

# The Machine in The Garden Revisited

## *American Environmentalism and Photographic Aesthetics*

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From its earliest appearance in the United States in 1839 as Daguerre's magic mirror, photography has occupied a privileged position in our public discourse on nature. Its material chemistry and apparatus were felt by many to guarantee sufficiently the medium's authority as scientific evidence, while its expressive potential in the hands of artists assured its prestige in the symbolic realm. It was this seamless blending of optical truth and visual pleasure that made photographs supremely useful for communicating values about human relations with and in the "natural world." This study will explore how photographic image industries (high and low) reflected and created changing models for how nature has been viewed and understood by Americans over the last 150 years.

From the age of Manifest Destiny to the age of global warming, the kinds of questions we can ask of nature photographs include: What images of nature are most potent for public consumption at a given historical moment and what ideologies underwrite them? Which publics are being addressed and why? Do cultural elites, including artists and curators, reinforce dominant myths about the relations between "the human" and "the natural," or work against them? By tracing in parallel the development of public environmental consciousness and the evolution of marketable images of nature, we will see influential styles of North American nature photography in their broader social contexts, not only in terms of iconography and formal style, but as responses to changing pressures of a national industrial empire that grew, matured and went global in the compressed space of two centuries.<sup>1</sup>

The wide dissemination of the daguerreotype in the United States in the years before the Civil War allowed this miniature, hyperreal, jewellike commodity to be rapidly assimilated by the nation's middle classes. The daguerreotype and the wet collodion process that supplanted it after 1860 were ideal mechanical servants of a highly rationalized industrial culture—useful for gathering specimens and extracting statistical information in the interests of art, medicine, science, law enforcement, factory discipline, and every other institution of bourgeois culture. For an influential segment of American intellectuals who wrote about it, the daguerreotype was praised as the living revelation of nature itself, literally frozen under glass for prolonged contemplation by window or lamplight. Its startlingly precise detail, heightened by the three-dimensional illusion of stereographic viewing, caught the imagination of the transcendentalists, for whom it held deeper meaning. These New World philosophers read the natural landscape as a sacred text, created by God and offered to individuals for interpretation. Heightened by parallel

waves of Utopian and evangelical revivals (Shakers, Brook Farm, Oneida Community, Latter Day Saints), transcendentalism joined older Christian doctrines about the immanence of God in Nature to Romanticism's insistence on the personal experience of the sublime. Nature was the sign of both divinity's awesome power and its redemptive grace, available to all seekers.<sup>2</sup>

As with the locomotive, the exemplary "machine in the garden," the mid-nineteenth-century camera represented both the triumph of scientific progress and a key productive agent in the generation of images of nature and culture. Like the locomotive, photography annihilated older understandings of space and time.<sup>3</sup> It was a potent symbol of bourgeois progress, cloaking scientific realism in the perfumed garb of Romantic aesthetics, a marriage that would be joyously re-celebrated by every generation of American photographic artists from Albert Sands Southworth to Minor White. In the context of nineteenth-century optimism about American progress, photography (like other processes of industrial manufacture) embodied the laws of nature; nature and technology appeared to spring naturally and autonomously from the same divine principle. Furthermore, these material and symbolic meanings were understood to be inherent in the very commodity the camera produced.

The latter half of that century witnessed a radical shift in public conceptions of wild nature that corresponded to accelerating industrialization and the conquest of the continent. Rapid urbanization brought problems for the propertied classes such as the immigrant influx and the creation of a newly visible and threatening urban proletariat and underclass; new stresses on the family; the danger of contagious diseases; the unpleasant odors, sights and assaults of city life; and the plundering of natural resources to feed a bottomless industrial maw. The population shift from country to city was dramatic. In 1800, a relatively homogeneous 5 million Americans lived in small towns or on farms, mostly concentrated east of the Appalachians; only 7 percent lived in cities. By 1900, 90 million Americans, a third of whom were of non-Anglo descent, populated the entire continent; 40 percent lived in cities while only 37 percent farmed. The Jeffersonian ideal of rural life, or rather, the reality to which it might have once corresponded, had become irrelevant.

The prominence of the Great West in the nation's iconography of nature at the close of the nineteenth century was symptomatic of a widely shared belief that the frontier was closing and, with it, a formative historical age. The 1890 census revealed that no vast tracts of land remained uncharted. In his famous frontier thesis, historian Frederick Jackson Turner crystallized popular notions about the exceptional and providential relationship of Anglo-Americans to their natural environment. Turner's frontier was "free land" settled by heroic white homesteaders who moved purposefully westward, who farmed and ranched and built local democracies in small towns. The West of mining, railroad building, irrigation, indentured labor from China and Mexico, Indian reservations, Spanish land-grant communities, grain elevators and feed lots did not figure in the story.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to those who lived there, Progressive Era cultural elites valued the West's natural environments more for their symbolic and spiritual meanings than for their economic productivity or ethnic diversity.

Stereographs were central to this process of producing and new spiritual imagery for leisure consumption. Highly industrialized in their production and marketing, the stereoview companies vied for the most popular images of the new spectacles of the

geological West. Particularly interested were railroad companies that wanted to advertise the scenic marvels of their routes to urban dwellers. Most of the well-known expeditionary photographers of the post-Civil War era, including Carleton Watkins, Edward Muybridge, William Henry Jackson and Charles Savage, worked directly for the railroads as salaried employees or on speculation.<sup>5</sup> Jackson's dramatic views of Yellowstone's geothermal wonders are cited as instrumental in convincing congress to create the second national park in 1872 (Yosemite was the first). But this move, like the move to nationalize Banff a decade later, was powerfully backed by private railroad interests that owned most of the lucrative tourist concessions and rights of way.<sup>6</sup>

Stereographs brought these views into every middle-class home. What did such images convey to these audiences? Unlike prints, engravings, and paintings, stereographs offered the theatrical illusion of depth with astonishing detail. Along with the imperial plate views shown in public expositions and engraved in such popular periodicals as *Harper's Monthly* and *Scribner's*, stereographs set the standard for scenic viewing expectations. On their travels, tourists sought out the features and vantage points they had already seen in pictures: giant redwoods, shooting geysers, precipitous canyons, soaring mountains and painted deserts. On a scale never before possible, scenery was commodified, packaged, and sold to a mass public. Its consumption signified leisure and status; the ability to take off time from the industrial work schedule of school and office, the disposable resources to acquire railroad tickets and accommodations, and the cultivated taste to appreciate the spiritual pleasures to be had. The Great West was seen as the antithesis of eastern city life with its dirt, congestion, moral degeneracy, crime, feminization, poverty, corrupt political institutions, and the increasing bureaucratization of everyday life.

