

SAME AS IT EVER WAS

RE-READING *NEW TOPOGRAPHICS*

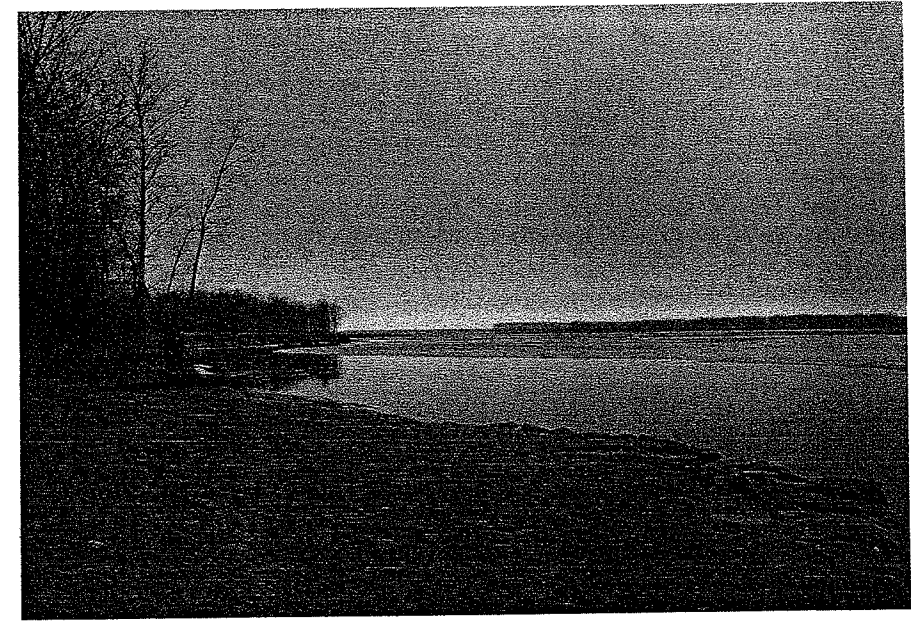
Toby Jurovics

NEW TOPOGRAPHICS: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape is arguably the greatest show never seen. This 1975 exhibition was organized by William Jenkins at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, and traveled to only two other venues the following year: the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles and the Princeton University Art Museum. It was accompanied by a slender forty-eight-page catalogue featuring three reproductions for each artist, their resumes, a checklist, and an introduction that stretches to not quite three pages. Yet rarely has an exhibition—particularly one seen by so few—had as substantive and lasting influence.

Jenkins was remarkably prescient in his selection of images, recognizing many of the artists who would come to exert the greatest influence on American landscape photography at the close of the twentieth century: Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, and Henry Wessel. When organizing an exhibition, curators should all hope to have such a high batting average. Yet while the phrase "New Topographics" immediately brings to mind for most of us a particular style of photograph, it is remarkable how little we actually know of the specific images that were displayed. *New Topographics* has become a shorthand, suggesting photographs made with a dry and restrained formal style. These images are expected to be uninflected and detached—made without sentiment or emotion. Most importantly, they are thought to possess a resistance or reaction to what was then the prevailing tradition of landscape photography, the West Coast aesthetic as defined by artists such as Ansel Adams, Wynn Bullock, Minor White, and Paul Caponigro. While the photographs associated with *New Topographics* knowingly exchanged the sublime for the subtle, many carried an emotional depth and complexity as well as an overt moral position equal to, if

not greater than, the work of these more popular and familiar photographers. They are anything but what might be considered dispassionate or documentary. Shortly after the exhibition, Robert Adams was asked, "You have been identified with the Urban Topographers, people like Stephen Shore, Frank Gohlke, Joe Deal, Nick Nixon. How do you feel about that?" He replied, "The term is too narrow to encompass all our sins. And it suggests a scientific attitude that, in truth, most of us I suspect don't feel."¹

