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VERGING GARDENS

by

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B. A., University of Virginia, 1973

Submitted to the Faculty of the School of the Arts
of Virginia Commonwealth University

in Partial Fulfillment

of the

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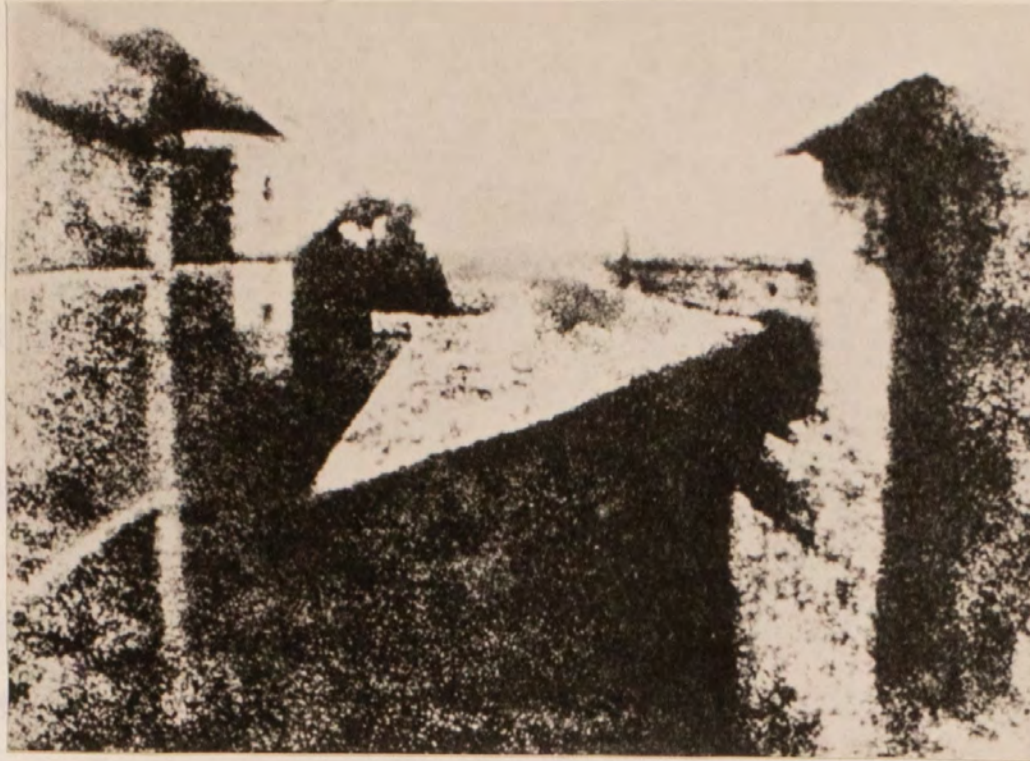
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INTRODUCTION

Webster's gives as an archaic meaning for the verb design "to indicate with a distinctive mark, sign, or name." For the kind of photograph which is essentially taken, not made, the idea of indicating is more appropriate than concepts of building up from a blank sheet of paper. The correct exclamation when this photographer thinks a success has been completed is "Eureka!": "I have found it!"

This paper identifies the topographic landscape as a type of photographic practice, examines the characteristics of the topographic landscape, and traces its development. The concepts of "density" and "the garden" in the topographic landscape are introduced, and a model is offered. An impression of a tradition in the topographic landscape is painted, the antecedent to the photographs represented in the Plates.

In the polemic The Painted Word, Tom Wolfe exaggerated the state of modern art to make a point: the work of art itself is foremost; theory cannot finally carry the piece. The hope here is that the photographs of Verging Gardens do not depend simply on their place in the pictorial lineage for value. As a non-verbal, yet referential, format, the topographic landscape can bring to attention ideas not easily accessible to other methods of expression. The topographic landscape is seen as a vehicle for getting at the real subject, the world, with a kind of poetic objectivity.



THE TOPOGRAPHIC LANDSCAPE

The landscape is a relatively recent development in art.¹ In photography, however, with its brief history, there have always been landscapes. While there are many ways to make a landscape photograph, the topographic method informs the mainstream of practice. Its prototypes are the earliest photographs, and it is the norm to which other approaches to the landscape implicitly compare. Nathan Lyons has stated:

The topographic intent, or an attention to the depiction of object, place, or event as opposed to the pictorial intent, an attention to interpretive values of personal expression, is of the utmost importance in tracing the evolution of landscape in photography.²

Although a sense of the topographic predates photography, and over

Illustration No. 1: Joseph Nicephore Niepce, "View from his Window at Gras", 1826. Beaumont Newhall, The History of Photography, 4th ed., (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1964), p. 16.

