Considering the Alternatives

New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape, SF MoMA, July 17–October 3, 2010
Sculpture Park 2010, Abington Art Center, Dates Unspecified

In 1975 the photography exhibit “New Topographics” first appeared at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. The show, which had photographs of suburban sprawl, urban decay, abandoned factories, and so on, is often cited as a paradigm shift in American photography, as the medium went from picturesque landscapes to corroded urban scenes, and from marginal art form to grounded academic discipline. In 2009, the House represented the show and then it traveled west for exhibits at LACMA and SF MoMA.

Most reviews of the reprised show have focused on the question of its relevance – Are these photographs still startling today? Has photography achieved its proper status as art? etc. But one should first note the anachronism of the original show. After all, Ansel Adams’ photography already existed within the context of the conversation paradigm enshrined by Teddy Roosevelt and others. The “wild landscape” was already man-altered by the very attempts to protect it. Moreover, as Charles Mann suggested in his synthetic account, 1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus, the manufacturing of landscapes is even a pre-Colombian activity.

“Man-altered,” as a paradigm, then, is a difference of degree, not kind. What Frank Gohlke’s dry irrigation canal, or empty Los Angeles landscape, for example, shows, is not the tragedy of alteration, but the tragedy of a specific brand of failed intervention. This is increasingly important to recall in the present of what Yates McCree has aptly dubbed “eco-vanguardism,” or the elite set of practices which “green” cities at the cost of certain human residents. Sustainability is crucial, no body disagrees, but consider the case of New Orleans, where “greening” was synonymous with “whitening,” as new green spaces were unabashedly planned on top of formerly black neighborhoods. Sustainability as a key word is empty without the real lives it claims to be protecting.

In 2009, the House represented the show and then it traveled west for exhibits at LACMA and SF MoMA. A corollary take on the “man-altered landscape” is currently on view at the Abington Art Center, where a number of artists both local and national have altered the landscape of the nearby woods. Their “designs with nature” include tree paintings in natural pigments which will dissolve over time by Richard Metz, as well as chainsaw carved faces jutting out of fallen logs by Jay Walker. Walker and Metz are no, say, Bernd and Hilla Becher, but neither are they trying to be. Their aim is less as a competitive attempt at facilitating positive artistic engagements with natural objects.

My sense of the value of the “New Topographics” show and its second life is nicely condensed in a quote from one of the photographers, Joe Deal: “it was more of an accident that I was up on the hill and looked down and could see the houses in the context of the landscape rather than just singling out the details of the architecture.” What this formal point suggests more broadly is the set of relations made possible through the photographic lens. What Deal sees is neither architecture nor photography, nor a simple “new topography.” Instead, it is a photography of relation, a photography which seeks to understand the interactions of humans and their environment without passing judgment. Philadelphians are not exactly being offered a parallel experience of seeing these classic photographs, but a corollary take on the “man-altered landscape” is currently on view at the Abington Art Center, where a number of artists both local and national have altered the landscape of the nearby woods. Their “designs with nature” include tree paintings in natural pigments which will dissolve over time by Richard Metz, as well as chainsaw carved faces jutting out of fallen logs by Jay Walker. Walker and Metz are no, say, Bernd and Hilla Becher, but neither are they trying to be. Their aim is less as a competitive attempt at facilitating positive artistic engagements with natural objects.

The Machete Group Discusses Theory and Practice
After One Year of an Ongoing Experiment

AK: The problem of theory and practice is often considered a question of engineering, since the engineer is the figure who is charged with the task of translating theory into practice, of producing an edifice that can resist the various contingencies that threaten its material existence. The engineer is a figure, in other words, that must attend to the difference between theoretical models and their empirical instantiation, a figure transfixed, but not paralyzed by the threat of catastrophe that haunts all attempts to place ideal structures into the contingent world. There is always the potential that the best laid plans will be laid to waste by contingencies that exceed calculation and it is the task of the engineer to take these into account. Our present seems to be enthralled with this figure, gripped by the dual obsession with security (the desire to calculate out the existence of contingencies that spell certain doom) and catastrophe (the desire to be present when things fall apart). We do not want our bridges to fall, but we want to present as spectators when they do. If one of our goals is to challenge this facile, albeit classical, model of the relation between theory and practice, we might then question to what extent the critic, as another figure of the link between theory and practice, can be decisive modes of intervention into the shared fabric of our world, artistic and theoretical practices are not exempt from incisive critique and must not be protected by the superficial niceties of good taste or the debilitating accoutrements of socially refined behavior.

education is a collective and dynamic process unrestricted to the formal hierarchies and bureaucracies of academic corporations.

Invisible Bridge

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