

“Examinations of Projected Freedom: Photography and the Spaces of the American West”
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ABSTRACT

Despite relatively recent trends in the history of the American West, which have increasingly cast the region as a land of dwindling resources, overpopulation, and ecological deterioration, it retains a great degree of its mythological connotations as a landscape of hope and opportunities for much of mainstream America. This analysis is largely concerned with two contradictory, normative European-American conceptions of the West, and their intersections with the photographic medium. These two primary mythologies of the West historically and artistically construe the American landscape as both transcendental wilderness and industrial economic resource. Although these constructs are somewhat paradoxical, they are not mutually exclusive. Both concepts derive from an overarching interpretation of western space that equates the perceived openness and expansiveness of the western landscape with physical mobility, social fluidity, and democratic freedom.

Within this mythological and ideological context, this thesis considers landscape photography's role in the twentieth-century West, and its conversations with the formal conventions and archetypal subject matter established by such early landscape photographers as Timothy O'Sullivan, Carleton Watkins, and William Henry Jackson. As the twentieth century progressed to its middle years, many forests, mountain ranges, and prairies had been decimated to extract lumber, oil, and mineral resources, while automobiles and the economic facts of the middle class had given rise to a vast tourism industry.

Photography was slow to adapt to these realities. Ansel Adams in particular continued to depict a vacant, wondrous West throughout the 1950s and '60s. He captured most of his images within national parks, ignoring the tourists, lumberjacks, and mines just beyond park boundaries. However, by the 1970s, a freshly disillusioned nation was ready to produce new views of the nation. Photographers of the New Topographics movement eagerly challenged perceptions of a fundamentally open, undisturbed West. To explore these ideological tensions,

I examine three major photographers, Ansel Adams, Henry Wessel, Jr., and Stephen Shore, whose careers span the 1920s to the early 2000s. By performing close visual analyses upon several representative images and considering the historical placement, formal technique, and artist's choice of apparatus, I explore how photography both shapes and reacts to cultural currents in the West. Of particular interest is the pervasive persistence of certain conventions established by early western photographers, especially the absence of human figures in the natural landscape. The conversely anthropocentric views of the New Topographics raise questions as to the quality of transcendence in the age of tourism, industrialism, and suburbia, and whether such spiritual values can still be sought and discovered in highly compartmentalized and altered landscapes. The ultimate pursuit of this thesis is to examine how photography is uniquely suited as a visual medium to engage the spatial ideology of the American West and its various connotations, human and natural, practical and intangible.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1: Tourism, Photographic Truth, and Henry Wessel.....	8
CHAPTER 2: Snapshot Photography, Transient Settlers, and Romanticism.....	27
CHAPTER 3: Inventing the Western Void.....	45
CHAPTER 4:	
The <i>New Topographics</i> Exhibition and Stephen Shore's Human Landscape.....	65
CONCLUSION: Wessel's West in the Twenty-First Century.....	88
APPENDICES.....	95
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	110

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of the American West stretches over a vast, fluctuating topography, covering the scrubby steppe of Colorado and Wyoming; the convoluted, crumpled ranges and alpine meadows of the Rocky Mountains; the deserts of stone arches, precipitous red cliff faces and serpentine canyons of Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico; the darkly lush forests of the Pacific Northwest; the sand and heat of Nevada giving way to the gold coast of California. The West is ever promising a surplus of sunlit futures to Americans searching for individual reinvention, material wealth, and social freedoms.

Lewis and Clark plunged into the West in the early nineteenth century to search for the fabled Northwest Passage, but also to survey the massive land acquisition from France that piqued the United States' desire to extend from Atlantic to Pacific. Although they covered a great deal of terrain and brought back an extensive body of information, their party lacked one significant feature which would define the exploratory expeditions that canvassed the West in the years from the 1860s to the turn of the twentieth century: photography.¹

The West and its exploration, settlement, and mythology are a perennial topic of discussion throughout American culture, filtered through popular media, painting, philosophy, geography, literature, and historical and cultural studies. But the West has fundamentally always been a region of images. In an analysis of the relationship between image and cultural conceptions of the West, curator and art historian Nancy Anderson cuts to the quick of the matter when she discusses an 1870 photograph made by William Henry Jackson, who accompanied several post-Civil War expeditions west of the Mississippi. In the image, Jackson photographs a painter, Sanford R. Gifford, sketching a scene of mesas

¹ Howard R. Lamar, “An Overview of Westward Expansion,” in *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, ed. William H. Truettner (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 3.

and cliffs in Wyoming, and thus “documents the first step in the process whereby the raw material, the western landscape, was transformed into both a work of art that conveyed cultural messages and a commodity exchanged in a commercial market.”² Photographs had a particularly profound impact on the nation’s conception of the West, and literally sold it as a land of opportunity and economic potential to the public and the federal government. As Anderson further notes, “the images secured on government-sponsored expeditions were so stunning in their documentation that aspirants for government funding...recognized their promotional value and capitalized on their power of persuasion.”³ Photography historian François Brunet adds that the “survey photographers’ created the classic face of the ‘wonders of the West’” which “they turned into visual myths.”⁴ Their statements betray a sense that the first photographs produced in the region misrepresented the reality of the West, or at the least, presented documentation skewed toward the features that would bring government appropriations to the explorers who employed them. Brunet contends that these photographers, who first spread images of sublime features in wide circulation, contributed indispensably to the creation of national parks in locations that embodied “an immemorial nature perceived as an outlet for the nation’s rifts and fractures and as the much sought after model of an ‘American landscape.’”⁵ The desire awakened by images showcasing economic potential, vast landscapes, and awe-inspiring locations of the West promised freedom through a wealth of resources and apparently endless space. Even the early settlers who rushed west after the Civil War encountered not a virgin landscape, but

² Nancy K. Anderson, “The Kiss of Enterprise,” in *The West as America, Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, ed. William H. Truettner (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 238-239.

³ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁴ François Brunet, “With the Compliments of F.V. Hayden, Geologist of the United States’: Photographic Policies of American Exploration,” in *Images of the West*, ed. François Brunet and Bronwyn Griffith, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007),12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15, 20.

a realm already mediated by the lens of photography in the service of propagandizing explorers.

To more fully understand photography's place in the history of the West, it is important to consider the major cultural currents that have impacted the popular mythology of the American West. The original federal policies that served to shape the topography west of the Atlantic seaboard continue to essentially impact popular conceptions of the western landscape. The initial period of western land policy spanned the years between 1785 and the outbreak of the American Civil War, and was mostly concerned with surveying and mapping the West and settling it with American citizens. As identified by Hildegard Binder Johnson in “Towards a National Landscape” (1990), the newly formed nation was heavily in debt, and through the Land Ordinance of 1785 sought the “orderly transfer of an immense, poorly known territory to private ownership,” which would thereby foster a “coherent” pattern of “settlement progressively moving westward,” and at the same time cultivate a strong economy.⁶ The establishment of this directive ultimately led to the rise of an “essentially” private American landscape which would later help drive “initiatives in modern times to establish park, forest, and wilderness reserves open to the public and to create trail opportunities” to mitigate the fenced parceling of the land.⁷ The need to occupy the westward territories to prevent colonization or seizure by other powers was palpable to the early surveyors, and thus the drive to expand west was from the very inception of the United States inexorably tied to nationalist aims. In helping achieve these goals, the settlers who built homesteads upon the neatly surveyed and mapped landscape attained private ownership of plots of land, which were divided in Johnson's estimation so as to increase sensation of private space; houses were erected in the center of resolutely square

⁶ Hildegard Binder Johnson, “Towards a National Landscape,” in *The Making of the American Landscape*, ed. Michael P. Conzen (London: Unwin Hyman Ltd., 1990), 128-129.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

plots, resulting in maximum separation between neighbors. Thus, an ideology of space that would prize distance and expansiveness was inherently folded into the demarcation of the western landscape. The settler’s perception of spatial independence would come to be synonymous with American freedom, and a particularly Western conception of freedom. The West would fundamentally become a landscape of renewal, where settlers could go to begin life anew as individuals, freed by sprawling horizons and physical isolation from the pressing expectations of neighbors and onerous responsibilities to community and society. The spaces of the West ultimately promised the ability to construct an independent identity founded upon material (and spatial) self-sufficiency.

It is this framing of the role of space in the nation’s history that proves most important to the overarching mythology of the American West, and photography’s role within it. Open space has always been the nation’s most potent ideological resource, a wellspring of wonder and hope to match the economic plenty offered by vast reserves of lumber, minerals, oil, and rich topsoil. The West has come to signify the states spanning the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific, and those bordering Mexico in the south. Yet the region began as all the territory west of the original Atlantic colonies. The frontier itself was mobile and restless, and it was the very fluidity of the region that was perhaps most enticing. The further Americans pushed west, the more pronounced the nation’s obsession with the expansiveness of its spaces would become. The confluence of grand vistas, material wealth, and the realization of continent-spanning dominance all played favorably upon a popular equation of physical mobility, social plasticity, and democracy, as though intrinsic to the western landscape itself was America’s ability to achieve total freedom by way of seemingly endless spaces. The ironic fact that an inherent byproduct of the pursuit of this freedom would be the fencing and closing off all that open space has by and large remained an unacknowledged subtext within the popular mythology of the West, photography serving

to prop up spatial freedom long after it fell to surveyors, cartographers, and homesteaders. For this spatial facet of American mythology to remain a phenomenon with cultural salience, the ability of the West to promise freedom through its spaces would have to remain unchallenged.

Tellingly, one of the most striking and persistent features of American landscape photography is the omission of people within the frame, providing an essentially blank slate upon which viewers can project an imaginary freedom. Even those early photographers who made ethnographic documentations of Native Americans largely denied these original inhabitants their fundamental place in the landscape by making portraits rather than images that would have acknowledged their contextual existence in western topographies. Committed landscape photographers who did include human figures at most rendered minuscule white explorers practically swallowed by the panoramic vistas they traversed. In the twentieth century, landscape photography retreated to the few topographies that remained unclaimed; namely, the national parks. By ignoring the tourists, settlers, and human artifacts that now dotted western landscapes, the trope of the vacant West could persist. Not until the relative national cynicism of the 1970s would photographers pointedly suggest that the ideal of spatial democracy had never come to fruition, the legacy of western expansion instead leaving a wake of ruined ecology, subdivided and prefabricated conformity, frustrated hopes, and ironic misunderstandings of the landscape. These ideas were first cohesively displayed for the public eye with the inception of the New Topographics exhibition in 1975, but as Britt Salvesen notes in his contemporary evaluation of the show, the artists who contributed “were all working as individuals rather

than as members of a cohort or movement,” suggesting a general shift in attitude toward the landscape, but hardly a sea change.⁸

The ways in which Americans encounter space continue to have profound implications for the West. As evidenced by the ongoing expansion of suburban and exurban communities, Americans still place a high value upon their private space, suggesting the critical themes introduced by the New Topographics have been met with a largely ambivalent public. Paradoxically, as American culture becomes increasingly media-driven, experience comes to mean less to the individual than representation, documentation, and evidence, as suggested by photography historian John Kouwenhoven and cultural critic Alexander Wilson in their respective discussions of snapshot photography and tourism.⁹ Snapshots preserve an experience for later retrieval even as the tourist landscape promotes limited perspectives and readings of the spaces at hand. While photographs present a necessarily fragmented representation of reality, the industrial development of the West, its highways, and car culture allow certain media perceptions to persist as individuals become more disconnected from landscapes both physically and conceptually, their gazes constrained by an over-determination of images as well as by the framework provided by automobiles, rest stops, and campgrounds.¹⁰ The experience of space strikes at the tension between two primary, contradictory conceptions of the West: as commodity for economic exploitation, and as sublime nature at the threshold of spiritual transcendence. Both ideas find their way into photography. Even photographers who document human-altered landscapes cannot help but reorder space and present the landscape as a fundamentally containable location rather than as an immersive experience. The car window and camera

⁸ Britt Salvesen, “New Topographics,” in *New Topographics* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2009), 11.

⁹ John A. Kouwenhoven, No title, *Aperture* 19.1 (1974): 106-108; Alexander Wilson, “Introduction: The View From the Road,” in *Discovered Country: Tourism and the American West*, ed. Scott Norris (Albuquerque, New Mexico: Stone Ladder Press, 1994), 3-22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3-8.

lens flatten and apprehend space as a two-dimensional phenomenon, and the scenic, panoramic photography of early artists such as William Henry Jackson, Ansel Adams, and Edward Weston gives way to the views of Henry Wessel and Stephen Shore, trained upon the minutiae and ironies of American life in the latter twentieth century. In such a chronology, the conceptual West begins as a land that can bear both the developmental burden of industrialization and the spiritual burden of a nation struggling to find an identity, an interpretation that rapidly deteriorates post-World War II as the region is subsumed by shallow consumerism and natural decay, becoming fundamentally a landscape of surfaces and empty promises, lacking physical or affective depth.

Photographic representations of the American West beg the question of the United States' cultural relationship to nature and wilderness, and how photography influences the link between landscape and identity as the proliferation of portable cameras and the creation of snapshot albums pose new conditions for interactions with space. Yet even with all these changes in America—photographic, economic, cultural, and historical—the West remains a potent symbol of American renewal and freedom. It is the object of this analysis to discuss how the specific medium of photography perpetuates, undermines, ignores, or challenges this mythology in both professional and vernacular contexts, and how the idea of western space is variously refracted through the camera lens.

CHAPTER I

Tourism, Photographic Truth, and Henry Wessel

Henry Wessel, Jr., a twentieth-century American photographer, works primarily in the West, focusing upon locales in New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and especially California. The early period of his work, from the late 1960s to the early '70s, was collected on a series of road trips throughout the Southwest, not unlike tourist excursions. However, rather than add another image to the thousands already taken of famous landmarks and national parks, Wessel records the spaces in between, the vast expanses of Western deserts and unmarked suburbs former photographers largely ignored. Working within the context of the endlessly imaged West, Wessel's formal conventions and choice of subject matter provide a significant commentary upon the ideological significance of the American West in the latter half of the twentieth century. His images of American spaces and landscapes most overtly contend with the effects exerted by tourism and urban development upon the topography of the nation, which has long looked to its landscapes for cultural meaning, in particular imbuing the western wilderness with great portents for democracy and social freedom.

In the West, the cultural weight attributed to unique topographical features such as Yosemite National Park is due in no small part to the chronic use of photography both by the government and by artists. Such images have long encouraged interest in these areas, photographs employed early on to convince potential settlers to pack up and head west, evolving throughout the twentieth century to promote national parks as tourist destinations. The tourist infrastructure, heavily reliant in the contemporary era upon interstate freeways and automobiles, draws travelers from thousands of miles away to admire America's natural beauty. The tourists who speed by on these roads are encouraged to partake of a fractured conception of the landscape that favors the scenic, the grand, the unique, and discourages interest in areas not easily accessible by car and the vast expanses

the traveler can traverse at high speeds, roadside flatlands reduced to featureless blurs. When Wessel stops on the shoulder of an unmarked highway to capture an image of the landscape and how humans interact with it, he reveals some of the unconscious attitudes contemporary Americans hold toward the West. He also documents a cultural shift in the role of landscape photography from focusing upon Romantic aesthetic conventions and the wilderness to focusing upon the residues of human involvement, no longer the predicators of civilized progress, but the artifacts of a society that has settled the West with industry and obscured direct experience of the landscape behind a skein of media images and carefully directed tourist frameworks.

Wessel takes on the landscape of the American West with an eye prone to extract the ironies of human interactions with the environment. He does not aggrandize the striking beauty of so-called wilderness areas—the scope of his frame finds some middle ground between Ansel Adams’ panoramas of Yosemite and high-contrast close-ups of gnarled wood grain. Wessel’s photographs have a tendency to foreground the human-made set against vistas unlikely to be the subject matter of picture postcards. Consider his photograph *Walapai, Arizona, 1971*, of a squat sign reading “ICE” set in the middle of a rather barren and rocky field with only sparse outcrops of grass.¹¹ The hills in the background appear lost and somewhat hazy, their featureless ridges as barren and uninviting as the foreground, ultimately serving as little more than a dark line to demarcate an equally gray and blank sky from the ground. With nothing else of particular interest for the eye to fix upon, the brighter white sign near dead center in the frame is the natural focal point of the image, inviting an array of interpretations. What is perhaps most striking about this particular image is that the sign has no apparent referent, failing to

¹¹ Henry Wessel, Jr., *Walapai, Arizona, 1971*, in *Henry Wessel*, ed. Thomas Zander (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2007), 4. (Because Wessel’s titles include only the place and date of the photograph and often repeat, I will refer to this image as “Ice”.) See Figure 1, Appendix A.

describe accurately either the landscape in which it stands or the realities of human existence in the deserts of the West. Lacking any actual ice, the sign instead seems to announce or underscore the total dearth of water in the frame, accentuating a barren reading of the landscape. At the same time, Wessel refuses to transform with his lens these unwelcoming environs into a celebration of the scale and grandeur of the West, reporting instead an essentially homogenous landscape significantly lacking any aspirations to the sublime. The setting of the photo is hardly National Park material: there are no snowcapped peaks, no impressive sheer rock faces, none of the extremes or showcases of natural awe apparent in Death Valley or Yellowstone, Yosemite or the Grand Canyon.

Wessel’s “Ice” most certainly does not fall into a tradition of the sublime or Romantic, nor does it depict a frontier experience of human interaction with the landscape (such as ranching, exploring, or mining), thus breaking at least in content with the major body of classic Western imagery. If the landscape is no longer for Wessel an object of sublime meditation, nor a frontier space inhabited by settlers and explorers, his images beg the question of how the mythology of the West has shifted during the twentieth century, and what role the West plays in contemporary American culture. It is interesting to note that “Ice” was taken when Wessel received a Guggenheim fellowship for a project entitled “The Photographic Documentation of the U.S. Highways and the Adjacent Landscape” (1971), which, as critic Sandra Phillips notes, is “by its title, a project about what can be seen from the driver’s seat of a passing car.”¹² Wessel thereby mimics the tourist, instamatic camera in hand, who traverses the West by road and documents the journey in a series of snapshot images. Perhaps unlike many tourists, Wessel includes human markers, but not the humans who made them, instead allowing their artifacts to come to the

¹² Sandra S. Phillips, “The Work of Henry Wessel,” in *Henry Wessel*, ed. Thomas Zander (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2007), 11.

foreground as evidence of the nature of human involvement. At the same time, Wessel’s constant lack of people contributes to a sense of abandonment, suggesting the West is a place of transience, given more to temporary travels than to permanent inhabitation.

Cultural theorist Alexander Wilson, writing on the topic of tourism in the American West, notes that “the car and the modern highway bring with them a different ordering of space.... Expressways, for example, are usually set off on a different grade from surrounding land, and access to them is strictly controlled,” and that “the car further divides the landscape, and our experience of it, into discrete zones. It promotes some landscapes and discourages others.”¹³ Wilson thereby implies that American highways enforce a kind of continuous transience. Once on the desert freeway, many miles may pass before there is the option to exit the route or change direction. Acting as unidirectional channels, the highways draw travelers to defined locations, roadside signage often referring to the end destination, drawing attention ahead rather than to the landscape passing by the passenger window at blurry speeds.

Wilson goes on to conclude, “Nature tourism catalogued the natural world and created its own spaces out there among the trees, lakes and rocks. It sold us...natural space and experiences.”¹⁴ This is an interesting conceptualization of space for two reasons. First, Wilson contends that in the twentieth century, the landscape becomes primarily a commodity, and second, Americans consume that commodity by virtue of car travel and the interstate infrastructure. This implies that contemporary American interactions with landscapes are fundamentally mediated by the structures of the road and by the car itself, as well as carefully guided and defined tourist experiences. Such encounters with the landscape are fundamentally organized around a series of commercial interactions

¹³ Alexander Wilson, “Introduction: The View From the Road,” in *Discovered Country: Tourism and the American West*, ed. Scott Norris (Albuquerque, New Mexico: Stone Ladder Press, 1994), 8-9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

involving specific human-made sites, including gas stations, motels, roadside diners, and visitor centers. All of these factors prevent full immersion in natural spaces by basically limiting access to unmediated and unaltered settings. The car scaffolds the landscape with windows in an opaque frame, presenting a necessarily limited view of the scene at hand, and roads, by their configuration, determine which aspects of landscapes drivers can even observe. Wilson speaks of the ways in which nature parkways “instruct drivers about how best to appreciate the scenery out the window” through “the design of their curves and rest areas.”¹⁵ Even out of the car and upon open-air trails, the hiker is instructed to remain upon the path and not plunge into unmarked terrain, both to protect visitors from unforeseen hazards and to prevent heedless trampling of environments. The tourist framework thus serves the express purpose of teaching Americans how to consume the landscape of the nation, and even in its most immersive moments keeps travelers within a predetermined position.

The careful ordering of the nation’s public spaces during the twentieth century has a great deal to do with pervasive forces of industrialization. Take, for example, the expressways that connect the far-flung cities of the West. These strips of straight, flat asphalt appear to traverse expansive terrains left largely untouched by human activity. Of course, traveling these roads by car at accelerated speeds, specific features of the landscape are difficult to pick out or focus upon. The fact remains that interstates are fundamentally a product of industrial processes that often physically and strikingly alter the landscape. Yet the highway traveler is not forced to contend with the passing landscape as a specifically natural or human-altered space. This relative reduction of vast tracts of land to mobile scenery easily ignored by car passengers suggests some of the effects of industrialization upon how humans conceive of natural spaces. Industrial processes impart

¹⁵ Ibid., 8.

the illusion of order and control, and fundamentally ignore topographical features by constructing very straight and level pathways that allow easy navigation. The rather entropic and unpredictable features of natural landscapes are thereby made invisible to the casual traveler. Furthermore, by introducing the automobile and roads into supposedly unaltered national parks, the industrial framework manages to circumscribe even the most rugged and severe topographies by distancing direct immersion. As the earthwork artist and theorist Robert Smithson concludes in “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape” (1973):

One need not improve Yosemite, all one needs is to provide access routes and accommodations. But this decreases the original definition of wilderness as a place that exists without human involvement. Today, Yosemite is more like an urbanized wilderness with its electrical outlets for campers, and its clothes lines hung between the pines. There is not much room for contemplation in solitude.¹⁶

Dividing the experience of national park landscapes into digestible chunks, the tourist experience manages to mitigate sensations of wonder or terror by implanting ordered, urban features within the wilderness.