¹See John Szarkowski, American Landscapes, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1981), p. 5; and Lewis Baltz, untitled essay, Landscape: Theory, (New York: Lustrum Press, 1980), pp. 27-28.

²Nathan Lyons, "Landscape Photography", The Encyclopedia of Photography, (New York: Graystone Publishers, 1963), Vol. 11, p. 1939.

time artists in various media have adopted topographic methods, photography seems to be the medium to which the topographic is most inherent. The camera obscura, the image-forming device which preceded the photographic camera, was used by artists primarily to render the landscape. It was, in fact, the light projecting a topographic landscape on the ground-glass of the camera obscura that the experimenters we now know as the inventors of photography sought to preserve. In many respects, the topographic landscape is the seminal image of photography.

Taken in the broadest terms, a topographic landscape is an outdoor scene clearly rendered in single-point perspective. Today such photographs are very common: certainly in the billions, perhaps in the trillions. These photographs are produced by snapshooters, by commercial photographers, by journalists, by space probes, by artists--nearly anybody (or thing) with a camera. The topographic landscape made for creative reasons exists in the context of the many vernacular images, and its meaning is affected by them. Given the worldwide flood of topographic representation, it is a mode of photographic practice neither esoteric nor elitist.

Landscape usually refers to an aggregate view, from a vantage point, of an area of land. The view does not concentrate on a particular object, but illustrates a number of things and features in an overall setting. The word landscape is given by Webster's as of Dutch origin--land plus ship. With the sense of ship in township, one might imagine lords commissioning painting of the valley of their lordships. The sound of scape, moreover, is related to scope: scope has the feeling of looking through an optical device in the present tense, and scape in the past tense, in the form of an optically derived picture. Landscape is often taken to mean natural scenery, as John Szarkowski uses it in American Landscapes:

The word landscape is used here... to denote a family of pictures concerned with two issues: the formal problems of picture-making, and the philosophical meaning of the natural site--those places where man's hegemony seems incomplete....¹

¹John Szarkowski, American Landscapes, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1981), p. 5.

In photography, there is also recognition of numerous combination forms of scape and landscape, such as the urban landscape and the moonscape.

Topographic refers to a specific approach to the interpretation of the landscape. William Jenkins has stated:

The word topography is in general use today in connection with the making of maps or with land as described by maps and it does not unduly stretch the imagination to see all photographs as maps of a sort. But for the sake of clarity a return to the original meaning may be helpful: "The detailed and accurate description of a particular place, city, town, district, state, parish or tract of land." ¹

The key phrase is "detailed and accurate". Topographic methods are those which emphasize the precision and clarity of the depiction: it is a "straight" school. Since the photographer aims for factual description, topographic landscapes are photographs made from negatives in sharp focus, maximizing depth of field, and correctly exposed, developed and printed for descriptive clarity.

To call a landscape topographic also implies that the photograph imparts some sense of the shape and dimension of the terrain it depicts. These photographs show the viewer the lay of their land. A vantage point is necessary which allows a certain amount of space to be seen: either from an elevated position, or with a mostly unoccupied foreground. The essential components are sky and ground, and mediating them, the horizon line. The ground includes objects at varying distances from the camera, giving the effect of depth. Importantly, the orientation of the topographic is square to the horizon. The image simulates the visual field of a human being in a state of equilibrium. The archetype is the hunter's sharp glance. (A successful shot requires correct orientation to the earth.)

The appearance of a topographic landscape is not obscure. The viewer does not need to learn a new sensibility to see the subject of the photograph. The print itself is not about its surface, which is un-

¹William Jenkins, New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape, (Rochester, N.Y.: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975), p. 6.

textured; nor about any kind of sculptural concerns: it lies flat, a 2-D impression; nor does it depend upon its relationship to other juxtaposed objects--it floats by itself, a hard-edge glossy rectangle. The viewer looks through the print into the photograph.

The content of the topographic landscape is in the photographed subject. The photograph may function in many ways, but it always documents what was in front of the camera. The photographer aspires to window-ness, to transparent camerawork, in order to transport the viewer to a thing beyond the photographic print. Jenkins has stated:

The two distinct and often separate entities of actual, physical subject matter and conceptual or referential subject matter can be made to coincide. It is this coincidence--the making of a photograph which is primarily about that which is in front of the lens--that is the central factor in the making of a document. 1

The topographic landscape has a dual existence: it is "here and now", in the print, and "there and before", in the subject of the photograph. Roland Barthes has written:

The type of consciousness the photograph invokes is ...unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of the being-there of the thing (which any copy could provoke) but an awareness of its having-been-there. What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the here-now and the there-then. 2

While this dualism is inherent in any photograph, in many the "there-then" is of lesser concern. In the topographic landscape, the realistic evocation of the "there-then" is high priority.