But the mass embrace of the nature experience took its toll. In 1908 sixty-nine thousand travelers visited the national parks. By 1921, annual attendance exceeded one million.<sup>7</sup> Automobiles revolutionized access and cheaply excavated dirt roads gave passage to previously inaccessible backcountry. Alpinists, hikers and campers, many of them wealthy businessmen and academics), keenly felt this encroachment and began to pool their resources and political influence to protect their spiritual refuges from the masses. The Sierra Club was founded in 1892 in San Francisco by a group of professors from Berkeley and Stanford to "enlist the support of the people and the government in preserving the forests and other features of the Sierra Nevada Mountains."<sup>8</sup> The naturalist and writer John Muir was elected its first president, a post he held for twenty-two years. Over the next century, the Sierra Club became a major institutional advocate for wilderness preservation and fertile ground for the blending of aesthetic values and environmental politics.

Apart from the mass marketing of stereographs, postcards, and popular reproductions in the illustrated press, how were American art photographers responding to the new spiritualizing of nature? Beginning in 1892 with the Photo-Secession and continuing with his vanguard gallery, 291, and *Camera Work* magazine, Alfred Stieglitz established himself as the most important arbiter of photographic art in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Shortly before the First World War, Stieglitz anointed the young Paul Strand as his exemplary modern photographer. Strand and his contemporary, Charles Sheeler, were bowled over by the 1913 Armory Show that introduced Americans to the innovative experiments of Post-Impressionist and cubist painting and sculpture. Both photographers

immediately abandoned the soft-focus, allegorical styles of pictorialism for hard edges, fragmented shapes, simplified compositions, and spatial ambiguity.

Further, they understood photography to be *mental* labor of the highest order. They saw the physical act of making an exposure as a moment of personal, spiritual one-ness with the subject. Choices of vantage point, lens, filtration, film emulsion, printing paper, and so forth were intuitive, though grounded in years of experience with materials and equipment. Borrowing from both French Symbolism and Roger Fry's theory of Significant Form, Stieglitz and Strand saw the descriptive, referential content of photographs as of little importance, except as these illuminated the artist's feelings. These feelings were concentrated in the act of pressing the shutter, when the overwhelming impulse to capture the "majesty of the moment" was realized.<sup>10</sup>

That these photographers seized on the act of releasing the shutter as the epiphanic instant needs to be understood as a reaction against the growing ubiquity and familiarity of the photographic process since the advent of dry-plate and roll-film cameras in the 1880s, a development that put inexpensive cameras in the hands of the masses for the first time. The First World War and the defeat of Germany was a windfall for George Eastman, whose Kodak Company appropriated German patents and opened up whole new areas of goods manufacture for industrial applications and amateur markets alike. Miniature roll-film cameras such as the Leica helped revolutionize European photojournalism in the 1920s, stoking a seemingly insatiable public appetite for picture magazines. Against this onslaught, the Symbolist bulwark thrown up by Stieglitz and his acolytes can be seen as a defensive maneuver against mass taste as well as the rejection of pictorialist sentimentality.<sup>11</sup>

The legacies of Romantic and Symbolist aesthetics as they were reinterpreted by Stieglitz and his circle in the 1920s provide the context for one version (but an important one!) of how the American environment and its social character would be represented to the American public. Furthermore, the importance of the rugged wilderness of the West cannot be understated in any discussion of the development of environmentally concerned photography. Had Edward Weston and Ansel Adams not come along when they did, they would have had to be invented. As native Californians, they would play an indispensable role as interpreters of a distinctively American natural, and national landscape, popularizing their ideas through copious articles in the photographic press, illustrated by their photographs. Both photographers made the requisite pilgrimage to New York to show their photographs to Stieglitz and both acknowledged him as the unquestioned mentor and early influence on their lives and work.<sup>12</sup>

Weston's famous doctrine of "previsualization" was rooted in the concept of the instant of exposure as the essence of photographic expression, and his tirades against pictorialist tropes and literary allusions in photography carried on the battle Stieglitz and Strand engaged in the pages of *Camera Work*.<sup>13</sup> For his part, Adams rationalized Weston's previsualization into a full-blown technical scheme for producing the desired range of negative densities at the time of exposure: the zone system. The act of photographing became highly abstracted, an intellectual project detached from any particular content, save the subject's luminance values. But both Weston and Adams spoke of the act of choosing the "correct" tonal values as emotionally and spiritually guided, independent of the subject's connotative meanings and therefore universal and transcendent as form. Tones, shapes, and their arrangements were to be perceived as

“equivalents,” to use Stieglitz’s famous term, for “the feelings the photographer had about life.”<sup>14</sup>

How could such an abstract, subjective, and profoundly ahistorical aesthetic be useful to emerging conservationist politics in California after the First World War? Certainly, dramatic images of the uninhabited wilderness, such as those Weston and Adams produced, drew on the storehouse of late nineteenth-century anxieties about the debilitating effects of over-civilization. If we accept the photographers’ assertions that their photographs revealed their deepest feelings about life, these feelings are not merely private, but also informed by the larger structures of feeling. Weston’s preference for simply composed images that emphasized earthy sensuality and the surface textures of natural forms constructed a world tightly regulated by a controlling, dominant intellect, purified of contradictions, bourgeois affectations, and incoherence. Adams took Muir as his model, setting out to produce a photographic equivalent to the nature publicist’s writings. He sought operatic landscapes that put his zone system to the test: stormy skies, moonlit deserts, snowdrifts, and the sharp contrast of light and shadow visible at sunrise.