In “Travel Films and the American West” (2006), film historian Jennifer Peterson describes how travelogue films of the early twentieth century achieve a similar containment of wilderness landscapes. Yet films do not act within the physical realities of the natural space itself, instead promoting a conceptual interpretation of wilderness before viewers even encounter a natural setting:

In displaying preserved pockets of land such as Yosemite, Yellowstone National Park, or the Taos Pueblo, travelogues worked to create a hermetically sealed series of landscapes frozen in time, rather like a collection of snow domes. Yet by filling these ‘primitive’ views with the mediating figure of the tourist, the films also...modernized and domesticated those wild landscapes.¹⁷

¹⁶ Robert Smithson, “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape,” in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1996), 165-166.

¹⁷ Jennifer Lynn Peterson, “The Nation’s First Playground: Travel Films and the American West, 1895-1920,” in *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel*, ed. Jeffrey Ruoff, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 80.

The film screen embodies a perfectly ordered, entirely safe world in which the represented spaces have no power to act directly upon the viewer. Simultaneously, Peterson’s suggestion that these films further mediate the interaction between human and landscape by introducing the figure of the tourist at play raises a vital point regarding visual media’s operation; namely, the ability to prepare the individual for an experience by allowing an undefined human presence to stand in her or his place. By visually acclimating viewers to a human presence within the experience of wilderness space, and specifically by showing that human presence engaging in idle or playful recreation, the filmic images to which Peterson refers manage to undermine Romantic aspirations to the sublime. In other words, the experience of the wilderness, which should idealistically transcend corporeal human existence by sheer scope and solitary immersion, loses its capacity to threaten or shock.

Smithson details this shift away from the sublime by describing how parks create a dialectical conversation between humans and landscapes, creating what he theorizes as “the picturesque.” More concerned with constructed urban parks, such as New York City’s Central Park, he states:

The picturesque, far from being an inner movement of the mind, is based on real land; it precedes the mind in its material external existence. We cannot take a one-sided view of the landscape within this dialectic. A park can no longer be seen as ‘a thing-in-itself,’ but rather as a process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical region—the park becomes a ‘thing-for-us.’ As a result, we are not hurled into the spiritualism of Thoreauian transcendentalism, or its present day offspring of ‘modernist formalism’ rooted in Kant, Hegel, and Fichte.¹⁸

In his formulation of the picturesque, Smithson relates how human transformations of landscapes are in turn subject to further transformation by natural processes. In this sense, the mitigation of the wilderness experience by the presence of the tourist is not so clear-cut as to completely occlude natural space. Rather, the tourist enters the park to gain an experience impossible within a strictly urban setting, but at the same time, tourists cannot

¹⁸ Smithson, “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape,” 160.

ignore their own presence within the park because of their reflection in constructed features. The tourist experience alters nature, but even though former conceptions of the sublime are thus transformed, the park still achieves an experiential conversation between human-altered and wilderness landscapes, often by juxtaposing the two. Simultaneously, Smithson denies complete separation between human and natural processes, instead arguing that parks allow for the natural and industrial to bleed from their narrow definitions. Thus, the physical processes of nature enter the city, and urban processes enter the wilderness, all the while affecting how humans define both urban and natural landscapes.

While Alexander Wilson argues that human-constructed frameworks cause tourists to consume natural landscapes the same as any other product, Smithson suggests that commodification is not such a total process. Peterson, taking a sort of middle ground, argues that the “ultimate quest” of tourism “is still magnificent scenery,” but representations of the activity “are equally invested in representing the process of getting to that scenery—the railroads, cars, horse paths, and walking trails the traveler must use to reach the scenery—and the *experience* of viewing the scenery once one has reached it.”¹⁹ She complicates Smithson’s conception of the dialectic between human and nature by noting visual media which introduce pointed images of the human figure within the natural landscape. Thus, not only do tourists contend with the experience of a natural or human space, but also the visual mediation of that space, and representations of how humans should behave in specific landscapes. With the advent of the portable camera, individual travelers gained the ability to create numerous images and mediations of space even as they experienced it. This creates a set of circumstances that alters the very nature of experience.

¹⁹ Peterson, “Travel Films and the American West,” 87.

When Peterson states, “the true national playground constructed by...films would seem to be not the space of the western landscape but the space of cinema itself,”²⁰ she establishes a parallel between the role of camera mediations of space and Wilson’s definition of the tourist experience as didactic and fragmentary. Thus, photography or film has the capacity to become an experience all its own, independent of the actual spaces it represents. Photography, in its most basic form, fundamentally orders space and reality by the mere virtue of framing and recording a discrete segment of the landscape. But this is only an extremely basic technical outline of the photographic process. On one hand, tourist photography might serve to arrest the fleeting impressions the tourist can gather of the landscape as she or he covers vast highway distances, movement more important to the tourist experience than lingering pauses. On the other, it is important to consider a broader scope of photographic history in the West, and the range of uses it has found in various hands. Because of the realistic appearance of a photographic image, and its ability to seize an instant out of time, a number of photographers and theorists have argued for the inherently truthful nature of photography. An exploration of this contention has particular bearing upon the American West, itself a heavily mythologized region, in addition to being continuously photographed. It is fruitful to consider that photography actually helped create much of the visual mythology of the West beginning in the late 1800s, but nonetheless, many would still argue that photography’s mechanical recording apparatus allows the medium to represent reality truthfully and unambiguously.

Critics and artists most commonly develop the thesis that photography depicts reality with accuracy by contrasting it to painting. Art historian Babara Novak expounds heavily upon this theme in “Landscape Permuted: From Painting to Photography” (1975). She contends that photography “injected” landscape painting “with a fresh quota of

²⁰ Ibid., 96.

reality,”²¹ and likewise claims that “direct photographs of Yellowstone...expose...an affectation of manner we would prefer not to find” in the work of notable nineteenth-century painter Thomas Moran, just as other photographers “expose the coloristic and painterly stylizations of [Albert] Bierstadt at Yosemite.”²² Photography acts, according to Novak, primarily as evidence that reveals the truth behind the limitations of human perception. Additionally, since “we would prefer not” to see the veil of artistic license overlain on landscapes, in Novak’s formulation, art should primarily attempt to pursue truth, and cut through erroneous interpretations to reality itself.

Another variation on this theme comes in “The Kiss of Enterprise” (1991), by art historian Nancy Anderson. She similarly criticizes nineteenth century landscape painting of the American West for its “constructed artifice...that offered assurance that the West could endure as both iconic symbol and economic resource.”²³ In other words, landscape painting existed primarily to create and sustain an image of a harmonious balance between human industry and the beauty of the natural landscape. Anderson also hones in on Thomas Moran, who, instead of depicting the human settlements and industrial development of his scenes, “focused almost exclusively on the sublimity of the landscape, editing out nearly every reference to change instigated by man.”²⁴ Both art historians concern themselves with misrepresentations particularly of the West, focusing specifically upon painting’s role in eliding the massive environmental damage actually caused by the industrial development of the region.

However, Novak does speak of the incorporation of human industry into painting during the latter 1800s in *Nature and Culture* (1980). She notes the contradictory nature of

²¹ Barbara Novak. “Landscape Permuted: From Painting to Photography,” in *Photography in Print*, ed. Vicki Goldberg (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 171.

²² *Ibid.*, 172-173.

²³ Nancy K. Anderson, “The Kiss of Enterprise,” in *The West as America, Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, ed. William H. Truettner (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 281.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 246.

artists such as Thomas Cole, whose artwork implicitly asks at what point “the arc from virgin wilderness through the pastoral ideal to the industrial landscape swerve[s] from constructive accord with God’s will to human destructiveness toward nature,”²⁵ and yet at the same time utilizes the figure of the “cut stump” as the inception of a “new iconology of progress and destruction.”²⁶ Novak’s analysis of the infiltration of the industrial into previously pristine landscapes suggests the early tension between national economic progress and the ideologies that elevated America’s Western wilderness to the height of religious myth. The painters depict undeveloped nature as necessarily doomed to disappear in the name of progress while still lamenting the industrial destruction of the natural landscape.²⁷ This reveals a lack of consensus both upon what constitutes a symbiotic human relationship with the environment and how Americans might be religiously or ideologically bound to the landscape. On the one hand, the patrons of progress contend that nature is a thing to be improved at the hands of man, while others yearn for silence and preservation. Yet Novak insists that the painters more concerned with untouched nature were “ignored in favor of the more active ‘public’ paintings of the Hudson River men, [in] which.... the noise of civilization could also enter, and the sound of the axe followed.”²⁸ Therefore, in the course of American landscape painting in the 1800s, the landscape as a spiritual resource struggles against conceptions of the landscape as material commodity. Novak’s wording suggests that the commodified landscape may have received more attention, and to a certain extent superseded representations of the pure or virgin wilderness. At the same time, even those painters who trumpeted the arrival of the civilizing forces of humankind did not completely abandon earlier romantic conventions. Such a paradox persists in the

²⁵ Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 159.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 165.

West, a region still valued for its undeveloped national parks as well as for its industrial resources. Even so, this is further complicated by the fact that national parks are themselves great generators of revenue by fervently inciting the tourism industry and its attendant products, from RVs to post cards and fishing poles to regional memorabilia.

The shift in landscape painting to images acceptant of human activity predated modern tourism, but coincided both with the settlement of the West and the rise of photography, a medium which, by the nature of its recording apparatus, often necessarily included evidence of human activity. Photography might thereby take some credit for forcing painters to represent the industrialization of the landscape. Even so, the human alterations these paintings incorporate are not unambiguously construed as positive or negative. The more salient cultural currents of the nineteenth century might interpret such alterations, both in photography and in painting, as positive evidence of civilized progress, at the same time mourning the destruction inherent in industry. Anderson's concession that photography could be equally manipulated in the hands of explorers and developers further undermines photography's aspirations to representations of an objective truth.²⁹ Despite what a photograph might show, the image of a gold mine is more immediately indicative of an explosion of western wealth than of the environmental issues it might cause, which may extend over a period of multiple decades and travel far beyond the site of the mine. Photography is better suited to capture the details of a relatively small scene at a specific point in time rather than a broad spectrum of small relationships dispersed over a large temporal and spatial region. No matter how supposedly objective a photograph may strive to be, it still delivers surface images.

François Brunet, in an analysis of nineteenth century landscape photography in the West, “With the Compliments of F.V. Hayden, Geologist of the United States’:

²⁹ Anderson, “The Kiss of Enterprise,” 256.

Photographic Policies of American Exploration” (2007), delves into the nature of photographic truth in the West by discussing the underlying goals of early survey photographers in the region. He argues that most early images of the West did not even strive for objectivity, because one of the most important factors driving the subject matter and style of these photographers was the fact that their employers, the explorers traversing the region following the Civil War, wanted to use the photographs to win appropriations and government appointments.³⁰ Brunet claims that in the process, these “survey photographers’...created the classic face of the ‘wonders of the West’ and did the same for the West’s first inhabitants, whom they turned into visual myths.”³¹ For Brunet, then, photography in the West from its very inception was not a medium of the truth, but a transformative process that took the raw material of the landscape, and through the fact of recording and distributing its image, created a mythological visual space more concerned with swaying public opinion than depicting the realities of the region. Brunet also discusses how stereoscopes³² first spread images of Yosemite Valley to the east coast and to Europe, and how other photographers popularized Mesa Verde and Yellowstone, contributing to their establishment as national parks.³³ It is important to note the extent to which these famous landscapes were initially mediated by photographic representation, the vast majority of Americans interacting with them first as photographic images, not through direct immersion. The West as a region was thus perfectly suited to becoming a landscape inflected in the public mind by visual conventions, explored by Americans just as photography became portable, and settled by hopeful immigrants as the nation struggled to

³⁰ François Brunet, “With the Compliments of F.V. Hayden, Geologist of the United States: Photographic Policies of American Exploration,” in *Images of the West*, ed. François Brunet and Bronwyn Griffith, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 15, 23.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

³² A popular technological apparatus of the 1800s that took double pictures of scenes that, when viewed through the binocular-like Stereoscope, created the illusion of three-dimensional depth.

³³ Brunet, “Photographic Policies of American Exploration,” 15, 20.

come to terms with the massive disjunctures in ideology caused by the Civil War. Therefore, as Brunet suggests, the West became a social commodity that allowed “the entire nation” to travel “West in fact or in thought to carve out its dream of a bright and prosperous future. This dream of the West served as an outlet for the nation’s rifts and fractures.”³⁴ Photography’s role in establishing this dream should not be underestimated. Indeed, without the advent of the massive body of images produced directly following the Civil War, tales of the West’s transcendent natural beauty would have seemed much less credulous. But the visual images circulated created the mass perception that the West was a land of immense spaces and immense opportunities.

Anderson formulates this media phenomenon when she describes how a nineteenth century photograph of a painter sketching a landscape “documents the first step in the process whereby the raw material, the western landscape, was transformed into both a work of art that conveyed cultural messages and a commodity exchanged in a commercial market.”³⁵ This casting of sight as consumption sees its outgrowth in Alexander Wilson’s articulation of American tourism, in which roads and cars encourage the visual consumption of certain landscapes, and the absolute ignorance of others. However, it is important to discuss the extent to which the tourist mentality as described by Wilson permeates interactions with the Western landscape. Certainly, the traveler on vacation or simply trying to get from one place to another has little interest in the flat plains, steppe, and deserts that dominate much of the terrain, concerned instead with the ultimate destination. However, people also inhabit these regions, as Wessel’s lens attests to in some of his images, such as his photograph *New Mexico, 1969*,³⁶ of a home set in the midst of a

³⁴ Ibid., 11.

³⁵ Anderson, “The Kiss of Enterprise,” 238-239.

³⁶ Henry Wessel, Jr., *New Mexico, 1969*, in *Henry Wessel*, ed. Thomas Zander (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2007), 22. See Figure 2, Appendix A.

vast white plain, or *Nevada, 1975*,³⁷ of the vista between two houses in the desert and a man dressed as a modern day cowboy. When Wessel stops at the side of the highway whose structure guides him on to the next scenic overlook, and records instead what the infrastructure omits, he makes an implicit statement about that infrastructure and its conceptual frameworks. His images begin to explore a tension in the West between transience and settlement, the pull of the road and a search for home in the region. The material reality of the landscape often contradicts the popular dreams of its economic opportunities and its vastness. Wessel’s photographs speak to how these imposed conceptual frameworks stand between the viewer and the landscape, exposing disjunctures between the mythology of the region and the facts of human existence in the West.

A contemporary of Wessel, the photographer Robert Adams, writes in 1994 extensively on the subject of the transformation of Western space and photographic representations thereof in his essay “In the Nineteenth-century West.” Adams takes a significantly pessimistic view of human interaction with the West and laments its deterioration in the latter part of the twentieth century. Speaking of photographs that recall the Western landscape before its transformation by the engines of industry and commerce, he states, “We try hard not to be sentimental, not to feel more emotion for a subject than it deserves.... If the open America we loved is gone, then its recollection and the grief that it inspires may be useless.”³⁸ According to Adams, the photographs of the latter 1800s captured an entirely different conception of the space of the Western American landscape than that which dominates our culture today. He likewise contends that the landscapes of those early images have disappeared, both in concept and in fact. Adams

³⁷ Henry Wessel, Jr., *Nevada, 1975*, in *Henry Wessel*, ed. Thomas Zander (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2007), 116. See Figure 3, Appendix A.

³⁸ Robert Adams, “In the Nineteenth-century West,” in *Why People Photograph* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1994), 133.

significantly does not criticize the conventions of the survey photographers, but instead lauds their ability to depict the depth and openness of Western spaces and what he perceives as pre-industrial silence.³⁹ However, Peterson notes how photographic depictions of space become problematic when trying to establish the truth of a region: “Armed with documentary authenticity, travel films are marketed as actuality, and national myth becomes naturalized as truth.”⁴⁰ The photographs Adams refers to were likewise marketed to an American public in order to encourage them to come west and settle, or presented to a government audience in hopes of receiving monetary rewards. They were not captured with naïve innocence or purely documentary aims. Even the openness or emptiness Adams identifies tacitly suggests the absence of a Native American presence. Adams appears to want a West completely absent of human activity, better explored by virtue of a few photographers, and experienced through picturesque images rather than direct immersion and permanent settlement.

A quote with particular implications for the work of Wessel comes in Adams’ contrast between a photographer of the nineteenth century and the photographer of today:

[I]f we consider the difference between William Henry Jackson packing in his cameras by mule, and the person stepping for a moment from his car to take a picture with an Instamatic, it becomes clear how some of our space has vanished; if the time it takes to cross space is a way by which we define it, then to arrive at a view of space ‘in no time’ is to have denied its reality (there are in fact few good snapshots of space).⁴¹

This observation is an indictment of sorts of the highway tourist who speeds through the West on the way to some more scenic destination, and ignores the vast majority of the landscape as an essentially blank non-space that she or he must cross as quickly as possible. This contributes to a conceptual shrinking of the space of the West, most of it

³⁹ Ibid., 134-135.

⁴⁰ Peterson, “Travel Films and the American West,” 86.

⁴¹ R. Adams, “In the Nineteenth-century West,” 136.

relegated to that which is passed through rather than that which is inhabited. Adams is thereby caught between wanting the photographer to inhabit space, but desiring that the West itself remain uninhabited, and thereby unaltered. The travel writer Alain de Botton suggests that “we may best be able to inhabit a place when we are not faced with the additional challenge of having to be there,” but reveals photography’s particularly complicated role in establishing this perception:

The anticipatory and artistic imaginations omit and compress; they cut away the periods of boredom and direct our attention to critical moments, and thus, without either lying or embellishing, they lend to life a vividness and a coherence that it may lack in the distracting woolliness of the present.⁴²

While de Botton contends that the photographic images that advertise destinations of tourism do not actually deceive, he presumably means only in the visual sense, because his description of pictures’ ability to omit and compress reveals that they do not communicate a sufficient description of experience. He importantly notes that when looking at a photograph, the consuming eyes can deny the body to which they belong, and therefore ignore all sensory and experiential facts necessarily related to physical bodily presence in actual space.⁴³ Adams, in a parallel line of reasoning, implicitly, if unintentionally, suggests that a person staring at a western photograph taken in the 1800s will have a more thorough and accurate understanding of the West than a tourist who drives through the region. What seems more plausible is that the open West is indeed gone, and in fact, never truly existed, having been populated by humans long before European settlers armed with cameras appeared to capture the region within the photographic frame. To ignore human artifacts and alterations is just as limited a perspective as that of the inattentive tourist who is entirely unable to contemplate how human and industrial processes affect both the landscape itself and the way she or he thinks about it.

⁴² Alain de Botton. *The Art of Travel* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 23, 15.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 19.

Looking again at “Ice” with this in mind, a certain amount of Robert Adams’ definition of the snapshot aesthetic shows through in Wessel’s treatment of the landscape as an essentially blank slate against which to pose the human words on the sign. The sign thus expresses most readily a desire to alter or revise the landscape, and the aesthetic of the photograph comments upon the sign’s ironic textual positioning against the landscape. Regarding Wessel’s photographic philosophy, Sandra Phillips writes, “Wessel understood that the challenge in photography was in seeing and choosing, in pointing, or pointing out, not imposing his personality or an imposed style upon a subject, not in illustrating a subject or idea,” suggesting that he takes a less strict stance against American treatment of the western landscape than Adams calls for.⁴⁴ Taking this claim as groundwork for interpretation, Wessel’s intent in this image appears ambiguous. Although the sign sits in the foreground and forms the central focus, it is quite small within the frame, dwarfed by the sheer flatness of the plain. At the same time there is no necessary interest on Wessel’s part in painting human endeavors in the West as hubristic or fallible. However, Phillips’ reading of Wessel’s work suggests he is somewhat lacking in social engagement, and overlooks the pointed and exacting compositions he employs to reveal paradoxical (and often humorous) contrasts. Although his style does not provide easy or overt interpretations, his photographs certainly comment upon the nature of human interactions with landscapes. He points out that Americans have indeed changed Western landscapes, and in so altering the circumstances of interaction, have transformed the ways nature or the wilderness can be conceptualized. The major issues Wessel forces his viewers to contend with are the physical effects of the interstate upon the landscape, the ways Americans inhabit the spaces of the West both as tourists and as settlers, and less explicitly, but no

⁴⁴ Phillips, “The Work of Henry Wessel,” 9-10.

less importantly, the impact of the portable camera on popular impressions of the American landscape.