To some extent, by its character as a trace, each photograph evidences a place in the past. Value as a historical document, however--showing what things were there, how they looked at a particular moment, and the significance--varies greatly. The topographic promotes its authenticity by standardized, optically-derived depiction, which seeks to preserve the discreteness of objects in the photographed

¹Jenkins, New Topographics, p. 5.

²Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image", in Classic Essays on Photography, Alan Trachtenberg, ed., (New Haven, Ct.: Leete's Island Books, 1980), p. 27.

field. Like all evidence, what an individual viewer sees in the photograph will incline towards his or her experience. It may be considered not a typical scene, or the information trivial. It depends. That evidence is subject to differing interpretations is not new. What matters is that all reasonable viewers would agree that indeed this is a document-- that this place did look this way, for at least a moment-- perhaps not later, or earlier, or very often-- but that the photograph can be trusted-- on its own terms. Even wrenched out of the continuum as they are, photographs contain facts.

By limiting innovation in depictive method to techniques which produce realistic clarity, the topographic photographer's role is that of an intermediary between the viewer and the world. The content of the photograph is less "how the photographer interpreted the world," and more directly, "the world." The photograph is about a subject outside the artist's mind. John Berger has written:

A photograph is a result of the photographer's decision that it is worth recording that this particular event or this particular object has been seen.... A photograph is already a message about the event it records.... At its simplest, the message, decoded, means: I have decided that seeing this is worth recording. ¹

The stress in the creative process is on the taking, as opposed to the making.

The photographer who adheres to the topographic is restricted in experimenting with the technical process of photography. Yet it is exactly this technical restraint which enhances potential meaning in the landscape, and enables striving for Berger's maxim: "Photography is the art of rendering observation self-conscious."² It is photography's penchant for verisimilitude which has fueled its popular explosion. Over our 140 years of active shutters, a visual language of the topographic landscape has evolved, through practice and by intentional

¹ John Berger, "Understanding a Photograph," in Classic Essays on Photography, p. 292.

² Ibid., p. 292.

invention, which has meaning to (even if not fully apprehended by) the broadest audience. When the photographer adopts a popular mode, rather than starting from scratch, the meaning of the new photograph is influenced and enhanced by antecedent photographs. Our heritage of photographic imagery is a vast "Depictionary", the basis of photographic literacy in our day. The modern topographic landscape, when made with awareness, reaps the seeds of the old grown into new turf.

EARLY TOPOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHY

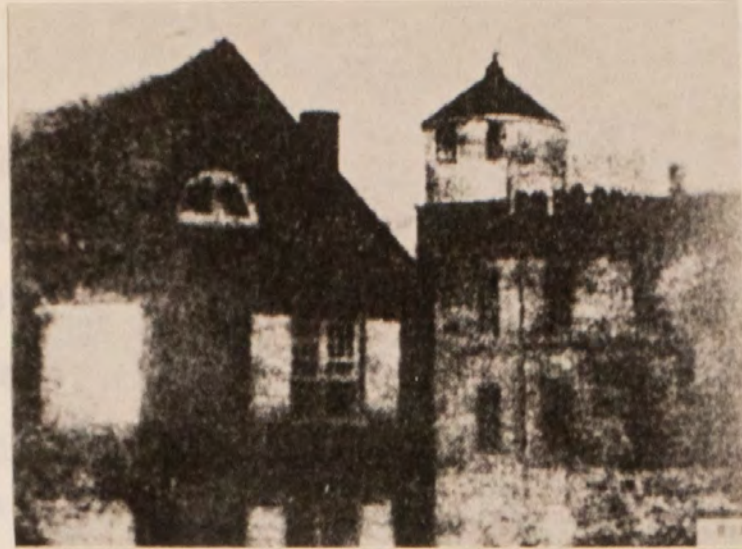
Historians usually credit the earliest photograph known to still exist as Niepce's heliograph, "View from the Window at Gras", dated 1826. A second early photograph is Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's *View from the Window at the Grande-Grasse*, dated 1839, among the first made on the east side of the Atlantic, and cited as the oldest American photograph. ¹ Niépce had read about Daguerre's efforts, and had probably even examined, but Niepce's view was certainly unknown to him. There are significant parallels between these two pioneering images, each made without photographic precedent, and relying to an extent on a tradition of images in other graphic media. Hubert Damasio has written:

In discussions of the invention of photography, the history of photography is most frequently presented as that of a revolution. One forgets, in the process, that the image-makers of the early days were hoping to seize, and the best of them those which they were able to reveal and develop, were not so much "discovered" as given the principles of construction of the photographic camera — and of the camera obscura before it — and the notion of space and of objects which were to be represented.

