Lewis Baltz: Discovering Park City

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Lewis Baltz: Discovering Park City

by

Susan H. West

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Preface

This research synthesizes interests in photography, land art, post-war cultural studies, and American history. In 2012, I enrolled in my first course at Hunter College: “Research Methods,” taught by William Agee, former Evelyn Kranes Kossak Professor of Art History. Agee was the first to encourage my interests, challenge my ideas, and instill confidence in my scholarship. We often spoke about American artists looking to the horizon, to the landscape, for inspiration and purpose, and discussed how our relationship to the land is complex and often pierced with contradictions. The possibility of a Land Art seminar surfaced during these early discussions. To my delight, Professor Agee offered the course in 2013 during my last semester of classes and the penultimate semester before his retirement from teaching.

During my graduate studies, I also had the pleasure of working closely with Professor Maria Antonella Pelizzari, who was the first to introduce me to the scholarship in the history of photography. Perhaps the foremost highlight during my graduate career was the day when the late Nathan Lyons joined our class to discuss his influential approach to the medium, explaining his curatorial practices and teaching philosophy. I had a fascination with the historiography and the cultural implications of the medium, and during the lecture course on “20th Century Photography,” Professor Pelizzari initiated my interest in the particular aesthetics of the New Topographics, where I discovered the work of Lewis Baltz. In contemplating a thesis topic, I selected a portfolio of images at the Yale University Art Gallery that draws upon the interests and possibilities encountered during my graduate studies.

Lewis Baltz began shooting the Park City portfolio in 1978 and this portfolio represented his conclusive work of the 1970s. During the two years he dedicated to the project, Baltz captured the rapid revolution of an abandoned nineteenth century mining town transformed into a suburban
housing development and ski destination in Utah. In the wake of the construction process, and amid the waste and refuse it produced, Baltz presented an unmistakably compelling style in the correspondence of spatial forms captured within the frame of the American West. The black and white photographs de-familiarize the viewer’s understanding of the land, and the lack of color draws the viewer’s attention to form and light, with a lively dynamism. Throughout, the portfolio demonstrates Baltz’s reflexive knowledge of contemporary art, the history of the built landscape, and his sensitivity to the rapid evolution of American urban culture during the 1970s.
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INTRODUCTION

The land, the elemental background of the United States that has been the source for both scientific discovery and artistic inspiration, has shaped national identity since the country’s inception. The preoccupation and involvement with the land has deeply engrained perceptions of what it means to be “American.” History has revealed the contradictions within this identity hinged to the land, keeping record of the alternating impulses to worship and loathe it, sanctify and destroy it. American culture is the manifestation of this drive. Writer and art critic Jeffrey Kastner, who has written extensively on postwar art and the fraught contradictions that have emerged from postwar American culture, has eloquently described the function of the landscape as a mirror and a lens. As he wrote, “in it we see the space we occupy and ourselves as we occupy it.”¹

Lewis Baltz (1945–2014), while aiming to present an objective vision that appears impersonal and detached, has contributed to define and heighten the experience of the ordinary American landscape during the post-World War II era. From 1967 through 1989, Baltz succeeded in photographing subject matter that was traditionally considered not worthy of higher investigation. Park City is an extension of the ideas explored and refined in earlier series by Baltz such as The Prototype Works (1967-1972), The Tract Houses (1969-1971), The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California (1974), Maryland (1976), and Nevada (1978); and it would later be followed by San Quentin Point (1986) and Candlestick Point (1989). At the approximate mid-point of this timespan, Lewis Baltz was one of the ten artists included in the 1975 exhibition New Topographies: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape curated by William Jenkins at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. As the title implies, the photographs survey the

here and now; it is a study of ideas, not of influence.\textsuperscript{2} Baltz, along with Robert Adams who was also included in the exhibition, was a seminal figure in the style that emerged in landscape photography at this time.

Although the show was successful it had a very limited audience; even so, the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue established a mode of landscape photography that was identified by Jenkins as the “New Topographics,” an aesthetic that continues to influence and provoke artists and audiences. This anthropological style replaced the old, idyllic California landscape representation characterized by pristine and heroic nature that began in the nineteenth century with the work of figures like Carleton Watkins (1829-1916), and was sustained through the mid-twentieth century career of Ansel Adams (1902-1984). The curator Britt Salvesen authored the principal essay in the catalogue published in 2010 on the occasion of the re-exhibition of \textit{New Topographies}, co-organized by the George Eastman House and the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, Salvesen wrote that “we can see New Topographies as a bridge between the still-insular fine-art photography world and the expanding, post-conceptual field of contemporary art, simultaneously asserting and deconstructing the medium’s modernist specificity, authority, and autonomy.”\textsuperscript{3}

Baltz was one of the leading artists working in this arena between fine-art photography and the expanding, post-conceptual field of contemporary art. The chapters that follow explore the context of the photographs taken in Park City, Utah in 1978-1979, and demonstrate that Baltz was operating in an artistic space informed by both his predecessors in the field of photography and also by his responsiveness to the latest advances in art by his contemporaries, particularly in Minimalism and Land Art. This position, with mindfulness to the past and an understanding of

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid, 12.
contemporary art, invites a fascinating comprehension of the portfolio. This thesis touches on many important themes that are raised by the portfolio, among them the significance of Baltz’s own upbringing in California at mid-century; the meaning of American national identity along with the history of its westward expansion; and the anti-establishment culture of the late 1960s and 1970s. In addition, both the impact of industry and the rapid suburbanization encroaching the formerly undeveloped landscape were factors that advanced the urgency of the environmentalist movement. In the wake of these changes, artists developed novel ways of perceiving the man-altered environment.

Many negative descriptors parade through the critical essays on Park City and other images of economic developments produced by Baltz at this time. Words like “ruin,” “mutilated,” “nihilistic,” “disarray,” and “unearthly” attempt to describe and define his photographs. These terms are not mistaken, but they illuminate an incomplete story in Baltz’s photographs. Whereas the choice of motifs often points to decay and an overall pessimistic view of the future, the quality of the photographs is often sublime. The beauty inherent in the Park City photographs is primarily achieved by Baltz’s talent in the darkroom, and keen understanding of technical and chemical processes that work exceptionally well for his images. The composition of the photographs also demonstrates his honed artistic eye for organizing shapes and balancing content within the frame, embedding a lively rhythm within the picture.

In an essay titled, “An Obscene Aesthetic,” curator and scholar Susanne Figner argued that, “by linking the sublime with bleak subject matter, Baltz exposes an American ideology that can be described as the technological sublime.” In the spirit of superhighways and the first manned mission to land on the Moon in 1969, the enthusiasm for technology experienced a revival, which

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was felt especially by the American middle class during the postwar economic boom that drove many families out to the suburbs.

The “technological sublime” was complicated by the cultural upheaval at the time. In the wake of the Vietnam War, the industrial rhetoric had a disdainful aftertaste for many of the artists who participated in protest movements. Artists were looking to the land for inspiration, and some groups were exiting the conventional art world altogether. Members of the Land Art movement formed their own exodus that literally and physically marked a departure from the four walls of the museums and galleries. The artist Robert Smithson photographed sewer pipes and heaps of earth in New Jersey, calling them “the new monuments.” Baltz turned to new buildings, documenting the structures in a series, which he saw as a form of record keeping, like small visual arguments that were presented to the viewer one by one.

Meanwhile, in academic circles, intellectuals were blazing new trails to examine humanity’s impact on the environment and the cultural implications of our footprint on Earth. Rachel Carson (1907-1964) was an American marine biologist and conservationist whose writings, notably *Silent Spring* (1962), were credited with advancing the global environmental movement. Architect, author, and educator Peter Blake (1920-2006) decried the influence of the billboard industry and perpetrators of sprawl in his influential book, *God’s Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape* (1964). Whereas Blake’s criticism was harsh, severely describing modern cities as devoid of culture, John Brinckerhoff Jackson (1909-1996) was influential in broadening and shaping an accepted perspective of the vernacular landscape, and prompted the development and trajectory of contemporary cultural landscape studies in America.

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5 Ibid.
In 1972, architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, in collaboration with Steven Izenour, conducted a landmark study at Yale University in 1968: Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form (published in 1972). Inspired by their mentor J. B. Jackson, Scott Brown and Venturi addressed the commercial vernacular, as opposed to the primitive, idealized, or industrial vernaculars celebrated under the rubrics of romanticism and modernism. They turned their attention to the strip, sprawl, and suburbs, where genuine diversity and contemporary aspirations found expression in the ugly and ordinary. The case studies, they wrote, “are not merely ordinary but represent ordinariness symbolically and stylistically; they are enriching as well, because they add a layer of literacy meaning.” Baltz, in his case study of the housing development in Park City, had similar didactic intent to promote visual literacy and connoisseurship in the everyday. These converging perspectives in the 1960s and 1970s – questioning the scope and direction of modern science, the significance of urban development, and attention to the American vernacular landscape studies – informed the intellectual texture of Baltz’s photographic work in the 1970s. A consideration of the implications of these positions, however, has not yet been presented holistically in an analysis of Park City.

There is yet another dimension related to the environment that prompted Baltz to create Park City. This is society’s ever-increasing preoccupation with the theory of “spectacle.” As it has been noted, photography at this time could be conceived as the quintessential instrument of the “spectacle,” as a medium “relentlessly proliferating the signs of an illusory reality cloaking the abstract forces of consumption and commodification.” This idea was derived from Guy Debord’s critical text, La Société du Spectacle (1967), where he posited that modern social life had been

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replaced by representation. The origin of the “spectacle,” Debord wrote, “lies in the world’s loss of unity, and its massive expansion in the modern period demonstrates how total this loss has been: the abstract nature of all individual work, as of production in general, finds perfect expression in the spectacle, whose very manner of being concrete is, precisely, abstraction.”

Debord’s discussion of the “spectacle” is a critical approach that resonates with Baltz’s photographic work. Throughout the 1970s, he developed and refined a visual dialect, which he often referred to as a common language that unraveled fundamental tensions between reality and its representation. At the end of the decade, his work culminated in *Park City* – a portfolio that exemplified the ability for Baltz’s photography to take part in a much larger conversation about contemporary art and culture.

The literature consulted for this research relied upon sources focusing on art historical, environmental, cultural, and political advancements relevant in America during the 1970s. A lengthy interview conducted in 2009 between Lewis Baltz and Matthew Witkovsky became the primary thrust for my discussion in the chapters exploring Baltz’s upbringing in California and his artistic influences. In addition, the gallery reviews, articles, and letters of Donald Judd, published in *The Complete Writings 1959-1975*, were essential to understanding the influence of Minimalism on Baltz’s photographs, and illuminated some of the most persuasive artistic forces explored during the 1970s. The work of Barbara Novak, Alan Trachtenberg, and Martha Sandweiss were important references for interpreting some of the ideas explored in Chapter IV, “American Nationalism and Westward Expansion.” The Land Art movement has become increasingly well documented, with particularly meaningful contributions by Lucy Lippard, the writings of Robert Smithson, and Suzaan Boettger’s *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (2004), which

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was the first comprehensive analysis of the Land Art movement in the United States. Other recent publications include Miwon Kwon’s *One Place After Another* (2004), and survey books such as Jeffrey Kastner’s *Land and Environmental Art* (2010). In the last chapter, “New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape,” the analysis relied upon Britt Salvesen’s essay in the recent exhibition catalogue (2010), in conjunction with the essay by William Jenkins published in the original catalogue (1975). The essays in *Reframing the New Topographics* (2013), edited by Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach, offered additional perspectives about the continuing influence of the images presented in the original show.

A more comprehensive perspective is uncovered by analyzing the *Park City* portfolio in the context not only of art historical significance, but also within environmental, national, and cultural frameworks. Such an approach is reminiscent of an influential suggestion by Marcel Duchamp in 1957, who advocated that the creative act is not performed alone. “The spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives its final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists.”¹² Accordingly, this research involves the interweaving of biography, formal visual analysis, historical and cultural context, and art literature contributions that collectively help to rehabilitate the portfolio by illuminating how Baltz pushed the bounds of the medium of photography and, in doing so, challenged the art establishment. Curator Sébastien Montabonel met Baltz several times towards the end of his life and knew him to be a highly charismatic person with prodigious intellectual capability, implying that it was not a leap to infer that Baltz was probably a genius. Regarding the artist’s impact Montabel recently wrote,

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¹² Text of a talk given by Marcel Duchamp in Houston at the meeting of the American Federation of the Arts, April 1957. Reprinted in *ARTnews*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (Summer 1957).
Lewis wasn’t just a step ahead of his fellow artists, but also far ahead of the institutions. The fact that neither the art world nor the photography world were conscious of what was happening led Lewis to some serious frustration. Here, again, history is repeating itself since the innovators who were most misunderstood in their own time are those we eventually come to venerate the most.\textsuperscript{13}

An examination of Baltz’s portfolio is complex and requires the utmost openness. Therefore, the objective of this research is not to limit scholarship to a set of mandated messages in these photographs, but rather, to carefully peel away layers of interpretation and allow viewers to engage more thoughtfully with the images from multiple points of analysis.

The multiple perspectives converging in the photographs demonstrate that Baltz was exploring concepts at the intersection of cultural, artistic, historic, and political climates. The portfolio \textit{Park City} reflects this constellation of ideas, while still remaining open to possibilities. It seems that \textit{Park City} has been overlooked in some measure, in part because of the success of the \textit{New Topographics} exhibition, and perhaps also because it was one of many portfolios created by the artist in the 1970s. The research presented in this thesis aims to highlight the contribution of these photographs specifically and redirect the reading of the portfolio by emphasizing Baltz’s masterful facility in the medium and his thoughtful awareness of his time and place.