CHAPTER II:

Snapshot Photography, Transient Settlers, and Romanticism

In 1974, Henry Wessel provided a series of images for an issue of *Aperture* devoted to the snapshot. Writers and contributors to the journal struggle with the fact that any person with a camera can make a picture, thereby calling into question what exactly makes photography an art, and if a distinction can be made between a snapshot and an art photograph. The snapshot certainly produces a new wrinkle in the history of photography, and some writers see it as the savior of photographic truth. The photographer Tod Papageorge, by contrast, claims that snapshots are a demeaned art form when compared to professional photography, and as a folk-art phenomenon have had little influence on the work of professional photographers.⁴⁵ Another photographer, Paul Strand, meanwhile busies himself with a technical definition of the snapshot as a photograph that seizes an instant out of time.⁴⁶ However, the mere fact that Wessel contributes some of his professional work to the issue, without commentary or titles, forces us to question what exactly a snapshot is, and its ideological or conceptual components. That is, how exactly does a snapshot relate to the aims of a professional photograph, and what are the feedbacks between vernacular photography and major practitioners of the medium? And most significant for this analysis, how does the popular American practice of snapshot photography and the attendant creation of personal imagery of landscapes reinforce and/or transform the cultural role of the West and its various spaces?

Writing for the same issue of *Aperture* in 1974, photography historian John Kouwenhoven provides the clearest discussion of the rise and influence of snapshots, and also alludes to his belief in the truthful nature of the medium in the hands of an amateur.

⁴⁵ Tod Papageorge, no title, *Aperture* 19.1: (1974): 24-27.

⁴⁶ Paul Strand, no title, *Aperture* 19.1 (1974): 49.

He describes a snapshot as a picture “taken quickly with a minimum of deliberate posing...and with a minimum of deliberate selectivity on the part of the photographer.”⁴⁷ This statement aligns the snapshot with the provenance of vernacular photography, images taken by non-professionals of whatever strikes them as worth recording. Professional photography, by contrast, such as that undertaken by the survey photographers of the American West, was heavily inflected by the personal and political goals of the explorers leading the expeditions, and the photographs they circulated on the east coast and in the halls of Congress were largely propagandistic tools used to win appropriations and appointments.⁴⁸ Therefore, explorers encouraged their contracted photographers to make images predominantly focused upon topography and geology of scientific and economic interest, or archeological sites of historical and cultural importance. Conversely, in the hands of an amateur, the camera can be pointed at anything, as the goal is neither to win fame or fortune, but merely to capture the world the as photographer sees it. Kouwenhoven additionally contends, “the camera lens is, after all, indiscriminate,” linking the untrained eye of the amateur to the mechanical eye of the camera itself.⁴⁹ Because the photographer cannot control the reality of a photographed scene, only the frame around it, snapshot images contain “things not even their makers had noticed or been interested in.”⁵⁰ As snapshots are made with less forethought than professional photography, they are more likely to include the random information and detritus of a scene than a professional photograph. If uninflected by convention or commercial interest, the amateur thereby appears to give new credence to the argument that photography is an inherently truthful medium.

⁴⁷ John A. Kouwenhoven, no title, *Aperture* 19.1 (1974): 106.

⁴⁸ Anderson, “The Kiss of Enterprise,” 256.

⁴⁹ Kouwenhoven, no title, 107.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

Photography historian and curator John Szarkowski presents perhaps the pithiest statement on the matter of photographic truth in *The Photographer's Eye* (1966) when he elucidates, “Paintings were *made*—constructed from a storehouse of traditional schemes and skills and attitudes—but photographs, as the man on the street put it, were *taken*.”⁵¹ The photograph thus apprehends reality, just as it is happening, seizing an instant of truth from the stream of time. It therefore seems obvious that a quick snapshot must portray the world with greater accuracy than a studied and laborious painting, and as a medium is well suited to interrogate human perception. Yet Szarkowski also points out, “The photographer edits the meanings and patterns of the world through an imaginary frame.”⁵² The fraught relationship between the indiscriminant lens and the manipulations of the photographer strikes at the core difference between the snapshotter and the professional. If the snapshotter does not adhere to an ideology or convention, the snapshots produced might seem inherently closer to an idea of an objective reality in which objects exist independent of subjective human action. Whereas a professional photographer may be heavily influenced by formal pictorial conventions, and thus arrange objects within the viewfinder of the lens to reflect accepted compositions, the amateur unaware of such conventions simply takes a picture of what exists in space. This is a somewhat problematic formulation however, when considering the cultural contexts of popular snapshot photography in America.

In “From Infinity to Zero,” Geoffrey Batchen describes a different kind of amateur snapshotter, one who is “coached by Kodak advertisements” and a social “network of expectations and obligations” to “mimic a set of gestures and poses thought proper for such pictures.”⁵³ If we accept Batchen’s suggestion that photographs are not merely a visual

⁵¹ John Szarkowski. *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵³ Geoffrey Batchen, “From Infinity to Zero,” in *Now is Then: Snapshots from the Maresca Collection*, ed. Marvin Heiferman (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), 126.

tradition, but also constrained by social structures and commercial overtones, their cultural role becomes much more complex. Kouwenhoven attempts to explain how exactly photographs, whether snapshot or professional, influence human perception, considering in particular their easy reproduction and dissemination. He puts forth:

By simply isolating a group of forms and textures within the arbitrary rectangular frame provided by the edges of its glass plate or film, a snapshot forces us to see, and thereby teaches us to see, differently than we could have seen through our own unaided eyes, and also differently than people had been taught to see by pre-photographic pictorial conventions.⁵⁴

Kouwenhoven’s interpretation is chiefly concerned with the fact that photography is uniquely positioned in a mechanical sense to reveal aspects of the world that paintings largely missed or ignored. Photography may not apprehend the truth, but it begins to explore the nature of perception by forming a visual contrast with painting and the human eye. At the same time, Kouwenhoven’s formulation of the impact of snapshot photography necessarily implies that the majority of amateur photographers were readily able to access other amateur images. While this may have been true to a certain extent in the 1930s, with the rise of camera clubs, photography magazines, fairs, and popular exhibitions, photographic artists’ aspirations to attain more prestigious art-world status significantly reduced these opportunities as the twentieth century progressed.⁵⁵ Batchen’s suggestion that advertisements by photography companies, as well as various how-to manuals by artists such as Ansel Adams, were more influential in establishing photographic norms than the egalitarian interplay of amateur experimentation thereby gains more credence as the twentieth century progresses. Kouwenhoven’s proposition, “We tend to see only what the pictorial conventions of our time are calculated to show us. From them we learn what is

⁵⁴ Kouwenhoven, no title, 107.

⁵⁵ John Raeburn. *A Staggering Revolution* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 9.

worth looking for and looking at,”⁵⁶ would thereby more accurately credit commercial structures with guiding the development of amateur photographers than the amateurs themselves. From the inception of popular photography, an entire set of conflicting aims was at work, and the massive revolution in seeing Kouwenhoven identifies was as driven by commercial and professional interests as by amateur artistry. It is equally important to consider that particularly during the period intervening between the end of World War II and the rise of digital imaging, amateur snapshots were typically taken as personal mementoes, compiled and collected in private albums, rather than published or publicly disseminated. This makes it somewhat more difficult to establish the overall impact of snapshot photography, as only a fraction of the images is available to the critical eye.

Even so, Batchen’s propositions about the role of advertisements and his explorations of some collections of vernacular photography that have seen recent exhibition do provide some insights into the cultural phenomenon of snapshots, and provide interesting suggestions about the American mindset. In particular, his formulation that “snapshots show the struggles of particular individuals to conform to the social expectations, and visual tropes, of their sex and class.... snapshots are odes to conformist individualism” has a peculiar analogue in the context of the West.⁵⁷ Considering Robert Adams’ suggestion that many post-Civil War settlers of the West interpreted the space as the opportunity to enjoy “freedom from responsibility.... leaving people, whatever their needs, behind,” and that Americans are “everlastingly after a new start out in the open, by ourselves,”⁵⁸ it is possible to see the West as a region in which American individuals all pursue the same kinds of freedoms, but in self-imposed isolation. This kind of freedom translates into carving out a personal space in which to enact a personal destiny, but

⁵⁶ Kouwenhoven, no title, 107.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵⁸ R. Adams, “In the Nineteenth-century West,” 142.

simultaneously accepting a social rootlessness that will allow for endless reinventions. The paradoxical relationship between wanting to forge a home, a place to control, and the ability to deny lasting connections with home and other people might translate into the respective mentalities of the settler and the transient. The settler aspires to permanently inhabit the mythological transcendence of the unmarred landscape, whereas the transient is ready to pull up stakes at any given moment to pursue the next dream of wealth and freedom. These are not explicitly defined or mutually exclusive mentalities, but the tension between yearning for home and desiring freedom from social responsibilities is a particularly Western state of being. The paradox is somewhat mitigated by tourism, which implies a home from which to travel and absorb the experiences of free movement throughout the landscape. Similarly to how Batchen frames the middle class photographer trying to establish an individual identity while conforming to the visual and social conventions of mass society, so the individualist transient endlessly pursues the social expectations the settler seems to embody in the West. The constant struggle between the individual who wants to strike out alone and the same individual's abiding desire for home is certainly a popular photographic topic.

Some of Wessel's pictures of American highways most clearly express the tension between settlement and transience in the twentieth-century West. Wessel takes few photographs where the road actually extends to the horizon, orienting his lens instead to the detritus and artifacts just off the shoulder, each small subject drawing the eye from the highway's inexorable progress. Another interesting image of Wessel's is compositionally something of a visual analogue to "Ice." The photograph, *Untitled, 1968*, depicts a lone telephone pole planted in a scrubby landscape.⁵⁹ A small skiff of cloud hovers above the

⁵⁹ Henry Wessel, Jr., *Untitled, 1968*, in *Henry Wessel*, ed. Thomas Zander (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2007), 5. See Figure 4, Appendix A.

post, the flat plain behind resolves into low, darker hills, and at the horizon, triangular mountain peaks. Like “Ice,” the human-made artifact occupies the center of the frame and appears small against the backdrop of the overall landscape, but the image reveals a greater amount of detail in the natural features. Trees stand out in the distance, the scrub brush makes a fine stippling over the rolling hills, and the hazy mountain slopes give a sense of great distance. The photograph captures the gradation of the sky, bright white at the horizon and darker at the apex. The landscape itself seems more interesting and worthy of consideration, but Wessel’s composition divides the ground in half with a striking diagonal line, the road sweeping from the bottom right of the frame and drawing the eye to the left where stands another telephone pole, almost omitted by the edge of the picture. The framing suggests the continuation of the phone poles down the lane, past this landscape the artist has briefly stopped to consider, implying the persistent pull of the road. The image has a fleeting quality, accentuated by the small, windswept cloud poised for a perfect instant above the post, in transit like the artist to another destination. The trailing tail of the cloud suggests that it is blowing in the opposite direction to the line of the road; the two travelers, the cloud and the photographer, are apprehended in the frame to regard each other on their separate journeys.

In this image, both the road and the telephone pole stand between the photographer and the natural landscape. Although Wessel’s eye is trained upon the mountains, and in general format this is a landscape photograph, the natural landscape is not his true subject—rather, it is how human details and artifacts frame interactions with the landscape. Wessel does not choose a vantage of the mountains that would hide the telephone pole or the road, instead foregrounding them much as they might appear out of a car window. He records the fact that modern Americans are used to interacting with the landscape from vehicles on roads. Like the driver of the car, he does not orient his gaze

directly to the topography, but keeps his eye trained forward along the line of the highway, implying constant travel within the West. Robert Adams points out the cultural significance of travel and movement in the West when he touches on the fact that early pictures of the West “remind us of the opportunity the openness provided for the confusion of space and freedom, an understandable but arrogant mistake for which we all now suffer.”⁶⁰ The road in Wessel’s image leads figuratively to another opportunity, which Adams describes as “apparently infinite,” but driven by “the compulsion of...greed.”⁶¹ This elucidates the differing ways the settler, the transient, or the tourist commodifies the Western landscape. The Western settler fundamentally looks for the opportunity to start a new life, searching the spaces of the West for a place to claim and establish an identity. The transient aligns with a conception of the West that foregrounds vast spaces and seemingly limitless resources that offer opportunities for reinvention and fluid identity. By contrast, the tourist consumes the landscape fundamentally as a recreational resource, concerned primarily with topographies of notable beauty or awe-inspiring qualities in which to act out various impulses while holding on to the identity implied by a permanent home. The tourist is more important in the context of the latter twentieth century, when the frontier itself exists only in concept, and the highway’s ordered enclosure of space has taken hold. The tourist uses the industrial infrastructure to remain in constant motion within the landscape, looking to consume the experience, whereas the settler or transient is interested in the actual material of the landscape and the opportunities it provides for wealth and success.

Wessel’s photography of highway landscapes does not fall unambiguously into either the category of a tourist’s amazed gaze or a settler’s yearning for home, but both ideas exist

⁶⁰ R. Adams, “In the Nineteenth-century West,” 140-141.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

in his work. He is at once a distanced observer of these cultural phenomena, and yet he operates within the mythology of the American West. His photographs document the failures and ambiguities of the region in addition to the undeniable pull the landscape exerts upon the traveler. Wessel’s own words give an insight into his personal conceptions of the West, and specifically, California. He describes a kind of flight from the East that mirrors the urges of much earlier settlers and immigrants searching for new frontiers:

In 1969, to escape a gray upstate New York winter, I flew to Los Angeles. I walked out of the airport into one of those clear sharp-edged January days. The light has such a physical presence; it looked as though you could lean against it. The long shadows of axial sunlight were fracturing the landscape, lighting faces like an on-camera flash, every surface detailed and separate. As I stood there, I wanted to photograph everything in front of me.⁶²

For Wessel, the Eldorado quality of California comes not through mineral wealth or the freedom of unclaimed space, but from the light’s transformative capacity, a golden light that lets the photographer see the world with incredible freshness and excitement. At the same time, Wessel’s words betray an undeniable photographic bias. The California light is not merely beautiful of its own right, but actually resembles a photographic process. Wessel insinuates that the landscape is naturally photogenic, or already exists in photographic form. Thus, the artist simply has to capture the photographic material rather than compose an image from scratch. Wessel’s description of California suggests the degree to which the landscape is already mediated, both by previous photographic images and the expectations a traveler brings to bear upon the scenery of the region. Perhaps Phillips allows Wessel’s statement to influence her reading of his work too literally when she claims that Wessel’s photographs express the “physical, plastic materiality” of “California light...a light that transforms everything, that made even—perhaps especially—the most banal of subjects

⁶² Phillips, “The Work of Henry Wessel,” 10 (qtd from *California and the West*).

wonders to be marveled at.”⁶³ Her conception of wonderment in Wessel’s imagery provides only a limited reading that aligns him more explicitly with a touristic perspective. She privileges the documentary technique in his images, noting that “the character of...materials is lovingly catalogued,” and that “there is no forlornness, no empathy, only amazement.”⁶⁴ Yet these comments ignore the fact that Wessel himself is a transplant to the West, and amazement is inseparable from yearning in many of his images. For Wessel, the Western light and landscape offer an escape from the less poetic East, and he keenly records a similar urge expressed within the artifacts of previous settlers. Consider again “Ice,” and the desire that the landscape become a welcoming home despite the harshness of the setting. The desire to escape the shortcomings of a former life transforms the settler’s gaze into an almost blind longing for a brighter future. The sign is detached from the landscape in that it does not provide an accurate representation of its surroundings, yet it is expressive of a deep desire to make the scene into a place to call home.

And yet sequences of Wessel’s work from around the period of his Guggenheim fellowship (circa 1971) never actually find a home, communicating instead a transient series of wanderings that periodically capture houses and settlements in the West, but more often depict roadside scenery. The figures of the car and the road become quite important in Wessel’s work during this period, and in understanding the contradictions of the settler’s situation in the West. As with “Ice” and his image of the telephone pole, another photograph, *California, 1969*, places a human-made object at the center of the frame, this time a white sedan.⁶⁵ This image deals explicitly with the transformation of travel in the American West, harkening back to Robert Adams’ statement about the

⁶³ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁵ Henry Wessel, *California, 1969*, in *Henry Wessel*, ed. Thomas Zander (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2007), 2. See Figure 5, Appendix A.

contemporary highway tourist’s inability to interact with the landscape because of the increasing speed of transit. Yet this image also begins to tease apart how industrialization transforms the physical format of the experience of the landscape by virtue of the car and highway, but on the other hand how the camera and the visual conventions it produces alter mental perceptions of the landscape. The two different kinds of mediation are certainly interrelated, as the camera is itself a mechanical apparatus that frames space much like a car window, but unlike a car or road, photographic images have no physical connection to the landscape. It is thus apparent that the photograph plays a slightly different role in organizing space than the “tourist experience” Alexander Wilson describes.⁶⁶ While a tourist destination may provide railings, roads, and artificial trails to orient the visitor in a physical location, photography’s disembodied nature disallows it from playing this exact role. The manner in which photography can be widely reproduced and dispersed, often stripping away any external contextualizing material, causes the image to shift from mere representation to an object in and of itself. Yet at best, photography can supply only an illusion of depth, and only as much spatial context as the frame of the camera allows. The burden of supplying the contextualizing details thereby shifts from the photographer to the viewer. By leaving the title of this particular photo of a sedan in a desert so ambiguous, Wessel accentuates the relative inability of a photograph to convey a physical sense of the space it represents as a person immersed in the landscape might experience it. At the same time, the fully contained space within the photographic frame can make the represented landscape seem almost complete, as though the mere fragment of continuous space is no longer dependent upon its *in situ* context. The perfect image of fragmentary space thereby challenges the value of direct immersion in the landscape.

⁶⁶ Wilson, “The View From the Road,” 3.

In *California, 1969*, Wessel lets the car itself stand in place of the figure of the tourist, implying that the manufactured aspect of highway travel stands between the tourist and direct experience of the landscape. Like “Ice,” this is another low-contrast image that reveals no detail in the sky and little of the landscape except a line of bluffs on the horizon. The car angles toward the landscape as though taking in the view, but stands as a constant reminder of travel itself, and the urge to keep moving. Ostensibly a landscape photograph, the image is a strange example of the genre. The curator Dennis Longwell says of Wessel’s images that, “like the tourist snapshot, they testify to having been there once,”⁶⁷ even though a photograph such as this makes no real testament to the location at all, as Wessel could have posed the sedan at any number of vistas in the American West with the same effect. Wessel’s decision to document this landscape at this particularly blank time of day, the noon sun casting no shadows to reveal the contours of the topography, suggests a conception of Western landscapes that are static and interchangeable. Alexander Wilson frames this kind of detachment from the landscape in a way that seeks resolution between the settler and the transient through the act of traveling: “It’s as if physical mobility is standing in for the dream of social mobility that North American Society has been unable to deliver.”⁶⁸ In effect, the car is the new symbol of American freedom for the latter twentieth century by allowing temporary denial of social station and spatial containment in a discrete area of dwelling or work. The imagery of a banal, washed-out desert and a car appeals to what Phillips identifies as “the gas stations, the American car, symbols of independence and rootlessness.”⁶⁹ However, Phillips’ reading of the symbology as an expression of independence through wandering and Wilson’s identification of the rootless traveler who denies familial and geographic ties conflict with Geoffrey Batchen’s explication of American

⁶⁷ Phillips, “The Work of Henry Wessel,” 12.

⁶⁸ Wilson, “The View From the Road,” 10.

⁶⁹ Phillips, “The Work of Henry Wessel,” 10.

cultural impulses behind making snapshot photographs of landscapes. While Wessel is a professional photographer who publishes his images for critical interpretation, Batchen notes the need in vernacular photography for narrators, present at the moment that snapshot was captured, to supply meaning for the image.⁷⁰ Rather than commemorate the nomadic impulses implied by a mobile culture more inclined to travel than put down roots, Batchen argues that personal photographs of visited landscapes are actually designed to place the traveler as part of a complex process of developing a personal identity inherently linked to geography.⁷¹ The tourist’s participation in a temporary and enjoyable wanderlust combined with the relatively narrow set of boundaries and structures that guide such experiences reveals a deep-seated tension between desires that may drive tourist activities and the manner in which a conventional consumerist framework can give expression to these desires without delivering definitive consummation. Snapshot photographs play a fundamental role in this process by helping participants articulate a personalized and visually embodied identity within an ultimately normative and resolutely shared, public, commonly accessible experience.

Yet the very fact that snapshots without narrators can convey relatively little meaning to the viewer begs the impact of this kind of image-making upon constructions of space. Considering photography’s inherently disembodied nature and the mass of ephemeral images Americans constantly construct along Western highways and in national parks, the photographic image’s relationship to continuous space becomes more fraught. As Alexander Wilson and Robert Adams have already suggested, cars and highway travel already mediate direct human interaction with the landscape, but photography further compounds the level of separation. Even driving a car, the traveler is still physically placed

⁷⁰ Batchen, “From Infinity to Zero,” 126-127.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 126-127.

within the landscape, and has to retain some sense of spatially continuity. There is sensible movement, and the terrain passes at a regular, if accelerated, rate. However, because the photograph is actually separate from what it represents and can be reproduced indefinitely, it can act as a multiplication of specific spaces even though it fragments the landscape's overall continuity. Furthermore, since a photographic image preserves objects at a precise instant in time, but without necessarily capturing any evidence that can divulge that exact instant, and without the ability to account for inevitable temporal transformations, photography imparts a false permanence to fleeting experiences. The fact that a photographer such as Wessel focuses almost exclusively on human-altered landscapes, and often captures the more mobile artifacts of human life, accentuates photography's role in providing a record of existence that is certain to fade. Because photographic records can exist long after the actual object has disappeared contributes to the level of importance viewers invest in such images, even if that connection comes at the expense of actual experience or direct observation. The quicksilver West, so often dictated by the temporary prevalence of resources, economic fluctuations, and a climate obscured by the desires of hopeful settlers, provides more opportunities than many other regions for capturing human existence at its most ephemeral. Wessel's frequent reduction of the landscape to a gray backdrop against which stand out strange articles at the fringes of human development suggests the importance Americans place upon their own necessarily fragile creations, implicitly believing in the unchanging virtues of the landscape upon which these tenuous endeavors are mounted. Yet human activity has irreversibly altered the Western landscape, a fact that many nineteenth century painters may have been content to accept as a necessary subtext to progress, but were at least cognizant. Because of the persistence of the photographic image and its superficial correlation to an immediately visible reality, the transient things the photographer captures appear fixed and permanent in actuality.