Illustration No. 2, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, "The Arsenal and Docks of the Philadelphia High School," 1839, Newhall, *The History of Photography*, p. 10.

¹Newhall, *The History of Photography*, p. 10.

²Gernsheim, Helmut, & Charles H. Allison, *The History of Photography*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1968), p. 131.



EARLY TOPOGRAPHIC DIRECTIONS

Historians indicate that the oldest photograph known to still exist is Niepce's heliograph, "View from his Window at Gras", dated 1826.¹ A second early photograph is Joseph Saxton's daguerreotype, dated 1839, among the first made on this side of the Atlantic, and cited as the oldest American photograph extant.² Saxton had read about Daguerre's efforts, and had possibly seen examples, but Niepce's view was certainly unknown to him. There are significant parallels between these two pioneering images, each made without photographic precedent, and relying on an intuitive synthesis of images in other graphic media. Hubert Damisch has written:

In discussions of the invention of film, the history of photography is most frequently presented as that of a discovery. One forgets, in the process, that the image the first photographers were hoping to seize, and the very latent image which they were able to reveal and develop, were in no sense naturally given; the principles of construction of the photographic camera-- and of the camera obscura before it-- were tied to a conventional notion of space and of objectivity whose development preceded

Illustration No. 2: Joseph Saxton, "The Arsenal and Cupola of the Philadelphia High School," 1839. Newhall, The History of Photography, p. 20.

¹Newhall, The History of Photography, p. 16.

²Gernsheim, Helmut, & Gernsheim, Alison, The History of Photography, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1969), p. 121.

the invention of photography, and to which the great majority of photographers only conformed.¹

In the histories of photography, the early views are appreciated for their successful realization--for the fixing of the images. The contents of the images are described, but no more.² The images serve to illustrate the photographic process, rather than the opposite. The characterizations most widely adopted of early photographs are "primitive" and "naive."³ It is often the case, however, that what distinguishes the topographic landscape as an image seems obvious.

The crude images reveal little of their subjects, by modern standards, but it is not because the photographers were not trying. Their intention was towards clear depiction, the principle of the topographic. Before there were even photographs, the photographers had to make decisions about their images. Some were for technical reasons, yet quite a few were concerned with the appearance of the subject in the image. The modern topographic photographer, faced with similar choices, resolves many of them in a like manner.

The framing of both photographs is square to the horizon; the vertical edges of the buildings are parallel to the edges of the frame. There is a sense of order which is in tune with gravity. The buildings are placed with the roofs toward the top of the frame, concentrating neither on sky nor ground to the exclusion of the other. There is moderation in their proportioning. The tendencies toward orderliness and moderation are signs of the profound role of the topographic as a civilizing agent. In the topographic vision there is never anarchy or

¹Hubert Damisch, "Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image," in Classic Essays on Photography, p. 289. See also Peter Galassi, Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1981), 152 pp.

²Gernsheim & Gernsheim, The History of Photography, pp. 58-59; and Newhall, The History of Photography, pp. 14-29.

³See discussion of "primitive" in essays by Andre Jammes and Robert Sobieszek, in French Primitive Photography, (Millerton, N.Y.: Aperture, 1969), unpagged.

entropy, for there are always borders and composition. There is rational display of the most disorderly. Whether photographed in the confusion of the city, or the wild of nature, the message is the priority of culture.

If a process to record the effect of light would work at all, it could record the difference between bright sky and dark ground. Because of this contrast, the photographs feature the articulation of the tops of the buildings-- towers, peaks of roofs-- against the sky. It is characteristic of the topographic landscape to exaggerate the line which marks the edge of the sky. In large part, this is due to the high sensitivity of photographic materials to blue light, which in the 19th century especially caused skies to be inevitably washed out to solid white. In the 20th century, with better though not perfectly spectrally-balanced films, the emphasis persists. The deficiency in the process, the silhouette effect, makes the tops of things more important. The skyline is a photographic phenomenon.

That a landscape dominated by buildings would be the subject of these early photographs was a matter of convenience. By shooting out the windows of their laboratories, Niepce's and Saxton's cameras could be undisturbed for the long exposure time, and the materials for developing were handy. That depicting buildings was practical, however, should not cause other implications of the images to be overlooked. Out the windows was architecture of the Western European tradition. From Western culture photography derived the perspective of the image, its scientific tools, and the perceived need for its utility. The emergence of photography was possible only after the achievement of a certain stage of industrial and economic progress. As photographs became accepted as true renditions of the world, and as they spread to new places, what they showed began to influence value systems and concepts of the "typical". Photographs could not convey the magical, the religious, or the symbolic very well; they emphasized the material, the constructed, the bricks which could be counted. Further, at a time when only a small minority of people inhabited cities and towns, a much higher percentage of photographs were of urban places. Thus

the topographic photograph was an important agent in the rise of the concept that the center of civilization was to be found in the cities of the West, and that it is against these places, and their values, that other cultures are measured.