Jenkins began his essay, "There is little doubt that the problem at the center of this exhibition is one of style. It should therefore be stated at the outset that while this introduction will concern itself with the exhibition as a stylistic event, the actual photographs are far richer in meaning and scope than the simple making of an aesthetic point."² In the decades that followed, however, most readers quickly cast aside his opening disclaimer and latched on to the following proposal, instead: ". . . the stylistic context within which all of the work in the exhibition has been made is so coherent and so apparent that it appears to be the most significant aspect of the photographs." In other words, Jenkins suggests these photographs all look somewhat the same, and, he continues, "It would seem logical to regard these pictures as the current manifestations of a picture-making attitude that began in the early nineteen sixties with Ed Ruscha."³ It is here that a critical problem arises with the catalogue: although Jenkins discusses Ruscha's photographs, in hindsight it seems most readers lost track of this antecedent, and the following interpretation has become attached to the artists in the exhibition rather than to Ruscha: "The pictures were stripped of any artistic frills and reduced to an essentially topographic state, conveying substantial amounts of visual information but eschewing entirely the aspects of beauty, emotion, and opinion. Regardless of the subject matter the appearance of neutrality was strictly maintained."⁴ To be fair, Jenkins devoted a substantial part of the brief text to distancing himself from this position, stressing that what a photograph is *of* and what it is *about* are two distinct points. But, if his concern was to clarify and maintain this distinction, Jenkins's easy use of terms such as "topography" and "documentary" and the constant thrust and parry between the idea of "description" versus "interpretation" did not help. In a recent conversation with Frank Gohlke, I inquired if the apparent oversimplification of Jenkins's hypothesis was understood to be facetious by the artists in



1.1 Robert Adams, *Missouri River, Clay County, South Dakota*, 1977.

the exhibition: "We all recognized it to be," he replied of his colleagues, "but everyone else seemed to take it at face value."⁵

This narrow interpretation of *New Topographics* persisted for decades, despite abundant statements to the contrary by the artists and the evidence presented by their photographs. In an essay for the catalogue of the 1989 exhibition *On the Art of Fixing a Shadow: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Photography*, Colin Westerbeck wrote of *New Topographics*:

Although this may be an inappropriate, catch-all term, it has continued in use because the exhibition did identify a new attitude toward landscape that had appeared in photography by the early 1970s. There is no question that an image like Robert Adams's 1977 *Missouri River, Clay County, South Dakota* [Fig. 1.1] is both photographically and geographically a long way from the work of Ansel Adams. Robert Adams has picked a middling time of year in which all of the forces of nature have nullified each other. The landscape itself is an in-between one, flat and featureless, with none of the mountain gloom

and mountain glory, the romantic ultimacy of both the terrain and the weather, characteristic of Ansel Adams' work. Robert's vision is a secular, maybe even an agnostic one. The tonal range of the *Missouri River* print is as flat as the topography. It is a *powerfully negative* [author's emphasis] picture depicting a vast and empty landscape with limited possibilities.⁶

In counterpoint, here is Adams's account of the conditions he encountered in the field while making the photographs in this series: "Along the Missouri River near Yankton, South Dakota. Mud, wind, beaver-cut saplings, an eagle, broken light over walls of trees, the crack of bank ice. . . . It was almost possible, except for the red plastic shotgun shells underfoot, to imagine meeting [Karl] Bodmer."⁷ It is as if two completely different images are being described; but, if looking at this photograph merely manages to accomplish the desire to zip up one's coat with the thought of a sudden chill, it is already more successful than it seems Jenkins or Westerbeck might have imagined possible. For all of their stated weariness of the dramatic grandeur of mid-century landscape photography, when presented with a more restrained vista, it was nevertheless a struggle for many critics and historians to appreciate.