But appeals to the sublime proved inadequate to the new political realities of the twentieth century. The bitter and ultimately unsuccessful fight to preserve the Hetch Hetchy Valley in the Sierra from being dammed (1907-14) had galvanized wilderness preservationists into an active political force for the first time. Muir had framed the battle for Hetch Hetchy as a struggle between God and Mammon, the spiritual values of the wilderness versus the needs and economic clout of San Francisco, rebuilding after its devastating earthquake. But such Manichean thinking collapsed in the face of modern accounting methods, the cost-benefit analyses of a new breed of resource managers exemplified by Gifford Pinchot, founder and director of the U.S. Forest Service. For Pinchot, the needs of people outweighed the needs of nature; the idea of wilderness preservation appealed to him only insofar as human needs were not at stake. The next stage of the battle was engaged when preservationists met Pinchot’s technocratic analysis head-on by developing cost-benefit strategies of their own.

The Second World War and succeeding Cold War gave a renewed boost to the appeal of dramatic natural landscapes, both Arcadian and sublime. Wartime propaganda churned out by the Office of War Information (which had absorbed the New Deal Farm Security Administration’s photographic unit) emphasized the abundance and special blessings of American life. After the war, Ansel Adams’s epic landscapes played well as familiar and comforting antidotes to memories of the Great Depression and the newer, more terrifying horrors of Buchenwald and Hiroshima. The United States’ new role as a global superpower, conquering world markets in the name of freedom and spreading democracy, found a ready imagery in the nineteenth-century’s version of Manifest Destiny: the conquest of the frontier.<sup>15</sup>

But the modern experience of the wilderness had changed dramatically. In 1946 and 1948, Adams received Guggenheim Fellowships to photograph the national parks and monuments. While photographing in a relatively pristine Alaska, Adams reformulated his environmentalist philosophy, blending old phobias about industrialization and encroaching alien populations with an equally conservative fantasy of a vanished pre-industrial golden age, the organic society. Adams hoped his photographs would restore a lost experience of nature that had become corrupted by the postwar burgeoning of family tourism and its commercial amenities, rapid

suburbanization, road building, and resource development. Pent-up demand from wartime rationing and the creation of a postwar culture of family consumerism (prominently featuring automotive travel and leisure activities) had created a monster. Adams's aesthetic contempt for mass culture is palpable—a contempt shared by the majority of postwar intellectuals such as Theodor Adorno, Dwight Macdonald, and Clement Greenberg.<sup>16</sup> But his dream of a lost organic society, where humans were imagined to have lived harmoniously with nature, found a new resonance among environmental activists.

Most of historians of American environmentalism credit Aldo Leopold, forester, naturalist, and philosopher, with changing the ways in which Americans understood their relationship to the environment and with ushering in modern ecological consciousness.<sup>17</sup> Leopold developed his ecology theories in the 1920s, but several decades passed before they became widely accepted. It was Leopold who shifted the emphasis in environmental politics from protecting wilderness for spiritual and aesthetic reasons to making it a matter of biological necessity. In a society where rational science had displaced religious belief as the indisputable authority on matters of the physical world, Leopold's ideas were welcome indeed. His notions of an "ecological conscience" and a "land ethic" were ideals that attracted nature-lovers, but his careful data gathering and painstaking study of micro-habitats provided the kind of hard analysis that could sway engineers and bureaucrats.

A graduate of Pinchot's Yale School of Forestry, Leopold was educated in the new science of resource-management promoted by the U.S. Forest Service. He was not a radical like Muir; he did not reject development outright. But Leopold strongly felt that things could go too far and that natural systems could be irrevocably damaged. Wilderness was not just a means of promoting beauty and vacation fun, it was a matter of preserving the very matrix of life itself, the intact "aboriginal biota." All living things in a shared environment were interdependent, and a new ethics that emphasized this interdependence was needed.<sup>18</sup>

But it was not until the early 1970s that photographic expressions emerged that reflected this new thinking about the complex interrelations of nature and development. Part of this lag can be explained by the persistent appeal of the image of the romantic wilderness in conservationist circles as well as in the popular media of coffee-table books and magazines. The idealizations of Weston, Adams, Eliot Porter, and their acolytes seemed sufficient; organized conservationists were confident that any viewer, on seeing them, would be persuaded of the inherent worthiness of nature preservation.

The 1950s and 1960s were the testing ground for conservationism's growing political muscle. Until 1950 the Sierra Club had been a local organization, numbering only seven thousand members. But that year, it formed its first chapter outside California and three decades later, it boasted an international membership of over one-half million. David R. Brower, its executive director and a public relations genius, led a series of provocative media campaigns to bend public opinion, using magazine articles, motion pictures, op-ed pieces, and hard-hitting illustrated brochures. Brower inaugurated the Sierra Club's popular Exhibit Format series of wilderness advocacy books, illustrated with lush color photographs. This has remained a Sierra Club hallmark: spectacular color picture books, calendars, and postcards in which photographs of wild scenic beauty "speak for themselves."<sup>19</sup>

The 1960s also brought the newly packaged dangers of pollution and overpopulation to public attention. The publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), first serialized in the *New Yorker*, demonstrated the pervasive toxicity of subsoils and groundwater due to chemical pesticides, notably DDT. Carson's exposé, drawing carefully researched links between industrial pollution and cancer, provoked a groundswell of indignation and alarm. Whereas it had been relatively easy to ignore the toll contaminated water and air took on the urban poor, suburbanites now realized that the poisons did not respect city limits. Another spur to public concern was the publication of biologist Paul Erlich's bestseller, *The Population Bomb* (1968), a pessimistic, neo-Malthusian treatise on the unsustainability of global population growth.