The coincident rise of the industrial West and the inception of America’s mobile middle class have led to the creation of an immense body of tourist snapshot photography, and countless records of the residues of human existence in the West. Batchen’s reading of snapshots’ role in American culture as personal documents and mementoes that, taken in series, reveal an autobiographical impulse on the part of the photographer raises questions about how Americans formulate identity through the use of externalized media. Although Batchen’s concern lies mostly with photography itself, the locales at which Americans produce snapshots play a concomitant role in the experience of identity. Batchen cites the fact that “Americans alone take about 550 snapshots per second, a statistic that, however it has been concocted, suggests the taking of such photographs might best be regarded as a neurosis rather than a pleasure,” causing him to link the urge to take so many pictures with the creation of identity.⁷² If we consider the fact that so many snapshots are made on tourist excursions, Alexander Wilson’s contention that “leisure time is increasingly the time, and creates the space, where we look for meaning in our lives” and that many “social institutions are now organized around buying, eating, or sightseeing,”⁷³ raises many questions about the nature of American identity, and the various extant social structures that serve to codify and give meaning to experience. Tourism and photography thereby play a complimentary role. The tourist experience of viewing natural wonders is itself a normative middle-class activity, and the taking of snapshots on these excursions preserves the image of the tourist’s body immersed in the landscape, engaged in the experience, invested and identifying with the cultural framework. While Wilson and Batchen both deal more explicitly with relatively recent trends in the American social picture, their ideas recall the work of Roderick Nash.

⁷² Batchen, “From Infinity to Zero,” 122.

⁷³ Wilson, “The View From the Road,” 4.

Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) delves into the relationship between the American landscape and national identity, and the importance the natural landscape has long played in defining America’s spiritual and ideological aspects.⁷⁴ His explication of this phenomenon centers on the impact of literature and painting upon popular conceptions of nature:

Appreciation of wilderness began in the cities. The literary gentleman wielding a pen, not the pioneer with his axe, made the first gestures of resistance against the strong currents of antipathy. The ideas of the literati determined their experience, because in large part they saw in wilderness what they wanted to see.⁷⁵

Early in the history of the American nation, the landscape became conceptualized in the media, and ideas about nature were inflected not so much by immediate interaction as by idealistic portrayals presented by a few influential writers and painters. Consider particularly how these artists and writers themselves interacted with the landscape: the painter Thomas Cole traveled to areas such as the White Mountains of New York to gather inspiration for his paintings, but after making sketches would return to his studio to finish the artworks.^{76,77} Thus, the human relationship to nature and the landscape remains tangential, a place more suited to receive artistic and spiritual impulses rather than a space to inhabit. Even though landscape-painting conventions often place the artist within the frame, actual interactions with nature are more transient, and often inclined to develop nature as a pure and untouched realm, or even as a threateningly untamed landscape in implicit opposition to civilization.

As mentioned by Anderson and Novak, artworks by American landscape painters in the eighteenth and nineteenth century often contain Romantic embellishments. Nash links these embellishments to the fact that

⁷⁴ Roderick Nash. *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1967), 47-48, 69.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁷⁷ Richard H. Gassan. *The Birth of American Tourism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008).

the concept of sublimity gained widespread usage in the eighteenth century. As an aesthetic category the sublime dispelled the notion that beauty in nature was seen only in the comfortable, fruitful, and well-ordered.... Edmund Burke formally expressed the idea that terror and horror in regard to nature stemmed from exultation, awe, and delight rather than from dread and loathing.⁷⁸

Nash further notes how as concepts of the Romantic and Sublime gained salience on the European continent, cultured Americans began to explore the landscapes around them and realized that “America’s nature, if not her culture, would command the world’s admiration” because in the “*wildness* of its nature...their country was unmatched.”⁷⁹ The very fact that so much of the territory of the nation remained effectively unaltered by human activity established, for many Americans, a distinct break from European culture, whose placement within and reliance upon human-made artifacts necessarily limited pure interactions with sublime nature. The artistic linkage of the American landscape to the sublime and spiritual persists at least through the first half of the twentieth century, particularly in the photography of Ansel Adams. Yet Nash notes ironies within Romantic views of American nature even at the outset of the adoption of the ideal. For example, James Fennimore Hoffman, a notable author of the early 1800s, expresses some trepidation regarding the destruction of natural landscapes, but acknowledges that this alteration is a necessary step in the progress of civilization across the American continent.⁸⁰ It is quite clear that many artists of this early period brought an idealized lens to bear upon their interpretations of the landscape, and largely appreciated the wilderness from the comfort of their desks and studios.

Although a great number of wilderness images continued to proliferate throughout the twentieth century, ostensibly allowing a great number of Americans to remain armchair adventurers and tourists, the aforementioned impact of cars and snapshot photography has

⁷⁸ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 45.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

had a paradoxical effect upon the West. With the closure of the frontier at the end of the nineteenth century, the material and conceptual value of the landscape experiences a transformation. Dreams of mineral and spatial wealth lose their power over the average American as gold rushes dry up and the land becomes more fenced and more owned. As highways and locomotives delve into the heart of the wilderness, the figure of playful tourist supersedes the awe-stricken pilgrim. The value of the West becomes more esoteric, and reasons for relocating permanently to the region conflate with tourism's visual consumption. Even so, the need remains for images of uninhabited spaces, in direct competition with scenes of parks overrun by middle class station wagons and motor homes. Photography's representation of western space as limitless had created the assumption that it was the actual openness of the landscape of the West that would lead to personal freedom. The photographer who rose to the occasion and provided modern images of pristine, vacant wilderness to an increasingly mobile and numerous American public was none other than Ansel Adams. As his career progressed and he began to take vastly vacant, panoramic photographs of Yosemite in the 1930s and '40s, the landscape was becoming continuously less open, the national parks mere islands in seas of commerce, real estate, and industry. Odd as it may seem, Ansel Adams, working with a mechanical apparatus in the twentieth century, perhaps comes closer to embodying ideally Romantic views in his photography than any landscape painter of the 1800s.

CHAPTER III

Inventing the Western Void

In the twentieth century, perhaps no artist has been as influential as Ansel Adams in developing the image of the vacant West. His empty national parks are more Eden-like for their absence of humans, Yosemite standing in for the pre-lapsarian Garden. His photographs are equally striking, though, for their complete lack of wildlife. Hardly once do we glimpse a bear, an elk, a deer, or even a bird or chipmunk. There is scant hint of a Native American past, or even the residues of settler life on the frontier. Only geologic certainties remain: granite domes, plunging waterfalls, impenetrable forests, ethereal mist. Ansel Adams has created an elemental world, rendered upon the silver screen of large-format prints. Any actual experience of even the quietest, most isolated corner of American wilderness could not hope to match the magisterial silence of an Adams picture, the deep contrast of his black and white universe, the unfathomable quality of his charcoal noontime skies. Even so, such representations of a perfectly depopulated West have hardly passed away with Adams' fading. Notable landscape photographers of the New Topographics movement, such as Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and Henry Wessel, although committed to recording human-altered landscapes, rarely capture human figures within the boundaries of their frames.⁸¹ Even though these artists' subjects often verge upon and take place within densely populated urban and suburban landscapes, they frequently treat the human-made objects in their frames as almost incidental features, happenstance as boulders in a field, or with formal compositions reminiscent of Ansel Adams, huge warehouses of corrugated steel taking on the pictorial grandeur of Yosemite's Half Dome. Photographs in this style often

⁸¹ See these collections of the artists' work: Robert Adams, *Los Angeles Spring*, Aperture Book, September 1986; Robert Adams, *From the Missouri West*, Harper and Row, 1980; Lewis Baltz, *Nevada*, Castelli Graphics, 1978; Lewis Baltz, *The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine California*, Castelli Graphics, 1974; Henry Wessel, *Henry Wessel*, Steidl, 2007.

leave a viewer with little sense of how these objects came to be, and what purpose they serve in the context of human life. The human-made thereby seems an organic byproduct of inevitable, natural processes rather than the outcome of intentional environments planned and built specifically for human use.

For the duration of Ansel Adams' most famous period, from the early 1940s through the 1950s, he systematically omitted built environments, particularly those created by industrial products. The few structures he does record are often rustic vestiges of an idealized frontier life. But by and large, the putative wilderness of the middle twentieth century Sierra Nevada Range in California is the subject of his photography, and in style and content, he strays little from the work of his survey photographer predecessors. He spent a great deal of time within Yosemite National Park, hoisting a bulky and cumbersome large-format camera to his vantages in the style of the early Western photographers who helped establish the national parks with their imagery, never upgrading to a more modern and manageable 35 mm device. Adams' affinity for finding the spiritual in nature is clear to John Szarkowski: "Adams' pictures seem as dematerialized as the reflections on still water, or the shadows cast on morning mist: disembodied images concerned not with the corpus of things but their transient aspect," and his images "are concerned...not with the description of objects...but with the description of the light that they modulate, the light that justifies their relationship to each other."⁸² The ethereal quality of Adams' work is indeed apparent in photographs such as *Spanish Peaks, Colorado* (c. 1951) or *Upper Yosemite Falls, from Fern Ledge, Yosemite National Park, 1946*. These pictures foreground Szarkowski's comments about the importance of light, which is very

⁸² John Szarkowski, introduction to *The Portfolios of Ansel Adams*, edited by Tim Hill (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1977), viii.

physical in Adams’ photographs, but may also be interpreted as a spiritual light that binds the objects together.

Spanish Peaks, Colorado, in particular, has a distinct and eminently balanced composition, dividing its frame between plains, mountain, clouds, and sky.⁸³ The smooth darkness of the foregrounded trees mirrors the deep sky, and the curved points on the gray mountain peak transition easily into the pale clouds. Each object stands out distinctly in high contrast, but there is no apparent conflict between fields. The sense of space is impressive, but not overwhelming, the calmness of the shot suggesting a harmonious relationship between viewer and viewed. This picture is almost the equivalent of a curio cabinet in that its frame contains its subject so completely. Each object seems presented in such a way that it is somehow detached from original context, the isolated mountain and the sparse, sharply defined trees archetypal of a very particular conception of an empty and remote West. The relative smallness of the trees in comparison to the frame and the spatial balance between foreground and middle ground suggests an equivalence in size and presence between the plains and the mountain, and the camera’s cropping of the sky prevents it from appearing overly expansive. These perfect proportions achieve an idealized and picturesque nature without the embellishments of the brush, relying instead upon the artist’s eye to find the angle and frame that will achieve romantic conventions. However, unlike many landscape paintings or the travelogue films discussed above and in Jennifer Peterson’s analysis, Adams manages to completely omit a human presence in the frame, insinuating that human forms or artifacts can add nothing to the natural beauty of the scene. Adams does not suggest that the mountain he photographs is terrifyingly sublime, or

⁸³ Ansel Adams, *Spanish Peaks, Colorado* (circa 1951), in *Photographs of the Southwest* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), 18. See Figure 1, Appendix B.

in need of human cultivation, but a flawlessly balanced whole humans can do little with but appreciate from an idealized distance.

Yosemite Falls also bears out a spiritual union between the elements of the photograph, the three primal forms of stone, water, and sky sharing nearly equal vertical thirds of the frame.⁸⁴ The bright, cloudlike waterfall seems to rise straight out of the vertical rock wall on the right of the frame, its tumultuous and smoldering shapes anchored on either side by sky and stone. But the frame provided by the sky and rocks is not merely compositional, but also tonal, each field dark, monochrome, and stable, particularly when contrasted with the parts of the fall that blow out into overexposure, detail lost to pure white forms. And yet the movement of the water is arrested, its rushing roar quieted in the picture, almost like frozen smoke with delicate wisps reaching into the sky. There seems to be a ideal unity between each element in the picture, the simplicity of the composition presenting idealized forms that manage, at the same time, to achieve a corporeal weight. The absolute blackness of the sky gives it a presence and gravity that makes it a kind of counterforce to the downward pull exerted by the earth. The water thus exists in perfect tension between the rocks and the firmament, and the longer the eye examines the frozen falls, the less certain is the direction of movement, or the orientation of up and down.

Szarkowski's readings suggest that Adams is much more concerned with form than with actual objects, implying an equivalence of intent, if not method, between Adams' pictures and the highly stylized paintings of Bierstadt or Moran. And yet Ansel Adams' photographs form an even more deeply ironic juxtaposition between the facts of human involvement in the landscape. The camera itself is a technological apparatus, an element of the processes of modern development that allow the conception of national parks as isolated

⁸⁴ Ansel Adams, *Upper Yosemite Falls, from Fern Ledge, Yosemite National Park, 1946*, in *Yosemite and the High Sierra* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 40. See Figure 3, Appendix B.

preserves. Still, Adams’ images represent a most idealized nature and edit out almost every reference to human activity. His photographs seem to champion a perfect and unblemished nature, but he baldly ignores the pressing realities of western development. By failing to show any facet of contemporary human activity in the West, Adams perpetuates the problematic ideal of limitless space and an invulnerable nature. At the same time, his representations of wilderness space are equally suspect, skewing toward images that apprehend from a great distance while foregoing contextual details. The pristine and uninhabited Yosemite he constructs presents a world geometrically ordered by the aspect of his camera, space collapsed into two dimensions and arranged according to conventions often borrowed directly from nineteenth century paintings. His images of sublime beauty exist nowhere but inside the world of his prints, which are but fleeting and selective glimpses of a landscape already dominated by highways, automobiles, clear-cuts, and trains.

One of Adams’ most revealing photographs is *St. Francis Church, Ranchos de Taos, New Mexico* (c. 1950).⁸⁵ This picture expresses most clearly a desire for the human-made to coexist in balance with the natural landscape. The walls of an adobe church arise out of the ground as abstract shapes; their crackled surfaces are planes bathed in ethereal slashes of glowing light. Adams treats the church exactly as he would photograph El Capitan in the evening light, or the layered walls of a canyon. The church is made of mud and rock, its forms mimicking stone formations of the desert. But in 1950, this rustic scene of a human structure is no longer an image of reality, but a document of the distinctive Southwestern architectural style that is as much the subject of tourism as the national parks. The exoticism with which Adams imbues this church allows the city-bred viewer/visitor to

⁸⁵ Ansel Adams, *St. Francis Church, Ranchos de Taos, New Mexico* (c. 1950), in *Photographs of the Southwest* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), 53. See Figure 2, Appendix B.

regard it as a bizarre intersection of elemental materials and human endeavors. This built structure, much like a mountain range or redwood forest, appears to be the product of impalpable forces and is thereby separated from contemporary human life by undefined historical and spatial distances. Even so, Adams’ focus upon the surface of this structure is emblematic of a cultural shift that will cause Americans to be less concerned with temporal presence (as related to geologic time and spirituality in nature) but rather with the image of things, and sight, rather than immersion, as the most important aspect of human experience.

The development of these landscape photography conventions, which permeate much professional work during the twentieth century, was by no means predestined. By the time Ansel Adams began to develop his career as a committed landscape photographer, earlier Western landscape images by the likes of Timothy O’Sullivan, Carleton Watkins, and William Henry Jackson were unknown to the contemporary public, who were much more engaged in current, Great Depression-themed documentary work by photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans.⁸⁶ Their documentary images contained first and foremost the human figure, the pressures of the landscape and environment written upon faces, body posture, and gnarled hands rather than in dunes and the lines of tree trunks. The rise to preeminence of Adams’ style of photography was multipart, depending upon the economic pressures of the 1930s; the federally-backed construction of interstate highways, which encouraged tourism, allowed greater access to remote corners of the West, and connected California with cultural currents in the East; the proliferation of portable cameras and photo clubs, which encouraged broad-based interest in the medium from an amateur and semi-professional audience; and photography’s relative existence outside formal museum or gallery definitions of artistic conventions. In *A Staggering Revolution: A*

⁸⁶ John Raeburn. *A Staggering Revolution* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 104-106, 287.

Cultural History of Thirties Photography (2006), John Raeburn discusses some of the most important events and personalities which converged to allow Adams to position himself as a photographic savant as well as the social conditions, cultural happenings, and personal maneuverings that contributed to his photography’s wide dissemination and persistent popularity.

At the beginning of the 1930s, California was still something of a cultural backwater, far from the museum and gallery scene on the east coast, dominated by MoMA in New York City, and in photography’s specific case, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz’s An American Place Gallery.⁸⁷ Photography had yet to find a secure footing as high art, and “when Stieglitz strove to enshrine it in the oughts...he, like contemporary museums, laid emphasis on ‘the individual creator and the single image’ and purposefully limited popular access to it,” and as an artist, Stieglitz “abhorred mass reproduction.”⁸⁸ However, Stieglitz was relatively unable to maintain his dominance over the definition of what constituted good artistic photography in the 1930s. The public’s reticence to accept his terms perhaps has much to do with the fact that he squandered the photographic medium’s particular ability for mass reproduction and publication, clinging instead to ideas related to the value of uniqueness inherent in handmade mediums such as paintings. At the same time, Raeburn details the many opportunities amateur practitioners had to exhibit their work through camera clubs, magazines, fairs, and popular exhibitions, proving that anyone could be a photographic author, and many Americans jumped at this prospect. By the 1930s, “more than 50 percent of American families owned a camera and made some six hundred million pictures yearly,” a fact that Adams was quite keen to capitalize upon by writing “generously illustrated how-to manuals, nominally practical but also self-consciously

⁸⁷ Ibid., 3-6.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 3, 8-9.

educative in proposing photographic standards and sketching the medium’s history.”⁸⁹

Adams thus exhibited a desire to expand his own photographic conventions and artistic ideals to the common practitioner, and a fundamental understanding of photography’s mass popular appeal to Americans. By coaching amateurs and hobbyists to emulate his own photographic styles, Adams practically guaranteed positive reception to his work.

Inaugurating Adams’ efforts to establish and legitimize certain photographic practices and styles was his co-formation of the California-centric f.64 photography group, most notably in conjunction with another western photographer destined for fame, Edward Weston. The basic goals of the group were to “forthrightly...assert the distinctiveness of California modes of seeing, not only in clarity of technique but also in terms of characteristic western subject matter” while at the same time conforming their work to “the straight esthetic prevailing elsewhere,” especially in Stieglitz’s circle.⁹⁰ Thus, these young Westerners desired to import the most sanctified photographic conventions to their own landscape, at once trying to join the east coast’s cultural hegemony. Simultaneously, they attempted to crack the narrow subject matter of established artists by injecting their own idea of the American landscape into photography, arguing for a western (and particularly Californian) uniqueness that would nonetheless be nationally relevant.

A major driving factor of the West’s resonance among the American people during the 1930s was the Depression, and the desire for an escapist landscape. Raeburn describes the images included in Group f.64’s first exhibition in 1932 in San Francisco:

Nothing was moving, and there was great attention to the finely detailed surface textures of the subjects. There was little in the photographs to suggest either the modern industrial world or the troubles of the times.... [T]he exhibition seemed to proclaim an enduring realm lifted above the uncertainties outside the galleries, one in which the formal disciplines of art mattered most.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Ibid., 6, 9.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 32-33.

⁹¹ Ibid., 36.

Unconcerned, therefore, with the cultures of people, and much more driven to “palpably evoke[] the special terrain, flora, and culture of California[,].... they depicted no orange groves, redwoods, or Sierra peaks, no missions, cable cars, or busy waterfronts. Such views would have seemed impossibly hackneyed.”⁹² The idea that Californians would view the world differently than their eastern counterparts would seem to rest upon the fact that westerners were still more conscious of the natural landscape, rather than the urban landscapes exploited by the likes of. Although industrial factories may have seized major eastern cities by the early 1930s, California in particular would have still offered employment in a variety of rural professions intrinsic to the landscape of the state, such as mining, logging, farming and ranching. At the same time, the Southern and Great Plains poverty depicted by Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange would lack the impressive counterpoint supplied by wilderness backdrops of lush forests, sparkling beaches, rich fields, and striking peaks. The Californians’ imagery was therefore very much driven to define their subjects in opposition to Eastern photographers, who were deeply invested in images of the human face and portraiture, in ethnographies of cities and architectural landscapes, in Depression farmers and rural blight.⁹³ Group f.64 instead once again began to deliver a West that was hopeful and almost unreal to a viewing public eager to consume images that seemed at the time to speak an un-cynical truth about untouched landscapes that could heal—emotionally and spiritually—a broken nation. Imogen Cunningham notes that “F/64 has always been considered reflective of American work in photography.... It is not only American, it’s Western American. It isn’t even American, it’s Western,”⁹⁴ thereby separating photographic work in the West completely from that taking place in the rest of

⁹² Ibid., 36.

⁹³ Ibid., 34.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 39.

America. She thereby constructs the West as an idealized embodiment of America somewhat beyond the reach of the rest of the nation.

Before Adams himself attained national acclaim for his large format landscape work, in 1937, his friend and associate Edward Weston won the first Guggenheim fellowship ever awarded to a photographer. He traveled California by road over the next two years while capturing many images to construct a unique new vision of the meaning West.⁹⁵ Although Weston was thereby funded for his project, to help pay for his car and travel expenses, he struck a deal with “Phil Hanna, editor of the Automobile Club of Southern California’s monthly magazine *Westways*...[who] agreed to pay \$50 per month for ten photographs,” each issue publishing “Weston’s pictures as a travelog [*sic*].”⁹⁶ Thus, these pictures first came to audiences as an advertisement of the West and its scenic grandeur, its matchless vistas, all accessible to the highway tourist, but rarefied and enshrined in the mystique of Weston’s abstract and modernist views. Raeburn notes that although Weston believed that “by revitalizing his audience’s perception of nature’s inspirational coherence...his photographs could serve as an antidote to social despair,” by the same token he avoided approaching the subjects of his contemporary period’s strife directly: “the depression did not inspire him to turn his lens on its casualties. Working in far-off California with a narrow if rich range of carefully controlled subject matter he seemed to epitomize the photographer whose work exemplified art for art’s sake.”⁹⁷ Weston thereby sought to elevate and edify by avoiding explicit images of pain and suffering, continuing to construct a western mythology of human optimism and liberating landscapes.