Of course, the Age of Science and the Industrial Era were not simply consequences of the invention of photography. Photography was certainly a factor, though. As the history of photography in third world countries becomes better known-- a recent phenomenon¹-- it parallels the advancement of those countries in economic activity on a Western model, following, for the most part, the growth of Western trade and imperialist colonization. In a certain sense, a photographer anywhere sees through Western eyes, and photography is both a token of, and a catalyst towards, Western values.

These values are heavily imbued with notions of progress in economics and culture. It should not be surprising that the topographic landscape, a civilized image of the world, should begin by showing civilized places. The bulk of topographic practice would continue to be of the "built landscape," especially as photography became a tool of practical commerce. These early landscapes, filled with buildings, though exotic at first when photography was a novelty, soon became the very opposite of exotic: they became the norm, to which the exotic was compared. Topographic landscapes of cities and towns helped the citizens to come to a common interpretation of their culture-- they were part of the social glue. Finally, viewers from civilized Western places became so saturated by these images that, unless they had some special relationship to the depicted scene, they would find it dull; the image reaffirmed what they already believed, and told them little new.

At the advent of photography, then, emerge the prototypes for a special kind of landscape: in tune with the surface of the earth, straining to show the subject clearly, of the built environment, and sensitive to the line between the humanly-wrought and the natural-- a view affirming the culture's self-perception.

¹See articles in History of Photography: an International Quarterly, (London: Taylor & Francis, Ltd., 1977-83).



DENSITY IN THE TOPOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPH

Compared to Niepce's and Saxton's images, Daguerre's famous and influential view of 1838 describes a built environment more effectively. Its content is more comprehensive. It documents civilized life and natural life, and shows their integration. Buildings line a Paris boulevard, which moves up the slope of a gentle hill. There are rows of trees, planted, certainly, and maintained, but eventually to follow nature's laws and not France's. There are at least three different types of advertising signs, and awnings shield about half the storefronts. Streetlamps are spaced every six trees. Is that really animal excrement (source: horse) in the street? Most remarkably, there is a duration in a sidewalk transaction between two people.

The slow decay of the bricks and mortar is arrested in a context of momentary events. Daguerre's topographic landscape is the sum of a variety of information. In the elucidation of its details is the richness

Illustration No. 3: Louis Daguerre, "A Parisian Boulevard," c. 1838. Newhall, The History of Photography, p. 20.

of the image. A term to describe the volume of intelligence data in a photograph is density. Density is a vital word to the photographer in a technical sense, measuring the intensity of the impression of light on a sensitive material after development. As an entry into the critical vocabulary, it carries several beneficial connotations.

Density measures the potential of a photograph to revivify a place in past time: the combination of the many components of photographic language into a single image. Density has reference to the amount of discrete bits of information per unit of image area, the dots of grain. The fineness of the recording is similar in kind to the number of lines in the half-tone screen of the printer, or the lines in a video image. It is a quality of the visual field; and like an electronic field, noise interferes with its clarity. The factors which matter include the grain through development of the light-sensitive materials and the degree of enlargement and regeneration. For example, between a contact print and a reproduction of that contact print in a book, the original print has greater density, though the image is, in most respects, the same.

Density is produced, further, by the photographer's application of the sensitive materials towards the recreation of the immediacy of the photographed scene. Fine grain alone is not enough. Density has the technical meaning of quantifying the relative opacity of black silver or color dye in a developed negative or print. It relates to the translation of the relative brightnesses in the photographed scene to differing tones in the print. The photographer, by selection of the quality of illumination, exposure, and method of development, has wide leeway in the interpretation of the light of the original scene in the photograph. In the critical use of the word, greater density results from a strategy towards distinguishing the discreteness of objects and their location in space. In black and white, the photographer's goal is legible chiaroscuro. It is application of the Zone System¹ for clarity of depiction, and is promoted by the awareness of light, highlights, contrast, and edges.

¹Ansel Adams, The Negative, Basic Photo 2, (Hastings-on-Hudson, N. Y.: Morgan & Morgan, 1968).

