

BA Photography in The Arts: Contextual Practices

Research In Context (ADAD5003)

Essay: Using both historical and contemporary examples, discuss the attempts made by contemporary photographic artists (such as the New Topographics) to photograph the 'blank spots' of the landscape?

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“Yosemite Valley had, during his [Ansel Adams] decades of photographing it as wilderness, a golf course, a luxury hotel, several camp sites, stores, a school, churches, and even a beauty parlour. Adams cropped it out in the name of Beauty, of formalism, of composition, but all his heirs learned to leave it out too and thus was nature photography created. And what he cropped-out, his fellow Americans learned not to see, leaving the American landscape as a chequerboard of scenic wonders and blank spots.” – Rebecca Solnit, *Landscape and Amnesia*, in *Creative Camera* (Aug/Sept. 1998). p. 35

Using both historical and contemporary examples, discuss the attempts made by contemporary photographic artists (such as the New Topographics) to photograph the ‘blank spots’ of the landscape?

The photographic depiction of the landscapes of our environments, both urban, rural and various other categories in-between, is practised today across a number of genres and movements within the artistic world. Whilst the concept of capturing a simple landscape photograph of a pleasant view, the method that is widely considered as – and as I also shall refer to it within this essay – the *classic* landscape photograph, is still continued today as a well-recognised and well-rewarded profession; the depiction of what precisely is regarded as a landscape photograph in today's climate is, as in any ever-changing area of the artistic realm, highly debated and arguably un-settleable. The argument can, in essence, be condensed down to two contrasting views; those being, the individuals who see the *classic* landscape photograph as the correct definition for the genre, and those who believe in seeing a 'true' picture – or photographs containing what I shall refer to within this essay as the *blank spots* – the views that remain unrepresented in those same *classic* works. In this essay, I will discuss the interaction of both photographic styles with their respective landscapes, including the work of Ansel Adams, and its role in the arguable partial mistranslation of the landscapes he worked with. Following this, I will consider the acknowledgement of this mistranslation through the work of contemporary photographers including the New Topographics.

To use the term *classic* to refer to a certain genre of landscape photography, is a bold venture I admit. However, this reference does not in any way serve as a definition for the movement, it will simply be, for the duration of this essay, the chosen method of differentiating between the two opposing styles of landscape depiction that I shall be discussing. Beginning the referral to the *classic* landscape photograph, is the aforementioned work of Ansel Adams. Adams is perhaps best known for his work photographing the natural landforms of Yosemite National Park in Northern California, and

throughout his career has produced some of the most well recognisable scenes of the landscapes that span the park's "nearly 1,200 square miles" (National Park Service U.S. Department of the Interior, 2023), such as *Monolith, The Face Of Half Dome*, 1927.