⁹⁵ Karen E. Quinn, “Weston’s Westons: California and the West,” in *Weston’s Westons: California and the West*, eds. Karen E. Quinn and Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr. (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2007), 19.

⁹⁶ Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution*, 250.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 248, 265.

Theodore Stebbins, in the introduction to *Weston's Westons: California and the West* (2007), does not come away from Weston's photography with precisely the same reading, conversely arguing that his “realistic...views of abandoned buildings at Rhyolite, Nevada, and Leadfield, California, and of the detritus along Route 66 in the Mojave Desert all reflect the depressed mood of these Depression years.”⁹⁸ Indeed, Weston exhibits a distinct interest in exhibiting human failures in the West, human artifacts either abandoned wreckage or mechanical shapes clashing incongruously with natural forms. But Raeburn's point is well taken, that Weston may have shown the remnants of failed human settlements and endeavors, but he chose to portray them in abstract terms, or as ruins, but importantly, “his pictures did not portray people and relate them to their environment.”⁹⁹ It is perhaps more astute to read Weston's images of abandoned ghost towns from Robert Smithson's perspectives on failed or destructive human endeavors such as abandoned mines or buildings, “which at first are deformities, [but] which in the most picturesque state, are often considered as such by a leveling improver.”¹⁰⁰ Indeed, Weston constructs a geometrical balance between stone walls that decay into triangular forms and the distant mountain foothills that intersect with the plain at similar angles. These are images not so much of explicit human failure, but of the aesthetic interactions of manmade works and natural processes.

And yet there is an irresolvable tension between Weston's belief in the California landscape as a symbol of hope and his almost complete lack of interest in depicting human endeavors in the West. This contradiction begs the question of how viewers of Weston's imagery should draw a hopeful or edifying experience from his landscapes, especially

⁹⁸ Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., “Introduction,” in *Weston's Westons: California and the West*, eds. Karen E. Quinn and Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr. (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2007), 14.

⁹⁹ Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution*, 260.

¹⁰⁰ Smithson, quoting Uvedale Price, “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape,” 159.

considering that most of his depictions of human artifacts come from ruined settlements. For Weston, certainly, the West largely exists as an esoteric and artistic realm, human settlements ephemeral and fleeting, not as a place of permanent inhabitation despite his own lifelong residence in California.¹⁰¹ Yet the paradox developed by Weston’s publication of his images in a tourist magazine designed to promote the landscape to thousands upon thousands of new visitors and his denial of the human form in California is not easy to resolve. Clearly, a kind of fantastic conception of the landscape is necessary. Karen Quinn lauds how Weston does not show the typical view of a site as experienced by the tourist,¹⁰² but in ignoring the means by which the average person interacts with the landscape, namely by virtue of automobile and an artificial framework of constructed paths and signs, removes his subjects from their material context. His photographs of Death Valley and similar features show an idealized nature that is in some ways superior to the actual experience, not least because his pictures deny human presence. He strives for existential isolation when already such isolation in nature is an increasingly difficult prospect. In a sense, Weston preserves the mythological open West free of settlers and Native Americans, displacing sublime meditation from parks overrun by station wagon motorists and picnickers to austere and depopulated photographs.

A similar kind of fantastic escapism was being played out contemporaneously in another California-constructed landscape: the silver screens of Hollywood. Of particular interest to Depression-era audiences were depictions of the settlement of the American West:

[I]n 1939 and 1940 quality productions of western films boomed, and adult audiences flocked to them. In those two years Hollywood produced a dozen or more

¹⁰¹ As Raeburn notes, Weston’s wife “Charis is one of only three human figures in the [Guggenheim] photographs; the other two are the corpse and a young man in front of a Salinas barn, seen at such a distance his facial features are indistinct,” 256.

¹⁰² Quinn, “Weston’s Westons: California and the West,” 24.

prestige westerns.... As hostilities opened in Europe and threatened to involve the United States, Americans became ever more preoccupied with the uniqueness of their cultural experience, and representations of the West’s mythology abundantly satisfied that need.¹⁰³

As part of a mechanism to alleviate the pressing and pervasive social problems caused by the Depression and the mounting threat of War, Americans returned to the same landscapes that had provided hope and the promise of national ideological solidarity after the Civil War. Although some Americans did indeed pack up and head west, the region was by no means the same kind of frontier full of open lands free for the claiming as in the nineteenth century. The people living in the West were no longer Native Americans with few legal rights, but white citizens of the United States who were not often pleased to see Dust Bowl refugees in jalopy caravans bearing down on their highways. Their fenced, owned lands left little space for new immigrants to settle themselves and begin again, far from others. Yet in fictional films, the widespread desire for continuous, future-oriented triumphs could be satisfied. The West, which had for all intents and purposes been conquered and explored, could be discovered and civilized anew in the collective imagination, film and photography being the chief tools for so doing.

This privileging of representation over actualities is an issue that film theorist Stanley Cavell undertakes in *The World Viewed* (1971). Although his concerns span the majority of Hollywood films, his contentions seem especially applicable to the western genre. One of his major assertions regards the displacing effects of photographic “reality” upon consumers of filmic images: “The depth of the automatism of photography is to be read not alone in its mechanical reproduction of an image of reality, but in its mechanical defeat of our presence to that reality.”¹⁰⁴ In effect, then, the photograph’s apparent 1:1

¹⁰³ Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution*, 272.

¹⁰⁴ Stanley Cavell, “From *The World Viewed*,” in *Film Theory and Criticism* 3rd Edition, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 345.

correspondence with the reality it depicts imparts it with a documentary authority. The truth of the existence of the objects in the landscape is seemingly verifiable because of the theoretical ability to visit the actual scene of the image and because of the mechanical recording nature of the camera. However, unlike a visitor to the original scene, the photographic viewer cannot actually exert any effects upon the objects in the photograph. The scene exists in reified and static form, embodying a reality from which the viewer is absent, and cannot challenge or verify in a definitive or meaningful manner. And yet Cavell notes that the apparatus serves to “screen its [own] existence from” the viewer, and as soon as the viewer accepts the pictorial reality as real, “we are displaced from our natural habitation within [the world], placed at a distance from it. The screen overcomes our fixed distance; it makes displacement appear as our natural condition.”¹⁰⁵ This imaginative leap is particularly important to sustain the West as a symbol of hope and American progress. Viewers of western films and photographs must accept the imagery of occupation and sublime nature as sufficient substitute for the actual ability to travel west and enact a personal victory over poverty. At the same time, the viewer is displaced from the tangible experience of the landscape, acclimated to experiencing it from a distance which renders objects stable and contained within a discrete frame at a comprehensible scale.

By the time Weston was preparing to publish his collection of Guggenheim photography as *California and the West*, Ansel Adams was beginning to wholeheartedly embrace photographic conventions of vacant landscapes with a distinct focus upon the awe-inspiring qualities of Yosemite National Park and other such scenic locales. In 1939, Adams undertook the largest and most widely-seen photographic exhibition of the decade at the San Francisco World’s Fair. One of the animating concerns behind his organization of the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 345, 354.

Photography Pageant was the fear that with so much amateur and popular photographic activity,

something like Gresham’s Law threatened photography, and to counter that danger its vast audience needed to be educated.... The World’s Fair provided an exceptional occasion to assemble such a didactic gathering for a much larger audience than any museum could muster.¹⁰⁶

Adams, after earlier advocating for a kind of photographic populism with his how-to manuals, now exhibited his own desire to see a photographic canon, and positioned himself to become one of art photography’s primary savants. One of the exhibitions at the Pageant would have a profound effect upon American photography for many years afterward, namely, Adams’ decision to expose the works of early Western photographers such as “William Henry Jackson, Timothy O’Sullivan, Carleton Watkins, and others,” whose “landscapes had hardly been exhibited nor their achievement recognized.”¹⁰⁷ This was a distinctive moment for photography, and particularly American photography, defining a nationalist branch of the art form that centered upon the Western landscape. Raeburn notes that these pictures “supplied a distinctive historical justification” for Adams’ relative exclusion of European photographers at the pageant, serving to claim high art photography as an originally American practice.¹⁰⁸ Thus, in the twentieth century America could finally claim a nationalist art that served to elevate American culture to the level of European competitors. Interestingly, that art was at once the product of technical and mechanical processes, therefore aligned with Manifest ideals of rational progress, and simultaneously, its most notable subject was a pristine and therefore superior landscape which could appeal to spiritual transcendence. In this way, photography achieved a space in which technology

¹⁰⁶ Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution*, 287-88.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 287.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 288.

and spiritualism became united, the nationalist paradox between nature and industrial development momentarily contained within the camera frame.

Adams sagely exploited this “reconfigur[ed]” photographic and national history to position himself as a definitively American photographer of the definitive American subject; as Raeburn notes, the World’s Fair “celebration served Adams himself, whose work around 1940 was beginning to center on...large-scale landscapes.”¹⁰⁹ And thus, by establishing the historical and nationalist precedence of the large format, western landscape photograph, Adams worked to perpetuate a distinct vision of the edifying, wide-open West. But in the middle twentieth century, the West was accessible as it had never been before. As cars and highways began to infiltrate the landscape along with a middle class who could afford to travel and utilize these technological developments as commodities, the landscape, as Alexander Wilson frames it, could be packaged and sold: “during the 1950s and 1960s, the modern utopian visions of a beneficent technology ushering a society of ease and plentitude easily translated into mass desire for leisure commodities. Cars, trailers, motorboats, camping equipment, home appliances, vacation cottages, televisions.”¹¹⁰ Unlike the original western photographers, Adams’ images would appeal not to a mass of settlers and immigrants looking to carve out a new life in a new landscape, but to a mass of established middle class citizens looking to get away for a short while, creating a “temporary migration of people” who want to experience a natural landscape “they understand to be a different and usually more ‘pure’ environment” than their typical urban dwellings.¹¹¹ Therefore, even as Adams worked to develop a kind of spiritual celebration of nature with his photographs, the forces of consumerism worked to turn such experiences into profitable commodities.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 288.

¹¹⁰ Wilson, “The View From the Road,” 4.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 5.

Adams' own essay, "The Meaning of the National Parks" (1950), reveals the extremely contradictory processes at work in the Western landscape in the twentieth century. His own contention is that "millions are drawn" to national parks "for spiritual experience," where they find themselves deep "in contemplation of the eternal incarnations of the spirit which vibrate in every mountain, leaf, and particle of earth, in every cloud, stone and flash of sunlight." This allows the visitor to "make new discoveries on the planes of ethical and humane discernment, approaching the new society at last, proportionate to nature."¹¹² On the one hand, then, Adams conceives of the natural landscape as presented in the national parks as an experience seemingly completely independent of the industrial and developed contexts of the visitors' day-to-day lives. He sees them appreciating the landscape with a perspective reminiscent of Henry David Thoreau's revelations, completely ignoring the fact that the Americans who tour the West in the middle twentieth century are not men and women seeking self sufficiency independent of a society they construe as superficial and hollow, but people who view American society as the provider of plenty, people who see the American landscape as so many views which can be bought for so much disposable income. Adams ironically contends that the ultimate development of the national parks should achieve "the complete adjustment of the material and spiritual aspects of the parks to human need, with full emphasis on the intangible moods and qualities of the natural scene,"¹¹³ thereby contributing to a conception of nature as a thing designed for human consumption. The human development of the landscape likewise only serves to provide clearer comprehension of the experience for a greater number of people. Thus, Adams prescribes guided frameworks that will serve to educate and edify, to digest the

¹¹² Ansel Adams. "The Meaning of the National Parks," in *A Portfolio by Ansel Adams: Celebrating the American Earth*, by Ansel Adams (Washington, D.C.: The Wilderness Society, 1981), 4.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

intangible. It seems that ultimately Adams would conceive of national parks as a series of his own photographs, arranged and displayed for ease of digestion.

In the introduction to *The Portfolios of Ansel Adams* (1977), John Szarkowski notes, without a hint of irony, “It was not foreseen that” Americans, upon seeing the views depicted by Ansel Adams, “would consider it [the landscape] their own, nor that a million pink-cheeked Boy Scouts, grinning teenage backpackers, and middle-aged sightseers might, with the best of intentions, destroy a wilderness as surely as the most rapacious of lumbermen.”¹¹⁴ Thus, Szarkowski buys wholeheartedly into Adams’ formulation of American tourists as those seeking, in good faith, an enlightened natural experience without bothering to consider the other forces at work, namely an advertising/consumer complex as unconcerned with the transcendental qualities of a hill slope as the most avaricious oil baron. Indeed, the intentions behind sightseeing are by no means always well-meaning, in fact often informed by a similar degree of entitlement that allowed nineteenth-century settlers to claim the entire West as their right, and ignore any Native assertions to the contrary. As Mark Neumann argues in his study of western tourism, “The Commercial Canyon” (1994), “national parks are linked to an ideology of American progress and control over the natural world,” thereby suggesting that Adams’ formulation of how national parks should be developed is not unambiguously harmonious with nature, but part and parcel with an overarching American philosophy of natural dominance for the benefit of American humankind.¹¹⁵ Both Adams and Szarkowski exhibit a considerable degree of naiveté, and a startling ignorance of history, particularly considering the extreme degree to which Adams’ images have been commodified, filling calendars, postcards, and any variety

¹¹⁴ John Szarkowski, introduction to *The Portfolios of Ansel Adams*, edited by Tim Hill (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1977), xii.

¹¹⁵ Mark Neumann, “The Commercial Canyon,” in *Discovered Country: Tourism and Survival in the American West*, ed. Scott Norris (Albuquerque: Stone Ladder Press, 1994), 196.

of walls in hotels, homes, and offices with reproductions of his photographs, to the point of utter ubiquity. Any person purchasing one of these reproductions implicitly enacts the belief that the beauty and qualities of the American landscape are something that can be owned, for a price.

Neumann offers another story that suggests the ignorance or irresponsibility of Adams’ depopulated American West by describing the human impacts of national parks, specifically on Native populations. He describes a Midwestern youth from the Lakota/Dakota Nation named Jake who works near Grand Canyon National Park in Utah, and poses as a Navajo for the benefit of tourists in full Native American dress on a berm just off the highway. For three dollars, a passing tourist can snap his picture, but “it’s five dollars if they want to get in the picture” because “it’s an added thing. It gives it more of a personal identification.”¹¹⁶ On an obvious level, an indigenous culture is commodified, and at the same time many tourists exhibit a glaring lack of cultural comprehension. Few ever stop to consider which Native American culture Jake actually belongs to; it does not matter that he is in fact a member of the Lakota/Dakota people, because he stands within the framework of the tourist experience as an interchangeable Native presence. Photography is here employed to collapse historical and cultural distance on an ambiguous level. The tourist pays more money in order to “identify” more closely with Native American culture, but in this particular case, consumer forces have reduced the purported culture to little more than a costume, a posture. Adams’ complete omission of the pre-European western past strips away any remaining cultural associations with Native populations, creating a tabula rasa upon which the (likely white) viewer can project associations drawn from dominant contemporary American values.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 198.

Alexander Wilson, looking to historical cultural currents that have helped define America’s relationship to the natural landscape since the inception of the nation, develops compelling evidence to help us understand why the average tourist does not partake of Ansel Adams’ appropriated spiritualism, at the same time posing explanations for the conservationist discourse arising in the twentieth century. He argues that from the beginning of Western Expansion “in the United States, progress was measured by how far nature...had been pushed back, and the feeling at the close of the nineteenth century, at least in the United States, was that the job was nearly done. It became possible then to argue that the wilderness had to be preserved,” notably with little belief that indigenous ways of life should be likewise defended.¹¹⁷ This exposes most clearly the ironies of Ansel Adams’ position. At once, Adams wants the natural landscape to be open for a great segment of the populace to enjoy, but simultaneously, he bemoans the wanton disregard of industrialism for the natural landscape. In so doing, he ignores the fact that interstates, automobiles, tourist motels, oil wells, and even cameras all arise from the same economic and technological forces. The easy American wealth of the twentieth century that allows mass-scale tourism is almost entirely due to the industrialism that even allows the nation to conceive of certain spaces as national parks, as preserves set apart from the rest of the landscape. As Wilson states, “It’s no accident that industrial agriculture, the spread of suburbs, and the growth of mass tourism all coincided in the mid-twentieth century.”¹¹⁸ However, it would not be until the early 1970s that photographers would begin to openly and consciously juxtapose the commercial and natural features of the American landscape, and even then, many established compositional and formal tropes would persist indefinitely.

¹¹⁷ Wilson, “The View From the Road,” 6.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

CHAPTER IV

The *New Topographics* Exhibition and Stephen Shore’s Human Landscape

One of the most interesting facets of twentieth-century nature tourism is the degree to which the natural landscape recedes finally from view, the majority of the experience dominated by the time spent in cars, motels, and gas stations, in the spaces between destinations filled by consumable products, trinkets, mementos. Equally as important as the experience itself are the products associated with the experience, the “shopping centers, superstores, and everything inside them. These were the forms that leisure and tourism had taken on this continent by the middle of the present [20th] century.”¹¹⁹ More than just destinations in and of themselves, addendums and enhancements to tourism, these stores and the products within actually provide the visual signifiers of the tourist experience, as well as the wealth it implies. The evidence of tourism, provided by tents, camping gear, recreational vehicles, and snapshots transform the spiritualism of travel to the wilderness into a system of social postures adopted by millions of Americans, each attempting a kind of individualistic escapism from the banalities of urban and suburban life, which in the end is an ironic example of conformity by way of consumerism. The product of tourism thereby sells the privilege of mobility. This leaves the natural landscape on an elevated plain, but stripped in the end of sublime enlightenment, instead offering social transcendence to the highest bidder.

The deep ironies of this situation, and especially their manifestations in the American West, remain largely absent from landscape photography until the 1970s. Even so, engagement with these issues by professional photographers was hardly a widespread or united effort. The first major acknowledgement of a need for new tropes in photography that would directly confront human interactions with the landscape came in 1975, with

¹¹⁹ Wilson, “The View From the Road,” 4.

William Jenkins’ inception of the “New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape” exhibition at the International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York.¹²⁰ Most of the eight American photographers of the exhibition worked with Western imagery and landscapes, including Robert Adams, Joe Deal, Lewis Baltz, Henry Wessel, Jr., Frank Gohlke, and Stephen Shore. However, the majority of these photographers took an ecological approach to their subjects, exemplified by Robert Adams. His pictures deal often with natural landscapes degraded and abandoned by major industrial projects, leaving a wake of environmental hazards and ruined habitats. Lewis Baltz’ work reveals urban landscapes that completely supersede the natural, massive warehouses taking on monolithic stature in his resolutely straight, geometric, high-contrast views. As discussed above, much of Wessel’s work did indeed engage with issues of tourism and snapshots, but even so, for the period of his work discussed in this analysis, he retains the historically established trope of omitting people from his views. More concerned with what tourists might miss or ignore while speeding up and down the interstate, Wessel could be said to occlude the actual tourist experience, and particularly its commodity and consumerist aspects.

The only clear outlier in the group of New Topographics photographers is Stephen Shore. While Henry Wessel may have traced the movements of a post-War tourist, snapping a few shots along the way, Shore turned the better part of his life during the 1970s into a series of extended highway excursions, visiting friends, sightseeing, sleeping in roadside motels, eating in diners. Along the way, he obsessively photographed every moment and object, from the breakfasts served on cheap dinnerware, to the boxlike televisions in anonymous hotel rooms, to the massive billboards near highway exit ramps.

¹²⁰ Gilles Mora, *The Last Photographic Heroes: American Photographers of the Sixties and Seventies*, (New York: Abrams, 2007), 154.

Indeed, quite unlike Wessel, Shore zeros in on what Alexander Wilson identifies as one of the primary effects of “modern mass tourism,” namely the creation of a “whole range of new landscapes: motel strips and campgrounds, airports, beach compounds, amusement parks, and convention centers,” all of which represent “a vastly different way of moving through the world.”¹²¹ Shore’s photographs, particularly those taken on his first road trip, are fundamentally about these very spaces, which more or less actually dominate the greater portion of a tourist excursion, despite their relative omission from professional photography and representations of the tourist act. Yet over the course of the twentieth century, these motels and concrete campgrounds became as much a part of the West as natural features, and the tourist’s relationship to these built spaces creates conditions for entirely novel relationships with natural landscapes.

One of the most important things to consider about all of the spaces Wilson names is their shared compartmentalization. On the smallest scale, the motel holds each family or separate tourist in a cramped and boxlike room with few windows, all in all nothing like the features the West has historically been prized for, especially the open sky, the towering mountains, the endless vistas. At the middle scale, campgrounds effectively create hundreds of miniature cul-de-sacs, each populated by a picnic table, a grill planted in the asphalt-coated ground, and hook-ups for RVs and motor homes. All this serves to effectively transport the suburban mentalities of private, owned space, fences, and mechanical comforts to a putative wilderness. But it is not the natural landscape and its wondrous features promoted by these planned campgrounds, but the gadgets and toys of the neighboring family, too close to ignore, their behemoth Winnebago occluding any further views. At the largest scale, pristine private beaches attached to resort communities effectively negate national parks’ aspirations to democracy, walling off the landscape and

¹²¹ Wilson, “The View From the Road,” 3.

hiding it from sight. The view itself becomes a commodity, a thing to be traded on the marketplace, the public beaches all too likely overrun and covered with trash. Thus, the illusion of openness is preserved only for those who can afford it.