Important factors in this aspect of density are fidelity of texture and a sense of depth into the frame. Depth is the outcome not so much of the miles away from the camera represented, but of tangible depth, which may be, in the world, not far. Students of art are familiar with the visual devices which may be used: for instance, in Daguerre's view, a roof in the near foreground is in front of the white townhouse, which is in front of the buildings beyond, and chimneys of succeeding structures are separated from the buildings behind them. The many ways to intensify the impression of depth are part of the basic grammar of picturemaking. The significance is that the view works towards clarification; the principle is not obfuscation, it is separation.

Density, so far, may be seen as the consequence of maximizing information about the photographed scene in the photographic image. These surface qualities are, by definition, obvious at a glance. One of the dictionary entries for density is "the quality or state of being dense"; and an entry for dense is "marked by compactness or crowding together of parts." The implication that it is the sheer quantity of things in a frame which matters, however, is not quite the meaning of the critical density; it is, rather, a quantity of significant things, of parts of social import. Daguerre's view, for instance, is a document with potential value to the historian of architecture, of city planning, of Paris of the mid-19th century; to the sociologist researching street vendors; to the student of street paving; to anybody interested in the past. The photographer's sense of what makes up a place-- a comprehensive impression of the whole-- ends up including the specialist's details. Such details may not stick out, but, upon observation over time, they are apparent.

The idea of "reading" a photograph has gained currency recently. In an analysis of a Walker Evans photograph, Tod Papageorge used the phrase: "meanings which reside in the detail of Evans' picture as an etymology resides in a word."¹ The ability of a photograph to respond

¹Tod Papageorge, "From Walker Evans to Robert Frank," Art Forum, (April 1981): 33.

to "reading" has correspondence to its density. Barthes identifies three components of a photograph: the linguistic message (title, caption, etc.); the denoted message (that which is depicted); and the connoted (or symbolic) message.¹ As he points out, the connoted message in advertising, for example, is straightforward, aimed at selling the product. The connoted message in the topographic is usually not so plain, and varies. Yet there is always intent towards the unprejudiced view--the denotation--for the photographer knows that the remnants of contemporary life which will attract people in the future cannot be fully predicted. The mapmaker sketches interconnections with a pretty good idea how people will navigate them; there is no foreseeing every circumlocution of the highways, nonetheless. What today seems unremarkable may be, if by off chance recorded, an essential clue. The viewer of a topographic landscape dons the detective's cap, whether historian, archaeologist, anthropologist, novelist, or artist. Roger Copeland has written:

In his preface to *Paludes*, Gide maintains that creative work of the highest order always contains a dimension which the artist himself is unaware of: he calls this "God's share."²

The topographic landscape has density when it can respond to questions from many quarters. Density is compression--an implosion. It is like complexity, but density is whole, and complexity is a composite. The difference between a topographic landscape--say, by Eugene Atget--and all the descriptions, explanations, opinions, and theories of a university class of ten discussing a copy of it for an hour, is that the latter is complex and the former has density. To make a photograph of high density, the photographer must welcome "God's share."

¹Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," Classic Essays on Photography, pp. 269-285.

²Roger Copeland, "Photography & the World's Body," in Photography: Current Perspectives, Jerome Liebling, ed., (Rochester, N. Y.: Light Impressions, 1978), p. 176.



EVOLUTION OF THE TOPOGRAPHIC LANDSCAPE

Opportunities for the topographic landscape expanded as the glass negative came into widespread use in the mid-1850's. Improved emulsions (though the godsend of dry plates was 25 years hence), better optics, the larger character of a glass negative over the daguerreotype, and the heightened resolution of glass over the paper negative--realized in a glossy contact print--gave photography a power of rendition it had lacked before. Speaking of Roger Fenton's landscapes of 1856-57, a critic of the time wrote:

Further than this the art of photography cannot possibly be carried, until either the means of producing the natural colors or processes absolutely instantaneous are discovered.¹

Actually there were deficiencies in the process which make the photographs of the 19th century distinctive today. The extreme sensitivity

Illustration No. 4: Alexander Gardner, "Richmond, Va.," 1865. James D. Horan, Timothy O'Sullivan: America's Forgotten Photographer, (New York: Bonanza Books, 1966), p. 52.

¹Thomas Sutton, Photographic Notes, Vol. i, 1856, p. 235; quoted in Gernsheim & Gernsheim, The History of Photography, p. 280.

of the emulsions to blue caused skies to bleach white. In addition, as Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock has written:

A lack of color sensitivity, noted and rued from Talbot's day on, prevented green from registering accurately. Greens photographed as black. Also, what was a correct exposure for foreground detail left the background often woefully underexposed, bleached out and therefore making for an extremely unnatural contrast in tones.¹

The effect of the characteristics was that important components of the natural world-- the sky and foliage-- did not photograph well, and thus were less emphasized in the practice of the topographic landscape.