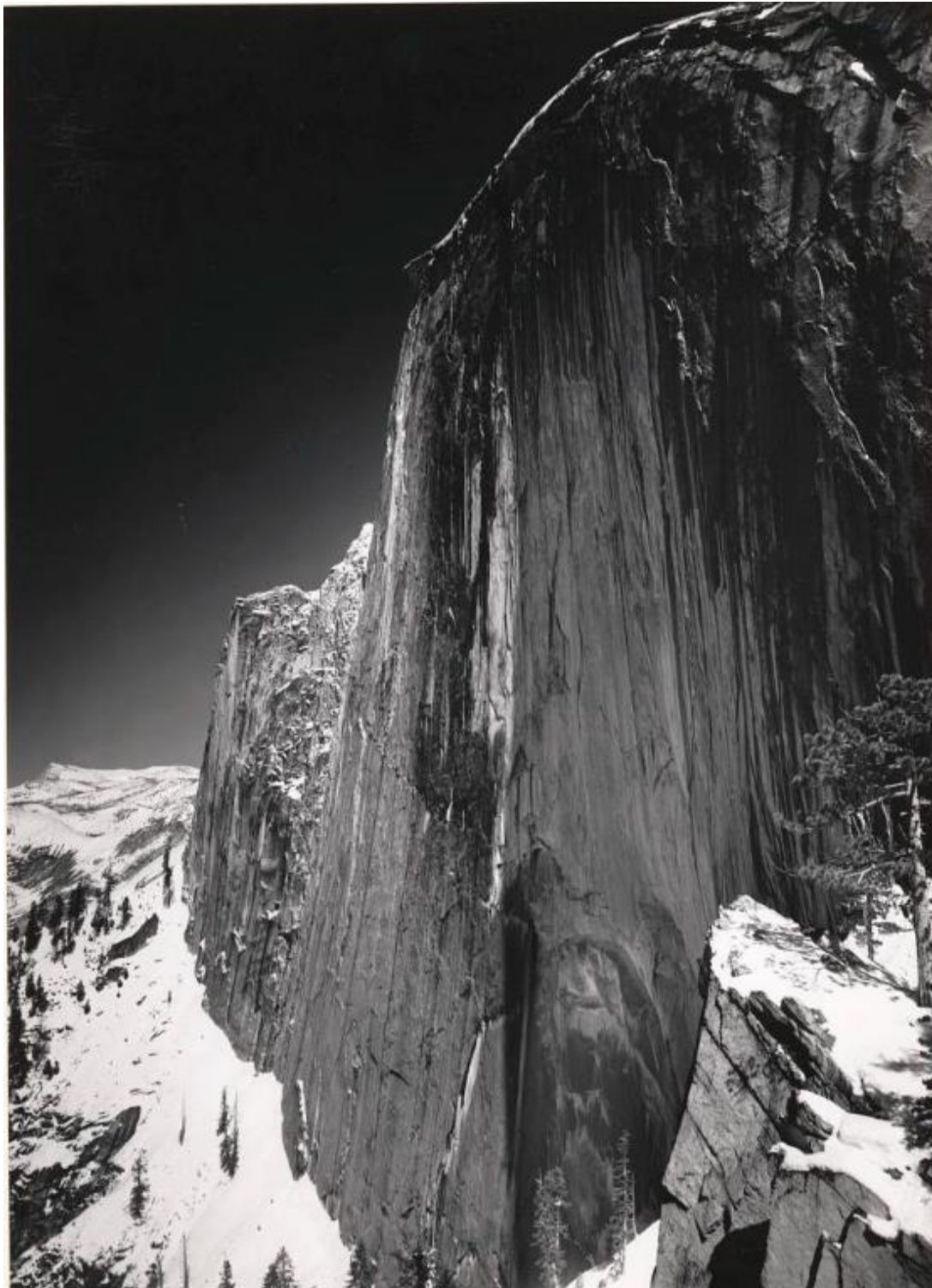


Fig1. *Monolith, The Face Of Half Dome*, 1927 (National Museum of American History, n.d.).

His approach to capturing his images, most often the geography of his home state of California, has been a common standard within *classic* landscape photography, to which many photographers since have compared their own work, and which many people consider the benchmark for a 'good' or successful landscape photograph. There is no question that when it comes to considering what precisely constitutes a 'successful' photograph in any field is entirely subjective, not just to the viewer, but also to the photographer themselves. However, as I would like to discuss within this essay the potential success of landscape photographers on their representation of the *blank spots* of their chosen scenes, this makes the classification of this matter slightly less vague. With this in mind, we can consider the success of Adams' work against this simple standard. To begin, we must first understand Adams' intentions within his work, in order to understand the measurable success in relation to our *blank spots*.

Primarily an environmentalist, Adams put the preservation of his photographed environments above all else. This is, agreeably undoubtable when we view an image such as Fig 1, in keeping with the theme curated within his work, we are immediately confronted by how pristine and apparently uninterrupted this scene appears. In her article *The Machine in the Garden Revisited*, Deborah Bright discusses Adams' realisation of the potential his work held within this area of conservation as during his time photographing Alaska, Adams "reconfigured his environmental philosophy, reiterating a mixture of Progressive Era phobias about industrialization". (Bright, 1992) As a result, alongside his longstanding hope that his work would rekindle a passion and appreciation of his subjects in the hearts of the American public, his photography was now serving new intentions, reminding that same public that they held a responsibility for their landscape's fate. Adams faced the ugly truth about his dearly loved landscapes, that slowly but surely, their uninterrupted, enduring beauty was

beginning to fracture at the hands of “car campers, parking lots, trail fees, paved highways, picnic areas, visitors’ centres, ranger stations and trash dumps.” (Bright, 1992) Human life would drain the parks of their own, and Adams knew this. Tourism would fuel his desire to collect and share the picturesqueness of the geography he held so dearly, and as Bright notes, his work found a new purpose “among environmental activists”. (Bright, 1992) Consequentially, the work Adams continued to produce followed the confidence of the environmental activists at this time, in that upon regarding these pure, unspoiled depictions of their landscapes, viewers “would be persuaded of the inherent worthiness of wilderness preservation”, as though providing them with the image of what *should be* rather than what *was*. And, in an era of romanticised, metaphysical artistic portrayal of the American landscape, this was an accurately targeted strategy. However, this idea of continuing the way of the *classic* landscape depiction, by choosing to ignore the inclusion of the aforementioned highways, dumps and parking lots, is what ultimately led to the unintentional creation of *blank spots*. For this reason, the work of Ansel Adams shall yet again serve as, as before, a benchmark against which we shall measure the ‘success’ of works of art; although now we shall consider not simply their success as art per se, but rather their success at highlighting to us the *blank spots* of their landscapes.