Stephen Shore’s work often deals with these landscapes and their compartmentalizing effects, but there are two phases to his work during the seventies, each with a different set of concerns and a different working philosophy. Shore’s shifting approach to the tourist experience produces two sets of quite divergent images. The first series of photographs he produced are entitled *American Surfaces*, taken from 1971 to 1972, and the second, *Uncommon Places*, were taken throughout the rest of the decade and first exhibited in 1982.¹²² Speaking of *American Surfaces* in “Stephen Shore’s *Uncommon Places*,” Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen notes, “Compared to later works, the photographs from Shore’s first journey seem spontaneous and unmediated, as if coincidence and circumstance determined the motifs.”¹²³ Much is made of the authentic snapshot aesthetic Shore achieves in *American Surfaces*, the un-posed nature of his friends, the objective documentary style. Schmidt-Wulffen attributes the easy-going nature and loose formalism of these early Shore pictures largely to the nature of the camera he used, “a 35 mm Rollei, the forerunner of the point-and-shoot. Photography with it is uncomplicated and does not intrude on the traveler’s activities: the omelet can be eaten while still warm, and acquaintances don’t have to pose.”¹²⁴ Thus, Shore’s 35 mm images can depict a reality observed by spontaneous reflex, briefly considered images snapped and forgotten. The pictures are specific records of the everyday facts of traveling, likely remembered by the tourist only as a series of repetitious experiences, each diner and cheap motel bleeding into the next. Shore’s attitude

¹²² “Chronology,” in *Stephen Shore* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd.), 146, 149.

¹²³ Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, “Stephen Shore’s *Uncommon Places*,” In *Stephen Shore: Uncommon Places: The Complete Works*, ed. Andrew Hiller (New York: Aperture, 2004), 7.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

and style of photography does not suggest to the viewer that one image is more important than another, that a person’s face is any more meaningful than an unnamed brick office block in Amarillo, Texas.

But there is a careful compulsiveness to *American Surfaces*. Shore photographs every dingy motel bed, every meal, every gas station, an accumulation of seedy details, sweating faces, and unglamorous storefronts. Shore often exhibits Henry Wessel’s acute eye for ironies, but melds these statements more explicitly with a cultural context of consumerism and advertising without revealing an explicit interest in the natural landscape’s collision with the human-made. His decision-making process behind the set of images he produced may be partially attributable to the fact that as rural tourism increased throughout the twentieth century, the overall tourist experience, and especially “the geographical focus shifted from natural features of the landscape to artificial ones such as golf courses or African animal-safari parks.”¹²⁵ After all, as these types of tourist-centric, built spaces proliferated, it became harder and harder for the traveler to avoid or ignore them. Especially in *American Surfaces*, the viewer is situated firmly within the realm of human life, staring at countertops and waitresses rather than mountaintops and trees. Perhaps because of his choice of subject matter and apparent existence outside of the Romantic or Manifest mythologies of the West, Shore is rarely talked about as a Western photographer. To be fair, a good deal of Shore’s photography takes place on the east coast, in and around New York City, Philadelphia, Maine, and New England. But Shore’s westward progression within the *American Surfaces* series (from New York to Amarillo, Texas) implies an undeniable engagement with the meaning of the West and its intersections with photography and tourism.

¹²⁵ Wilson, “The View From the Road,” 9.

Shore's use of color and his choice of camera in *American Surfaces* allow his photographs to achieve a more striking departure from previously established art photography conventions than many of his contemporaries, despite similar concerns regarding the impact of the built landscape upon the natural features of American topography. Shore focuses his lens upon a considerably smaller segment of the American landscape, faces often dominating the foreground, and equally often set against a consumer backdrop of diners and gas stations. One such photograph, *Sandusky, Ohio, July 1972*, was taken on Shore's first trip from New York to Amarillo.¹²⁶ The picture consists of a Texaco gas station attendant posing in front of a pump. His smile is faint, his tanned face and arms suggesting the bright heat of the summer. In many ways, it is an altogether unremarkable image of a typical highway scene. The identity of the photographed worker remains unknown to the viewer, Shore's motivation for capturing his image for public exhibition equivocal. The image displays Geoffrey Batchen's contention that American snapshooters may sometimes be said to suffer from an almost neurotic compulsion, taking pictures for little purpose except to fulfill a deep-seated urge to document.¹²⁷ However, the photograph is not "boringly sentimental in content,"¹²⁸ Shore having no apparent personal connection to the man, the expression on his subject's face somewhat self-conscious, failing to achieve any kind of candid connection between photographer and photographed. Exhibited in isolation, the viewer is left with few tools to directly analyze the actual content of the picture.

Shore's original exhibition of the prints from *American Surfaces* seems almost to strive for such an ambivalent reading. Unlike many art photographers before him, he did not develop his own film or make his own prints, simply dropping off the rolls at a drug

¹²⁶ Stephen Shore, *Sandusky, Ohio, July 1972*, in *Stephen Shore* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2007) 68. See Figure 1, Appendix C.

¹²⁷ Batchen, "From Infinity to Zero," 122.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

store and exhibiting the standard “Kodak-sized prints,” pasting the entire body of images in three rows along a wall without frames, matting, or captions.¹²⁹ In an interview with Shore, critic Michael Fried notes that this style of exhibition makes it “very hard not to speed up and start looking generically” at all the images.¹³⁰ Yet in an image like *Sandusky, Ohio*, of an all too generic scene, the blandness of the subject itself suggests an American landscape that has been flattened and homogenized by a rampant commercialism of chain stores and utilitarian architecture, the typical gas station remarkable not for any aesthetic value but for the convenient service it provides to the traveler. The image has a “Why not?” quality to it, as though the simple fact that the man and the gas station exist makes them worth recording, particularly considering the inexpensive nature of Shore’s apparatus, and the speed with which he can take the picture. The subsequent publication as a low-resolution drug store print further accentuates a disposable culture, there being no particular formal qualities in Shore’s early work that hew to an established artistic convention.

When Fried admits that he has a hard time approaching *American Surfaces* without beginning to lose interest, consuming the images at an ever-accelerating pace, he reveals some of the difficulties posed by Shore’s work to formal analysis when reading the images in isolation. They frustrate the critical eye that wants to linger upon the photograph and explore the relationship between formal qualities and content, and consider the image as its own contained world. *Sandusky, Ohio* particularly prevents the viewer’s immersion because of Shore’s decision to use his camera flash, even though the scene was taken in bright daylight. The sharp shadows and evenly lit surfaces appear to collapse space, an extreme flatness overtaking the image. Shore achieves a similar effect in an image of a convenience

¹²⁹ Michael Fried, “Interview: Michael Fried in conversation with Stephan Shore,” in *Stephen Shore* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2007) 9.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

store clerk in *Toledo, Ohio, July 1972*.¹³¹ Again, we see an unnamed worker in a commercial setting. The dark outline the flash creates around her makes her appear almost like a cardboard cutout pasted in front of a flat image of hundreds of identical cigarette packages. Her blank expression barely registers the presence of the camera, as though she cannot quite understand why Shore should want to take her picture. Another image, *Grand Canyon, Arizona, June 1972*, depicts a similarly two-dimensional rendering of figures in space.¹³² Three teenagers are set off from the dusky depths of the Grand Canyon at sunset by Shore’s flash, the only figure looking directly into the camera disguised by dark sunglasses. The occluded background would be completely indecipherable if not for the title of the image, the boys just as likely sitting on a concrete bench in a city park, waiting for a high school football game. The seemingly unique Grand Canyon becomes even less visible, and thereby less important, in *American Surfaces* than cigarettes and gas stations.

The full impact of *American Surfaces* perhaps fails to register unless viewed as a complete body, as distractedly consumed by the viewer as the highway tourist consumes junk food at a nationally branded fast food restaurant. The images of unhealthy-looking meals and un-flushed toilets are rendered in colors that seem lewd, almost gratuitous. It is small wonder that critics accustomed to the scenic, stark, and sober faces of Walker Evans, Ansel Adams, and Robert Frank, rendered always in austere black and white, found themselves suffering from visual indigestion after viewing *American Surfaces* for the first time.¹³³ There is an undeniable trashiness to Shore’s America, an aggressive ugliness that even appears when he photographs people, with whom his relationships remain ambiguous, setting them off against the wall of a public restroom or in the backseat of a car, their faces

¹³¹ Stephen Shore, *Toledo, Ohio, July 1972*, in *Stephen Shore* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2007) 68. See Figure 2, Appendix C.

¹³² Stephen Shore, *Grand Canyon, Arizona, June 1972*, in *Stephen Shore* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2007) 69. See Figure 3, Appendix C.

¹³³ Cristy Lange, “Nothing Overlooked,” in *Stephen Shore* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2007) 41.

sweaty, their hair greasy, their clothing unkempt. While Alexander Wilson contends, “We tour the disparate surfaces of everyday life as a way of involving ourselves in them, as a way of reintegrating a fragmented world,”¹³⁴ Shore offers few opportunities for the viewer to understand the subjects of his images or place them within a cohesive story. Instead, he often accentuates the fragmentary nature of the tourist experience, revealing it as a disconnected series of spaces, faces, and advertisements. The gritty nature of the images has drawn comparisons to Robert Frank, but Shore claims that *American Surfaces* was something of a reaction to Frank’s canonized series of photographs, *The Americans*, taken between 1955 and 1956:

I know that sometimes my work is compared to his [Robert Frank’s] because we both do road trips, but I think that in a certain way mine is a reaction against being a strongly stated—or visually stated—view. So there was a kind of restraint in the way I worked. But also I saw a complexity in what I was drawn to that could not be expressed simply in terms of ‘this is bad, this is not.’... I understand the problem with them [gas stations], I understand the problem with the car culture, but things are not that simple.¹³⁵

Any single image of *American Surfaces* may well bear out this contention, an explicit social commentary not easily found in a specific picture of a cup of coffee on a stained tablecloth. However, “restraint” is hardly an accurate term to describe Shore’s early work. The hundreds of images in *American Surfaces* never once capture a scene in which the natural landscape does not take a backseat to tacky architecture or storefront consumerism, nor does his lens orient itself to the subject after the fashion of established formal conventions. The series is nothing less than a total assault upon how the American social landscape had been photographed by artists since the F.D.R. days of the W.P.A., and upon many photographers’ decision to aestheticize the cultural and economic poverty of the nation.

¹³⁴ Wilson, “The View From the Road,” 5.

¹³⁵ Fried, “Interview: Michael Fried in conversation with Stephan Shore,” 14.

Endemic of this historical trend is Robert Frank’s photograph *Ranch market – Hollywood*, in content a similar picture to Shore’s *Toledo, Ohio*.¹³⁶ In Frank’s image, however, the woman clerk standing behind the counter does not register the photographer’s presence at all, staring tiredly out of frame, heavy makeup worn over patchy, rough skin. Directly above her, a brassy and rosy Santa Claus wishes everyone a “Merry Christmas,” and the store signs on either side promise quality food, “Absolutely no fillers,” “100% All Meat,” announcing an authentically bigger and better experience with a hundred exclamation points contrasting wildly with the worn human face. The irony of the picture achieves a kind of baroque tragedy, a woman beaten by the everyday ins and outs of a banal existence selling cheap food, right in the middle of the city of dreams. Similarly poignant is *Bar – Las Vegas, Nevada*, of a slumped man staring down at the musical selection on a juke box, standing alone on a busted tile floor, the only other patrons dim shadows on the far edge of the frame.¹³⁷ Meanwhile, glaringly bright sunlight blasts through the circular windows in the doors leading outside. Frank shows the dismal underbelly of Las Vegas in this daytime den of drunks, but the somber expression on the man’s face evokes sad empathy rather than disgust or ambivalence. Again, in *Jehovah’s Witness – Los Angeles*, the subject of Frank’s photo stares mournfully into the lens, crooked shoulders pressed against the wall, hand clutching a tract, a suitcase sitting at his feet.¹³⁸ Here, the viewer sees a man used to being passed by and ignored on the street, suddenly confronted by the photographer, who seizes the image of his isolation on the city sidewalk. The people in Frank’s images are worth lamenting, echoes of Depression-era strife, beaten figures whose

¹³⁶ Robert Frank, *Ranch Market – Hollywood*, in *The Americans* (Steidl: Gottingen, Germany, 2008). See Figure 1, Appendix D.

¹³⁷ Robert Frank, *Bar – Las Vegas*, in *The Americans* (Steidl: Gottingen, Germany, 2008). See Figure 2, Appendix D.

¹³⁸ Robert Frank, *Jehovah’s Witness – Los Angeles*, in *The Americans* (Steidl: Gottingen, Germany, 2008). See Figure 3, Appendix D.

day-to-day struggles reflect upon the hard-working character of the American nation. They have an undeniably human face.

In Shore’s work, we are confronted instead with the debris and detritus of the photographer’s own consumer existence, the meals he photographs only half-eaten, the unmade beds he has just slept in and left for unidentified (and unacknowledged) workers to clean. Schmidt-Wulffen argues this is because “Shore did not want to make photo art; he was concerned with the behavior of tourists and their uncomplicated snapshots.”¹³⁹ But a personal photo album of Shore’s toilets, water fountains, and unknown waitresses would hardly exhibit the “seductive melancholy” Batchen finds in most vernacular snapshots.¹⁴⁰ Shore is far from an emotional photographer, and while Batchen argues that snapshots “speak of our youth, and our whole culture’s youth” and that it is therefore difficult to see them “except through a haze of nostalgia,”¹⁴¹ there is little to reminisce about in *American Surfaces*. The America Shore photographs may be a series of motels and gas stations only recently constructed, but they are hardly suffused with youth. Part of this may be because the average freeway motel or diner does not appeal to a particular historical period, the freshness of such a locale quickly stripped away by a thousand transient travelers. Such places attain an almost abject quality, built at the fringes of cities or at periodic intervals on interstates, far from prosperous permanent dwellings. They serve notoriously bad food, the pictures hung on the wall are the equivalent of visual muzak, the hues of paint are gaudy and unsightly, the sheets on the beds rough, the pillows flat. Yet they are a prime necessity for any person traveling great distances by car, ignored until needed.

Continuing his dissection of snapshots, Batchen reasons that “the relative lack of imagination shown in these photographs in fact shifts the burden of imaginative thought

¹³⁹ Schmidt-Wulffen, “Stephen Shore’s *Uncommon Places*,” 8.

¹⁴⁰ Batchen, “From Infinity to Zero,” 123.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

from the artist and subject, where historians usually seek it, to the viewer, who is invited by these pictures to see much more than meets the eye.”¹⁴² Something similar could be said of *American Surfaces*, that each separate flat image does not bear the ideological stamp of Shore, that, as Schmidt-Wulffen puts it, the “role of the author recedes into the background, relaxing the relationship with the recipient, who, discharged from his or her precisely defined role as viewer can embark on a journey to discover the picture.”¹⁴³ Therefore, a thick-cut steak caked in orange seasoning stuffed into a small stovetop pan may communicate an image of American plenty, disgusting excess, or simply an average meal uninflected by any ideology.¹⁴⁴ It is only when one of Shore’s snapshots is seen within the total context of his early work that his preoccupations and ideas about the American social picture really come to the surface. Ultimately, however, Shore constructs a much bleaker picture of the nation than Robert Frank or Walker Evans, even though his images lack their explicit depictions of poverty and overt social strife. The people in *American Surfaces* are either of the middle class or filtered through its equivocal gaze. They are not viewed as the worn members of the working class, instead caught like Shore himself in a sea of repetitive banality. Perhaps most fascinating is the similarity between a picture Shore takes on the east coast to one he takes in Texas. The tableau of the table, with its coffee cups, saltshakers, utensils and butter pats is hardly different in New York than in an unnamed diner in Santa Fe, New Mexico.¹⁴⁵ Shore denies Western specialness. In a landscape overwhelmingly populated by consumer landmarks, the quality of Western light

¹⁴² Ibid., 127.

¹⁴³ Schmidt-Wulffen, “Stephen Shore’s *Uncommon Places*,” 13-14.

¹⁴⁴ Stephen Shore, *Lake Powell, Utah, June 1972*, in *American Surfaces* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2005) 76. See Figure 4, Appendix C.

¹⁴⁵ Stephen Shore, *Santa Fe, New Mexico, June 1972*, in *American Surfaces* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2005) 47; Stephen Shore, *New York, September 1972*, in *Stephen Shore* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2007) 15. See Figures 5 & 6, Appendix C.

fails to register any differently than an Ohio noon on Shore’s cheap Kodak prints, his glaring flash cutting against the local colors, painting every scene in the same tones.

One definite impression given by the series is that American surfaces are in the 1970s abrasive to the eye, and the people who dwell among them are certainly not cast in the image of popular beauty or stoic persistence. Since the new human spaces of the era are themselves anti-aesthetic, Shore seems to find no purpose in portraying them otherwise. The viewer is confronted with cultural blandness. As Christy Lange notes, Shore “picked up on the absurd and unwittingly empty promises that appeared on America’s surfaces.”¹⁴⁶ Lange continues to describe Shore’s visual treatment of these vacant slogans as surfaces in and of themselves, the image of authenticity beginning to stand in for the genuine article:

Shore’s representations of previously digested or previously rendered images—a painting advertising a bus company, or autographed headshots of actors hanging on the wall—replace one surface with another.¹⁴⁷

In some sense, the picture of the celebrity is tantamount to the celebrity’s physical presence, because the photograph is a legitimate record of the actor’s former inhabitation of the space. The photograph closes the temporal gap between observer and observed, and the viewer can still bask in the aura of a disembodied presence. Furthermore, Shore’s decision to omit natural landscapes without framing them in a built environment, particularly in the West, suggests that even the people who live there no longer register the uninhabited topography except as a historically determined image. *American Surfaces* is something of a snide comment upon the West by a young photographer who came of age in Warhol’s Factory, enthralled by a culture of schlock and unimpressed by a frontier seemingly lacking the wondrous imagery it once contained. There are plenty of people in Shore’s West, and they are just as bound to the middle class lifestyle as any New England city slicker.

¹⁴⁶ Lange, “Nothing Overlooked,” 62.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

However, Batchen’s brief yet striking statement, “Snapshots work to reconcile personal and mass identity,”¹⁴⁸ suggests that we should not be too quick to pigeon-hole *American Surfaces* as the work of a cynical young man who can see little value in the mass culture of the early 1970s. Lange picks up on a similar thread in Shore’s early work, finding “a feeling of restless randomness, as if there were no decisive moments,” within “the monotony of being on the road alone,” broken only “by the comforts of staying with friends.”¹⁴⁹ Shore is, after all, himself a product of the culture he documents. If he is indeed collecting a visual autobiography on his road trips, the self-identity suggested by such a journey is one of transience, and of affective homelessness. The hotel beds he sleeps in are anonymous, the fixtures reduced to antiseptic minimalism. By contrast, the dirty, worn sheets of a personal bed in New York or a friend’s house become positively inviting, if only because they give some evidence of being lived in, rather than borrowed for brief hours. There’s a quiet despair evident by the time the viewer encounters Shore’s thirtieth identical breakfast of greasy eggs and coffee, a despair that Shore seemingly counteracts with a decidedly cynical edge. The image of the un-flushed public toilet turns the viewer’s stomach, and encourages quick transit to the next image, maybe now the face of an acquaintance or a stranger. The exceeding flatness of *American Surfaces* thus becomes defensive, as though Shore does not want to risk becoming too attached to any one scene or person, perhaps out of the fear that they will prove to be no more memorable or meaningful than the next consumer vista.

How jarring a juxtaposition, then, is the viewer confronted with upon surveying Stephen Shore’s next series of photographs, *Uncommon Places*. All of a sudden, the sky has entered Shore’s frame, along with a rich palette of colors and a depth of focus that stretches

¹⁴⁸ Batchen, “From Infinity to Zero,” 127.

¹⁴⁹ Lange, “Nothing Overlooked,” 70.

miles into the horizon. These new spaces no longer confront the viewer with startlingly flat surfaces, but invite entrance into a much larger field of perception. One of Shore's most aesthetically pleasing photographs, and one of his most consciously ironic, was taken mere months after the conclusion of his *American Surfaces* trip, entitled *South of Klamath Falls, Oregon, July 21, 1973*.¹⁵⁰ A lush blue sky fills the top of the half of the frame, green and goldenrod grass intertwines with a classically Western split-rail fence, tan mountains rise in the background, and shocking white clouds converge perfectly upon a giant billboard at the center of the frame. The elevated sign is something of a picture within the picture, depicting a painted and equally scenic view of a snow-capped peak reflecting in a golden lake, but somewhat marred by a large, off-blue splotch in the sky, apparently painted over the words the billboard is meant to advertise. The framing of the sign makes it seem like some kind of glorious landmark. But however much its painted sky attempts to blend into the background, it occludes a great portion of the natural space behind its flat surface. The billboard's disjunctive relationship to the actual mountains visible on the horizon makes it operate as a kind of giant magnifying glass, bringing what is distant immensely closer to the viewer, and in greatly idealized form. The picture could be read as a comment upon Ansel Adams' style of photography, in which the beauty of the image may begin to supersede the actual experience of the space represented. Yet Shore's own image is a compelling depiction of space, the dynamic of the opposing diagonal lines formed by the telephone lines, fence, and billboard creating an effortlessly balanced composition, the scenery as gorgeous as anything viewed from a car window. This is the West Americans are accustomed to seeing, big on space and small on human figures, despite the ironic twist of the sign.

¹⁵⁰ Stephen Shore, *South of Klamath Falls, Oregon, July 21, 1973*, in *Stephen Shore: Uncommon Places: The Complete Works*, ed. Andrew Hiller (New York: Aperture, 2004) 29. See Figure 7, Appendix C.