CHAPTER I

PHOTOGRAPHS OF PARK CITY, UTAH (1978–1979)

His ambition drives him, like a physicist longing to decode chaos. With deep respect and consternation, Baltz has circled a territory for decades – noting every nuance, systemizing every fact. He’s made complex, remarkable, angry pictures. And, any one could detonate like a passive-aggressive; the picture that looks great in your hand might just blow up somewhere inside your head.

Marvin Heiferman, 1989

Park City consists of one hundred and two small format (eight by ten inch) gelatin-silver prints chronicling the exteriors and interiors of a housing development that became America’s largest ski resort in the mountains of Summit County, Utah. The photographs were captured in the years 1978-1979, and were first published in a gallery catalogue by Leo Castelli in 1980. The catalogue is a monument, by far Baltz’s largest compilation of photographs, and even outnumbers his first portfolio, The Prototypes Works (1967-1976), which featured eighty-four images. The Yale University Art Gallery acquired Park City in 2000 and exhibited it in 2002. This was, surprisingly, the first public exhibition of these photographs. Most recently, Park City was included in the exhibition titled, “Lewis Baltz with works by Carl Andre and Charlotte Posenenske” (April 30–July 9, 2016), at the Stills Centre for Photography in Edinburgh, Scotland.

The Park City portfolio is a sequence organized into three phases of the housing project: an external survey of the development site (phase I); interior construction (phase II); and then...

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15 Included in this exhibition are works from several of his seminal series: The Prototype Works (1967-76), Park City (1978-79) and Candlestick Point (1987-89). The exhibition was co-curated by Sébastien Montabonel to reflect the affinity that Baltz highlighted between his photography and the work of his Minimalist artist peers.
returning outside again with images of the homes nearing completion (phase III). In the publication printed on the occasion of the exhibition, “Lewis Baltz with works by Carl Andre and Charlotte Posenenske,” Nicolas de Oliveira and Nicola Oxley, authorities on Installation art, wrote a compelling essay titled, “A Staircase to Infinity: Medium, Seriality, and Space in the work of Lewis Baltz.” Together they argue how the development, though carefully and painstakingly photographed, drew Baltz’s ire. De Oliveira and Oxley write that it arguably “marks a moment when the Holocene – a term meaning ‘recent whole,’ and describing the period of human expansion, agricultural advances and technological improvements – shifts into the Anthropocene, a time in which manmade intervention comes to dominate nature, producing wholesale changes in our ecosystem and climate.”

In the first phase, the outdoor shots of the construction site collectively reveal the panoramic vista of the landscape. In essence, the portfolio opens with a survey of the land, presenting wider views of the exterior surroundings that will eventually encompass the housing development. Each photograph in this section is titled with the exact locations captured in the frame, enhancing the topographical nature of these records. The ground is in a state of flux, in the process of being cleared for homes to emerge from the turned earth. A constellation of tire tracks and mounds of debris are found in most images, the newly collected piles in stark contrast to the mountains in the distance.

There is exquisite detail from the foreground to the background in every image, emphasizing the maximum depth-of-field. In most cases, one can discern small pieces of rock, blades of grass, and splintered wood. Outlines are crisp and brittle, and are not softened by

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distance. In the background, trails from ski slopes are carved into the sides of mountains, and each pine tree stands in sharp relief against the bright white snow. For the most part the skies are clear, but occasionally there are images with several clouds, and their soft, puffed outlines contrast sharply with the rough texture of rocks and rubble. Baltz wanted these prints to record the clarity of light in Park City. The uncanny stillness is derived from the clear atmosphere and pristine lighting conditions of high altitude. The sharpness of light has a severe quality that aims to eliminate signs of the generalized, soft-focus picturesque in this landscape, and Baltz certainly achieved this through his measured process in the field and deliberate techniques in the darkroom.

The images of this portfolio are often high-pitched, dynamic, and rich with contrasts, conveying several aesthetic categories. They are uncanny and desolate, yet traces of man’s activity and influence are visible throughout the series. Many of the photographs are formal in their composition, tonal hues, and framing, while others appear like snapshots or evidence-based documents, as if taken at the scene of a crime. Dirty cement floors, piles of scrap plywood, and panels of drywall are captured and printed with the same care and precision that Edward Weston famously used in his close up view of a solitary green pepper in 1930. Baltz brings these formal qualities and print craft to the subject matter evident in the series: debris, construction, and chaos.

In an essay on Park City, published in 1980, Baltz detailed his technical method of printing and darkroom process. This information is essential to our understanding of the photographs, thus it is worthwhile quoting in full:

I use a 35mm camera with a 35mm lens, which I stop down to the smallest aperture for maximum depth of field. I use the camera on a tripod. Whenever possible I use the camera at eye-level, not pointed up or down. I do this to make my photographs conform to the conventions of ordinary seeing […]

I use Kodak High-Contrast Copy film, rated at ASA 6. As this film has almost no latitude I bracket two exposures above and two exposures below the indicated correct exposure. I develop the film in Perfection Micrograin developer, a product made specifically for
rendering continuous-tone images on microfilms such as High-Contrast Copy. I develop the film according to the directions on the developer package. This film and developer combination has a number of inherent inconveniences but, altogether, works better than any other that I’ve used. Despite such difficulties, low film speed, lack of exposure latitude, and extremely long development times, this combination of materials produces an extremely high resolution image, surpassing what can be obtained from more conventional materials, and allows me to use a 35mm camera in situations which would otherwise require a larger format negative. This is the only technique that I use that is in any way out of the ordinary.

I print on Agfa Brovira paper, usually grade 3, though the quality and supply of this paper have become so unreliable that I may not continue using it.

I develop the Brovira, 1:2 Dektol for 2 ½ minute at 70 degrees, then fix in two successive 5 minute mixing baths. Prior to washing I immerse the prints in a combination hypo-clear and partial Selenium Toner bath for five minutes. The toner is used to give the prints archival stability and its effect on the image is not noticeable. I wash the prints for one hour and air dry them. This is the extent of my darkroom technique.17

Notwithstanding Baltz’s employment of relatively basic equipment, the standard 35mm camera, and his general disavowal of the culture of photography (explored in greater detail later in the thesis), this quote demonstrates his extraordinary devotion to the technical precision of the work’s production. The darkroom is arguably the nexus of his work. The space presents itself as the technical area par excellence – “part scientific laboratory, part factory, and part hermit’s devotional retreat.”18

The highly detailed renderings of the scenes in Park City convey the clarity of light in Utah, which was critically important to Baltz. He described how the altitude offered a sharpness that seemed to fix each object in its own discrete place. These objects, he noted, were “disconnected from [their] surroundings as though the space in the photographs was not of a continuous piece.”19 An example of this style is found in the image titled, “Prospector Village, Lot 95, Looking West” (Fig. 1). The fire is affixed to its own place within the picture frame, isolated

17 Lewis Baltz, Landscape: Theory (New York, 1980), 27.
19 Ibid.
from the nearby debris and scenic background. In the detail captured, the viewer can practically hear the crackles and pops from the flame, and one can sense movement as the black smoke floats up and rises outside the boundaries of the frame. Despite this movement, there is also simultaneously an extreme stillness that confronts the viewer, achieved in part by the organization of the contents depicted, and also by the acute detail in the mountains in the background. Such detail shortens the distance between the mountains and the fire in the foreground. The trace of man is obvious in the pile of waste and debris that was deliberately collected and lit on fire, yet one also senses a post-apocalyptic world devoid of human existence. Such is the irony in many of the images throughout the portfolio.

These images, similar to previous portfolios by Baltz, demonstrate that he was interested in rendering the American landscape without the obvious evidence of the artist’s hand, and that photography was the ideal medium for him to address broader issues of American culture and the current state of society as reflected in the landscape. The site in Park City had escaped large-scale construction until the housing development in 1978. For decades in the nineteenth century it had been used as a dumping ground for silver mining activities, and the contaminated land had a visible record of its prior use. The mine on top of which Park City was built had polluted the ground water and perhaps the landscape itself. Baltz described the area as “preternaturally silent and lifeless. The place looked like the aftermath of purposeless violence.”20 The churned and pulverized soil seized the photographer’s attention immediately. Unlike the urgent, forceful, and condemning approach of architect Peter Blake in his book God's Own Junkyard, which will be explored later in this thesis, Baltz aimed for a level of objectivity that kept his images within the frame unbiased. As detailed in the explanation of his technique, he achieved this in part by keeping the camera

20 Baltz, Landscape: Theory, 25.
positioned to a person’s natural eye-level, and thus inviting the viewer to experience their own visual survey of the surrounding land.

Although the artist expressed in interviews that he aspired to be aesthetically anonymous, after studying Baltz’s work closely, one can certainly come to recognize his hand behind the lens. In the same essay from 1980, Baltz discussed his approach to the Park City landscape and illuminated his methodology for rendering the land before him:

If this sounds as though I’m suggesting that I decided to simply level the camera, point it at the horizon, make a photograph, run it so many degrees, make another, and so forth; that is substantially correct, at least in the case of the first nineteen images in the Park City series. The formal qualities, such as they are, of these photographs echo that order implicit in the scene. The same formal concerns were addressed, and uncannily well, by NASA’s photographs of the surface of Mars.\textsuperscript{21}

The statement reflects Baltz’s thinking about photographs made for scientific purposes and perhaps by mechanical means. It is a presentiment to projects later in his career, when he was living abroad in Europe, in which he explored photographic series that depict the clinical interiors of state-of-the-art industries and government research centers, such as \textit{Sites of Technology} (1989-1992). At the time of the \textit{Park City} series, the approach allowed Baltz to distance himself while simulating “that order implicit in the scene.” Implied here is that just as he snapped one photograph after another, “run it so many degrees, make another, and so forth,” so too did each house emerge out of the earth one after another in the housing development. In the automatism of this recording, Baltz did not believe in the individual image’s ability to define the world. Photographs document a momentary surface of the world and they are inherently fixed in time. According to Baltz, the single image’s “literalness and immediacy make it difficult to extrapolate accurate and reasonable generalizations about the world that exists outside the borders of the photograph.”\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 25.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 26.
An intriguing example that supports Baltz’s skepticism that a single image is ambiguous and therefore cannot fully describe the world in and on itself, is found in the photograph titled, “Interior 28” (Fig. 2). Removed from the context of the portfolio the image of a close-up of one of the interior floors of the construction site appears as though it could be the surface of Mars. The darkness in the top left corner creeps into the photograph like a small piece of the galaxy. The image recalls Man Ray’s Surrealist photograph, “Dust Breeding,” taken in 1920.23 Man Ray, a close friend and collaborator of Marcel Duchamp, photographed the surface of Duchamp’s “The Large Glass” with an exposure that lasted two hours, and therefore remarkably captured the diverse textures of dust and material that had collected on the glass over the course of a year. As the image is taken out of context, the viewer has a difficult time sensing the orientation of the work. On the floor of “Interior 28” are particles of plaster, dirt, dust and nails that are captured in such highly detailed recordings in the photograph that the sense of scale and scope is perplexing. Strong light shining on these small objects casts severe shadows against each form, making them appear as if the viewer is looking at much larger objects from afar. The shadows in the corners also alter the sense of depth. However, when looking at this photograph as part of the Park City series, the severe frontality of the image is definite and assured. One can immediately recognize the particles as a construction site floor.

Baltz had a systematic approach throughout the 1970s. Each photograph held equal importance in the context of the suite, and could not be fully understood as a single image. Baltz compared the lone image to a film still: when removed from the film, that isolated image exists, but only as a fragment detached from the story to which it belongs.24 Time and again in essays,

23 Dust Breeding is in several collections, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.
interviews, and artist’s statements, Baltz articulated his desire for his work to be perceived as a collective whole, rather than as a series of discrete images. As he stated,

The individual images have very limited powers to define the world. But, if individual images can’t define the world, perhaps a sufficient number of images could, at least, surround the world and thereby contain some part of it. My own solution to the problem of the veracity of photographs is to make the series, and not the single image, the unit of work. Grouping photographs allows points to be raised, asserted through repetition, criticized, restructured into sub-categories; in short, a coherent visual syntax can be developed to show a number of facets of the same general subject. The ability of such a group of photographs to describe a subject is comparable to that of non-narrative film.25

Baltz’s use of a sequence to build a narrative derives its structure from film, and his interest in cinema played an important role in the development of his work. In interviews he cited the works of Michelangelo Antonioni, in particular Red Desert (1964), and Jean Luc Godard’s The Weekend (1967) as primary influences.26 Baltz’s Park City, the documentation of a housing development from start to finish spanning over two years, effectively confirmed this photographer’s preference for the mechanics of multiple images rather than the viewer’s response to a single, evocative photograph.

All photographs in this portfolio are intimately connected to the very idea of landscape, but what distinguishes Park City is the absence of scenic wonders and people. Consistently in the 1970s, Baltz achieved a unique quality, a characteristic that lies between the familiar and the unknown. Stereotypically, this in-between arena conveys the marginalized: borderline counterexamples that the viewer can recognize, but to which she cannot relate. However, Park City actually reveals typical, albeit neglected, examples of the most common scenes of American culture and the landscape genre in that time and place. This gives the portfolio its modern duality: the scenes are obvious and parochial, and yet the palpable detachment amidst the familiar makes

the images provocative. This friction had also been recorded in nature, given that much of the American landscape by the 1970s – permeated by highways and saturated with billboard signs and parking lots – had become a cultural artifact of industrialism.