It is interesting that where photography was least articulate, much of the painting of the era concentrated. Lindquist-Cock has stated:

No matter how else the painting of the 19th century might be characterized-- by comparison with the revolutionary Symbolism and Abstraction of the 20th century-- it may be considered to have been dominated by an attention to the external appearance of nature.²

Yet while there was much borrowing between painting and photography, and preoccupation with similar philosophical notions, the landscapes had distinctly different appearances. Turner's skies, the plain-air school, and the precise delineation of leaves and plants were exactly what photography could not accomplish. The sources of meaning in painted and photographed landscapes diverged.

The years until the turn of the century saw the emergence of several schools of topographic landscape. Mammoth-plate contact prints of the natural grandeur of the American West, landscapes of the inconvenient, exemplify the topographic as a pure form. Cabinet cards of Main Street memorialize the close-by symbols of civic progress. There were landscapes of the never seen, and the ever seen.

A number of topographic photographers, several with Civil War experience on Matthew Brady's teams, accompanied expeditions through

¹Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock, The Influence of Photography on American Landscape Painting 1839-1880, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), pp. 85-86.

²Ibid., p. 7.

the American West beginning in the late 1860's.¹ These probes to chart the wilderness were sponsored by the U. S. Geological Survey and by railroads. Information recorded abstractly on the resulting maps was vivified by the photographs. Other photographers worked from studios in San Francisco and other nascent cities. Forerunners of NASA's moonscapes and red Mars-scapes, these photographs are of places not depicted before in Western culture; photographed with an advanced technology on the frontier; experimental and exploratory.

While some of the photographers were more influenced by painting conventions than others, the Western landscapes represent for the most part the application of purely topographic strategies of description. Unencumbered by a socially-derived prioritization of elements within their subject matter, the photographers made choices based on the capability of their tools to convey the subject. Above all, these pictures are direct. The framing and point of view eschew complication, allowing the colossal subject to speak for itself. The levelness of the camera is in contrast to, and emphasizes, the irregularity of the terrain. The blank sky pushes energy down upon the rough line of earth's end and heaven's beginning. The scale, the immense mass, is demonstrated by details of tiny trees, while textures delineate volumes. Reflections emphasize form. By use of foreground and mid-ground against far away background, combined with the characteristic lightness of distant objects, the depth of the landscape is accentuated. And by the use of small aperture and large plates, sharpness and immediacy are obtained.

It is for more than their historical interest that the Western landscapes made their mark. As they document, they manage to do more-- they incorporate a sensibility which is aesthetic. The introduction

¹Significant names include Timothy O'Sullivan, Carleton Watkins, Eadweard Muybridge, William H. Jackson, and Andrew Russell. See John Szarkowski, The Photographer and the American Landscape, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1963); Weston Naef & James N. Wood, Era of Exploration, (New York: Albright-Knox Art Gallery & The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975); and Karen Current & William Current, Photography and the Old West, (New York: Harry Abrams, Inc., 1978).

within the topographic context of what Szarkowski has called "a concern for plastic values"¹ represents an integration of photographic characteristics which are sometimes considered to be irreconcilable. The photographer Brassai has said:

The photograph has a double destiny.... It is the daughter of the world of externals, of the living second, and as such will always keep something of the historic or scientific document about it; but it is also the daughter of the rectangle, a child of the beaux-arts, which requires one to fill up the space agreeably or harmoniously with black-and-white spots or colors. In this sense the photograph will always have one foot in the camp of the graphic arts, and will never be able to escape the fact. Indeed in every photo you will find the accent placed either on the side of the document or of graphic arts. It's inescapable. 2

While Brassai may be right that a photograph can never fully succeed in both directions, there is a special quality to those which come close. Isolated examples predate the Western landscapes, but it is with this body of photographs that a strain of topographic work of formal intensity may be said to begin. Photographs which cannot be readily placed into the camps of design and documentary, which straddle the line by belonging to both, are capable of a kind of expression which is the essence of a purely photographic sensibility.

In many of the Western landscapes, something of the photographer's party appears: either camp tents, boats, a wagon, or figures. Sometimes a figure lolls disconcertingly against the spectacular scene. The convention of the figure in the landscape, adopted from painting, helps to show scale; it also changes the photograph. There was also the shoeshine man and his customer in Daguerre's view. The inclusion of people in a landscape introduces issues into the photograph which would not be present otherwise; at the same time, the people crowd out other issues. In the unpeopled landscape there is inherent a sense of the direct relationship of this piece of the world to all humans, society as a whole, and to the viewer as a member of society. In a landscape which includes people who can be differentiated as individuals, or as types,

¹Szarkowski, American Landscapes, p. 7.