However, Shore allows his interpretation of the sign to remain ambiguous. Its placement in the landscape of the photograph and its ability to exist without clashing coarsely with the natural scenery recalls Robert Smithson’s descriptions of human involvement with the landscape. A photograph that in *American Surfaces* would have likely highlighted the garishness of the painted façade suddenly captures the built environment within a context large enough that it can no longer dominate nature. The billboard coexists almost comfortably with its setting. Writing in 1973, Smithson notes, “Modern day ecologists with a metaphysical turn of mind still see the operations of industry as Satan’s work. The image of the lost paradise garden leaves one without a solid dialectic, and causes one to suffer an ecological despair. Nature, like a person, is not one-sided.”¹⁵¹ Smithson thereby proposes the human artifacts that infiltrate a landscape are not inherently evil or troublesome, but are part of a necessary communication between people and their environment. In this photograph, Shore points out that human-altered landscapes do not always degrade or attempt to dominate nature, and the submerging beauty of the scene helps mitigate his sharp insight into the seeming superfluousness of a sign that merely depicts what exists in actuality behind its surface. What is less clear in *Uncommon Places*, and in some of Smithson’s writings, is to what degree the character of transcendence is irrevocably altered by the presence of human structures and modifications, and the possibility arises that nature-induced sublimity is an outmoded (and perhaps unnecessary) facet of modern human experience. There is certainly less nervous energy masked by cutting cynicism in *South of Klamath Falls*, and in general in the rest of *Uncommon Places* than in *American Surfaces*, but there is not necessarily a greater appeal to the sublime. Shore manages to find beauty even in consumerist spaces, and retains a certain ambivalence to both the human artifacts and natural features he photographs.

¹⁵¹ Smithson “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape,” 161.

And yet, the differences between *American Surfaces* and *Uncommon Places* are immediate and distinct. Why such a sudden shift in Shore’s work, a striking turn away from the seedy side of the consumer landscape to how humanity coexists with the remaining beauty of Western topography? Critical reception to *American Surfaces* was admittedly cold, and Lange notes that Shore found himself suddenly seeking distance from the snapshot format and its cultural connotations.¹⁵² Lange and Schmidt-Wulffen both describe in detail Shore’s decision to switch from the light, portable, and inexpensive 35 mm camera to a large format plate camera that shoots 8 x 10 inch negatives, as well as the technical considerations this shift in apparatus necessitates. Lange notes that in Shore’s later images “the stubborn flatness of the surfaces he photographed had changed, because even the shallowest planes appeared in the finest detail, revealing their textures and depth.”¹⁵³ By exposing the more complex features of even the flattest surfaces, Shore’s new format could no longer simply deal with superficial juxtapositions. The simple facts of the scope of the frame and the level of resolution offered by the massive negatives inherently disallow the narrow segmentation of the landscape revealed in *American Surfaces*.

Shore’s large format approach coincides with that of his contemporary and fellow New Topographics photographer Robert Adams, who admires pictures that show “space itself as an element in an overall structure, a landscape in which everything—mud, rocks, brush, and sky—[is] relevant to the picture, everything part of an exactly balanced form.”¹⁵⁴ However, one distinction between the two is that Adams typically casts the human-made in a more overtly negative light, built features necessarily destroying his interpretation of the natural balance. Adams comments that pictures from the 1800s make him “marvel that the sheer size and beauty of the [Western] space could have absorbed and hidden for so long the

¹⁵² Lange, “Nothing Overlooked,” 73.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁵⁴ Robert Adams, “In the Nineteenth-century West,” 147.

damage done by unrestrained self interest,”¹⁵⁵ casting himself as one of Smithson’s metaphysical ecologists. Adams argues that space has been destroyed by human involvement in the West, and its original beauty will soon be completely irrecoverable.¹⁵⁶ The West is thus a paradise lost. This is certainly not Shore’s approach. Ironically, the large format Adams lauds for revealing space with greater accuracy makes it much more difficult for a photographer like Shore to make simple visual statements about the built environment. However, the greater amount of forethought, planning, and technical skill required to take pictures with an 8 x 10 camera by necessity makes the images more posed, and more self-conscious. The so-called accuracy of large format cameras, which operate on a time scale more analogous to the “geologic and botanic”¹⁵⁷ realities of Western space, have a tendency to strongly order space along perspectival lines constructed by the camera’s level perch upon a tripod, also suggested by the gridded viewfinder the photographer uses to find the frame.

Schmidt-Wulffen describes how the new camera limited Shore’s ability to approach the subjects he photographed in *American Surfaces*:

[S]ince color films for 8-x-10 cameras require an extremely long exposure time, people have to stand still, holding their breath. Posing, of course, destroys the authenticity called for in documentary photography.... It is thus the camera that determines the elements typical of *Uncommon Places*: few people, parked cars, and lots of architecture.¹⁵⁸

Indeed, in *Uncommon Places* no longer does Shore depict his friends, the unknown waitress, the dirty bathroom, the ugly motel. Such subjects would seem almost too vulgar for the expensive and time-consuming process necessitated by the large format camera. Additionally, Shore could hardly drop his negatives off at the drug store and be satisfied

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 143.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 134-135.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 136.

¹⁵⁸ Schmidt-Wulffen, “Stephen Shore’s *Uncommon Places*,” 10.

with an envelope of wallet-sized prints. After all, he was striving for greater photographic resolution, and more serious subjects rendered in a more serious format. The photographs of the series begin to organize beauty within the built environment by placing it upon a frame large enough to discover sequences, patterns, and parallel geometries of hundreds of intersecting lines formed by streets, windows, buildings, signs, cars, power lines. As Lange describes *Uncommon Places*, Shore’s views reveal “a repetition and multiplicity in the built environment. Instead of a single house, we see a row of houses, introduced by a procession of perfectly aligned palm trees.”¹⁵⁹ For Shore, western space has not disappeared, plowed under by bulldozers and tract housing, but it has rather been transformed into an infinite profusion of interconnected surfaces. The incorrigibly two-dimensional surfaces Shore once took snapshots of have multiplied into an intricate net underneath the spreading Western sky.

Although Schmidt-Wulffen notes the much more analytic nature of taking pictures with a large format camera—the apparatus itself too heavy to use without a tripod, the image to be captured no longer revealed to the photographer through a small and ambiguous viewfinder, but rendered upon a very accurate geometric grid—he goes on to make the bizarre claim that “no longer does the apparatus mediate between the photographer and the subject while he waits for the right moment.”¹⁶⁰ In actuality, it seems the snapshotter taking pictures on the fly does not “wait” for the right moment, but simply takes advantage of the fortuitous convergence of subjects at a particular instant. A necessary predicate of the snapshot form is that many of the pictures are throwaway because the photographer misses the moment, and the fleeting image she or he intended to capture disappears. As the discussion of the snapshot Kouwenhoven provided above argues,

¹⁵⁹ Lange, “Nothing Overlooked,” 87.

¹⁶⁰ Schmidt-Wulffen, “Stephen Shore’s *Uncommon Places*,” 10.

the apparatus ideally recedes into the background, and does not exert significant pressure upon the snaphooter when determining what to photograph. What seems a more accurate interpretation of Shore’s work with the large format camera is that he is no longer constrained by the pull of the road, the need to constantly cover ground and document hundreds of fragmentary glimpses of the landscape. Instead, he can find the precise image of a subject from the precise angle he desires, and because the format is expensive and somewhat cumbersome, he is well served by waiting for the ideal light to illuminate the scene, or for the person he does not wish to include to move along.

It is thus apparent that Shore’s work, operating relatively independently of formal or monetary considerations during the *American Surfaces* series, becomes much more constrained by the very nature of the camera he chooses to use throughout *Uncommon Places*. The necessary lack of people, the decidedly more geometric compositions, and the much greater depth of field, while all influenced by technical facets of the large format camera, nonetheless push Shore’s work into a much more traditional idea of art photography, particularly within the genre of landscape photography. After all, famous landscape photographers in the American West from Timothy O’Sullivan to Ansel Adams used large format plate cameras throughout the course of their careers. A particularly interesting facet of the images produced by large format cameras is the immersive appearance of the spaces they represent, an illusion achieved by virtue of the wider angle of the view and the greater depth of focus, and at the same time, the degree to which photographers tend to compose much more ordered and geometric conceptions of space.

One instantly notable difference between the images in *American Surfaces* and *Uncommon Places* is the prevalence of off-kilter angles. *American Surfaces* is full of free-wheeling compositions, lines colliding wildly, the planes within the picture intersecting the frame at odd and inconsistent angles. By contrast, *Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue*,

Los Angeles, California, June 21, 1975 shows a street corner scene organized in exacting Renaissance perspective.¹⁶¹ Ordered shapes in the frame interact with each other; the arrows on the Chevron sign in the foreground point directly to the Texaco sign just down the street. The angle of the road and the gas station awning mirror each other's recession to the vanishing point. Two vertical light posts stand in the dead center of the photograph, framed on either side by the heavier vertical lines of a closer light pole and the Chevron sign post. Despite the strip mall quality of the foreground subject, the gas stations and pawnshops cannot hide the blue mountains in the background, and a pale blue sky dominates the top half of the frame. There is a sense that the city is circumscribed by natural landscapes, ordered and contained geometries fading easily into the immense topography in the distance. The human landscape may not be aesthetically compelling, but it serves a utilitarian function, and poses no direct threat to the greater West. The scope of the image itself prevents any one feature from dominating the viewer's attention, and the face of consumerism is not an overwhelming presence.

Schmidt-Wulffen posits that in images like this the subject and/or meaning “remains unarticulated and open to the viewer, whose gaze is not distracted by any indicators.”¹⁶² Thus, the pointedly cynical evasiveness of *American Surfaces* transitions into a studied contemplation of light, geometry, and landscape. Lange contends that the photographs in *Uncommon Places* are emblematic of “a new conception of the landscape picture, one in which the details themselves—their density and abundance, rather than their entirety—were intended to be the focal point or subject.”¹⁶³ However, considering the historical predominance of large-format landscape photography in the West, with artists from

¹⁶¹ Stephen Shore, *Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California, June 21, 1975*, in *Stephen Shore* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2007), 86. See Figure 8, Appendix C.

¹⁶² Schmidt-Wulffen, “Stephen Shore's *Uncommon Places*,” 14.

¹⁶³ Lange, “Nothing Overlooked,” 87.

Carleton Watkins to Timothy O’Sullivan to Ansel Adams attempting to take in as much of the scenery as possible in every view, Lange’s argument does not quite hold up. Shore in fact exhibits a return to history, and to historical conceptions of western space that once again favor untouched spaces rather than built environments. One of the later images from *Uncommon Places* is a fitting finale to the series, rooting Shore at last in the West’s most famous landscape, Yosemite: *Merced River, Yosemite National Park, California, August 13, 1979*.¹⁶⁴ From an elevated perspective, the image describes a family at play on beach along the bend of a large river in the park, seemingly perfectly posed. Indeed, upon closer inspection, one of the figures standing in the water is actually posing for a family member to take his snapshot. The set-up recalls William Henry Jackson’s famous photograph of the painter Sanford Gifford sketching a western scene for the benefit of viewers on the east coast.¹⁶⁵ Shore likewise captures tourists turning Yosemite into the backdrop of their family excursion, partaking wholesale of the produced experience sold by national parks and all their surrounding media. At the same time, Shore echoes the compositional format of a thousand survey photographs before him: a scene of wondrous natural features, tiny figures standing in the distance, their chief purpose seemingly to provide scale for the viewer. The landscape behind them is empty of any sign of human beings or artifacts, an inviting swath of verdant forest fading into steep mountains and cliffs, capped by a puzzle blue sky. At the same time, the people in the frame seem almost too impeccably poised, recalling an advertisement or the kind of picture that graces the insides of park brochures. The small and anonymous figures recreating on the beach perhaps invite viewers to experience this luxurious vacation spot for themselves, promising a peaceful escape from city life and the attendant masses. In 1979, such an immaculate and vacant Yosemite can hardly be an

¹⁶⁴ Stephen Shore, *Merced River, Yosemite National Park, California, August 13, 1979*, in *Stephen Shore* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2007), 169. See Figure 9, Appendix C.

¹⁶⁵ Anderson, “The Kiss of Enterprise,” 238-239.

accurate representation of a nation consumed by the tourist experience. The photograph exhibits a strange distance from the claustrophobic views of *American Surfaces*, Shore's cynicism and ironic eye apparently and ultimately undermined by the West's promises of eternally open, continuous, and democratic space. And yet it is not entirely clear that Shore's re-appropriation of older landscape photography conventions is an equal reversion to an uncritical pursuit of natural or pastoral sublimity. He steps so far away from the scene at hand in *Merced River* that the photograph conveys an even deeper ambivalence for the figures at play in the park and the landscape that surrounds them. They are simply people performing an everyday interaction with a natural environment, and Shore refrains from stamping either the tourists or the landscape with an overtly ideological visual reading.

CONCLUSION

Wessel’s West in the Twenty-First Century

While Shore converted to the large format apparatus of an earlier day, Henry Wessel, Jr. continued to work with the possibilities of the 35 mm medium. He continued to explore the middle ground of western spaces, at the same time exhibiting an increased interest in the domestic landscapes of the region. After he relocated to dwell in California permanently in the 1970s, the road trip thematics fell away from his work, and as the ’70s passed into the ’80s, his images show him photographing the scenic and peaceful neighborhoods around the San Francisco Bay and the sundrenched beaches of southern California. Smoothly toned black and white pictures discover an almost pastoral network of picket fences, grassy hills, suntanned beachgoers, and eclectic houses. Particularly in the San Francisco neighborhood images, there is a noticeable lack of irony and a keen appreciation of western light. Wessel’s focus upon the domestic bespeaks a certain desire to understand not just the sold experience of the tourist and Hollywood West, but how all the promises of open space and democratic freedoms have played out for those who have settled upon the uttermost coast, with no further unknown frontiers to pursue, facing the realities of escalating population and diminishing space.

In 1990, Wessel began a new serial project and a foray into the color world of cibachrome film with *Real Estate Photographs*, a collection of images of house fronts captured from the seat of his car. An interesting kind of history of the West emerges by way of architectural trends, periods of American culture exposed by size of house, depth of lawn, presence of fences, garages, porches, and the proximity of neighbors. Older stucco homes, such as the pastel lime green shotgun house in *No. 91167* stand close to the road, the small

patch of grass that forms the front yard only a small buffer against the outside world.¹⁶⁶

The large front window is not closed off by a shade or curtains, offering an inviting if vague view of the interior. The driveway leads in back of the house to a hidden place to park the car, and the unadorned façade of the home does little to announce wealth or ostentation, instead promoting a sensation of simple comfort.

Another white stucco home reveals a slightly later generation of dwelling in *No. 91117*.¹⁶⁷ Now, the single car garage has moved to the front of the home, and the house sits slightly further back on the lot. The front door perches atop a short flight of regally proportioned stairs. But the picture windows are sealed off, the life inside the house entirely invisible from the sere California light. The only break in the blind white front of the house comes at the left of the frame, an arched gate leading into a shady back yard surrounded by a tall fence. Life has retreated further to the back of the house, further from eyes of neighbors and passerby. The withdrawal of houses upon their lots becomes more exaggerated in the later period home shown in *No. 905718*, the two-car garage no longer incorporated into a balanced front face of the dwelling, but comprising almost all of the visible house.¹⁶⁸ The home proper sits behind the garage, covered by its shadow. The single window is more than half occluded by a heavy awning, the visible sliver of glass resolutely shuttered. The lawn is deeper and the fence higher, no suggestion of the backyard available to the eye. Neighboring houses are pushed further away on either side.

The inherent progression of these houses describes an evolving relationship with space. As the houses move further apart and sit on larger lots, they exhibit more claustrophobic features; smaller windows, taller fences, and heavier blinds encase the

¹⁶⁶ Henry Wessel, Jr., *No. 91167*, in *Real Estate Photographs*, (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2006), 7. See Figure 6, Appendix A.

¹⁶⁷ Henry Wessel, Jr., *No. 91117*, in *Real Estate Photographs*, (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2006), 43. See Figure 7, Appendix A.

¹⁶⁸ Henry Wessel, Jr., *No. 905718*, in *Real Estate Photographs*, (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2006), 15. See Figure 8, Appendix A.

homes, while the space to store cars, perhaps the ultimate American symbol of post-World War II mobility, increases. The home becomes an isolated fortress, the blinded windows adorned by corporate symbols of burglar alarm systems. Newer houses hide from the voyeuristic gaze Wessel turns upon them from his car upon the road. The design for increased privacy and expanding spatial footprint of houses reflects strangely in the growing importance of the garage, significant square footage and visible space devoted to those products which promote travel away from the home, temporary escape from the stationary house by virtue of transit and movement. At once, the house is larger and spatially more self-contained and concealed, the closed off windows giving the structure a more claustrophobic, confined feeling. The inhabitants thereby seem more solidly detained within sprawling yet sealed habitations, simultaneously and ironically more attenuated to roadway mobility. Alexander Wilson notes that interstate highways “were talked about as though they had an important democratizing role: the idea was that modern highways allowed more people to appreciate the wonders of nature,”¹⁶⁹ but there is another kind of freedom implied by the simple act of transit itself. The driver of a car is no longer simply bound to the immediate landscape of her or his permanent dwelling, but an ersatz possessor of the entire landscape offered by the road. The incorporation of mobility into the permanent home implies a persistent conception of Western space as limitless, and the true container of the promise of American freedom.

Decidedly more pointed are Wessel’s color images of Las Vegas, captured in the early 2000s. These images describe an evolution of the mythology of Western spaces, in which glib consumerism, rather than the perceived openness of the landscape, promises a bright future of easy living. But as the viewer looks deeper at these images, it becomes apparent that this opportunistic future is founded on a plastic, tawdry, and flimsy foundation of

¹⁶⁹ Wilson, “The View From the Road,” 9.

casinos and tract houses which promise not so much freedom and individual autonomy as purchasing shares in a collective fantasy. It is significant that even as Wessel changes to color film and moves into the twenty-first century, he continues to shoot with a simple 35 mm camera and exhibit relatively modest-sized 20 x 24 inch prints.¹⁷⁰ The pictures are relatively analogous to *American Surfaces*, but somewhat lacking in Shore’s aggressive glibness. Not a soul inhabits any of the images, and the vacated hotel hallways and fountains take on the antiseptically funereal mood of a hushed museum or abandoned ruin. As Wessel himself introduces the collection, “Seen from a distance, the architecture of Las Vegas is inviting, seductive, full of promise. Once you inhabit this architecture, you are quickly disillusioned, finding yourself bewildered and disoriented. In the end, you have been misled, usually back into a casino,” suggesting a cultural, if not physical, ruin.¹⁷¹ There are few pretensions in Wessel’s version of the Las Vegas strip that the landscape can any longer edify a people manifestly marching into a progressive future, because now anyone can buy into the homogenous democracy of suburbia, while still entertaining gold-rush dreams of Las Vegas jackpots, or at least the heady romanticism of an impulsive Vegas wedding.

Two images seem to sum up this superficialization of exterior and interior spaces. The first, *No. 01, 2000*, depicts the luridly roofed towers of a white castle, illuminated by hard and gleaming lights, accentuating the falseness of the façade.¹⁷² The fanciful red, gold, and blue turrets adhere to no reality; the ultimate tastelessness of the plaster castle is not a fortress against any outside invader, but a distracting monument to throwaway wealth. The monolithic hotel wings rising on either side of the bright castle lurk in somewhat

¹⁷⁰ Melissa E Feldman, “Behind the Wheel with Henry Wessel,” *Art in America* 95.10 (2007): 85.

¹⁷¹ Henry Wessel, Jr., in *Las Vegas* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2006), 5.

¹⁷² Henry Wessel, Jr., *No. 01, 2000*, in *Las Vegas* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2006), 31. See Figure 9, Appendix A.

ominous shadows, the true and unadorned reservoirs of wealth that stand behind the sparkling spectacle. This colossally ugly structure occupies a voided space, and the photograph works to highlight the manner in which this kind of destination architecture manages to disguise its setting, its vulgar and flashy audaciousness disquietingly magnetic. The wedding chapel Wessel reveals in *No. 17, 2003*, is a hideous amalgamation of primary colors, rubber plants, and strange geometry.¹⁷³ The room defies perspective, twin fluorescent tubes hung at a haphazard angle casting an impossibly bright glare on the vacant space. The red upholstery on the pews clashes vehemently with the blue carpet and the glittering gold and silver curtains hung from the ceiling in some unfathomable and asymmetric pattern. The color palette is an ideal match for the hotel castle of *No. 1*, the overwhelming cheapness of all the props oddly accentuating the awkwardness of the room, the sloping ceiling and pews converging at odd angles upon the pulpit, which is shoved into the smallest corner of the space. The windowless compartment suggests a subterranean setting, far from the western sunlight Wessel has so eagerly celebrated elsewhere. Standing in opposition to the rest of his work, these two photographs epitomize the ultimate perversion of the dream of the West, cheap thrills and trashy built spaces supplanting the eternal natural beauty that once symbolized the transcendental dreams of a nation striving for democracy.