As the portfolio sequence turns towards interior images, as captured in the second phase of the housing project, construction moves indoors, and the photographs display qualities that are even more characteristic of Baltz’s work. These photographs share with the landscape the same sense of confined airlessness and convey a similar stillness. Indoors the effect is completely claustrophobic, such as in “Interior 34” (Fig. 3). In most cases, one senses that the workers have just cleared out of the room moments before Baltz took the picture. Boot prints leave their trail through the dust and dirt on the floor of “Interior 20” (Fig. 4), hammers and tools are strewn about, garbage is left in a heap on the floor, tentacles of electrical wires flail about, but in some cases are left neatly tied together for another day. Baltz captured a close range image of the light bulb packages, “Interior 40,” referencing the near completion of the home as filling the empty sockets is the last task before handing over the keys (Fig. 5). Throughout the portfolio, and more comprehensively than in any other portfolio Baltz created in the 1970s, the artist took a deeper dive into the total consummation of speculative development. Baltz achieved this total consummation by his organization of the sequence, which begins with an outdoor survey of the physical site for the construction of the housing development, gradually recording the early renderings of basement foundations and driveways, and eventually documenting the building phase as it moves indoors towards its finality. Such comprehension of the entire process gives one the sense that Baltz was in the trenches for two years, systemizing the facts of a man-made housing development, as he had never quite done before.
Park City presents several themes that comprise Baltz’s “visual syntax.”

Some of the images exemplify Baltz’s ambition to create art for art’s sake, devoid of any documentary meaning. One of the strongest images compositionally in the portfolio, and one of the most well balanced, is that of a heaping pile of garbage captured in “Interior 1” (Fig. 6). The image is reminiscent of a John Chamberlain sculpture composed of a dynamic agglomeration of discarded and crushed automobile metal, such as his 1962 sculpture Dolores James (Fig. 7). Chamberlain emphasized the importance of fit or the marriage of parts in his work, and such stability is also seen in the heaping mass photographed in Baltz’s image. The pile is made up of discarded wood, torn cardboard, wire scraps, and other miscellaneous junk. The play of light and shadows, in and out of the crevices and dancing across the walls, gives the photograph a lively energy, and suggests that the image was taken at dusk. The house is almost complete; the dry wall is up but the electrical sockets are still open. Although the pile sits heavy within the frame, conveying an idea of permanence, it is in fact a temporal installation that will be quickly removed from the site. This quality illustrates an ironic theme running across the portfolio: the impression of physicality and longevity that contrasts sharply with the instability of a construction job that will soon dismantle all the parts. Similarly, the common and sentimental notion about the permanence of one’s home is undermined by the rapid assemblage of the mass-market American housing industry.

Another example of the artistic achievement in the portfolio is the exterior shot titled, “Prospector Village, Lot 102, Looking West,” which depicts a heaping mound of dirt and debris with five wooden planks scattered on the pile (Fig. 8). Baltz’s work at this time has been recognized for evoking the then new aesthetic of Minimalism, which rejected Abstract Expressionism by emphasizing impersonal geometric shapes and industrial materials. The

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rectangular planks look like steps and are reminiscent of Donald Judd’s 1967 sculpture *Untitled (Stack)* at the Museum of Modern Art (Fig. 9). Baltz expressed in interviews that he was absolutely looking to his contemporaries working in Minimalist art. The term refers to “objects that are open and extended [and] more or less environmental,” rather than being constituted as single entities.\(^{28}\) Oxley and de Oliveira persuasively argue that,

Baltz’s works challenge the perception that photographs are primarily understood as depictions of something, whereby the medium and its material concerns are secondary to the subject portrayed; instead one is struck by the absence of metaphor and representation, which are aspects strongly associated with earlier pre-Modernity. Through the use of seriality, the allusion to the bas-relief, and the engagement of the viewer’s agency, his photographs display their allegiance to objecthood and Minimalism, linking him unquestionably to the sculptures of artists such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Robert Irwin, and, not least, Andre and Posenenske.\(^{29}\)

Judd’s stack is comprised of twelve units, each uniform in size and made of galvanized iron painted with green lacquer. The units are affixed to the wall at one of their long sides, and they are positioned one above the other in a vertical arrangement with exactly nine-inch intervals between each unit. Although anchored, the stack projects outwards from the wall activating a relationship with the space around it. Judd regarded this type of work as neither painting nor sculpture, but rather as examples of what he referred to in 1965 as the “new three-dimensional work.”\(^{30}\) Whereas the ideology of Judd’s piece is in its serial repetition of geometrically identical units spaced at exact intervals, the geometric objects in Baltz’s photograph were found objects arranged haphazardly. Nonetheless, similarities can be drawn here – in the repetition of the one hundred and two images throughout the portfolio, all of which are geometrically identical units of eight by ten inch gelatin-silver prints. When mounted for exhibition, Baltz spaced the images at exact intervals,

\(^{29}\) Nicolas de Oliveira and Nicola Oxley, “A Staircase to Infinity,” 7.
\(^{30}\) Judd, “Specific Objects,” 181.
the white space of the gallery wall creating a grid around his images and activating the surrounding space. The planks in Baltz’s photograph vary greatly in size and shape, but are proportionately spaced across the pile of dirt and debris and framed frontally. The planks function as a collective unit to activate the picture plane with a dynamic diagonal gesture across the frame. Also similar in nature is the fact that each plank appears to hover over the dirt, and a dark shadow cast beneath the board emphasizes each plank’s objecthood. In an article titled, “The Anti-Photographers” (1976), Nancy Foote considered the use of photography in conceptual art and noted how Baltz’s photographs often related to Minimalism in their frontality and sparse geometry.\textsuperscript{31}

The mountains in the background of Figure 8, “Prospector Village, Lot 102, Looking West,” once again demonstrate how there are qualities in Baltz’s images that can lend some permanence to this pile of dirt and loose rubble, alluring the viewer into thinking that perhaps this mound of dirt belongs here. In reality, the dirt will be discarded in a moment of time, erased. The objects within the frame balance the entire photograph, which Baltz described as a “democratically rendered display.”\textsuperscript{32} In using the term “democratic,” Baltz is suggesting both the accessibility of his image, emphasizing the vernacular subject matter, and that all parts comprising the photograph are of equal importance. This type of rendering and organization stands in contrast to a photograph by Ansel Adams, for example, where there is an obvious focal point, such as a waterfall or the cloud covered peaks of a mountain range, and the astounding vistas within the frame are not easily accessible (at least not for most people, and not on a daily basis). In Baltz’s Park City images, the democratically rendered display allows the viewer to select from multiple points of entry into the photograph, rather than have the point of entry dictated by the photographer. By comparison, the


\textsuperscript{32} Baltz, Landscape: Theory, 27.
approach in this portfolio is slightly different than images in Baltz’s *The Prototype Works*, where the severe cropping of each scene cannot help but point towards their wider context. As with many other images in the *Park City* portfolio, there is a lively and active movement created through the textures, light, and shapes in “Prospector Village, Lot 102, Looking West.” The movement implied by the tire treads and newly created roads invites and activates the viewer to make choices and walk the paths within the picture.

Although human traces abound in each of the photographs in the *Park City* portfolio, there is one anomaly in the series. Out of the one hundred and two images, only one in the entire series depicts a human being: a photograph titled, “Prospector Village, Lot 12, Looking Southwest on Comstock Drive Toward Masonic Hill,” in which three men stand near one of their trucks (Fig. 10). They are perhaps concluding their day, as the light casts severe shadows that suggest the late afternoon and nearing sunset. Baltz frames them in a voyeuristic manner, allowing the viewer to see the men clearly but not close enough to imagine being able to hear what they are discussing. The camera for this shot is cast slightly downward, emphasizing the feeling that the viewer is an outsider looking into a scene. The uncanny sense of stillness and voyeurism are qualities that reappear in the contemporary work of American photographer Gregory Crewdson, who is known for conceiving sets that depict American homes and neighborhoods. The lack of physical human presence throughout the portfolio contributes to the cinematic quality of this photograph, as if the scene were staged. The severe contrast of light and dark in the shadows suggests that Baltz must have photographed the series at the end of the day. In this outdoor image, with the sun setting, the shadows are cast long and outwards and help Baltz emphasize his eerily desolate subject.

A suggestion of violence adds a thematic edge to this portfolio. Baltz has often been likened to a forensic photographer, and this analogy is apparent in *Park City* where several images register
a hint of uncanny. An example is the image simply titled “Interior 25,” depicting an interior room with a single wire hanging in the middle of the composition (Fig. 11). With his treatment of the hanging wire at the very center of the frame, reminiscent of a hanging noose, Baltz’s intention was to produce a strong reaction. The room is a complete mess: construction garbage everywhere, a collapsed ladder lying across the middle of the floor, empty boxes and buckets strewn around the room. On the left side of the frame a door is slightly ajar, the opening vying for the viewer’s attention, instilling a sense of urgency. The blinding light from the outside exerts a forceful internal pressure, as if the light were about to force the door open and flood the space. On the door are marks, perhaps paint or dirt; however, given the suggestions of a crime scene, one is also inclined to read the marks as splotches of blood. If the wire were not hanging curiously from the ceiling in the middle of the room, the image would not generate such a charged interpretation. In a less dramatic reading of the image, the message illuminated from “Interior 25” is simply the irony that construction and destruction look very much alike.

There are less enigmatic and violent images that still give the viewer an impression of the photographs serving as forensic evidence through Baltz’s deadpan style. In the photograph titled, “Interior 18,” there are planks of wood collapsed down the center, and the viewer has the sensation of stumbling into the scene by chance (Fig. 12). The shadow in the left foreground hints to a door that has just been opened ajar allowing light to spill through the entryway onto the fallen wood, the planks looking like battered witnesses to the construction project. The original publication of Park City in 1981 included an essay by Gus Blaisdell, who was a writer and teacher at the University of New Mexico and whose critical essays addressed photography, motion pictures, painting, and philosophy, among other subjects. In the essay, Blaisdell discussed how the heaps and piles in the photographs push the mind around, “making it dodge, turn aside, run for cover, or
cover its eyes. This description suggests a battleground, a no-man’s-land of scorched craters, earth blasted open, and the sky itself stained.” As he continued, “any progress is blocked, halted, turned aside, and thus made desperate and hysterical with fear. Consciousness itself becomes the broken hills and torn terrain of a war zone.”

The photographs activate our minds and our senses, as demonstrated in “Interior 25” and “Interior 18” (Figs. 11 and 12), and this feature relates to the viewer’s sense of accountability. This responsibility is emphasized further through the experience of holding the physical photograph. Reviewing the portfolio of Park City in person is a vastly different experience from reviewing reproduced images in a book. The prints are beautiful, striking, and intimidating all at once: their formal composition of light, balance, point of view, line, rhythm, and framing give conclusive evidence that Baltz was a maestro at handling the technological specificities of his medium, and that Park City was a pinnacle project of his decade-long inquiry.

Towards the end of the portfolio, illuminating the third phase of the construction project, the images begin to take on familiar qualities in the form of domesticity. In this transition, some of the earlier tension in the series is released. With the rolling mountains as the backdrop in many of the exterior images, the viewer is invited to acknowledge the construction site as both a mutilation to the landscape and an idyllic model of domesticity in the newly completed luxury homes: “Prospector Park, Subdivision Phase III, Lot 55, Looking West,” (Fig. 13). The middle ground emerges, almost floating between an empty foreground and the mountains rising in the distance. Here, middle class family homes take form like strange appearances; the homes seem alien, like artificial configurations on the land. It is as if they suddenly materialized out from the upturned earth, or dropped down from the blanket sky above. Baltz’s presentation of the severe

frontal quality of the homes is purposeful, implicitly confrontational, as if each did an about-face to antagonize his camera. Each of the homes depicted in “Prospector Park, Subdivision Phase III, Lot 55, Looking West” (Fig. 13) represented a dream that approximately sixty million Americans achieved by 1980 when they moved out to “suburbia,” a stunning social phenomenon that had first emerged when Baltz was growing up in California at mid-century, and had really gained currency by the 1970s.\textsuperscript{34} The author and social observer Tom Wolfe wrote about this social-cultural shift in \textit{The Pump House Gang} (1968). In a series of short stories, Wolfe described the departure from the old-world, European framework of class structure and the transition towards a society that cared less about systems of status. He wrote,

\begin{quote}
What is a California electronics worker making $18,000 a year supposed to do with his new riches? […] Why not, à la Hugh Hefner, put it all into turning his home into a palace of technological glories? […] Why not surround the palace with my favorite piece of landscaping of the happy worker suburbs of the American West, the Home Moat. It is about three feet wide and a foot and a half deep. Instructions for placing rocks, flowers, and shrubs are available. The Home Moat is a psychological safeguard against the intrusion of the outside world. It guards against the fear that It is going to creep up in the night and press its nose against your picture window.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

The postwar years had provided the American middle class with an economic boom of unprecedented size, accompanied by countless new consumer goods: prefabricated houses, cars, televisions, Kitchen Aids, waterbeds, and countless leisure activities, from the drive-in to the barbeque.\textsuperscript{36} The images in Bill Owens’ photographic project, \textit{Suburbia} (1973) convey how all of these products were celebrated as signs of individual freedom and American progress. The message that comes through in each of his images is how Americans uncovered an identity and a place of refuge in a world of commodities. Owens’ images are actually quite celebratory, honestly capturing the banality of suburbia, which are surprisingly compelling because he is able to convey

\textsuperscript{36} Figner, “An Obscene Aesthetic,” 33.
the diversity beneath the mundane. His treatment of suburbia is in stark contrast to Baltz’s sentiments towards his own upbringing in suburban California at midcentury, where detachment and enigma prevail over the American dream.

