanger. Politically democratic, it retains a sort of ‘secular’ monarchy. Since it is not a member of the European Union it maintains an economic and symbolic separation from the rest of Europe. That Norway has frequently been ruled from elsewhere historically is relevant to understanding Norwegian identity. As a modern nation it has only been independent for a century (interrupted by German occupation in the 1940s). For Norwegians, autonomy is important, and the monarchy symbolises national identity, hence, in London, the embassy title is ‘The *Royal* Norwegian Embassy’ (my emphasis).

There is a tradition of visual artists in Scandinavia travelling and studying elsewhere in Europe (Rome, Berlin, Paris). As already indicated, Scandinavians – on the periphery of Europe and echoing their Viking ancestors – expect to travel; artists are no exception to this. It follows that the Norwegian pictorial integrates a number of external influences. Johan Christian Dahl (1788–1857), who is frequently hailed as the ‘father’ of Norwegian landscape painting, studied in Germany, and his work is clearly influenced by European Romanticism; although he himself emphasised ‘rediscovery’ of the Norwegian landscape on his return.⁸ Notions of beauty and of the sublime take on a particular inflection in an environment so subject to intensity of summer light, limited winter light, and the effects of reflection on ice and snow. Artists studying in Paris in the late nineteenth century encountered Realism and on their return likewise integrated this within a Norwegian pictorial. What is striking about Norwegian art history and, indeed, various websites hosting discussions of Norwegian art, is the frequent reference to the ‘Norwegian romantic landscape tradition’ associated with the National Romantic Movement of the second half of the nineteenth century. In the imagined community of this particular nation, *heimat* is rural.



Knud Knudsen, ‘Parti fra Odda I Hardanger’ (An area of Odda, Hardanger), 4 June 1863.

Photography in Scandinavia developed, as elsewhere, through the involvement of artists and writers, as well as through the involvement of those with other scientific and technical interests, and through the establishment of commercial studios by those who saw potential for selling images. Foremost among the latter was the Knudsen business in Bergen. Knud Knudsen (active 1862–1900), from Hardanger, south of Bergen, was a country boy, who went to Reutlingen in Germany to study fruit farming, and there acquired a stereoscopic camera. He pre-eminently documented Bergen and his home surroundings, noting people at work, for example, fishing or farming, and roads and railways