One of the challenges with interpreting *New Topographics* has been the inability to separate the subjects of these photographs from their meaning—what they are *of* from what they are *about*—or, more specifically, the failure to consider the subjects of these images in anything more than a reductive fashion. As soon as a subject was categorized as "suburb" or "warehouse" or "muddy riverbank," one was on to the next picture. Adams made this well-known statement at the beginning of *The New West: Landscapes Along the Front Range*, his landmark monograph published the year prior to *New Topographics*:

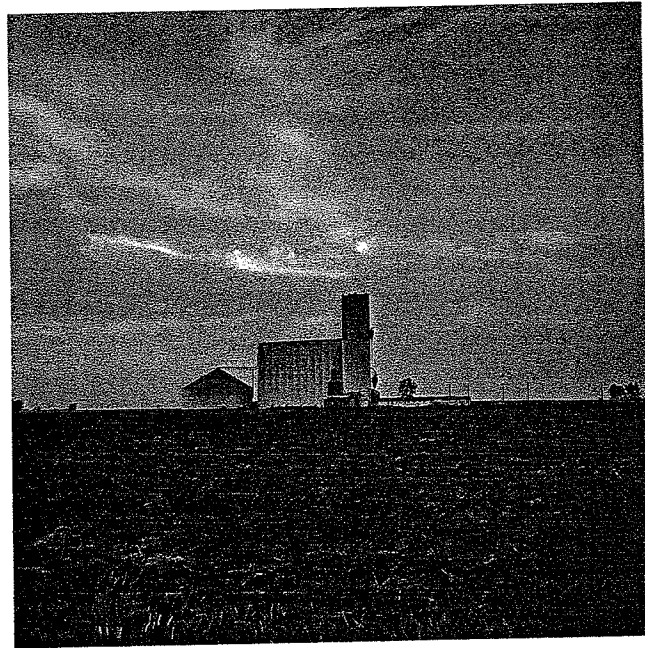
Paradoxically, however, we also need to see the whole geography, natural and man-made, to experience a peace; all land, no matter what has happened to it, has over it a grace, an absolute, persistent beauty. The subject of these pictures is, in this sense, not the tract homes or freeways but the source of all Form, light. The Front Range is astonishing because it is overspread with light of such richness that banality is impossible. Even subdivisions, which we hate for the obscenity of the speculator's greed, are at certain times of day transformed to a dry, cold brilliance.⁸

Peace, grace, and beauty are not what we have been led to expect when looking at these photographs, but, beyond the dispiriting construction of suburb upon suburb, Adams's photographs also remind us of the glow of the afternoon light on the high plains, or the rustle of a breeze that momentarily distracts us from the dull hum of passing traffic.

Frank Gohlke similarly described the powerful emotional reaction he felt when photographing the Midwestern landscapes that would appear in his book, *Measure of Emptiness: Grain Elevators in the American Landscape*: "I was frustrated by the discrepancy between the ordinariness of the facts surrounding the grain elevators and the intensity of my emotional responses to the objects themselves. . . . To me, the photographs I was making argued that there are deeper impulses lurking somewhere in the functional surfaces and details of the grain elevators, and that subjective choice as well as objective necessity has a role in determining their form."⁹ Gohlke suggests that the tension between form and meaning is not a dialogue solely confined within the borders of the print but rests within the subjects of the photographs themselves, in our responses to their practical uses and cultural associations. In an image such as *Grain Elevator and Plowed Field, Wellington, Kansas (1973)* that might initially seem spare or even desolate, Gohlke locates a dramatic narrative along the horizon—an emphatic, graphic line dividing the frame simply and clearly as well as a mark that defines a fluid and shifting perception of the outside world rather than a specific place (Fig. 1.2). In much the same way, the grain elevators act as cairns that help fix our position, while also describing a constantly changing relationship as we move within the landscape.

Gohlke's photographs are equally concerned with the temporal and physical presence of weather: of the wind, rain, and heat of the Great Plains. And, although harder to recognize at first look, he also intends these images to reflect our humanity: "The dignity of grain elevators, the precision, intelligence and grace of their formal language, their majestic presence within the landscape all seem to confirm the faith that, given the right circumstances, we will make visible the best that is within us."¹⁰ Again, he asks us to look beyond the act of identification or cataloguing to discover purpose and meaning.