Yet after viewing Las Vegas through Wessel's eyes, the sneaking suspicion grows that part of what made Yosemite's Half Dome so appealing to early viewers was not only its beautiful aesthetics, but the vague dream that veins of precious minerals hid deep underneath similar mountains. Those effervescent dreams have now distilled and been transposed to new monuments, plunging canyons and sweeping vistas no longer the icons of

¹⁷³ Henry Wessel, Jr., *No. 17, 2003*, in *Las Vegas* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2006), 21. See Figure 10, Appendix A.

hope. These cannot, after all, be converted directly into cash, unlike the human-made Monument Valleys of towering casinos, resorts, and silicone citadels. Underneath these glittering complexes, however, there is a vague yet palpable sense that the West has failed to deliver upon its constructed promises of sublime edification and transcendental democracy. A cynicism of fixed rules, stacked decks, moral ambiguity, and dumb luck underpins any Hollywood or Vegas dreams. And yet these locales still comprise the imagery of the prosperous and hopeful West, an icon which remains persistently potent. Even though the majority of Western Americans may dwell in identical suburbs, a lottery or gold-rush mentality persists in the region. A true democracy of equitable prosperity may never have come to fruition, but there remains a democracy of odds, that any single individual may still travel West, and with a single lucky draw or Hollywood break, rise to the utmost precipice of wealth and fame. As long as there is hope for the individual to attain such elevation above the hoarding mass, the iconic West can seemingly absorb an infinite number of human failures and inequalities despite a growing number of photographers depicting environmental and social degradation in the region. And yet, even photographers like Henry Wessel, Jr. and Stephen Shore shy away from taking a strictly critical stance, working within their own paradox of loving Western light, imagery, and iconography, while realizing contemporary problems with the settlement and mythology of the region. Their photography best exemplifies the tension between the ugly, garish appearance of contemporary built environments and the natural backdrop of mountains, deserts, prairies, forests, and gorges. They trace the American West's mythological transformation from an uninhabited and sublime realm to densely populated consumerist topographies of material wealth, which are the new monuments of the American landscape.

However, Wessel gives a final ironic gesture to his viewers in his Las Vegas series with the image *No. 05, 2001*.¹⁷⁴ On the outskirts of Vegas, he finds another strip of identical motel rooms, but bathed in a soft, magic hour twilight. The parking lot stands completely empty, and the foreground of the picture is comprised of a soft green lawn. A tree, its trunk drawn in a sensuous S-curve, occupies the center of the frame, a striking formal reversal of so many of the pictures Wessel took on his initial tours of the West. Particularly, unlike *Walapai, Arizona, 1971*, in which the “Ice” sign is the incongruous occupant of a natural landscape, in *No. 5*, the tree is the natural feature set amidst a built environment. If the rest of Wessel’s Las Vegas photographs are brash, strident, or pointedly critical of the city’s flimsy facades, this picture suggests a harmonious coexistence of human-altered topographies and the living objects within. The alternating blue and pink motel doors perfectly match the delicate hues of the cloudless sky and rose-tinted blossoms on the tree. There is no appeal to the vast, wilderness sublime in this image, but Wessel’s eye finds a poignant and pleasing aesthetic in an archetypal tourist setting, an emblem of the human destruction of natural landscapes as a result of uncritical American consumerism. Wessel, otherwise so disparaging of the Las Vegas scenery, in this outdoor landscape finds a moment of fleeting beauty. Even as the topographic features change, in Wessel’s vision of the West, the natural light remains beyond the ability of human intervention to sour completely, animating even the most ordinary objects with an eminently photographable glow. No matter the extent of human transformation of the American landscape, it seems there is yet an urge that possesses photographers to attempt to construct a West of perfect images, determinedly absent of actual human figures. It is perhaps ironic that Wessel ultimately finds beauty in Las Vegas only in the most transient of locations, a roadside

¹⁷⁴ Henry Wessel, Jr., *No. 05, 2001*, in *Las Vegas* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2006), 41. See Figure 11, Appendix A.

motel, a reminder that the true ideological power of the American West is the mythical promise of mobility, social and physical. It is a promise that remains strangely resonant among the restless who yet seek undiscovered frontiers within the endlessly mapped and imaged geographies of the West.

Appendix A: Henry Wessel, Jr.

Figure 1: *Walapai, Arizona, 1971*



Figure 2: *New Mexico, 1969*



Figure 3: *Nevada, 1975*



Figure 4: *Untitled, 1968*



Figure 5: *California, 1969*



Figure 6: *No. 91167 (1990)*



Figure 7: No. 91117 (1990)



Figure 8: No. 905718 (1990)



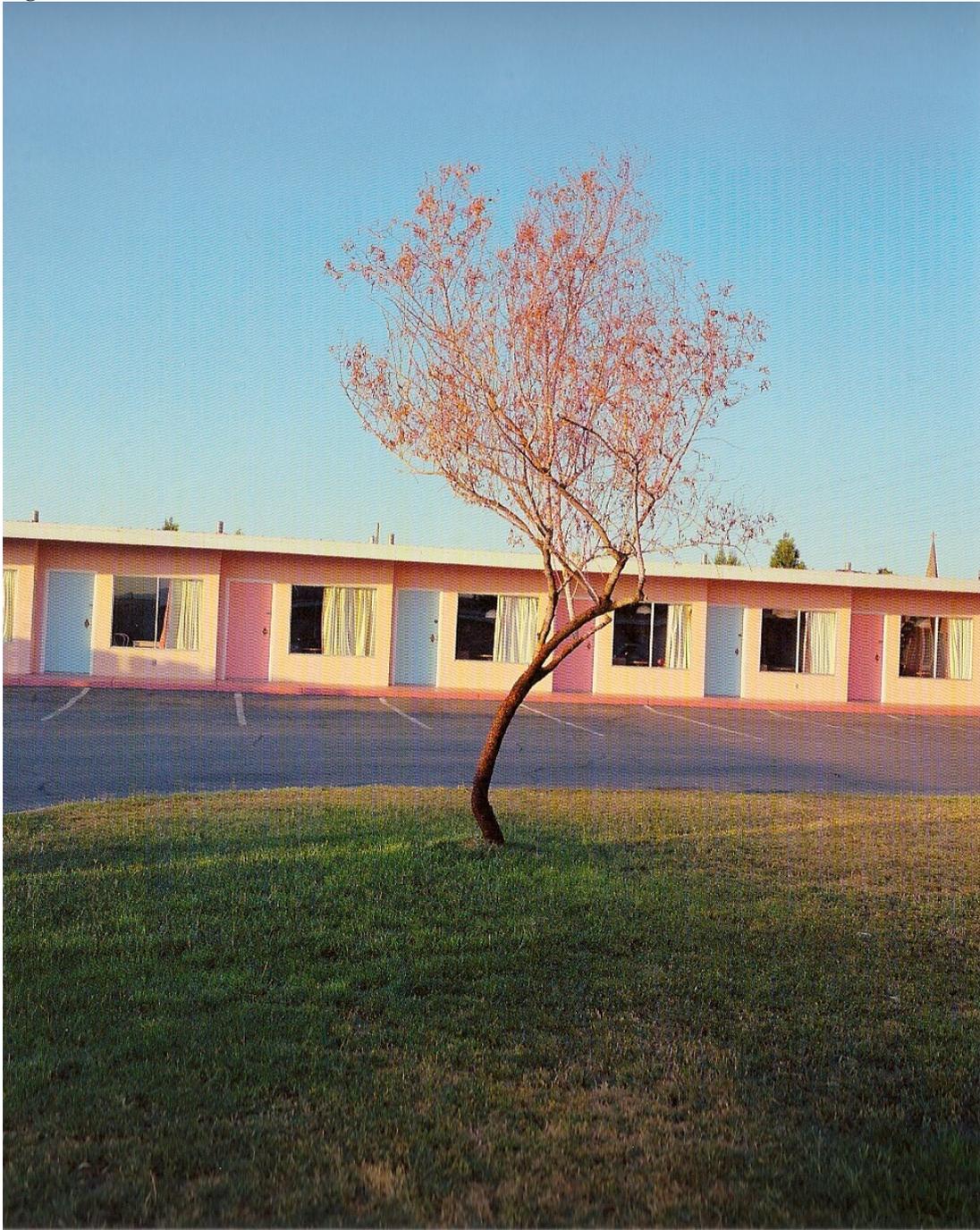
Figure 9: *No. 1* (2000)



Figure 10: *No. 17* (2003)



Figure 11: *No. 5* (2001)



Appendix B: Ansel Adams

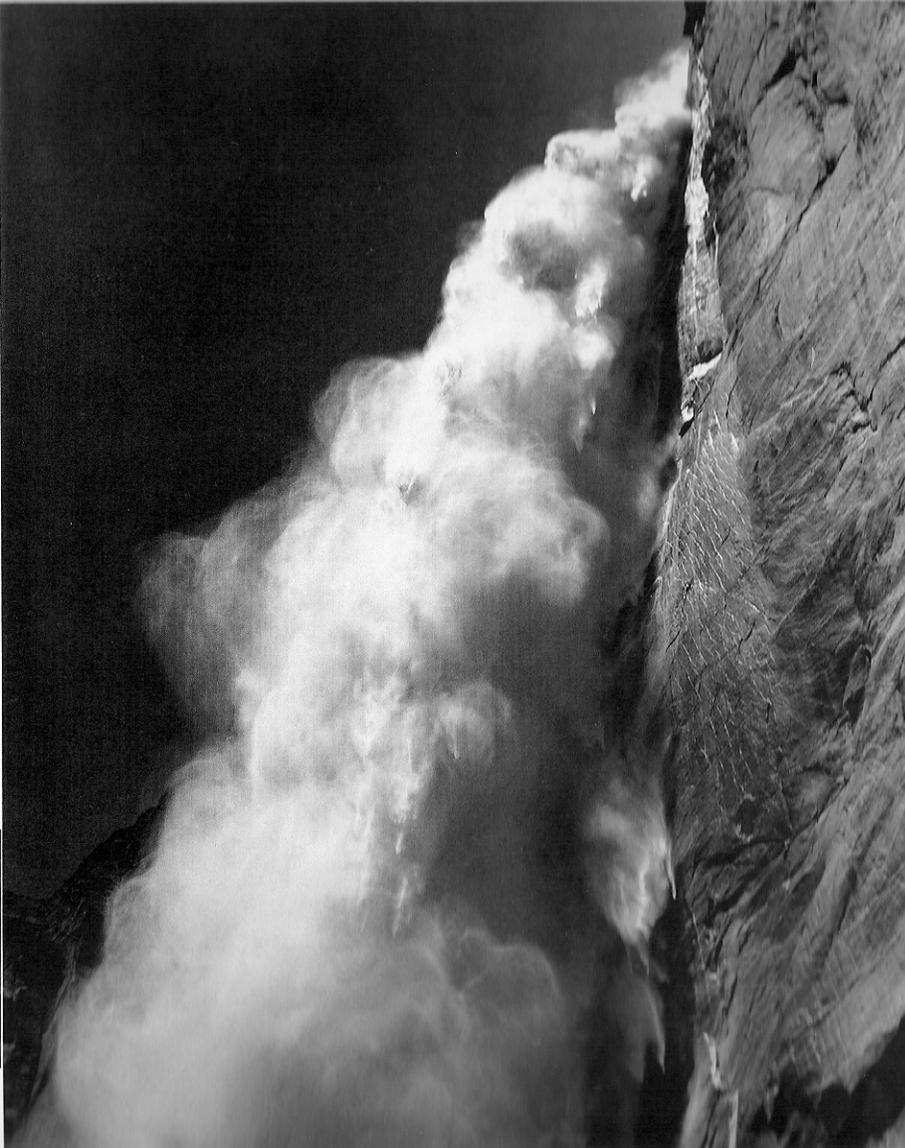
Figure 1: *Spanish Peaks, Colorado* (c. 1951)



Figure 2: *St. Francis Church, Ranchos de Taos, New Mexico* (c. 1950)



Figure 3: *Upper Yosemite Falls, from Fern Ledge, Yosemite National Park, 1946*



Appendix C: Stephen Shore

Figure 1: *Sandusky, Ohio, July 1972*

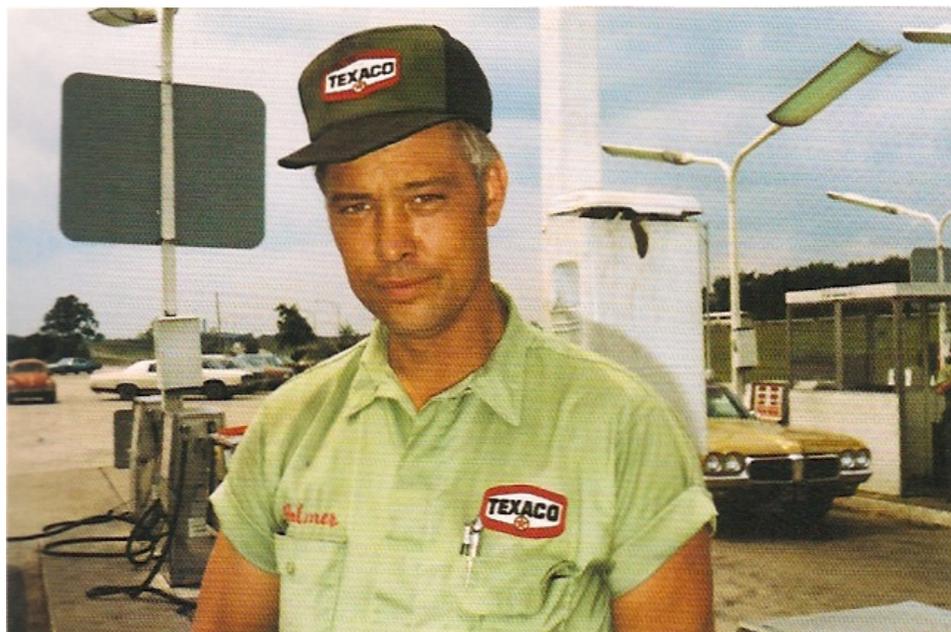


Figure 2: *Toledo, Ohio, July 1972*



Figure 3: *Grand Canyon, Arizona, June 1972*

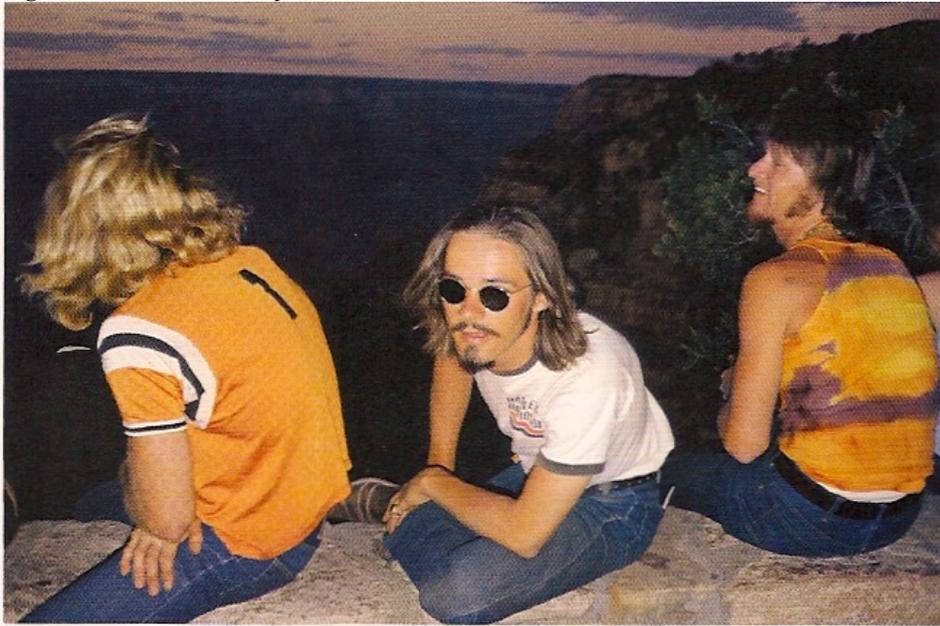


Figure 4: *Lake Powell, Utah, June 1972*



Figure 5: *Santa Fe, New Mexico, June 1972*

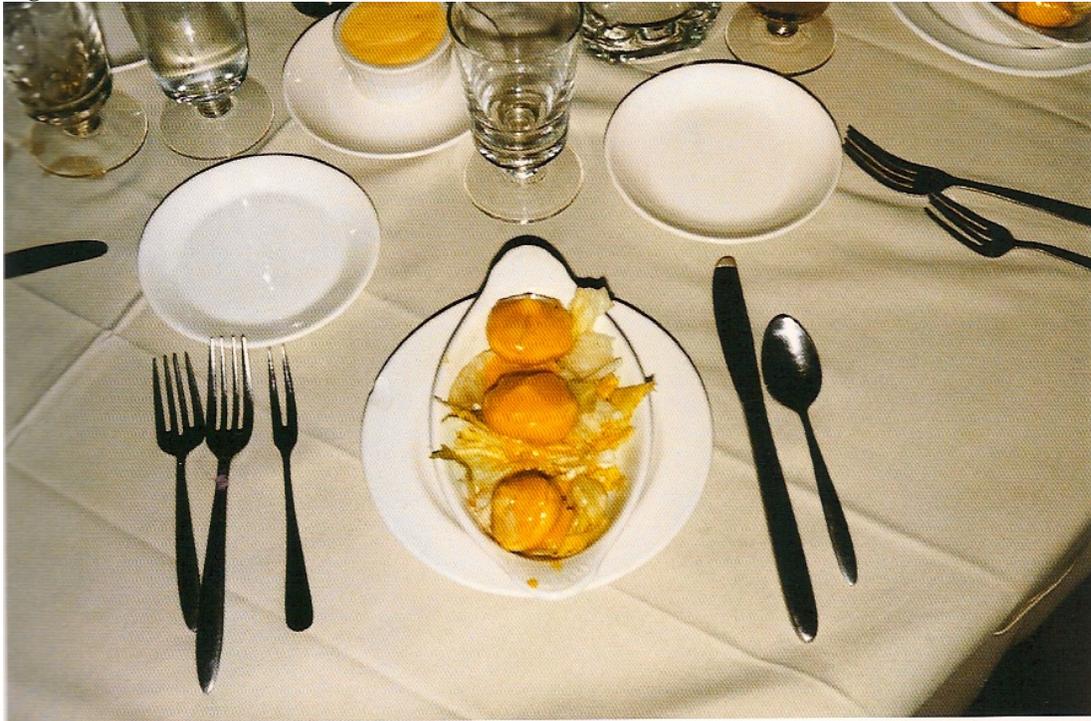


Figure 6: *New York, September 1972*



Figure 7: *South of Klamath Falls, Oregon, July 21, 1973*



Figure 8: *Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California, June 21, 1975*



Figure 9: *Merced River, Yosemite National Park, California, August 13, 1979*



Appendix D: Robert Frank

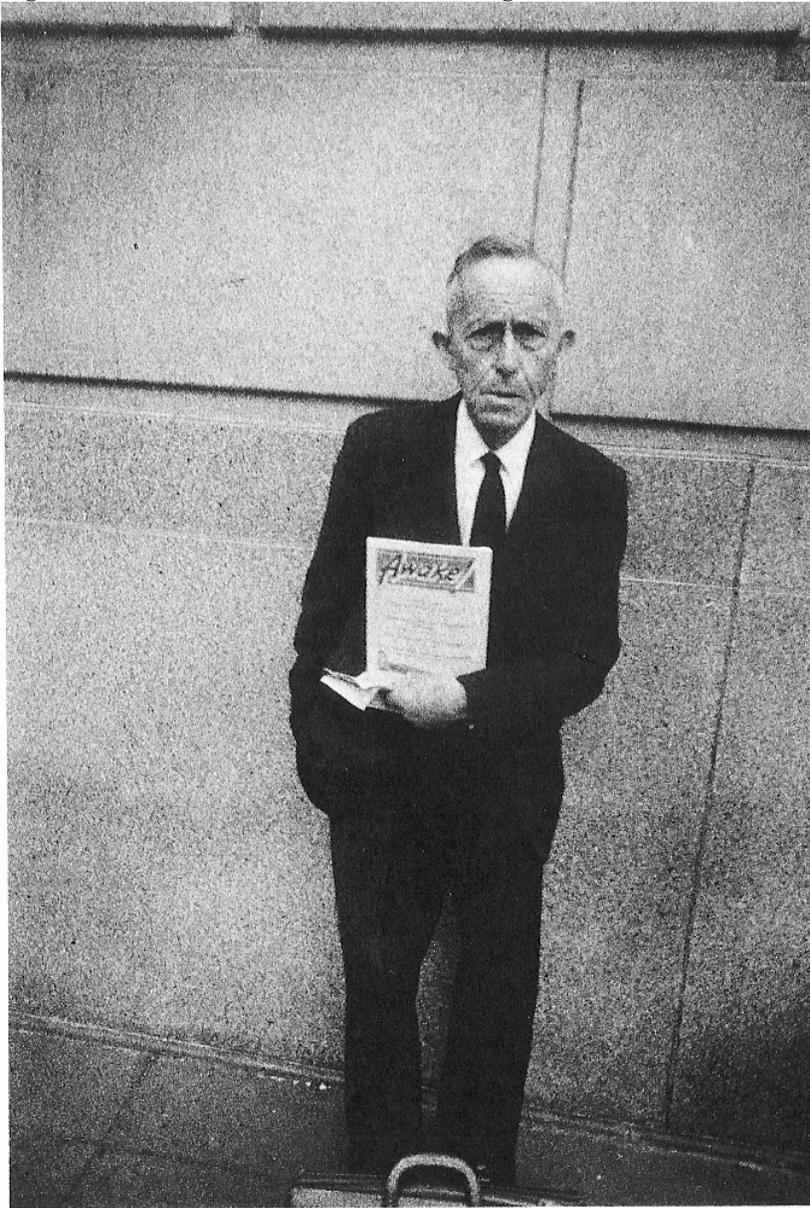
Figure 1: *Ranch Market – Hollywood* (1955-1956)



Figure 2: *Bar – Las Vegas* (1955-1956)



Figure 3: *Jehovah's Witness* – Los Angeles (1955-1956)



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