The images of Park City represent the culmination of Baltz’s inclination to push the boundaries of photography in the 1970s and his formal response to the state of American cultural establishment at that time. The images are complex in their ability transcend boundaries, conveying sentiments that are at times faintly mocking, occasionally scornful, and often purely factual; they are neither disparaging, nor are they celebratory. The content is refined and intelligent, even though the actual subject matter is litter and discarded material. The photographs comment on crimes committed against the American landscape, but also recognize the growth of opportunity. They can be read as journalistic documentation, but they are also artistic concepts. In terms of his approach, Baltz attempted to remain critically detached and in doing so raises questions about the principle of authorship, however his unaltering commitment to the craft of framing and his meticulous technique in the darkroom present a seeming contradiction to his cool objectivity. Baltz was able to demonstrate an aptitude for crafting honest documents of pictorial evidence that captured the negative implications of the cultural ethos without getting overtly cynical or political. All of these features converging in the Park City series result in an idea-oriented portfolio that resists classifications and allows for divergent interpretations.
CHAPTER II

LEWIS BALTZ AND CALIFORNIA AT MID-CENTURY

Lewis Baltz was born in Newport, California, in 1945, and it is clear that the time and place of his birth informed the ethos behind his early work through the years of Park City. In an interview with Matthew Witkovsky in 2009, Baltz described his photographic pursuits as being the vehicle to produce vocabulary that reconciled his sense of the “unspeakable horror of his origins.”37 The California suburbs at mid-century, the edgy space beyond the city limits mutilated by crisscrossing highways, were fertile grounds for cheap, commercial architecture to sprout: gas stations, chain restaurants, tract housing, parking lots, industrial parks and shopping centers. This is the sprawl to which Learning from Las Vegas brought significance; Venturi and Scott Brown made a compelling case to architects and artists that the vernacular landscape was indeed fascinating and meaningful. “We have described in the Las Vegas study the victory of symbols-in-space over forms-in-space in the brutal automobile landscape of great distances and high speed, where the subtleties of pure architectural space can no longer be savored.”38 Rejecting the glorification of heroic originality in architectural history, such as Byzantine cathedrals, they traced the workings of symbolism from the present day’s roadside. Suburban developments promised an eerily bucolic lifestyle, leading many Americans to relocate away from the densely populated cities. For Baltz, this was the blighted milieu in which he came of age, developed a sense of self, and built the foundation of his scrutiny of American landscapes.

37 Oral history interview with Lewis Baltz, November 15-17, 2009 (Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution), 13. This interview with curator Matthew Witkovsky serves as one of the few primary sources available on Lewis Baltz, and much of this chapter is attributed to their conversation in 2009.
38 Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, Learning from Las Vegas, 119.
Peculiar and precocious, Baltz spent much of his childhood hanging out in camera shops in Southern California and began photographing obsessively when he was twelve years old, one year after his father died. He purchased his first Rolleiflex in Laguna Beach at a camera store that made a lasting impression. The shop was owned by William “Bill” Current, a veteran of World War II, who opened the camera shop after three hundred and eighty days of combat (at a time when the average combat service lasted less than thirty days). The store provided a means of earning a living despite his physical disabilities. Baltz described Bill as a cultivated man, an omnivorous reader, and one of the most independent thinkers he had ever encountered. Bill became a father figure and role model; he not only tolerated the young photographer’s presence, but he also cultivated a meaningful relationship and discussed all facets of life.

Academically, Baltz did not apply himself at all. After high school, he decided to focus exclusively on photography instead of attending college. The draft for the Vietnam War reversed those aspirations and created a generation of scholars among those who sought shelter from military conscription.39 “Given the choice of living my own life and going to school, I would live my own life; and the choice of being conscripted or going to school, I would go to school.”40 Baltz first attended Monterey Peninsula College and quickly discovered a group of talented faculty members, many of them young, radical transplants from the East Coast who held Ivy League doctorates. In his words, “it wasn’t just a school of ashtrays.”41 He worked very closely with Elliot Ruchowitz-Roberts, who had just received a doctorate from Columbia University, and taught introduction to poetry and creative writing. Eventually he transferred and earned his B.F.A. at the

40 Interview with Matthew Witkovsky, 1.
41 Ibid, 2.
San Francisco Art Institute, and then moved to Southern California for graduate studies at the Claremont Graduate School.42

Bill Current, who lived in Monterey, was his foremost influence in photography and continued to mentor Baltz as he worked his way through school. Current produced his own body of photographic work that he brought to New York to share with John Szarkowski, the renowned director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In 1963, in his second year as director, Szarkowski included several of Current’s images in one of the earliest photographic shows that featured the American landscape. Included images that ranged in date from the 1860s to the present, the exhibition was titled “The Photographer and the American Landscape” and featured one hundred and eighty-three works by nineteen photographers. Szarkowski wrote in the accompanying catalogue:

Some of the nineteen photographers have been pivotal figures, of decisive influence; others represent ideas as broadly as photography itself. Some have been conscious artists, fully aware of their aesthetic art; others, approaching their work as craftsmen of sensibility and intelligence, have perhaps been better artists than they have known. But all have shared in some measure a common interest and a common concern: each has attempted to define what the earth is like. Among them they have helped peel away, layer by layer, the dry wrapper of habitual seeing, and have presented new discoveries concerning the structure, the beauty, and the meaning of our habitat.43

Bill Current was in good company in the show. Among the nineteen artists represented were 19th century and 20th century recognized masters such as Timothy H. O’Sullivan, Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Paul Caponigro, and William Garnett. Baltz’s work in the 1970s followed this trajectory of helping to “peel away, layer by layer, the dry wrapper of habitual seeing.” He pivoted away from the customary way of photographing the land and built environment, and presented

42 Lewis Baltz, “Meetings with Remarkable Men: John McLaughlin,” in Lewis Baltz Texts, 190.
new discoveries within the daily, vernacular surroundings lived and experienced by most Americans.

Between 1961 and 1969, Baltz developed as an artist while the medium of photography gained greater traction as a credible field in the contemporary canon of fine arts. From his earliest explorations behind the lens, Baltz set out with the intention to make photographs with artistic purposes. As he stated, “I never had any ambition to do anything commercial, anything journalistic. I wanted to be an artist, and I wanted to be an artist whose work was done in the medium of photography. It may be debatable to this day whether I ever succeeded in achieving that ambition, but the point is, I was never – I never had any uncertainty about that.”\textsuperscript{44} Prior to 1960, Baltz thought it was difficult to consider a career in photography. He assumed that one most likely had to be a war-time photojournalist or fashion photographer, and these were lines of work that Baltz found parochial and tedious.

By the early 1960s, although photography was still in a position with comparatively limited opportunities for artists, the attitudes were shifting in American art and academia. A rapid expansion in the practice and analysis of photography was taking hold. Baltz fervently contemplated his own unique approach to his work. He was fascinated by the work of Ed van der Elsken, Walker Evans, and Wright Morris, and believed the use of text and image was a brilliant pairing. Regarding Walker Evans, Baltz was particularly inspired by his “typological” approach and wrote, “From the 1920s on Evans made a lifelong project of inventorizing the visage of America; his images of cities and towns, buildings and signage, automobiles, faces, styles approached the typological in its thoroughness and anonymity.”\textsuperscript{45} Baltz also deeply admired and made images in a classic, modern vein à la Edward Weston and Paul Strand.

\textsuperscript{44} Interview with Matthew Witkovsky, 4.
We had this mythology of Edward Weston, which combines a lot of things. Weston was an enormously romantic figure. I mean, he was sort of a man alone in the world against the world; he took off to Mexico. He had beautiful women. At least, he had one beautiful woman I can think of – extraordinarily beautiful. Lived by himself. Had this Walden-like existence on what is now, well, one of the most beautiful pieces of land in the United States.46

The quotation suggests that, in these early years, Baltz conceived it a very romantic thing to be an artist, a position that gradually dissolved later in his career. Although his conception of being an artist was at times stereotypical, Baltz did not idealize his California surroundings. A major disconnect between Baltz and the most famous photographic predecessors from this area was his ability to remain receptive to the messages of present day reality. As he stated,

It dawned on me when I was living in Monterrey that serious photographers – the Edward Westons, the Wynn Bullocks and the Ansel Adamses – would go to some special, privileged, “natural” place to work. It was an article of faith, in this case the faith of American Transcendentalism, that to commune with nature was the sign of a great soul… Unfortunately, my life very rarely involved going to Yosemite. My life was about going to shopping centers, being in town, an urban situation, which seemed to me was also a landscape but one that no one had any interest in looking at. But I was interested in looking at it.47

His preoccupation for a unique language in photography would eventually help pave the way to a new avenue, marking a departure from what he personally felt to be the diminishing choices in photographic aesthetics available to him in California.

Consequently, Baltz grew disdainful of the world of photography, despite his love for the medium as an appropriate language to address social concerns. In an interview with writer, curator and artist David Company in 2014, Baltz said: “Are we talking about photography, or are we talking about the world of photography and its history and its historians, its networks, its personalities, its gods… because I don’t credit any of that. I think as a medium it’s brilliant. And

46 Interview with Matthew Witkovsky, 4.
it’s brilliant because of the simplest things that it does, and does well.”48 In his interview with Witkovsky from 2009, he described photography as close-minded and provincial, particularly during the earlier years of his career. Those involved with the craft of photography were obsessed by the search for the spiritual or the sensationalist depiction of events. This fetishizing approach had its roots in late nineteenth century photography, which he disdained. When pushed by Witkovsky to elaborate on what he perceived to be the shortcomings of the field in California, Baltz cited the catalogue associated with the 2007 exhibition The Collectible Moment, presented by the Norton Simon Museum (formerly known as the Pasadena Art Museum). The show presented one hundred and sixty images by historical and modern photographers, with an emphasis on the contemporary artists involved with the development of the photography program at the museum in the early 1970s. Baltz was included in the show, along with Diane Arbus, Ansel Adams, Aaron Siskind, Edmond Teske, Edward Weston, Minor White, and several others. Despite the surge of talented photographers, Baltz told Witkovsky that the catalogue was an example of the “depressing picture of the state of mentality in photography in 1970 or so… [and] it’s a very good survey of what was going on and people’s attitude.”49

In a typically sarcastic and mocking repudiation, Baltz went on to describe the culture of photography as “some sort of dank, polluted valley in Appalachia where everybody’s been screwing their sister for four generations, and people look a little funny and talk a little funny.”50 Increasing this feeling of suffocation, Baltz also articulated to Witkovsky that the master professors of many graduate programs were akin to baronial figures running a fiefdom whereby students were compelled to work in the vein of the reigning photographer and not according to

49 Interview with Matthew Witkovsky, 9.
50 Ibid, 6.
their own facility, judgment, and artistic inclination. To be sure, there were opportunities in California where Baltz was not looking. After receiving his master's degree in 1960, the late Robert Heinecken was hired by the U.C.L.A. art department, where he taught for the next thirty-one years. In 1963, Heinecken founded the department's photography program, where he did not offer a stylistic blueprint to his students and instead encouraged experimental freedom.

Looking beyond California, the culture, pursuit, and overall infrastructure of photography were quite different from Baltz’s experience. “When researchers dig into the history of the American ‘photo boom’ of the 1960s and 1970s, they inevitably find that all roads lead back to Nathan Lyons,” said Jessica S. McDonald, the editor of Nathan Lyons: Selected Essays, Lectures, and Interviews (2012). Lyons was influential in transforming the community of photography, especially as it pertained to cultivating an understanding of images as language. As a photographer, curator, educator and critic, he made an impact on every facet of the discipline. In the 1960s, as curator at the George Eastman House in Rochester, he presented seminal exhibitions, including “Toward a Social Landscape,” which showcased younger practitioners of the documentary “snapshot aesthetic” pioneered by Robert Frank. The show illustrated the rapidly transforming social landscape as it was actually lived and experienced by Americans, rather than an exalted or idealized presentation of the everyday experience. In practice, however, this aesthetic, more subjective and spontaneous, was entirely different from the deliberate and calculated framing in Baltz’s approach to photography.

After Lyons left the George Eastman house in 1969, he dedicated his time to the creation of an alternative space for education, the Visual Studies Workshop (VSW) in Rochester, where he directed the program for more than thirty years. The idea for the Workshop was initially conceived

in 1954 when Lyons returned from military service to Alfred University and participated in poetry workshops. He described the space as allowing for a lively climate of investigation and risk taking. From the outset, Lyons had cross-disciplinary ideas about photography as part of visual studies, and VSW had a dual function as being both a working artist’s studio and presenting a dynamic academic curriculum. Breaking the mold of traditional MFA programs, students came from all backgrounds – dance, history, philosophy, and literature. Lyons stressed the importance of putting the history of photography into a broad framework.

Lyons stressed the importance of developing “practice into theory, not theory into practice.” In his words, “It’s not the model of how painters were traditionally trained, where they sat in the great museums and copied the works of masters or plaster casts, or some of the other variational models. I think it has something to do with an attitude of research, rather than simply promoting a talent whose ideas don’t grow or develop over time.”

Nathan Lyons was a critical figure in his contribution to the development of the field of photography in the United States. He established an investigative model rather than an applied model that limited students to work within set parameters. Such an approach was novel and it offered a sharp contrast to Baltz’s experience at the San Francisco Art Institute.