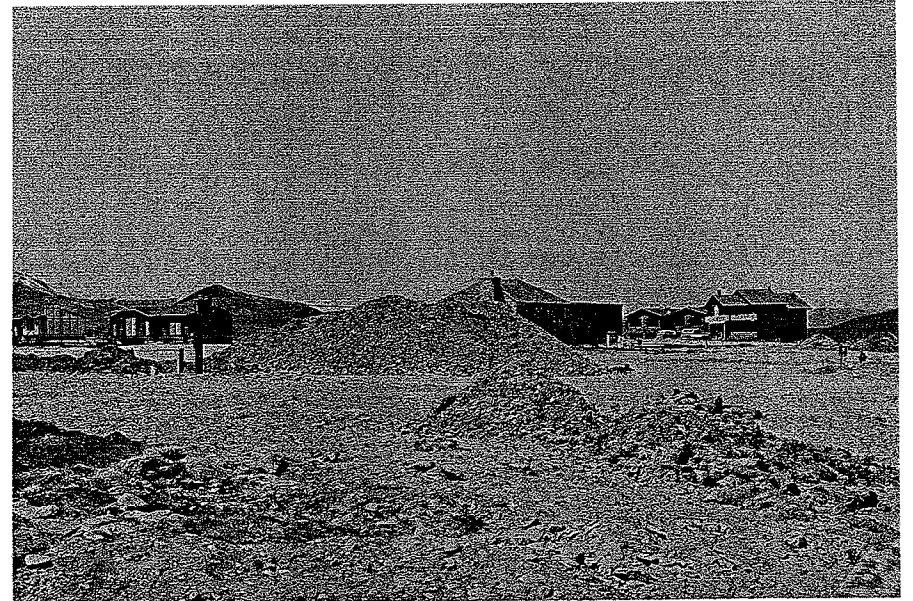
The photographers in the *New Topographics* exhibition were not attempting to isolate and distance themselves from the landscape but to re-engage in a way that would be meaningful to contemporary experience. In an interview



1.2 Frank Gohlke, *Grain Elevator and Plowed Field, Wellington, Kansas, 1973.*

conducted for Gohlke's 2007 retrospective at the Amon Carter Museum, *Accommodating Nature*, the photographer stated: "Landscape work was being done by a lot of people that were influenced by Adams, Weston, Minor White, and Caponigro that just seemed really dead to me—all the conviction had gone out of it. They weren't responding to the world anymore: they were responding to an ideal of photographic excellence that came purely from other photographers."¹¹ On the one hand, Robert Adams and Gohlke both identify form as the vehicle that points to the emotional truths in their images, a fundamentally traditional position that seems much closer to Edward Weston than Ed Ruscha. Yet they also speak openly about the broader social concerns implicit in their photographs and of a more catholic and tolerant view of the everyday landscape.

Perhaps the least expected voice in this conversation was that of Lewis Baltz, who once stated, "I want my work to be neutral and free from aesthetic and ideological posturing," while discussing photographs made at Park City, Utah, in 1978 and 1979. Within the same interview, however, he said:

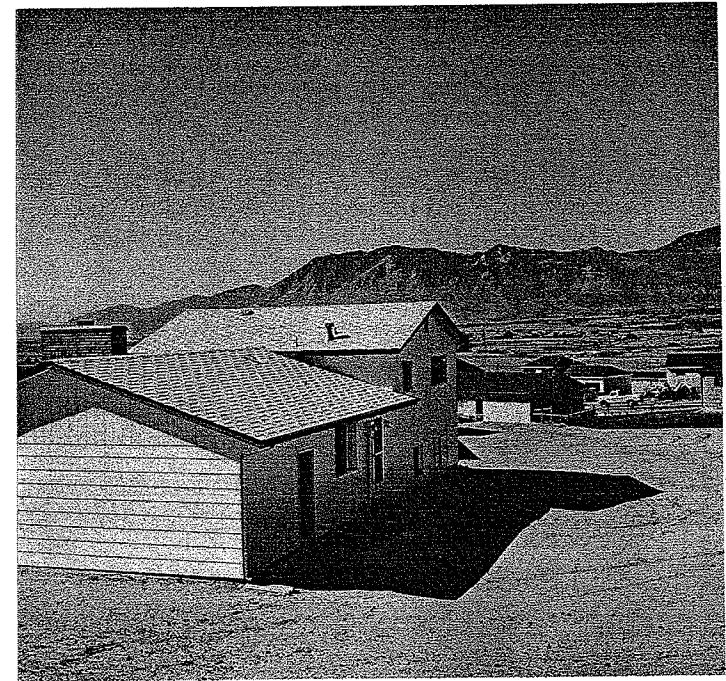


1.3 Lewis Baltz, *Prospector Village, Lot 111, Looking Northwest, 1978–79.*

Yet it's 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. One of the most common views our society has of nature is among the most rigorously secular and least appealing: landscape-as-real-estate. This is the view of nature presented to me in Park City and the view that I tried to show in the photographs. . . . This attitude holds all non-productive land as marginal; nature is what is left over after every other demand has been satisfied. 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.¹²

There is clearly nothing neutral about his position. Far from being emotionally barren, Baltz's photographs openly convey sadness, disappointment, and anger at how we have used the landscape (Fig. 1.3). The earth at Park City appears stripped bare and scarred, and piles of dirt and debris mimic the summits of the Wasatch Mountains in the distance. It becomes hard to distinguish construction from destruction, and, rather than a resort, Park City feels like a wasteland.

Compounding the reductive understanding of *New Topographics* was a problem of connoisseurship. Whether the reasons are cultural or emotional, most viewers have a consistent reaction to particular types of landscapes. No matter how familiar it may be, Ansel Adams's *Clearing Winter Storm, Yosemite Valley, California* (1942) has an almost universal resonance (see Fig. 3.7, p. 58). Given the popular expectation for landscape photographs to resemble Yosemite Valley at its most theatrical, it is unsurprising that the restrained prints of *New Topographics* and the comparative banality of their subject matter was confusing and off-putting to many viewers. The relatively poor quality of the reproductions in most catalogues and monographs printed in the 1970s only added to this problem. When being told a photograph is barren and desperate, it was hard to imagine from an inferior reproduction that this was not the case; but, in these photographers' desire to draw a connection between the physical characteristics of their subjects and the formal quality of their prints, photographs from this period are an example of the medium at its most effective. In the dry and austere tone of Robert Adams's *Newly Completed Tract House, Colorado Springs, Colorado* (1968), we feel the sun burn the back of our necks as it beats against the siding of the house (Fig. 1.4). Shielding our eyes from the bright afternoon light that radiates from this print, we can easily imagine the crunch of gravel underfoot as we walk across the dusty lot. There is a remarkable consonance between the subject and the photograph—between the object and how it is represented—and a more fluid and sophisticated technical command than has generally been acknowledged. Jenkins claimed, "the relationship between a subject and a picture of that subject is extremely fragile," but this could not be further from the truth.¹³ Photography is the least fragile medium of all, a place where truth is the least at risk, and it is in acknowledging the care, sensitivity, and affection with which these prints were made that we begin to recognize the importance of these places. Jenkins stated, "It must be made clear that 'New Topographics' is not an attempt to validate one category of pictures to the exclusion of others. As individuals the photographers take great pains to prevent the slightest trace of judgment or opinion from entering their work."¹⁴ I would instead suggest that the goal of Adams, Gohlke, and Baltz's photographs was to encourage empathy and concern. While this may not be immediately apparent, these prints create formal equivalents to the landscapes they portray that are as potent as any other example one can name.