These debates were also affected by the countercultural politics of the 1960s and early 1970s that questioned all forms of received wisdom about the way the world works. Sprung from the seedbed of campus protest during the Civil Rights movement and Vietnam War, a small, but influential cohort of eco-radicals advocated a new land and consumption ethic, drawn from various Marxist, feminist, anti-corporate and anti-militarist ideas. The media-savvy attacks of Ralph Nader and his Raiders on corporate malfeasance and waste led to the creation of consumer protection laws and stricter manufacturing standards. While concentrated in a narrow class niche (a niche that included many college-educated artists), these counter-cultural activists were in the vanguard of the new ecological and health consciousness that spread to the broad middle classes by the 1970s. This bore fruit in the demand for goods, technologies, and services that could not be provided by conventional for-profit businesses: natural foods, homeopathic medications, alternative healing, recycling of waste products, alternative energy, organic farming, composting.<sup>20</sup>

The popularization of some of these new consumer values and growing skepticism about unimpeded growth was spurred in 1973 when the oil-producing nations of the Middle East and Venezuela (OPEC) dramatically raised the price of oil on the international market. Underpriced oil and gas, the basis of the U.S. economy, disappeared temporarily, sending the economy into a series of devastating recessions. Cars lined up at gas pumps and serious talk of gas-rationing left the public traumatized. Light, fuel-efficient Japanese cars made telling gains in the U.S. market and Jimmy Carter was voted into the presidency in 1976, partly on the basis of his alternative energy agenda—an agenda that horrified the powerful corporate energy conglomerates and that Ronald Reagan promptly overturned four years later.

The year Carter was elected, William Jenkins, curator of twentieth-century photography at the George Eastman House, mounted an exhibition of landscape photographs. Jenkins proposed that the nine photographers in the exhibition represented the landscape in a radically new way, rejecting earlier romantic and metaphysical paradigms and cultivating an impersonal, clinical distance from their subjects. Jenkins called this work the "New Topographics," alluding to the aesthetic indifference of the land surveyor (as opposed to the nature poet). That this style of work would be embraced as the authoritative new model for environmentally concerned photography is ironic, given that the photographers vociferously rejected any political motives for their work.

In his introduction to the catalogue, Jenkins further discouraged any connotative readings of the images, maintaining that the importance of these works was in their formal innovation, not their content.<sup>21</sup> But while these distinctions seem untenable now,

they reflected the dominant thinking of the time, expressed most clearly in John Szarkowski's aesthetic manifesto, *The Photographer's Eye* (1964). The most influential curator of photography during his three decades at the Museum of Modern Art, Szarkowski redefined the medium of photography through a narrow selection of formal attributes (vantage point, time, detail, the thing itself). As with Clement Greenberg's art theory, subject matter—what the photograph showed—was irrelevant to the medium's proper aesthetic discourse. But to those who saw them in the mid-1970s, the New Topographics were about (among other things) the end of romantic nature and the erasure of the boundaries between the human and the natural on which that old ideal depended.

The work of Robert Adams and Lewis Baltz was particularly influential on younger art photographers. While preserving the aesthetic of the straight, richly detailed, black and white print descended from Strand and Weston, their choice of subjects was novel and striking. They were drawn to landscapes of suburban sprawl, new industrial parks, excavated freeways, and scenes (not scenery) of no apparent aesthetic or sentimental value. The photographs seemed banal, yet opaque and resistant to interpretation (though Baltz's carefully framed details of new industrial parks had a contemporary minimalist feel, as did Hilla and Bernd Becher's typological photographs of industrial architecture).

Nonetheless, in the larger context of the OPEC oil crisis, Carter's election, and the mobilization of green politics, it was impossible not to see the New Topographics photographs as a collective commentary on new sunbelt land development and the profit-driven exploitation of fragile natural resources. The plains of Colorado and the hills and valleys of Southern California (where Adams and Baltz made their pictures) were undergoing a massive land-use changeover from farming to new suburban housing. In both cases, these subjects were controversial by definition as questions were being raised about the sustainability of such rapid population growth in semi-arid regions.

In 1981 the Sierra Club published *Dead Tech: A Guide to the Archaeology of Tomorrow*, a book originally published in Germany with photographs by Manfred Hamm.<sup>22</sup> Hamm's images were organized by subject: military ruins, automobile graveyards, sunken harbors, abandoned steel mills, and so forth. Unlike *The New Topographics*, *Dead Tech* was unabashedly a propaganda book, a polemical photo-essay on the long-term environmental and economic costs of industrialization and militarism, even as the manufacturing economy was being dismantled in Europe and the United States and relocated overseas. Both projects, however, turned the old nature story—the idea that nature existed as a refuge from civilization—on its head. Human degradation is inescapable, they declared; there is no longer any “nature” out there, isolated and untouched by human industry. The melancholy mood of black and white documents well suited the abject character of the New Topographics landscapes, but by the early 1980s, color photography began to be accepted increasingly by an art establishment that had been leery of its “low” commercial and consumer associations. New color processes such as the Cibachrome and the chromogenic print made color printing in the darkroom accessible and cost effective for the first time.

The 1980s also brought a conservative political backlash against the activist political movements of the preceding two decades, a backlash epitomized in President Ronald Reagan's appointment of James Watt as his Secretary of the Interior. Watt, a Colorado attorney, led the so-called Sagebrush Rebellion by mountain state developers, ranchers, and industrialists against environmental regulations. Putting into practice the



ideological blend of Christian Fundamentalist certitude and free-market rhetoric that had swept Reagan into office, Watt set out to methodically dismantle political consensus on conservation, opening public lands to mining, oil and gas exploration, grazing, and trying to wean the national parks off the federal budget by privatizing as much of their operation as possible. For Watt and the other conservatives in power, good stewardship of the nation's resources meant using them to boost private-sector profits.