Since Baltz did not aspire to becoming, nor did he have access to work in the vein of, a master photographer, he turned to other artists for influence, including artists outside the medium of photography. In the 1960s he was contemplating the works of Donald Judd and Joseph Kosuth, the latter of whom was a major influence specifically in The Prototype Works. During their interview in 2009 when Witkovsky reminded Baltz that he had previously described the series as an homage to Kosuth, Baltz confirmed that notion. He noted that Kosuth had an exhibition at

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Kunsthalle Berne in Switzerland and that part of the show was actually titled “Prototypes.”

Baltz’s images in this series captured subject matter reduced to its essence; he told Witkovsky that Kosuth “[was] reducing something to its essential elements, so it’s literally irreducible beyond that state.” Kosuth, an early practitioner of Conceptual art in the mid-1960s, explored projects that presented ideas as directly, immediately, and purely as possible. He referred to how artists, from the mid-1960s onwards, began to drift from medium specific questions to concerns with the overall examination of art. Instead of scrutinizing traits particular to the medium, Conceptual artists were examining the ideas transmitted. Kosuth also believed that traces of artistic skill should be eliminated from art, a notion questioning the principle of authorship that was similarly confronted by Baltz and one of the reasons he favored the mechanical aperture of the camera and the medium of photography.

Baltz also pointed to his fascination with real estate photographs and noted that Ed Ruscha was an influence. In his search for beauty in bleakness, the banality of Ruscha’s gas stations encouraged a wide-ranging repository of subject matter in the vernacular landscape for Baltz. His interest in the reproduction of evidence-based records was also similar to Ruscha, who wrote: “Twenty six Gasoline Stations is not a book to house a collection of art photographs – they are technical data like industrial photography.” Baltz’s portfolios at this time, similar to Ruscha’s, eschew the emergence of the photo-essay that deepened a particular subject as in the case of Robert Frank’s seminal The Americans (1958); instead their publications are serial artworks that focus on the dispassionate documentation of repetitive and banal subject matter.

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53 Interview with Matthew Witkovsky, 7. The exact date of this exhibition could not be confirmed. In the interview, Baltz said that the show was “very, very early on.”
54 Ibid, 9.
57 Nicolas de Oliveira and Nicola Oxley, “A Staircase to Infinity,” 12.
interview in 2009 Baltz confessed to Witkovsky, “Ruscha kind of saved my life at a certain point, although he doesn’t know it. But it seems to me that the commodification […] is a very American thing.” J. B. Jackson, who published the first issue of Landscape magazine in 1951 and remained editor until 1968, was described by Baltz as “brilliant” because he was able to convey how Americans were not attached to land itself, but rather to their equity in the land. At this point in the interview, speaking about Americans generally, Baltz said:

If they got a better deal, they would move. So maybe it is really a very American thing. But I would also have some sort of, again, maybe atavistic notion that a home was some sort of special place. It was part of one’s identity. It was something where your children’s identity is also formed, that it has a special relationship to you that no other space has. So the notion that this would be commodified and simply be an exchange item, that seemed to me – there is something obscene about that to me.

Among all of the portfolios Baltz created in the 1970s, the obscenity of such commodification is most evident in Park City. In order to refine his own visual language in photography, Baltz turned his attention outside of the medium. Minimalism and Conceptualism, his preoccupation with real estate, industrial growth, and the consequent commodification of American culture, enabled Baltz to use his photographs to participate in conversations regarding contemporary art and contribute to its new purposes.

58 Interview with Matthew Witkovsky, 19.
CHAPTER III
THE SEVENTIES – INFLUENCES AND THE PROTOTYPE WORKS

In 1985 Lewis Baltz published an essay, “American Photography in the 1970s: Too Old to Rock, Too Young to Die,” and wrote that the 1970s was an anxious decade for Americans, bracketed politically by presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, and photographically by Diane Arbus and Cindy Sherman. In the essay, Baltz described how photography began to excel as a medium accepted in the fine arts during the 1970s, which culturally and politically was an otherwise bleak decade in American history. The medium transitioned away from the outcast, peculiar, and freakish subject matter that was popular in the 1960s, and instead turned to the most basic source of American myth and symbol: the American landscape.

Baltz claimed that, prior to the 1970s, the private market for contemporary photography was virtually unheard of even in America. The first commercially viable New York art gallery devoted exclusively to the exhibition and sale of photographs was opened by Lee Witkin in 1969; and in 1971, the Light Gallery opened its doors on Madison Avenue and was dedicated to showcasing and selling the works of living photographers. Both establishments flourished throughout the decade. Also in 1971, Yale University began actively collecting photographs for the first time when it acquired twenty-five prints by Walker Evans. From 1979 through 2013 Tod Papageorge directed the graduate photography department at the Yale School of Art. In 1972, Peter Bunnell, previously a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, went to Princeton University to occupy the first endowed chair in the history of photography in the United States. The highest halls

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of learning began to make scholarship of the medium more accessible. Expanding enrollment, diversifying curricula, and growing employment in the university system meant that higher education institutions were becoming incubators for academic achievement and professional growth in photography.  

For his part, Lewis Baltz joined the illustrious roster of art dealer Leo Castelli’s gallery in 1971. Describing the somewhat sudden emergence of photography’s position on the fine arts stage, Baltz recalled an observation by Marvin Heiferman: the art world seemed to have “a cyclical interest in photography that lies dormant for thirty years and then re-erupts in a flurry of excitement for a few years, a behavior pattern rather like that of a hyperkinetic child discovering a new toy.”  

Heiferman was director of Castelli Graphics and Photographs from 1975 to 1982, and prior to that he was assistant director at the Light Gallery. By the mid-1980s he began focusing on projects that explored the impact of vernacular images.

In the 1970s, Leo Castelli represented many of the most interesting artists in the country, arguably the best artists in the world, and Baltz was a photographer wholly dedicated to his craft in a stable of artists doing anything but photography. Recalling his representation during their conversation in 2009, Witkovsky described Baltz’s appointment on the roster as an “exotic phenomenon.” Baltz, who often commented about how there is no justice in the art world, said that Castelli’s interest to become his dealer was “huge validation for the work,” and he attributed much of his success to Castelli’s early recognition of his work.

Another shift in the art world came from the growing awareness of the revolutionary, pared down aesthetics of Minimalism. In a conversation with curator Sarah Greenough, Witkovsky

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63 Ibid, 48-49.  
64 Ibid, 55.  
65 Interview with Matthew Witkovsky, 28.  
66 Ibid, 30.
recalled that in 1964 Donald Judd famously wrote that he wanted to work on “the threshold of the interesting,” implying that he wanted to retain the viewer’s attention, but not lure one into a world of allusion.67 In a statement that appeared in “ABC Art” by Barbara Rose, Judd wrote, “One of the most important things in any art is its degree of generality and specificity and another is how each of these occurs. The extent and the occurrence have to be credible. I’d like my work to be somewhat more specific than art has been and also specific and general in a different way.”68 The statement is applicable to Baltz’s images of the housing development in Park City in that each photograph is a highly detailed rendering of one specific place at a precise point of time, the names of each photograph emphasizing this specificity. And yet, simultaneously, the content pictured is universal enough to reference any housing development in general, from Utah to New Jersey. Regarding the specificity of his work, Judd described how painting and sculpture were far less neutral and much more defined in 1965. In an essay titled, “Specific Objects,” Judd wrote that the “new three-dimensional work doesn’t constitute a movement, school, or style. The common aspects are too general and too little common to define a movement. The differences are greater than the similarities.”69 Analyzing Minimalist work in 1968, Judd wrote that this art, “rather than introducing idealization and generalization and being allusive, it excludes. The work asserts its own existence, form, and power. It becomes an object in its own right.”70 For Judd the idea of Minimalism was centered on the physicality of the three dimensional object.

In California, the West Coast version of Minimalist ideas came by way of the painter John McLaughlin – who was known for his abstract, geometric paintings that were something other than

67 In a podcast titled, “In Conversation,” released on April 12, 2011, Sarah Greenough, senior curator and head, department of photographs, National Gallery of Art, and Matthew S. Witkovsky, exhibition guest curator, discussed the exhibition, “Lewis Baltz: Prototypes/Ronde de Nuit.” The podcast is still available online on the National Gallery’s website.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
illusionistic, referential depictions of shapes and colors on canvas, but instead were entities onto themselves. Baltz first learned of the artist through his high school friend Tom Holste, whose M.F.A. thesis focused on John McLaughlin. Holste spent hundreds of hours at McLaughlin’s home, interviewing him about his philosophy of painting, which developed out of his contact with Zen Buddhist art and focused on the experience of pure space, “the great vibrating void,” and “nothingness.” According to Baltz, McLaughlin’s importance was an article of faith for his generation of California artists given that McLaughlin was the first Los Angeles artist able to transcend parochial and provincial interests. “McLaughlin’s paintings are intelligent… There is no compromise in his work; McLaughlin is the quintessential “difficult” artist. He was an artists’ artist; no praise could be higher.”

In 1967, as the pared-down design elements of Minimalism thrived, Baltz, at age twenty-two, began a series of images eventually referred to as The Prototype Works (1967–1973). The portfolio was shown for the first time in 1971 at Castelli’s gallery in New York, and it was shown again in 1973. These were images of vernacular objects and recognizable subjects that were not descriptions of things, but, as the term prototype indicates, represented the first of a kind, “an original model on which something is based.” The generic objects were without question influenced by a sense of place: cars, empty billboards, windows, signage, and building facades. The western United States, and California in particular, was considered the matrix of what was going to happen in America in the near future. The suburban cityscapes of West Coast America, through its storefronts and parking lots, were signs of postindustrial decay that comment laconically on the culture that spawned them. The prefabricated, postwar industrial landscape,

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72 Ibid.
73 Baltz, Rule Without Exception, 36.
74 Nicolas de Oliveira and Nicola Oxley, “A Staircase to Infinity,” 10.
rapidly descended upon the American landscape. Better automobiles, an abundance of gasoline, and a new interstate highway system that made it possible to live in the suburbs were the critical factors that contributed to an urban exodus that dramatically changed the country.

The unnerving intersection of commercial detritus and human habitation was not officially conceptualized in photography until William Jenkins brought together a number of artists in his exhibition, *New Topographics*, in 1975. However, well before that show Baltz had a fascination, which he described as a mixture of attraction and horror, with this eruption of utilitarian structures built as cheaply as possible in the American suburbs. In *The Prototype Works*, he declared that dealing with this subject matter was a kind of exorcism.

It was a way of placing it – if you couldn’t make any other sense of this, you could at least try to make an aesthetic sense. And by working with it, you could distance yourself from it. So it was a way of getting rid of something. This was a fundamental difference, I think between Bill Current and myself. Bill photographed the things – trees, river, the seacoast, prehistoric architecture in the Southwest – that he loved and admired and used his photography to better understand and bring himself close to them. My psychology was exactly the opposite – I used photography to distance myself from a world that I loathed and was powerless to improve.  

Baltz articulated this tension as typical of his images in the 1970s. As previously discussed for *Park City*, his images are, simultaneously, instantly familiar and completely alien. Human traces are detected in each image, and yet the environments are inhospitable.

In 2011 *The Prototype Works* series was exhibited at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. and the wall text explained that Baltz “inked the edges of many of his prints and mounted them so that they project forward from their mat board rather than recede behind it. With this technique, he minimized the illusion of his photographs as ‘windows on the world’ and stressed

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75 Interview with Matthew Witkovsky, 14.
instead their nature as independent objects.” As Witkovsky described during the show, the seduction of Baltz’s images was based on the way in which they functioned as both an object and an image. In this way, Baltz was able to build on the physical and object-based concepts of Minimalism, while still working within a two-dimensional medium.

The exquisite print quality of Baltz’s photographs also accounts for the attraction – an attraction that is comparable to the luscious prints that Ansel Adams became known for, even if Adams was dealing with a subject matter that was far removed from that of Baltz. There is a magnetism in the inky blacks, milky whites, and every shade of gray in between, which successfully draws in the viewer. This seduction clashes with Baltz’s subject matter: a parking lot wall is the main attraction in his photograph titled, “Laguna Beach” (Fig. 14). Sarah Greenough, senior curator and head of the department of photographs at the National Gallery of Art, described these fascinations as the “push and pull” of Lewis Baltz photographs in the 1970s. The tonality, play of light, and organization of the images are incredibly persuasive and dynamic, and yet most often the images are documenting quotidian and unappealing aspects of the built environment: a billboard, the rough facade of a concrete building, a garage bay door, or a crumbling driveway.

The Prototype Works also demonstrated Baltz’s serial approach, discussed earlier, and the importance of contemporary art on this approach. As he explained then, “I wanted to work with groups of images. Certainly I got this from Bill Current, but not only. Since the beginning of the 1960s, we started seeing serial imagery from [Andy] Warhol, from [Donald] Judd. Josef Albers had been resurrected as the father of it all.” Beginning in 1949, Albers had explored chromatic

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76 In a podcast titled, “In Conversation,” released on April 12, 2011, Sarah Greenough, senior curator and head of the Department of Photographs at the National Gallery of Art, and guest curator Matthew S. Witkovsky discussed the exhibition, “Lewis Baltz: Prototypes/Ronde de Nuit.” The podcast is available on the National Gallery’s website.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Interview with Matthew Witkovsky, 7.
interactions within compositions of nested squares, culminating in hundreds of paintings and prints that would make up the series, *Homage to the Square*. Starting in the early 1960s, both Warhol and Judd would explore repetition and serial imagery in various mediums.

Baltz was looking keenly to his contemporaries for influence, particularly to the pop, minimalist and conceptual artists, and outside the bounds of the photographic medium. Baltz found that what the great artists of the late 1960s had in common was a desire to make art that took account of the space around it and made the viewer part of its space. Beginning with *The Prototype Works* and culminating in *Park City*, Baltz defined a set of parameters and found a way for photography to participate in the conversation with the great developments of recent art.