In the following decades, landscape photographers saw the world around them, both artistic and physical, transform completely. Through the 1960s and 70s, the American population continued to rise rapidly, and alongside this came an increase in pollution, urbanisation, and the resultant demise of the Great American Wilderness at an almost incomprehensible rate. The response within the art world, was one that would revolutionise the representation of geography through photographic practice, a renewed approach to familiar lands. And at the forefront of this emerging contemporary style, were a collection of artists newly formed by

curator William Jenkins, that would come to be infamously known as the New Topographics. Jenkins had entitled them as such, as their response to the American landscape would be, as the name implies, a matter-of-fact, almost scientific report of their surroundings, with an almost “impersonal, clinical objectivity”. (Bright, 1992) The New Topographics consisted of photographers Robert Adams, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Frank Gohlke, Joe Deal, Nicholas Nixon, Lewis Baltz, John Schott, Henry Wessel, and Stephen Shore. In 1975, the group were commissioned by Jenkins to contribute to an exhibition at the George Eastman House, in Rochester, New York, that would ultimately alter the genetics of landscape photography permanently. Whilst the work of – those who came to be known as the ‘Old Topographics’ or *classic* photographers such as – Ansel Adams had intended to depict the attempts of conservationists to protect the landscapes from human intervention, the New Topographics presented an alternative standpoint to the viewer, that human interference, destruction was not just inevitable, but already occurring all around them, just outside the frames of Adams’ shots.

When consulting Adams’ work *Santa Elena Canyon* (Fig 2), which he captured in Big Bend National Park in 1947, we are confronted with a scene that reflects scope and scale, a vast landscape, powerful and pure. Adams depicts Big Bend National Park through the lens of awe and inspiration, as though we are supposed to be pioneers, seeing this scene for the first time. The geography of this image undoubtedly demands a certain respect from the viewer, in the same way a great-grandparent would demand the same of a young child, although one cannot help but question the honest inclusion of this depiction, relative to our consideration of photography’s *blank spots*. However, this absence of ‘spots’ or existence of *blank spots* cannot be realised without alternative depictions of these spots themselves. It is exceptionally difficult in these instances, to see what is not there.



Fig 2. *Santa Elena Canyon*, 1947 (Christie's, 2023)

Therefore, in order to begin to prove the existence of these *blank spots* we must first experience them as *acknowledged spots*. *Untitled* by Victoria Sambunaris (Fig 3) depicts the Mexican village of Boquillas del Carmen, from the opposite side of the Rio Grande in Big Bend National Park, Texas. It displays the gentle meander of the river, with the American side of the border marked by a bank of grass and the opposite bank, the Mexican side of the border showing its desert-like topography. In the near background, one can make out a small settlement, presumably the aforementioned village, and further away still the shape of some of Big Bend's mountain ranges can be seen. Sambunaris works to redefine the term 'landscape', despite its suggested proximity to Adams' work with similar adjective description. All the elements of a 'classic' landscape are present, however Sambunaris has

intentionally interrupted a potentially familiar scene of a riverbank, by capturing the presence of human interference in addition to the natural surroundings. Her work focuses mainly around the communication of human and industrial development of her chosen landscapes. Working in direct contrast to Adams' work, Sambunaris captures a landscape with the sole intention of depicting its human interference. Disrupting the 'classic' perception of landscapes in art, Sambunaris suggests the presence of a man-made environment within an otherwise barren land, challenging the age-old stereotype of 'beautiful', untouched 'artistic' geography. For these reasons, Sambunaris' work was selected to be part of an exhibition entitled *Ansel Adams In Our Time* from December 13th 2018 to February 24th 2019, which displayed numerous works by Ansel Adams through the years, alongside "work by contemporary artists whose modern-day concerns centred on the environment, land rights, and the use and misuse of natural resources point directly to Adams' legacy". (Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 2019) Sambunaris has divided this work into two sections, which may not at first bear any great intention, however when broken down into two images holds a greater meaning still. Viewing the left section alone would likely bring the viewer back to the *classic* works such as that of Adams, as its uninterrupted scenes may help to return to that sense of picturesqueness reflected in his images. However, when we turn to the right section, we are reminded of the human intervention within the scene and that in today's landscape, as is the same within this work by Sambunaris, the uninterrupted must exist alongside the interrupted, in order to portray the full picture. A convenient and simple metaphor, yet one integral to this practise nonetheless; this idea of the undeniable existence of these blank spots is precisely what had led the New Topographics' effort to expose them years prior to Sambunaris' own attempts.