The decade also brought unprecedented media coverage of environmental disasters. The names of Love Canal, Three Mile Island, Bhopal, Chernobyl, and Prince William Sound still resonate with dread. Scientific reports on acid rain, deforestation in poor nations, human-made droughts, desertification, ozone depletion and global warming became a source of increasing international concern. The resistance of the Reagan and Bush administrations to worldwide demands for pollution reduction and increased energy efficiency made the United States a pariah nation among the advanced industrial countries. The scandalous deal-making and crony capitalism that rocked the Environmental Protection Agency during Reagan's administration and the repeated refusal to sign international protocols on pollution galvanized a new wave of political activism. This included broadened political alliances among established conservation organizations such as the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, Audubon Society and the Nature Conservancy, all of which added greatly to their memberships in the 1980s.

New grassroots direct-action groups also sprang up, impatient with the more mainstream organizations' strategy of reform through lobbying Congress and statehouses. These new groups tended to be anarchist and locally based, rejecting bureaucratic structures as well as alliances with political parties and other social-activist groups. "No compromise in defense of Mother Earth!" was the motto of the most visible group, Earth First! Many of the eco-radicals drew their ideas from theories of deep ecology, so named by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, the movement's founder. Deep ecology drew on Eastern thought as well as on Western sources such as Muir and Leopold. Its guiding tenet was that humans are not the measure of the natural world, but are subordinate to its laws. Deep ecology positioned itself as a profound critique of Western philosophy; it rejected the idea of humans as fundamentally different from other forms of life and therefore deserving of special consideration. Deep ecologists advocated an ethic of biocentrism, the belief that everything in nature has equally inherent and intrinsic worth. Anthropocentrism, that gives precedence to human needs, is destructive to the harmony of all life.<sup>23</sup>

The reductive character of the biocentric/anthropocentric polarity proposed by deep ecology was challenged by social ecologists and environmental scientists who argued that the notion of a transcendent order of nature in harmonious balance was not borne out by research. These critics noted that no state of equilibrium, where organisms coexisted in a stable ecological relationship, has ever been documented. Rather, nature appears to be in continual states of flux and disturbance, with populations and plant and animal communities developing unevenly and idiosyncratically over time. Nor are human interventions universally harmful. The "natural" tropic rainforest of the Amazon, for example, owes some of its character to the human inhabitants who planted and transplanted its flora.<sup>24</sup> Thus the debate should not concern whether or not humans intervene in nature, but which kinds of interventions should be promoted and which kinds

should be opposed. In other words, it isn't a question of self-evident natural laws, but a question of all-too-human politics.

Feminism added another strong flavor to the radical environmentalist stew. Justifiably concerned at the lack of race and gender analysis among the white male-dominated environmental activist groups, cultural feminists launched their own critique during the 1970s and 1980s, with the publication of Carolyn Merchant's scholarly *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) and the more radical feminist theoretical works of Mary Daly and Susan Griffin.<sup>25</sup> In these texts, the culprit wasn't humans in general but male attitudes toward nature as manifested in the development of scientific rationalism, technocratic values, global militarism, and the ongoing subordination of women and children, frequently through violence and fear. For many cultural ecofeminists, the "male problem" was biologically determined and therefore irremediable. Women needed to assume leadership of a radical and woman-centered environmental agenda, but as with deep ecology, radical ecofeminist theories provided satisfyingly sweeping answers to bafflingly complex historical issues, but tended to obscure the decentered and local operations of power and resistance.

An effort to introduce a cultural feminist critique of landscape photography surfaced in 1987 with the exhibition and catalogue *Reclaiming Paradise: American Women Photograph the Land*. Originally curated for the Tweed Museum of Art in Minnesota by Gretchen Garner, *Reclaiming Paradise* attempted to recover a distinct "nature aesthetic" for women from the overwhelming identification of landscape photography with male artists.<sup>26</sup> Several years earlier, photographer Linda Connor had provided the polemical pretext for Garner's project in a talk she gave before a largely male audience of photographers, teachers and critics. "Is it too farfetched," Connor asked, "to link man's passion for new lands, high places, the challenges of nature, landscape photography with pissing? This is territorial claiming and marking at its most basic. And what better place to piss off of than the top of a mountain—marking a vista."<sup>27</sup>

Drawing from the cultural feminist writings of Merchant and Annette Kolodny, Garner proposed a distinctly feminine sensibility in landscape photography, a sensibility that "emphasizes the links between human beings and the natural world . . . statements of union, not ownership."<sup>28</sup> Photographs by twenty-six women from all periods of U.S. photographic history were assembled to give evidence that such a gendered vision existed, from the Pictorialist Anne Brigman to Connor herself. But as is often the case in such surveys, differences among the photographers in social class, historical period, regional locale, and race or ethnicity were ignored. All were subsumed under a mythical female nature that was viewed as the wellspring for their individual visions.