It is widely agreed upon, among art historians and critics, that *The Prototype Works* are critical images because they successfully shifted the paradigm of photography from description to proposition.\(^{80}\) The exhibition of *New Topographics* (1975) received similar recognition and helped move the needle advancing the paradigm shift even further. For his part, Baltz felt that *The Prototype Works* were images that represented truly genuine works of art, the first that he had ever created. For this reason, Baltz destroyed nearly all the photographs that he had made up to that point: “I had bodies and bodies and bodies of work, which I destroyed, because they weren’t really mine. They were influenced by one or another of my idols, influenced by Bill Current a lot. Influenced by a lot of people, a lot of things. So it really wasn’t my work. And I destroyed it.”\(^{81}\)

Baltz’s departure from American landscape photography and his affinity with American Minimalism posits more questions in relationship to the reception of the work, in terms of how one views the active engagement of the viewer in the functioning of art. These were much debated issues at this time. In the seminal essay, “Art and Objecthood” (1967), Michael Fried criticized

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\(^{80}\) Baltz, *Rule Without Exception*, 37.

\(^{81}\) Interview with Matthew Witkovsky, 9.
Minimalism’s favoring of the spectator’s experience above the work’s relational properties, thus rendering it indistinguishable from a general experience of the world.\textsuperscript{82} Fried addressed the viewer’s perception of Minimalist art in relationship to a different kind of reception of the work of art, based on the work’s aural “presence,” which was the modernist expectation for how a work of art should be received. These were points that pertained to the aesthetics of Baltz as well. Regarding Baltz’s first admirable contribution to photography, Adam Weinberg, curator and director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, wrote, “Baltz’s low-key, understated and elemental works reveal subjects that are inexorably temporary, yet they have an inevitability, a permanence, even a stateliness. His images demand more than contemplation and delectation: they demand reckoning.”\textsuperscript{83} Such reckoning with these photographs aligns with Fried’s proposition on objecthood that implies the object, and not only the beholder experiencing the object, must remain at the center of the situation.

\textsuperscript{82} Nicolas de Oliveira and Nicola Oxley, “A Staircase to Infinity,” 7.

\textsuperscript{83} Baltz, Rule Without Exception, 37.
CHAPTER IV

AMERICAN NATIONALISM AND WESTWARD EXPANSION

America is the country of the Future. From Washington… through all its cities, states, and territories, it is a country of beginnings, of projects, of vast designs, and expectations. It has no past; all has an onward and prospective look.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1844

From the outset of colonization, our cultural character has depended on geological territory, and the relationship has unfolded as a complex bond punctuated by ironic inconsistencies in terms of how we measure our values and identify American culture. The American psyche has always been deeply absorbed by the quintessentially American ideals of “Manifest Destiny,” and this captivation with expansionism and imperialism has fueled the mechanisms of a dystopic society. As Baltz told Witkovsky in 2009, “Americans are never attached to the land. They are attached to their equity in the land.” One can read these elements in Baltz’s efforts to document the evolution of Park City, as it was transformed from an old, abandoned nineteenth century mining town in rural Utah into a housing development and ski destination.

The original settlement of Park City was founded in 1860 when deposits of silver were discovered nearby. The mining boom lasted until 1889, when a fire burned the entire town to the ground, which happened in conjunction with diminishing returns from the mines, marking the end of an era and the downturn of the local economy. Park City devolved into a dilapidated ghost town over the next half a century, until the growing interest in skiing during the 1960s took hold. Good ski conditions, the picturesque old West setting, and thousands of acres of undeveloped land suggested to investors that Park City could be developed along the same lines as Aspen,

85 Interview with Matthew Witkovsky, 19.
Most of the land in Utah, prior to the construction boom, had been open range, as seen in the background of the photograph titled, “Looking North from Masonic Hill toward Quarry Mountain” (Fig. 15). However, the site of Baltz’s images in Park City were originally dumping grounds for mining wastes in the early nineteenth century.

The origins of Americans’ relationship to the land, which started with the nascent identity of the thirteen colonies, is an important context to understand the culture that shaped the art of Lewis Baltz. Retracing this deep-rooted connection gives an explanation to the post World War II urban exodus to suburbia, and to California in particular, emphasizing the need for land of one’s own in order to achieve the American dream. This was certainly not the first time Americans set out for the West Coast; Thomas Jefferson believed the nation depended on its westward expansion and settlers began to colonize the West in 1803 after the Louisiana Purchase took place. Later, the California Gold Rush (1848–1855) sent people out in droves, and the 1930s also witnessed a migration to the West. The quintessential dream was about a new life, a fresh start on a plot of land.

During the twilight years of the eighteenth century, immediately following the American Revolution, the land was arguably the binding ingredient that brought together thirteen disparate colonies. Americans had not only won their independence from the British Empire, but they had also acquired an empire of their own. To be sure, the potential of an American nation remained a utopia that very few actually took seriously. George Washington was an exception. He had a unique, expansive vision that was continental in scale and informed directly by the land. For

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86 Baltz, Landscape: Theory, 24.
87 Art historian Barbara Novak, while not directly quoted in this research, has published much of the influential literature that has informed the author’s understanding of the interconnectivity between American identity, landscape, and art.
example, after leading the Revolutionary Army to achieve independence from Great Britain, Washington wrote:

The Citizens of America, placed in the most evitable conditions, as the Sole Lords and Proprieters of a vast tract of Continent, comprehending all the various Soils and climates of the World, and abounding with all the necessaries and conveniences of life, are now by the late satisfactory pacification, acknowledged to be possessed of absolute freedom and Independency. They are, from this period, to be considered as Actors on a most conspicuous Theatre, which seems to be peculiarly designed by Providence for the display of human greatness and felicity.88

The Continental Congress in 1784–1785 grappled with how to organize future settlement on the frontier. Jefferson, a delegate of Virginia at the time, helped draft and pass ordinances that would ambitiously carve up the West using a grid, which was a tool championed by one of his models, the Italian architect Andrea Palladio (1508–1580). Just as Palladio used a grid to organize the Venetian Republic, Jefferson relied upon the rational system to layout an enduring plan for the nascent United States. Through the Land Ordinances of 1784 and 1785, the hope was that the systematic planning would chart out new townships in the westward expansion, holding each new township accountable for the obligation to take part in the civic process of governing, teaching, building schools, and maintaining order. Furthermore, the grand socializing experiment would indoctrinate the settlers to democratic ideals and unite the nation.

J. B. Jackson has pointed out that this grid was an “ingenious, if unimaginative, way to create a landscape,”89 and it was met with skepticism in the beginning. Settlers from the East or from Europe complained of its monotony and its disregard of the earth’s topography, since the grid made no adjustments for rivers, hills, and marshlands. The system was never meant to be a method for organizing cities and regions, nor was it meant to produce close-knit communities, as

those were for the settlers to create over time. The purpose of Jefferson’s grid was to facilitate the distribution of land as simply and as equitably as possible – to create a land of opportunity. To have a clear title to a piece of land was the dream of every American.\textsuperscript{90} Baltz had an underlying incentive that parallels the evenhanded inclination of the founding father: installed in grids, the images become one large non-hierarchal work; a collective whole (Fig. 16).

From the initial years of the republic, as westward expansion gained currency, nobody had any idea what the vast interior of the American landscape contained; at most it was imagined as consisting largely of expanses of impenetrable forests and bands of Indian tribes. At the dawn of the nineteenth century, U.S. culture was still considered far inferior to that of Europe, in that the new nation lacked any architectural relics that connected America to a glorified antiquity. It was the nature of the land, its Arcadian topography, which gave the young nation something ancient and noble to counter Europe’s monuments. With the developments of telegraph wires and the completion of the transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869, technology conquered distance.\textsuperscript{91} One hundred years later during the mid-twentieth century, cars, infrastructure, and major highways would encourage another type of impassioned expansion that led to the phenomenon of the suburbs and exurbs.

The first westward expansion of the American empire seemed to be an inexorable force, barreling along to compensate for the great loss suffered from the Civil War. At stake during this period was the pictorial integrity of photographs, given that many of the photographers working during the nineteenth century, such as Carleton Watkins, framed the land for financial or political gains, receiving government commissions or making a profit from the encroaching tourism.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid, 5.
\textsuperscript{91} Martha A. Sandweiss, \textit{Print the Legend: Photography and the American West} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 156.
Photographs at this time often communicate a narrative that conformed to nationalistic and imperialistic interests, and were meant to promote tourism, national identity, and western expansion.

In 1855 Americans “discovered” a monumental motif of the national landscape in Calaveras County, California: the giant sequoia trees (*sequoiadendron giganteum*), the oldest and tallest living things on earth. Transcendentalist writers Ralph Waldo Emerson, and later his disciple Henry David Thoreau, had been telling Americans for years that God was more easily found in nature than in the works of man. The giant sequoias seized national attention, and the implication of age due to their height captured the country’s imagination. In the early 1860s, one visitor saw the trees and over-optimistically hypothesized:

> They were of very substantial size when David danced before the ark, when Solomon laid the foundations of the Temple, when Theseus ruled in Athens, when Aeneas fled from the burning wreck of vanquished Troy, when Sesostris led his victorious Egyptians into the heart of Asia, I have no manner of doubt.

Deeply embedded in the chemistry of our country’s genealogy is the idea that returning to nature will restore authenticity and guide one towards the discovery of greater truths. As Barbara Rose observed, “in a culture lacking pinnacles of order through a monarchy, an established church, or a direct link with the mythologies of the classical world, American art has traditionally found its most elevated subject matter in the natural landscape, often endowing it with qualities that transcend its literal appearance.”

Opportunities to make picturesque photographs of the American interior abounded, exemplified by the work of Carleton Watkins and Eadweard Muybridge. The prevailing norms of nineteenth century images of the West strike a balance between conveying the uninhabited majesty

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of the American landscape, while constructing a summons for man to cultivate this wilderness through settlement. The photographs of Watkins are essentially inviting, and through their organized compositions, the viewer can accumulate the vicarious thrills of exploration and travel. In the photograph titled, “The Sentinel Rock,” a print of which is in the collection at the Yale University Art Gallery, the mountain looms large over the simple wooden clapboard structure in the foreground (Fig. 17). Particularly interesting at the right side of the frame is the juxtaposition of the white picket fence next to the massive height of the sequoia tree. The fence, an American trope signifying property and the human demarcation of the landscape, conveys obvious notions of domesticity. It exerts control and discipline over the wilderness. Conversely, the sequoia is a powerful and majestic specimen of nature, left standing grandly near the entrance to the settlement. The two contend for authority, and while the sequoia might be the obvious choice as the dominant object, its limbs running two-thirds of the way up the trunk appear to be cut off, possibly in an effort to control and frame the view from where Watkins took the shot.

Such framing of the West made the land consumable for the American people, but, as Alan Trachtenberg has persuasively argued in Reading American Photographs (1989), the composition of Watkins’ photograph ultimately sacrificed pictorial integrity. In reality the American land was being seized by explorers, cartographers, settlers, artists, and the military to convey messages of nationalism, idealism, hope, and glory. In the wake of such widespread appropriation, ruin ensued. Therefore, the story of “Manifest Destiny” in America is paradoxically also a history of lament for the gradual destruction of this “Garden of Eden.”

When one brings these considerations to the twentieth century, they resonate powerfully through the writings of architects and artists. The architect Peter Blake expressed a similar concern in his notable book God’s Own Junkyard (1964), giving a negative spin on the popular phrase that
America was “God’s Own Country,” or simply “God’s Country.” The generous illustrations throughout his publication demonstrate that Americans settled for the ugly and, except for the national and state parks, not much of the beauty of the country was preserved (Fig. 18). As he wrote, “Unhappily those fine National Forests and State Parks tend to do to the landscape what National and State Museums do to painting and sculpture: that is, embalm it. (They tend to “elevate” us on Sundays and holidays, rather than enrich our lives all year round.)”\(^94\) Blake also noted that culture’s most gifted artists, philosophers, and scientists always pointed to the laws of nature as the greatest source of inspiration. Without such there would have been no Leonardo da Vinci, John Ruskin, or Frank Lloyd Wright. As he firmly stated, “In destroying our landscape, we are destroying the future of civilization in America.”\(^95\)

Similar ideas are reflected in the *Park City* portfolio, but without the dreadfully disdainful tone in Blake’s writing. Through his efforts to document the swift alteration of this particular place in the American landscape, Baltz – intentionally or not – indicated a propensity to make amends with nature by seeking meaning and probing into the cultural inclinations of society. His photographs reveal that our expectations of nature are conditioned by our experiences as inhabitants of a modern industrial society. In his *Landscape: Theory* essay, published in 1980, Baltz wrote that it is “far from incorrect to think of the natural wilderness as a moral wilderness as well; it is, at the least, morally neutral, and therefore accommodating to most any system of beliefs we project upon it.”\(^96\) In a similar vein, Robert Adams, one of his noteworthy contemporaries, produced a body of work in 1974 called *The New West*. In his review of these photographs, John Szarkowski observed: “Though Robert Adams’ book assumes no moral postures, it does have a


\(^{95}\) Ibid, 85.

moral. Its moral is that the landscape is, for us, the place we live. If we have used it badly, we cannot therefore scorn it, without scorning ourselves.”97

Jonathan Green describes how, in the 1970s, the photographers of the new American frontier were fascinated by “the change that occurs with the transformation of wilderness, rural territory, and open land into urban environment.”98 He persuasively argued that the dominant theme of this new photography was the phenomenon of change. Throughout the Park City portfolio, Baltz focuses his camera on the piled debris and man-made refuse in the forefront of the frame, which often sit in sharp contrast to the ancient mountains in the background. In this juxtaposition, nature becomes the ultimate canvas on which to illustrate the conflict between modern society and nature. It’s a very different perspective compared to the nineteenth century photographers who stood with the civilized world behind them and cast their cameras out toward the wilderness.99 Baltz, and his contemporaries in the 1970s, stood in the open land and directed their lenses at the rapidly approaching industrialization of society.