1.4 Robert Adams, *Newly Completed Tract House, Colorado Springs, Colorado*, 1968.

In a 1984 interview, Baltz explained, "I don't think people find the content of these photographs to be the sort of thing they care to look at or think about. Perhaps people will see the work and wonder 'What possible reason could there be for anyone to spend this much time photographing this stuff'—and maybe that might draw them in deeper."¹⁵

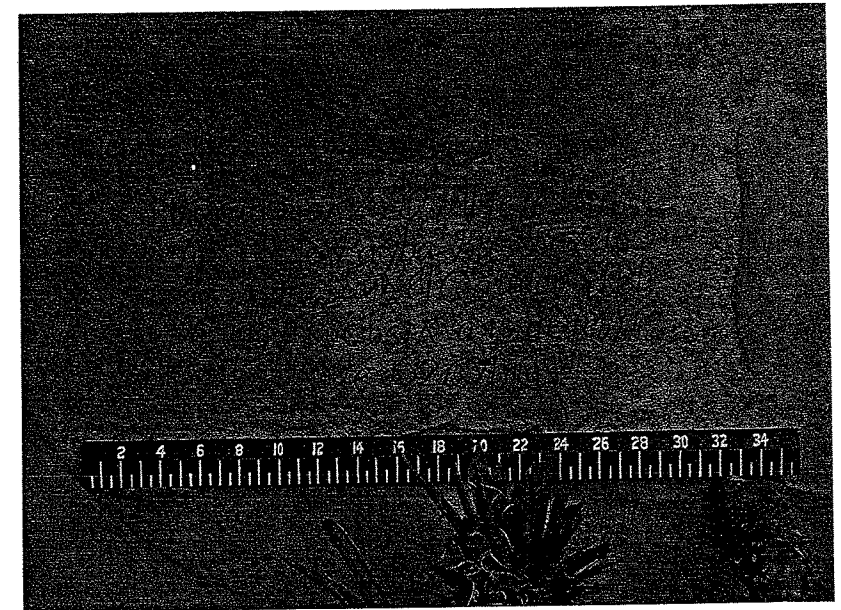
A final issue to consider is the assumption that *New Topographics* implied a rejection not only of its most immediate photographic precursors, but the refutation of all precedent. The salient historical dialog that evolved during this period was not with the mid-century West Coast tradition but with the nineteenth century. From the outset, the relationship between the New Topographics of the twentieth century and the Great Surveys of the nineteenth century was frequently noted, and photographers and critics—including Jenkins—often invoked the work of Timothy H. O'Sullivan and William Henry Jackson. Before the exhibition was taken down from the walls, Adams had already begun making the photographs that would become *From the Missouri West*, his



1.5 Lewis Baltz, *Fluorescent Tube*, 1977.

most historically grounded and, arguably, his most influential project. Adams changed cameras from the square format used for *The New West* to a 4 x 5-inch view camera in order to approximate the format and the methodology of his predecessors, in an effort “to try to rediscover some of the land forms that had impressed our forebears.”¹⁶ While Adams made no attempt to cover the tracks of the twentieth century, there are images in this series that are near duplicates of photographs O’Sullivan made on the King Survey during the late 1860s and others that draw heavily on images by Jackson and Andrew J. Russell.

Baltz also trades on traditional motifs of landscape photography, referencing the nineteenth century implicitly and explicitly. While the repetitive imagery and serial presentation of his 1975 portfolio *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California* owed much to the strategies of contemporary art, there is an equal debt to the nineteenth century photographic surveys and their attempts—in however limited a fashion it may ultimately have been—to catalog the West. The 1978 portfolio *Nevada*, which was photographed in the year following the *New Topographics* exhibition, marked a new complexity in Baltz’s narrative style. Rather than repeating a single, constant theme, *Nevada* followed the expansion of the suburbs into the open desert surrounding Reno, the same terrain crossed by O’Sullivan in 1867 and 1868. Alternating between panoramic views of the



1.6 Timothy H. O’Sullivan, *Historic Spanish Record of the Conquest, South Side of Inscription Rock, New Mexico*, 1873.

horizon, homes under construction, trailer parks, and city streets, there are abrupt and jarring shifts in scale from image to image that recall the experience of turning the pages of a survey album. In the detail of a crushed fluorescent tube, its jagged fragments are both a metaphor for the careless destruction of the landscape and a nod to O’Sullivan’s well-known photograph from Inscription Rock—measures of the past and future of the West (Figs. 1.5 and 1.6).