More recent ecofeminist critiques have highlighted the need for addressing abuses at local levels and at a multiplicity of sites, making insistent links among gender, race, class, nationality, and environmental degradation. Ecofeminists such as Vandana Shiva have led the way with an international perspective on these crises, particularly as they impact women and children in poor countries. For it is in these "underdeveloped" regions that women perform the bulk of subsistence farming that supports the family and village. If ecological disasters strike, it is they who are most directly affected. Shiva has been in the vanguard in developing an anticolonial feminist theory that links planned international economic policy, originating in the first world, with the destruction of local economies and women's importance within them. In this critique, nature in poor

countries is systematically exploited and depleted of its carrying capacity by minority Western, male-dominated institutions and global monetary policies. Third-world environments are purposely “maldeveloped”—destroyed in order to be made productive for the global export market.”<sup>29</sup>

With such a proliferation of environmental critiques, it might be reasonable to expect artists to address a diverse array of landscape subjects from a range of political positions. Some artists and photographers put their talents to work in the service of direct-action organizations such as Greenpeace, Earth First!, and animal-rights groups, documenting actions for publicity purposes and creating agit-prop works for demonstrations and media actions.<sup>30</sup> But in the mainstream art world, photographers still seem more indebted to past aesthetic ideas than in pointing the way to any significant new expressive vision of human and environmental relations. The 1980s gave the appearance of pluralism in the art market, but as with the consumer world in general, this had more to do with branding and the illusion of choice than with any real expansion of the discourse. If anything, the proliferation of postmodern pastiche strategies succeeded in disguising the real shrinkage of political expression in the culture industries. This becomes clear when we compare the kinds of images that might have been made with the limited ones we have actually seen exhibited.<sup>31</sup>

What is frequently promoted as environmentally engaged photography in the art world relies for its effect on established conventions of the picturesque/sublime, the founding tradition of nineteenth-century landscape art. Like the female nude, landscape encodes its own aesthetic histories in Western art, but unlike the former, these have not been subjected to much scrutiny as tokens of exchange in the larger political economies of class, gender, race and national identity. For the most part, contemporary photographs present oversimplified, if visually spectacular, dramas of “the human” and “the natural.” Their emotional tone is either ironic, showing us a nature that has become the butt of some huge visual joke, or apocalyptic, mesmerizing us with the sublime spectacle of nature’s immolation. In particular, the photographs of Richard Misrach, John Pfahl, and Lewis Baltz have been praised in the art press as expressions of a contemporary environmentalist consciousness.

Suspicious that Baltz’s carefully composed studies of waste sites, Pfahl’s power plant pastorals, and Misrach’s lush color studies of the “man-mauled” Mojave merely spectacularize what they depict are countered by the argument that the photographs are intended as art, not as political propaganda or corporate publicity. It as though being an artist is sufficient guarantee of a kind of natural innocence from any externally imposed values. As Reyner Banham wrote of Misrach’s photographs: “Educational and moral values alone do not make great art. Vision that strikes a *human chord* in the viewer and the technical proficiency to make such resonances felt, are what make art happen.”<sup>32</sup> But what is this “human chord,” if not a shared set of “educational and moral values” about what the photographs show?

In the introduction to his lushly illustrated homage to nineteenth-century views of the Niagara River Valley, *Arcadia Revisited* (1988), John Pfahl verges on treating modern-day pollution as an occasion for an intensified aesthetic experience: “The Niagara River is well known to be one of the most toxic waterways on the continent . . . Perhaps these devastating issues are peripheral to the thrust of this body of work and can best be confronted in other venues, but disquieting thoughts will inevitably figure into the

ultimate meaning of these images.”<sup>33</sup> Pfahl’s most recent series, photographs of industrial smokestacks discharging puffs of toxic smoke in Turner-esque hues against sunset skies, prompts a bittersweet meditation on the terrible beauty of these “phantasmagorias of light and color.”<sup>34</sup> The photographer relates that one day while he was out photographing, a gust of wind suddenly propelled a cloud of acrid fumes his way, forcing him to abandon his work and stumble back to the car, trying not to inhale. Where once it was the forbidding terrain of the frontier that posed challenges to adventurer-artists, it now appears that confronting hazardous pollution has become the new test of the photographer’s personal fortitude.

Has any postmodernist version of the “end of nature” debate emerged to temper older nostalgias for paradise lost? Nature would seem an ideal subject for deconstructionists and indeed, Frederic Jameson’s famous 1984 essay, “Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” provided some pointers. Jameson presented the postmodern condition as a sharp rupture with the unitary imperatives of the past. For Jameson, this transformation corresponded to the change from industrial capitalism to global multinational capitalism that is diffused, heterogeneous, and impossible to grasp coherently. Radical artists, says Jameson, must operate ‘schizophrenically’ in a culture of simulacra, images of images, mere signs of commodities. No longer is there an authentic, original subjectivity that we can claim: historicism displaces history, the work of art is a text of signs, and nostalgia for lost referents is the new aesthetic affect. As far as nature is concerned, wrote Jameson, the vision of the preindustrial organic society so dear to idealists like Martin Heidegger “is after all irredeemably and irrevocably destroyed by late capital, by the green revolution, by neocolonialism and the megalopolis, which runs its superhighways over the older fields and vacant lots, and turns Heidegger’s ‘house of being’ into condominiums.”<sup>35</sup>

While some tendencies of postmodernism seem in thrall to the unending play of signs, Jameson sees progressive possibilities for artists. Radical artists can take charge of the passive flow of images by constructing their own “cognitive maps” to situate themselves within the vast totality of global systems, allowing them to realize their position and regain their capacity to act. But as Rosalyn Deutsche cogently noted, Jameson’s sweeping analysis begs all questions of his own position as a white, male, first-world intellectual.<sup>36</sup>

As though to take Jameson’s thesis literally, independent curator Jeffrey Deitch put together a 1990 exhibiton called *Artificial Nature*, funded by the Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art in Athens. A glossy art book of the same title was edited and produced by Deitch and Dan Friedman and it circulated internationally. According to its introduction, *Artificial Nature* examines “the changes in consciousness that are resulting from the transformation of our natural environment into an artificial environment by advances in biological and computer science, and by the continued expansion of the global consumer culture.”<sup>37</sup> The book shows us Jameson’s dystopian, hysterical sublime in full swing: global, cybernetic, and totalizing. Its cover features a computer-simulated suburban roadscape with automobile, rendered in glowing Technicolor hues. An array of glossy images from art history, public relations, manufacturing, fashion, medical science, architecture, NASA, film, press photography, and contemporary art fills its pages. Does this strategy of amassing visual images from diverse archives across distinctly different historical periods and cultures to bolster an abstract curatorial notion sound familiar? Are

we supposed to swallow Deitch's postmodernist ahistoricism any more easily than we did John Szarkowski's Formalist brand?