In the wake of humans’ seemingly careless upheaval of the earth to transform the land into a housing development and eventual ski resort town, Baltz’s measured surveillance of the process, spanning two years, viewed the disrupted land as a worthy investigation. This approach is aligned with practices of Land Art. Such inclination to recycle ruined land, whether by industry or natural disaster, reflects the most compelling sites for Land Art, according to the late artist Robert Smithson:

My own experience is that the best sites for “earth art” are sites that have been disrupted by industry, reckless urbanization, or nature’s own devastation. For instance, The Spiral

98 Green, American Photography, 164.
99 Ibid, 163.
Jetty is built in a dead sea, and The Broken Circle and Spiral Hill in a working sand quarry. Such land is cultivated or recycled as art.\textsuperscript{100}

Smithson emphasized his proclivity to reclaim mining and quarry sites specifically in an interview with contributor for The New Yorker, Calvin Tomkins. As he stated in 1972, “One of the things that interests me most, in fact, is the idea of using abandoned quarries, old strip mines, and such places as sites for earth art. These ruined landscapes could be recycled, too, and given over to a different type of cultivation.”\textsuperscript{101}

Art historian and critic Lucy Lippard has rightly stated, the reconstructive potential of an art practice that raises consciousness on the land, about land, history, culture, and place cannot be underestimated.\textsuperscript{102} For Baltz, the most common view our society has of nature is among the most rigorously secular and least appealing ones: landscape-as-real-estate. As Baltz writes, “The fact that the land offers our society such an excellent arena for its venality should tell us much about what is distinctly “modern” in landscape.”\textsuperscript{103} His interest in real estate and commodification, and its impact on shaping American culture, is related to some of the fundamental beliefs in the Land Art movement. These were artists looking to the land because they were dissatisfied with the current social and political system, and were therefore not willing to produce traditional fine art objects to indulge, commodify, and perpetuate that system.

\textsuperscript{101} Calvin Tomkins, “Maybe a Quantum Leap,” The New Yorker (February 5, 1972): 54.
\textsuperscript{103} Baltz, Landscape: Theory, 29.
CHAPTER V

LAND ART AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

Instead of using a paintbrush to make his art, Robert Morris would like to use a bulldozer.

Robert Smithson, 1966

The whole inhabited world, from the highlands of Peru to the heart of Asia, is marked by vast circles and parallel lines and spirals, great avenues of monoliths, many dating back thousands of years: signs of our sense of responsibility for the survival of the earth and its people. Could much the same not be said of our immense grid of landscapes, our geometrically designed cities, our parks and wilderness areas?

John Brinckerhoff Jackson

In October 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, six months after the student riots of Paris, and just weeks before the election of Richard Nixon as President of the United States, Robert Smithson organized an exhibition called “Earthworks” at the Dwan Gallery in New York. The show presented the large-scale outdoor works of fourteen artists, most of which was represented by photographs. The earthworks challenged conventional notions of exhibitions and sales given that they were either too large or too unwieldy to be collected. The fact that the works were mostly presented as photographs emphasized Land Art’s resistance to acquisition. Smithson, arguably the group’s most influential artist, wrote a pivotal essay in 1968, “The Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,” which provided a cultural framework that positioned Land Art as a reaction to the disengagement of modernism from social issues as represented by the critic Clement Greenberg.

104 Smithson, The Collected Writings, 95.
105 J. B. Jackson, “Preface,” in A Sense of Time, A Sense of Place, viii.
Land Art fully emerged during the 1970s, just before the *New Topographics* exhibition in 1975, and many of these artists were contemporaries of Lewis Baltz, exhibiting similar inclinations and probes into American culture. They were a diverse group that famously abandoned the white cube of the gallery to make dramatic interventions in the living landscape. A number of Land Art projects required extensive planning, the collaboration of many hired individuals, and large earth-moving equipment to see the conception through to fruition. Two examples include Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970), and the bureaucratic labyrinth that Christo and Jeanne-Claude had to navigate for their installation of *Valley Curtain* (1972) in Colorado. Other artists worked in isolation, but then required financial backing and fabricators in order to physically realize their works. Perhaps with the exception of the brawling days of Abstract Expressionism, the Land Art movement was arguably the most macho of the post-war art era. In its first manifestations, the genre was one of diesel and dust, populated by hard-hat-minded men, finding their identities away from the comforts of the cultural center, digging holes and blasting cuts through cliff sides, recasting the land with ‘masculine’ disregard for the longer term.¹⁰⁶ Such reaction to the existing art world power structures cracked the glass ceiling of the institutional forces that had marginalized some forms of art, including photography, and challenged the accepted subject matter of art. To be sure, the fact of the matter was that their work was often funded by the gallery system, as the efforts of the dealer Virginia Dwan, among others, could attest.

However, like the work that it embraces, the term Land Art is variable and complex. The grandiosity of Land Art projects can be problematic when the place-specific art occupies the space rather than illuminates its surroundings. Even though Michael Heizer was one of the more reclusive artists working with the land in 1970, he recently created a powerful example of place-

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specific art occupying space in 2012 with the installation of a 340-ton granite boulder at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and bestowed the title: *Levitated Mass* (2012). Workers spent more than a year digging the trench that runs beneath the megalith, and the museum funded the installation with about $10 million in private donations. Sharing space with this titanic geologic specimen might be a breathtaking experience, but what does the displaced boulder actually illuminate about its origins? The installation highlights the expanse of art history, recalling ancient megaliths like Stonehenge, while simultaneously exhibiting the awesome possibilities in engineering today. Ultimately, however, the narrative also occupies shallow waters, for this Los Angeles installation is defined by tourism and celebrity. The project demonstrates how the showmanship of certain Land Art installations can problematically *occupy* the space rather than foster a place-specific dialogue. Lucy Lippard – famed art critic, early champion of feminist art, and one of the first to write about the dematerialization of conceptual art – has provocatively criticized contemporary Land Art for demanding all the attention, “like a spoiled child,” whereas by comparison the American Indian geomorphs and rock art are able to quietly absorb us into their space while offering clues about the cultures that created them.\textsuperscript{107} Baltz’s work falls into the latter category and can be “quietly absorbed” – it is not about pomp and display. His aesthetic was focused on banal or decayed subject matter, photographed with a detached and unemotional viewpoint, which can be read as a denunciation when compared to the grandiose vision of a previous generation of landscape photographers.\textsuperscript{108}

Jeffrey Kastner has argued that land artists expanded the contextual spaces between previously delimited boundaries of sociology, science, history, and art by conflating all of them into a messy and frequently exuberant expression of ‘postmodernist’ twentieth century life.

Resituating the site of the aesthetic epiphany, as Michael Fried discussed, from the object to the beholder and the surroundings in which the object was perceived dramatically altered the terrain of art-making tradition. In Land Art, the artist, and occasionally the viewer, is transformed from observer of nature to actual participant, a notion paralleled by Baltz in his images of Park City which contain ideas that activate the mind. Many land artists relied heavily on photography since only a few viewers could make the pilgrimage to physically experience the earthworks sites. In her essay, “The Anti-Photographers” (1976), art critic Nancy Foote writes,

Photographs are crucial to the exposure (if not to the making) of practically every manifestation of conceptual-type art – Earthworks, process and narrative pieces, Body Art, etc. Their first function is, of course, documentation; but it can be argued that photography offers certain specific qualities and possibilities that have done much to inform and channel artistic strategies and to nurture the development of idea-oriented art. Despite its dependence on photography, however, conceptual art exhibits little photographic self-consciousness, setting itself apart from so-called serious photography by a snapshot-like amateurism and nonchalance that would raise the hackles of any earnest professional.

Foote suggests that Conceptual art’s Duchampian underpinnings strip the photograph of its artistic pretensions, transforming it from a mirror into a window. While arguably Baltz’s portfolio is conceptually driven and idea-oriented, it is difficult to strip the images of Park City of their artistic pretenses – his labor carefully developing the film in the darkroom are evident in the wide range of tones that achieve maximum visibility in the prints. During the interview in 2009, Baltz stated that with his work during the 1970s he was “aspiring to make something that was like a window.” In this manner, as demonstrated throughout the Park City portfolio, the ideas that the prints reveal about the society within the frame become most critical, not what is pictured in a literal sense. Many of the Land Art projects were also conceptual in this vein, and echoed the tenets of Minimalism since the work was often stripped down to its very essence.

109 Kastner, “Preface” in Land and Environmental Art, 16.
111 Interview with Matthew Witkovsky, 22.
Another angle that provides important contextual framework for studying Baltz’s photographs, beyond the museum and gallery setting, is environmentalism and the formal development of cultural landscape studies as a curriculum. The discipline emerged out of the field of human geography, which first gained currency in the United States through Carl Ortwin Sauer (American, 1889 – 1975) at the University of California, Berkeley. Sauer, whose best-known work is *Agricultural Origins and Dispersals* (1952), was instrumental to establishing the curriculum and early development of the geography graduate school at Berkeley.

In addition to geography, cultural landscape studies implicated several other disciplines: art history, design, architecture and landscape architecture, environmental sciences, urban planning, and American studies. John Brinckerhoff Jackson (American, born in France, 1909 – 1996), although not formally confined to academia, since he was a visiting lecturer, was an admirer of Sauer and is credited with continuing where Sauer left off in the 1950s. Jackson urged his readers to take a close look at their surroundings, no matter how parochial, and to recognize the origins, utility, and appeal of parking lots, gas stations, tract homes, and billboards. He contended that it was all too easy to dismiss such things as beneath scholarly notice. As geographer Peirce F. Lewis wrote: “The basic principle is this: that all human landscape has cultural meaning, tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form.”

While Jackson urged his students to look at the built landscape differently and attempt to recognize its value, others wrote searing cases against the “uglification” of the American landscape. For instance, in the original introduction to *God’s Own Junkyard*, Peter Blake had written: “This book is not written in anger. It is written in fury.” In the updated introduction to the

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1979 edition, Blake acknowledged: “Of course it was – it was part and parcel of that emotional period that began with the election of an exciting young president who promised and tried to remake the world; that next had to deal with the nightmare of his murder and the murders of others whom we admired; that then moved from frustration into urgent political resistance to the Vietnam War; and that finally settled down into serious pursuits of environmental issues in the 1970s.” With incontrovertible facts and a wealth of photo evidence, Blake set forth a pictorial lesson (Fig. 18) still relevant today and made a hard case against the “planned deterioration” of the American landscape, which was far more than a blow against beauty.

At the same time, there was another source that generated nationwide concern, triggering alarms in the environmental sciences. In 1962 Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* to document the detrimental effects from the tide of chemicals born out of the Industrial Age. Her thesis was that humans were subjecting themselves to slow poisoning by the misuse of chemical pesticides that polluted the land, air, and water. Such environmental hazards are a common point of discussion now, but in 1962 her research took the world by storm and sparked a national debate on the use of pesticides, the responsibility of science, and the limits of technological progress. The July 1962 headlines in *The New York Times* captured the national sentiment: “*Silent Spring* is now noisy summer.” One needs to only skim the table of contents to get a sense of the urgency in her research and severity for the situation at hand: *Elixirs of Death, Needless Havoc, Rivers of Death, Through a Narrow River*. In Chapter 12, *The Human Price*, Carlson wrote:

The new environmental health problems are multiple – created by radiation in all its forms, born of the never-ending stream of chemicals of which pesticides are a part, chemicals now pervading the world in which we live, acting upon us directly and indirectly, separately and collectively. Their presence casts a shadow that is no less ominous because it is formless and obscure, no less frightening because it is simply impossible to predict the

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113 Blake, *God’s Own Junkyard*, 7.
effects of lifetime exposure to chemical and physical agents that are not part of the biological experience of man.\textsuperscript{115}

Citing Carson’s research here is not to suggest that Baltz’s work consciously operated as an environmental warning. When taken at face value, certainly one of the misconceptions surrounding Baltz’s work in the 1970s is the assumption that he intended to use his photographs primarily to raise awareness about injustices committed against the environment. The junk, collected debris, trashed construction sites, cheap tract homes, desolate parking lots, and ugly corporate buildings register as smear campaigns against the American land. Journalistic repetition, even for good cause such as bringing awareness to environmental harms, risks becoming its own kind of pollution. Such reiteration of offenses reduces crisis to banality, so to resent Baltz as an ecological nag, therefore, is to miss the point.

There is such irony in Carson’s controversial research, which is compelling for comparison to the often caustic approach of Baltz’s treatment of the built landscape. Carson’s research marked the first time when a sizable community of scientists was documenting the physiological and environmental effects of the unbridled use of pesticides. The overarching theme of her research is the powerful and often adverse effects mankind has on the natural world. She observed thus, “To have risked so much in our efforts to mold nature to our satisfaction and yet to have failed in achieving our goal would indeed be the final irony.”\textsuperscript{116} Her delivery, and the tone throughout\textit{ Silent Spring}, is impassioned and alarming, and in this regard, her fever pitch is at odds with Baltz’s cool photographs in the 1970s. Though seemingly there is an indictment in his images, there is no obvious outrage on Baltz’s part. The precision in detail, strict framing, and severe frontality indicate a man in control of the camera and his emotions. Not one millimeter is unaccounted for,

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid, 246.
\end{quote}
reminiscent of why Baltz’s work is compared to a type of legal brief. His photographs offer the look of dispassionate records collected by a witness who seems to understand both the immediate and long-term implications of what he sees. It is his understanding, a subtle suspicion towards the manmade landscape infused throughout the portfolio, which can be aligned with Carson’s concerns. Both Carson’s research and Baltz’s images from the 1970s examine a postwar culture that arrogantly claimed dominion over nature. Though different in their missions and approaches, both pursuits convey the power of mankind while simultaneously heightening the sense of being vulnerable and permeable.

