

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-Columbian 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 McKee 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 "whiting," 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.



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 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 the documentation of alteration than a pleasant attempt at facilitating positive artistic engagements with natural objects.



Machete readers may balk at the show's ideology, as seen in Walker's opening quote: "People used to find gods in the woods, some still do," and with good cause (not only for its vague spiritualism but also for its retroactive romanticism). But be that as it may, walking through the show's wooded path on a sunny Sunday this past month was more of the more unexpectedly pleasant art experiences I've had for some time. "Considering the alternatives" was a phrase George Bernard Shaw coined when he was asked how he felt on his ninetieth birthday. In an era where even the most sane among us seem to believe armageddon is around the corner, we are in something of Shaw's position, looking at a crumbling world but imagining that it still has to be better than no world at all. Given that alternative, some healthy practices of landscape alteration are welcome to even the most cynical.

- Avi Alpert