*Artificial Nature* adds up to little more than a visual joyride through consumer-ville and the text is little help with its aphoristic utterances in Barbara Kruger red:

*Could it happen that the next generation will be our last generation of real humans . . . It is not at all unusual for a well-adjusted person to mellow out on Valium and spend the weekend interacting with the rest of the world mainly through television . . . Artists who can grasp the new technology may have a much more direct opportunity to redefine our idea of nature than they did when their media were limited to painting and sculpture.*

Is this Moholy-Nagy speaking or Andy Warhol? Deitch's pretensions to a new postmodern consciousness about nature and culture ring hollow. As with Jameson, questions of privilege and power (who has access in the information age? who doesn't?) are left unanswered. Nor, of course, should the unprecedented access to global information that new technologies make possible be confused with enlightenment!

If this discussion of the history of photographers' response to changing social ideas about nature tells us anything, it is that to the degree that artistic as well as environmentalist strategies are invested in totalizing answers to the nature/culture debate, they will remain ineffective as agents of a workable ecological politics. The designation of generalized categories of victims, whether animals, women, poor people, rainforests, preindustrial cultures, industrial workers, or dupes of the corporate media, only masks historical causes and effects. Symptomatic of the failure to understand the local, political character of environmental crises is the almost complete absence of nonwhites from the leadership ranks of our national environmental organizations.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, they and their worlds are absent from view in almost all publicized art photography exhibitions and publications that address environmental issues. They are obscured by the foregrounding of an abstract, apolitical fiction of "nature" that an equally abstract "humanity" has despoiled. Given that both global and domestic pollution take a disproportionate toll on poor nonwhite communities, this erasure is scandalous, though not surprising.

The problem is consistent from the transcendentalists to the Symbolists, from the Formalists to a dominant strain of postmodernists: a single set of relations is seen as determining and all others are beside the point. For the transcendentalists and Symbolists, individual intuition was the sufficient governing principle of artistic expression. For Formalists, the inherent attributes of the medium ordered its proper tradition and aesthetic mission. For Jameson and Deitch, the cognitive fragmentation of postindustrial subjects is the central condition. In all of these master narratives, the importance of other social relations—gender, sexuality, race, class—are discounted, even though critiques from these vantage points have repeatedly undercut their assumptions. Natures, cultures, and environments are local and historical; they are not epiphenomena. They (and their signs) are contested across many social, economic and political territories. As efficient tools of communication and as bearers of influential histories of representing nature in industrial societies, photographs will continue to play a critical role in these debates. What we now face is the challenge of making landscape images speak in local dialects.

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<sup>1</sup> A relatively recent but problematic example of this sort of larger study of persistent strains of sentiment and expression in some of the histories of American landscape photography is Estelle Jussim and Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock's *Landscape as Photograph* (New Haven: Yale, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> See Franklin Kelly, "The Pastoral Ideal," in *Frederick Edwin Church and the National Landscape* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1988), 67ff. See also Barbara Novak's pioneering study, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> For provocative comments on the sense of modernity that photography's invention evoked, see Shelly Rice, "Parisian Views," in Daniel P. Younger, ed., *Multiple Views: Logan Grant Essays on Photography, 1983-89* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1991). Classic models for the study of the changing perception of nature with the advent of industrialization include Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford, 1967); and Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, (New York: Oxford, 1973). For discussions of the iconography and symbolism of the railroad in nineteenth-century American painting, see Leo Marx's "Introduction" to *The Railroad in the American Landscape, 1850-1950* (Wellesley: The Wellesley College Museum, 1981), 12, and Patricia Hills's important overview, "Picturing Progress in the Era of Westward Expansion," in William H. Truettner, ed., *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1991), 97ff.

<sup>4</sup> Turner's legacy still weighs on Western historians. See "Introduction: Closing the Frontier and the Opening of Western History," in Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 17. See also Richard Slotkin, "The New El Dorado," in *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan, 1985); and William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 46.

<sup>5</sup> See Weston Naef, *Era of Exploration* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975). See also Peter B. Hales, *William Henry Jackson and the Transformation of the American Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1988), 146-50; and Robert Taft, "Photographing the Frontier: Second Phase," in *Photography and the American Scene* (New York: Dover Publications, 1938), 277ff.

<sup>6</sup> Jay Cooke's banking firm, which had a controlling interest in the Northern Pacific Railroad, brought strong political pressure to bear in Congress for the creation of Yellowstone National Park. F. V. Hayden, leader of the 1871 Hayden Survey, lobbied for the Northern Pacific in Congress, distributing W. H. Jackson's photographs to members, along with geological specimens, which were displayed in the Capitol and the Smithsonian. Cooke's agents also distributed copies of N. P. Langford's series of *Scribner's* articles, which touted the Northern Pacific's role in bringing tourists to Yellowstone's scenic wonders with ease and convenience. See Hales, *William Henry Jackson*, 108.

<sup>7</sup> Peter J. Schmitt, *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1990), 155.

<sup>8</sup> Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale, 1967), 132.

<sup>9</sup> For a cogent discussion of how Stieglitz secured his aesthetic hegemony, see Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Back to Basics: The Return of Alfred Stieglitz," *Afterimage* 12 (Summer 1984): 21-25.

<sup>10</sup> The phrase "majesty of the moment" proved crucial to Edward Weston's emerging aesthetic in the early 1920s. It was coined by critic Paul Rosenfeld in his review of Stieglitz's photographs in the April 1921 issue of *The Dial*: "They affirm [life] because they declare each of them the majesty of the moment, the augustness of the here and now."

<sup>11</sup> See Ulrich Keller, "The Myth of Art Photography: A Sociological Analysis," *History of Photography* 8 (October-December 1984): 249.