Instead of continuing to regard the *New Topographics* exhibition as a rift or divide, it is essential to return these photographs to the narrative history of American landscape photography. The photographers in the exhibition were eagerly embraced by the academic and museum communities, yet these were not the only intended audience for their work. Most of these images are not immediately gratifying, and they require a degree of sophistication and knowledge of photography to understand fully. Even today, they challenge much of the viewing public, and many museum visitors still wrestle with photographs made during this era. To a degree, all landscape photographs fundamentally concern nature, and, as Baltz explained, “Nature elicits other responses from us, responses

that expose the contradictions between our actions and our image of ourselves."¹⁷ Perhaps this contradiction explains why these photographs have met with such resistance from a broader audience—these are simply not subjects most people want to look at or be reminded of. It, therefore, becomes our responsibility as critics and curators to make these photographs comprehensible and accessible.

It must be acknowledged that the formal elegance and lyricism that has been a hallmark of more traditional American landscape photography is not mutually exclusive with a contemporary practice; nor should the affection and concern that stands behind these photographs be dismissed for fear of sentimentality. Sentiment unchecked can argue against the truth, as suggested by the potent need many people still have for landscape photographs that portray the appearance of an untouched wilderness. Our goal, therefore, should be to help make understandable the desire for reconciliation these photographs advocate so passionately. As much as there is critique, anger, and despair, many of these artists also desired to create a language of possibility, one that was meant to help affect and influence attitudes and choices surrounding the present and future of the landscape—what Gohlke has called "the world you would like to see and the world you have to look at."¹⁸

~~Robert Adams~~
~~PHOTOGRAPHERS~~
~~THE WESTERN~~ ~~CITIZENSHIP~~

~~Adams~~

~~views of the photographs of contemporary Colorado framed in~~
~~Robert Adams's *The New West: Landscapes Along the Colorado River*~~
~~Joan Murray, a curator, that she found it to be "a good book." "It is"~~
~~the result of "a century of... plains and mountains, still abun-~~
~~dant and lush, marked upon by billboards, electrical wires and paved~~
~~finally abandoned by the modern world." Thomas, Deanne Newhall,~~
~~the renowned curator and historian of photography, believed Adams's photo-~~
~~graphs revealed "a historical record of uncontrolled blight." "The New West~~
~~seen through the camera of Robert Adams," he explained, "is the immense~~
~~and inspiring Rocky Mountain landscape cluttered with the sprawl of~~
~~acres of unattractive, monotonous, tract houses, mobile homes, filling stations,~~
~~parking lots, and miles of freeway and billboards." Such photographs offered~~
~~a sharp contrast to traditional landscape images that had presented audi-~~
~~ences with soothing, therapeutic visions of wild nature. While Ansel Adams~~
~~continued to deploy the wilderness aesthetic in this fashion, Robert Adams's~~
~~photographs registered, at least among some viewers, feelings of sadness and~~
~~despair. According to Murray and Newhall, *The New West's* jarring portraits~~
~~of "unattractive sprawl set against inspiring mountains offered an implicit con-~~
~~demnation of environmental degradation that undermined romantic wild-~~
~~ness imagery.~~

In 1975, Robert Adams's photographs, along with work by many other photographers, appeared in the *New Topographics* show, an exhibition that signaled a major departure in American landscape photography. Rejecting the wilderness aesthetic of pure nature, the *New Topographics* photographers instead emphasized the visible markings of a "man-altered landscape."