The study of environmentalism and landscape theory documents the fact that since the beginning of history humanity has modified and scarred the environment to convey some message, for better or worse. Regarding those messages, J. B. Jackson implored his students to differentiate the wounds inflicted by greed and destructive fury, versus those that serve to keep us alive and pave the way for new symbols to emerge.

The success of Land Art, as persuasively suggested by Lucy Lippard, lies in its limited purpose as a spiritual medium where the art is considered a participant in the cosmos. Through such art one’s relationship with the land is activated, and the viewer in turn becomes a contributor through this personal encounter. The web of relations between the construction of the site, its specific location and the maker are irrevocably intertwined; they are one. In 1968 Robert Smithson argued that each moment of the artistic process was of equal importance, rendering it impossible to isolate the artistic process from the object of art. As he wrote,

For too long the artist has been estranged from his own ‘time.’ Critics, by focusing on the ‘art object,’ deprive the artist of any existence in the world of both mind and matter. The mental process of the artist which takes place in time is disowned, so that a commodity

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value can be maintained by a system independent of the artist. Art, in this sense, is considered ‘timeless’ or a product of ‘no time at all.’

Considered in its entirety, the Park City portfolio demonstrates the two-year process by which Baltz captured the phases of construction and transformation in the landscape of one particular locale in Utah. The success of his idea-oriented, conceptual process and his technologically advanced practice in the darkroom was best described by Marvin Heiferman when he wrote, “The picture that looks great in your hand might just blow up somewhere inside your head.” The land artists who worked to move the earth and rearrange the natural world did so in an effort to mediate our sensory relationship with the landscape. Baltz’s approach lacked the physicality of their work, but correspondingly he sought to change our emotional and spiritual relationship with the land.

\[119\] Ibid.
CHAPTER VI

NEW TOPOGRAPHICS: PHOTOGRAPHS OF A MAN-ALTERED LANDSCAPE

The psychedelic ethos of the 1960s broke down the trends toward social conformity that were rigorously propagated in America during the 1950s. The passionate engagement and the gestural abstractions of Franz Kline and Arshile Gorky in the 1950s eventually gave way to an art of cool detachment and cognitive analysis, as exemplified by the conceptually-aligned worked of a practitioner like Joseph Kosuth, whose art was stripped of personal emotion and focused on ideas. Emerging from that era of cultural and political unrest, the decade of the 1970s marked a turning point for restraint and artists searched for ways of relevant expression. Britt Salvesen has argued that the investment in the everyday was a critical outlet for those who had lost faith in the grand plan, but still believed that individuals bore responsibility for social equity and environmental sustainability. Encouraged by Minimalism’s attitude, the emergence of Conceptual art eventually positioned the artist in an even more oblique relation to the art object.120

Artists were looking to the land for inspiration, and as this research has explored, some groups were exiting the conventional art world scene altogether. Members of the Land Art movement formed their own exodus that physically marked a departure from the four walls of the museums and galleries, even while they produced largely photographically-based documentation for exhibition in those very spaces of art. Meanwhile, in academic and scientific circles, intellectuals were blazing new trails to examine humanity’s impact on the environment and taking note of our footprint on earth.

In the midst of this, at the midpoint of the decade in 1975, William Jenkins organized the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, which was first mounted at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, and subsequently traveled to the Otis Art Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design) and Princeton University. The show consisted of one hundred and sixty eighty works by ten artists: Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bern and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, and Henry Wessel, Jr.

A far cry from a “blockbuster” exhibition, very few people actually saw the show. Those who did were immediately torn between the seeming accessibility of the show: plainly prosaic views of New England, Los Angeles, and many places in between. Recognizing and identifying the subjects was not difficult; however, reading and interpreting them was challenging, and continues to be problematic. This dichotomy, which harkens back to the very essence of the irony surrounding the land and American identity, is the undercurrent of the “new topographic” style in photography. Although the images are deadpan, banal, and even boring, they are not easily penetrable, and Baltz’s aesthetic is symptomatic of this.

At the time of the exhibition, all of the artists were at an established point in their careers and had achieved success and exposure to varying degrees in the art world. They worked as individuals, rather than as members of a cohort, and tried to bring clarity and make peace with the classic attacks on the ruination of the American landscape. Baltz was not yet familiar with the work of all of the photographers represented in the exhibition. He first saw the Bechers’ work at the Sonnabend Gallery during his first or second trip to New York in 1971; he was “astonished” and “loved the work.”

121 The Bechers in turn would also go see Baltz’s photographs at Castelli’s

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121 Interview with Matthew Witkovsky, 23.
gallery, and curator Sébastien Montabel recalled asking Hilla Becher whether it was out of friendship or courtesy. She replied, “Well yes, but not only. Lewis was always a step ahead of everyone else and he was without any doubt a huge inspiration to us.”122 Around the same time, he also saw the work of Robert Adams, who was featured in a show at the Museum of Modern Art.123 Regarding Adams, Baltz expressed, “I was just delighted, mostly because I really hadn’t encountered anyone who was working on problems similar to my own. And I was beginning to worry if I was some kind of like solitary maniac, a minority of one.”124

Similar to the Bechers in subject matter, the portfolio titled, The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California (1974), features photographs that concentrate on large, industrial buildings. When viewed as an installation, the photographs dissolve into the formal play of planes and lines of dark, light, middle grey, and institutional uniformity.125 The sites’ inscrutability and the homogeneity of buildings, which housed companies that made everything from yachts to semiconductors, led Baltz to observe, “Look at that… you don’t know whether they’re manufacturing pantyhose or megadeath.”126 This ideology is echoed by photographer Joe Deal in his assessment of works displayed in the New Topographics exhibition: “In making these photographs I attempted to make a series of images in which one image is equal in weight or appearance to another. Many of the conscious decisions made while the series was evolving had to do with denying the uniqueness of the subject matter in one exposure as opposed to another in the belief that the most extraordinary image might be the most prosaic.”127 The uniformity of the

124 Interview with Matthew Witkovsky, 23.
127 Ibid, 44.
subject, paired with Baltz’s unemotional approach, presented a new way of looking at the landscape of the American West.

Jenkins praised the “style-less” images and described them as anthropological rather than critical, scientific rather than artistic. In the eyes of critics, these were also the descriptors for the show’s shortcomings. In 1975, in his essay titled, “The New West” on Robert Adams, Baltz wrote about the invisibility of the photographer as a new language:

The ideal photographic document would appear to be without author or art. Yet, of course photographs, despite their verisimilitude, are abstractions; their information is selective and incomplete. The power of the documentary photograph is linked to its capacity to inform as well as to reflect our perception of the external world. In view of this it becomes possible, for example, to marvel at the striking resemblance the rural south still bears to Walker Evans’ ’30s photos.¹²⁸

The show, barely visible at its time, has had a significant impact on future generations, framing a new way of representing the land. This project proved a significant shift in attitude toward the landscape as photographic subject and cultural preoccupation. Inherent in their work was a rejection of the nineteenth and early twentieth century treatment of the landscape by photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, and Minor White, who selectively rendered a landscape of the sublime, steeped in emotion. Since the medium’s invention, photographers had been depicting architecture in natural surroundings, as well as the isolated wilderness, but there was as not much precedence for treating the ordinary suburban built environment as a subject in and of itself.

In a conversation with Britt Salvesen in November 2006, Baltz described his practice of creating images through a “determinist” process, whereby critical analysis of current conditions led to subject and attitude, and purged them of sentimentality and subjectivity.¹²⁹ Excluding these

qualities creates an inhuman distance that is readily apparent in Park City. Baltz’s ability to disengage enables him to achieve a kind of alien environment, despite the fact that the photographs depict some of the most common and quotidian views. He is therefore able to challenge the conventions of distance, physically and emotionally, by presenting scenes that are relatable and recognizable, but also seemingly inhabitable and undesirable. The cycle prompts an internal questioning, the viewer asking herself if this is really the environment in which she works and lives.

Baltz’s role in the New Topographics is exemplified by the group of photographs in Park City. Today the resort welcomes millions of visitors and also hosts the Sundance Film Festival. Baltz recorded the early stages of earthmoving and construction, which turned a natural wilderness into a profit-ready landscape; his images function as a premonition of the procession of the commodity, intimating the afterglow of a new dystopia. Unnervingly, the last image in the entire portfolio displays a schematic bird’s eye view map of the sixty-seven houses in the suburban development, indicating which plots are for sale, under construction, under contract, or closed. Almost all of the homes have closed, and it looks like only four are still listed for sale.

In 1973, the photographer Bill Owens published a portfolio titled, Suburbia, which went on to become a cult classic of American culture in the 1970s. It was an important contribution to the history of photography, and created an interesting parallel to the ideas explored in New Topographics. The second edition printing was released in 1999 with a compelling introductory essay by journalist David Halberstam, who set up the context for the images. Each image is accompanied by a quote, an observation from the person in the picture, which gives each photograph a more emotionally persuasive edge; honest tokens of social history. The images are

like anthropological remnants of the middle-class American culture that boomed in the 1970s. Many of the people photographed were the first in their families to own homes, multiple cars, and the latest technology in the domestic sphere: washing machines, televisions, unique kitchen appliances. Throughout the book there is a candid sense of accomplishment in the faces of those photographed. Despite the frankly strange and secluded lifestyle that living out in the suburbs often endorses, there is beauty and diversity beneath these scenes of banality.

In his documentation of the tract houses and trailers in the suburban Southwest, Robert Adams revealed photographs of American homes that both shock and simultaneously intrigue. Regarding the images Szarkowski wrote, “The gaggle of plywood ranch houses at the foot of the mountain, fenced in by the trailer parks, acid neon, and extruded plastic of the highway, is an affront even to our modest expectations. But his pictures also show us that these settlements express human aspirations, and that they are therefore not uninteresting.”131 Owens, making actual portraits of the people who lived in such homes, photographed his subjects without judgment or criticism. In doing so, this emotional distance allowed to camera apparatus to capture the essence of the people who lived and experienced the newly built American landscape (Figs. 19 and 20). Looking at these images in conjunction with *New Topographics* gives an even more complete picture of what was happening to American culture during the 1970s.

As Baltz was compiling his first portfolio, *The Prototype Works*, he was working in a vein that echoed the styles of his predecessors. As the years pressed on, it is clear that Baltz began a search for his own unique voice behind the lens – or, regarding his visual voice, the deceptive absence of it. As Aaron Schuman noted, “working through the sequence, one recognizes Baltz’s intense engagement with his immediate predecessors, and then marvels at how he yet manages to

distill his own aesthetic." The *Park City* images, shot at the end of the decade, reveal a photographer who achieved a unique language in his quest, passing through many aesthetic venues: Minimalism, Conceptual art, and Land Art. Ultimately his pursuits advanced the unique contribution of photography to interpret and decode the cultural consequences of the American land.

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CONCLUSION

As the housing development rose out of the earth in Park City, Utah, so too did a new identity resulting from a changing social order. As a seemingly detached observer documenting the land’s transformations, Baltz recorded the rapid integration of technology with everyday life and the resultant nostalgia for a simpler, more natural existence. The political strife of the time, and the increasingly decentralized, grass-roots political attacks on the “institution” that contributed to it, were echoed in the art world’s increasing ambivalence towards its own institutional traditions.

Today, in this period of continued industrial growth, as populations expand and globalization continues to shrink the world’s trade routes, we continue to be in an ongoing dialogue with the land. One of the most striking legacies of Baltz’s photography is his quasi-detached observation of the process by which human development and expansion necessarily consumes the natural resources upon which it is founded. At once the source of our natural sustenance and also the foundation for the advancement of our civilization, the land and our treatment of the environment will continue to be at the forefront of our navigation.

Among the many relationships that define the human condition, the individual’s connection to their environment is primary. By deciphering the Park City portfolio, and interpreting its features against the broader framework of Land Art, the history of photography, cultural anthropology, and American history, this research has positioned Lewis Baltz as a unique contributor and participant in the historical continuum of artists drawing inspiration from the American landscape.
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Figure 2: “Interior 28,” Park City (1978-1979).
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Figure 3: “Interior 34,” Park City (1978-1979).
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Figure 9: Donald Judd, *Untitled (Stack)*, 1967. Lacquer on galvanized iron, twelve units. Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Figure 10: “Prospector Village, Lot 12, Looking Southwest on Comstock Drive toward Masonic Hill,” Park City (1978-1979). Yale University Art Gallery. Purchased with a gift from Mr. Frank H. Goodyear, Jr., B.A. 1966, and with the Janet Simeon Braguin Fund.
Figure 11: “Interior 25,” Park City (1978-1979).
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Figure 14: Lewis Baltz, *Laguna Beach*, 1969. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 15: “Looking North from Masonic Hill toward Quarry Mountain,” Park City (1978-1979).
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Figure 16: The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California (1974), installation shot.
Figure 17: Carleton E. Watkins, *The Sentinel Rock 3,270 ft.*, 1866. Yale University Art Gallery.
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