<sup>12</sup> Stieglitz showed little interest in Weston's photographs when he first saw them in 1922, while he enthusiastically promoted the younger Ansel Adams and gave him a show at An American Place in 1936. One might speculate that Weston's strong personality and maturity made him a less appealing candidate for mentoring and shaping, a role that Stieglitz relished.

<sup>13</sup> See Edward Weston, "Random Notes on Photography," in Beaumont Newhall, *Photography: Essays and Images* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 223; and Paul Strand, "The Art Motive in Photography," in Vicki Goldberg, *Photography in Print* (New York: Touchstone, 1981), 276.

<sup>14</sup> "A great photograph is a full expression of what one feels about what is being photographed in the deepest sense, and is, thereby, a true expression of what one feels about life in its entirety." Ansel Adams, "A Personal Credo" (1943), cited in Goldberg, *Photography in print*, 378.

<sup>15</sup> See my "Victory Gardens: The Public Landscape of Postwar America," *Views* 11 (Winter 1990): 3.

<sup>16</sup> See Jan Zita Grover, "The Winner Names the Age: Historicism and Ansel Adams's Manzanar Photographs," *Afterimage* 16 (April 1989): 14.

<sup>17</sup> The term *ecology* was first coined by zoologist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) in 1866 to describe the science of relations between organisms and their environment. Haeckel did not understand ecology as a political idea, but merely as a

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conceptual tool for discussing an area of study. See Anna Bramwell, *Ecology in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: A History* (New Haven: Yale, 1990), 39-41.

<sup>18</sup> See Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic" in *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine, 1966).

<sup>19</sup> This discussion is necessarily limited. The rapid proliferation of scenic magazines such as *Arizona Highways* and picture books for family consumption (e.g. Time-Life Nature series so popular in the 1960s), as well as nature programming on television, have played a role in raising awareness of environmental dangers. The Sierra Club targeted its messages to educated consumers who had the resources and leisure to enjoy wilderness vacations with their families.

<sup>20</sup> Barry Commoner's influential bestseller of the early 1970s, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), advocated a halt to capitalism's drive for continuous expansion and promoted "thinking small" for a sustainable environment. Unlike Paul Ehrlich, Commoner did not see population growth as a primary cause of environmental catastrophe but corporate greed.

<sup>21</sup> See my "Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men," in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning* (Cambridge: MIT, 1989), 125.

<sup>22</sup> Manfred Hamm, *Dead Tech: A Guide to the Archaeology of Tomorrow* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1981).

<sup>23</sup> For a good introduction to deep ecology theory, see Michael Tobias, ed., *Deep Ecology* (San Marcos, CA: Avant Books, 1984). See also Rik Scarce, *Eco-Warriors: Understanding the Radical Environmental Movement* (Chicago: Noble Press, 1990). For critiques of deep ecology by left ecologists, see Murray Bookchin, *Remaking Society: Pathways to a Green Future* (Boston: South End Press, 1990); André Gorz, *Ecology as Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1980); and the special issue, "Un-Greening the Third World: Food, Ecology and Power," *Race & Class* 30 (January-March 1989).

<sup>24</sup> "New Eye on Nature: The Real Constant Is Eternal Turmoil," *New York Times*, July 31, 1990, C1. See also William K. Stevens, "Balance of Nature? What Balance Is That?" *New York Times*, October 22, 1991, C4.

<sup>25</sup> The term *ecofeminism* was first coined in France in 1974 to call attention to the relationship between women's oppression and environmental destruction. Ecofeminism comprises a range of political tendencies, international in scope, with both narrow (local) and large agendas. In germinal U.S. ecofeminist theory, the writings of Merchant, Griffin and Daly were key: Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980); Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978); Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).

<sup>26</sup> This representation of landscape photography as a male province shows little sign of changing, as the recent *Aperture* special issue "Beyond Wilderness" (Summer 1990) indicates.

<sup>27</sup> Linda Connor in *Aperture* 93 (Winter 1984): 48.

<sup>28</sup> Gretchen Garner, ed., *Reclaiming Paradise: American Women Photograph the Land*, exh. cat., foreword by Martha Sandweiss (Duluth, MN: Tweed Museum of Art, 1987), 5-9.

<sup>29</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (London: Zed Books, 1989).

<sup>30</sup> For example, Sharon Stewart's *Toxic Tour of Texas* photo-documentary project (1990) was used as evidence in state legislative hearings and exhibited at the State Capitol in Austin, as well as in alternative grass-roots activist venues. Governor Ann Richards used Stewart's work in developing her environmental policy and recently placed a temporary moratorium on the excavation of new toxic-waste landfills in Texas.

<sup>31</sup> I am addressing dominant bodies of work and criticism that have appeared during the last decade in mainstream art-photography venues in the U.S. (e.g., *Aperture* magazine, the art monograph industry).

<sup>32</sup> In Richard Misrach, *Desert Cantos*, introduction by Reyner Banham (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 6.

<sup>33</sup> John Pfahl, *Arcadia Revisited* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 54.

<sup>34</sup> John Pfahl, "Power and Smoke: Two Statements," *Aperture* 120 (Summer 1990): 24.

<sup>35</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984): 53-92.

<sup>36</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, "Men In Space," *Artforum* 28 (February 1990): 22.

<sup>37</sup> Dakis Joannou's preface to Jeffrey Deitch and Dan Friedman, eds., *Artificial Nature*, exh. Cat. (Athens: Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art, 1990).

<sup>38</sup> See Philip Shabecoff, "Environmental Groups Told They Are Racists in Hiring," *New York Times*, February 1, 1990, A20. For other references on domestic "toxic racism," see "Dumping on the Poor," *time*, August 13, 1990, 46; Elizabeth Martinez, "When People of Color Are An Endangered Species," *Z* 4 (April 1991): 61; and Dana Alston, ed., *We Speak For Ourselves: Social Justice, Race, and the Environment* (Washington, DC: Panos Institute, 1990).