Fig.3, *Untitled*, (Boquillas del Carmen), Big Bend National Park, Texas, 2009 (Yancey Richardson, n.d.)

Following this understanding of *acknowledged spots* we can now comprehend much more clearly the work of the New Topographics and their motivations. Their goal, in similarity to Adams', was to convey an importance of stewardship over and responsibility for the landscapes that the human race exists within, and their use of their respective photographic styles to communicate this to the public. Although, in contrast to Adams' undeniably *romantic* approach to conveying this ideal through the depiction of, as discussed previously, what *should* be rather than what *was*, the work of the New Topographics chose to approach the translation of this rationale from an angle that seemed to cause quite a stir within the artistic communities at the time.

Some of the most notable work that best suggests this contrast to that of Ansel Adams is that of Joe Deal, particularly his piece *Untitled View*, 1975, taken in the developing suburbs of Albuquerque, New Mexico. This image in particular shows the complete contrast in depiction to the works of romantic classicism that preceded it. Whilst Ansel Adams strived to reflect the pristine, virgin landscapes that appeared to have been pioneered by the individual behind the camera, Deal's work created an immediate U-turn in this goal, with his stylistic choices depicting the very scenes that Adams had seemingly denied the existence of.



Fig 4. *Untitled View*, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1975 (Mutual Art, 2023)

Within this photograph, we are presented with a single suburban household just below the centre of the frame, surrounded by a desert scene that despite obvious human intervention, seems to remain otherwise completely barren. Shrubbery surrounds the property, accompanied by electricity pylons that are dotted across the scene and the edge of a second building that is cut in half by the right side of the frame. Minor and empty roads cross the image at numerous points, however apart from the assumption of tenants residing within these properties, there are no sure signs of human life within the image. In fact, the

photograph, which it seems Deal has forbidden a horizon, has an empty and almost unnerving quality to it, due to this desperate search for signs of life that bring no success.

Robert Adams (no relation to Ansel), fellow New Topographic photographer, spoke about the degree to which the success of a photograph could be measured, discussing that a photograph should reveal to the viewer “important Form that we ourselves have experienced but to which we have not paid adequate attention. Successful art *rediscovers Beauty for us.*” (Adams, 1996) Alongside our chosen measurement of success to communicate the *blank spots* of the landscape, we can assess the work of Deal’s *Untitled View* along these guidelines. Reviewing Deal’s work in his book *West And West: Reimagining the Great Plains*, Larry Schwarm comments on the stylistic choices of the artist, “Most photographers approach this landscape looking for atypical qualities, anomalies rather than the common. Joe Deal in not one of those photographers”. (Schwarm, 2011) Schwarm discusses Deal’s work as a break within the photographic conventions of the time, and alongside this analysis, one must agree with the undeniable observation that Deal’s work does in fact contradict each element that constituted the *classic* beauty of Ansel Adams works. With this in mind, this assessment presents the basis to conclude that Deal’s work does carry some level of *success* in depicting the respective *blank spots* of the landscape. Deal’s work does, as Robert Adams states, present the viewer with a “fresh imitation of Form”, and against this benchmark, the attempts of the New Topographics to depict these *blank spots* was ultimately their success also. With this in mind, there is evidence enough here to suggest that the success of contemporary photographers such as the New Topographics and others that followed in their footsteps, such as Victoria Sambunaris, to capture these *blank spots* where Ansel Adams did not, is plentiful.

To conclude, the attempts made by photographic artists including as the New Topographics to photograph the *blank spots* of the landscape have had a significant impact of the definition of the genre landscape photography. The 'landscape photograph' continues to evolve through the depictions of changes both within the natural world that its respective artists attempt to take on the stewardship of, and the man-made landscapes that are slowly encroaching on them as time proceeds. The inevitability of the intervention of man within all environments, is what ultimately continues the discovery of the landscapes of *blank spots*, because as Robert Silberman so accurately states in his review of the New Topographics essays by Britt Salvesen and Alison Nordström, "Landscapes not altered by man? Those are hard to find even on the moon". (Silberman, 2011)

The success of landscape photographers on their representation of the *blank spots* of their chosen scenes was pioneered by the New Topographics but has been continued through the development of these styles through the production of more recent photographic work, and is survived by other contemporary artists who share their in their mission. Despite these decades of development that saw the works of *classic romanticism* lost beneath the layers of emerging photographic styles such as the likes of the New Topographics, we must not forget that it was the likes of Ansel Adams that were responsible for the very foundations of this mission. Adams' goal was the beginning. The artists that followed were working to reroute the journey that would ultimately end in that same shared destination.

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