²Brassai, quoted in Lawrence Durrell, Brassai, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968), p. 13.

the first issue becomes the relationship of the people in the photograph to the landscape, and only secondly the relationship of the landscape to society and the viewer. Our attention is so riveted by the appearance of our fellow humans that people will dominate any stage they are on. Once a photograph includes people who can be identified as individuals, it starts to be about them: their social circumstances, their intentions, their emotional state, whatever. In Daguerre's photograph, a mere trace of mercury on silver iodide, two blurred silhouettes, is enough evidence to be able to make class distinctions-- the street vendor versus the man who can afford to have his shoes cleaned.

People are a part of the landscape, especially the built environment, as much as any other object. It is one of the virtues of the unpeopled landscape, however, that it portrays all people as equal: none of them are included. There is no separation of humanity into the photographed and the non-photographed; there's no chance of viewing people in a way which exploits, patronizes, or glorifies them. The viewer is neither inferior nor superior to the content of the photograph. The landscape which does not depict individual people preserves a democratic, classless outlook, from which it can approach issues which concern all people.¹

While the Western photographers could find a strong subject matter in nature, a terrain of such wildness and power was generally not available along the Atlantic Coast. There were practitioners of the topographic landscape of pure nature, but their work, especially towards the end of the century, tended to move into painterly effect of soft focus and textured prints-- decidedly not topographic. This kind of pictorialism is still popular in camera clubs and photo magazines. The topographic landscape of settled areas is identified with the commercial photographers of the era, living in cities and towns, documentarians of the bustling Industrial Age. Most of the urban topographic landscapes were made for a client, usually as a commercial enterprise. Whereas the

¹A perceptive discussion of the issues in the photography of people may be found in the title essay of Max Kozloff, Photography & Fascination, (Danbury, N.H.: Addison House, 1979), pp. 6-60.

Western landscapists were responsive to the form of the terrain, the commercial landscapist aimed to impose a socially-derived message upon the subject. The message was the client's.

Over time, and pervasively, photographers and businessmen collaborated to develop a style of picture which best suited the needs of the business interest. That businessmen tended to perceive the same needs for their pictures, and that they tended to be conformist, helped spread its adoption; the rules are much the same for a commercial photographer today. A photograph of a factory, for instance, is made towards its best facade, emphasizes its size, plays down dirty features, and shows humanizing details, such as architectural ornamentation or plantings. It should probably include, readily legible, the company sign or logo. The weather and lighting are upbeat: blue sky, with perhaps puffy cumulus clouds, or in sophisticated practice, such as found in annual reports, or currently in Architectural Digest or Fortune magazines, twilight with the sky taking on tones of sunset, the lights of the building glowing. When a bank built a grand building to emphasize its role as a community institution, the photographer for the bank made a picture which reinforced that impression. To engage in the trade, after all, one must sell prints (and often, borrow money).

By continued application of these rules of visual organization, a code of the commercial topographic landscape became established, which sets bounds that the photographer must work within. As this specialized view became both recognizable and widely utilized, it began to take on a new meaning--began to make a value judgement about its subject. The views most favored by commercial clients became identified with them, perceived as sympathetic to their concerns. As the proud view of the company factory symbolized the company to itself, it came also to symbolize the many aspects of the company--social, political, etc., which were not in the photograph--to the general viewer. The views took on the extra baggage of affirming not only the company's building, but the whole company. To endorse a company's vision of its skyscraper is to endorse, to a large extent, the company's values on other topics as well. And conversely, no company

would purchase a photograph showing its skyscraper tilted, for it would imply something unfavorable about the company as a whole.

Just as the commercial topographic landscapes came to take on the attributes of their subjects-- the businesses-- the city skylines came to represent the aspirations of the community as a whole; the kind of photograph, for instance, which might grace the cover of the phonebook, or the city's annual report. In comparison to the Western landscapes of the natural, these are landscapes of the social. Ever more vertical cityscapes, busy streets, and new construction showed things were thriving and life was getting better. The photographer sought the view which justified the Chamber of Commerce's boasts. Every hill became the Acropolis, every water works the Roman Aqueduct, every hamlet a budding Manhattan. These were landscapes not of God-in-nature, but of man-in-nature. Befitting the zeitgeist of scientific positivism, these photographs were facts which proved progress.

Beginning in the late 19th century, and continuing until the present, the topographic landscape is epitomized by the strains which may be labeled the natural and the commercial. The natural landscape is inherently sublime, and is depicted for itself. The built landscape is photographed for social utility, with conscious attention to the correct message to be conveyed. The creative worker makes photographs for an audience which has been thoroughly trained to recognize the visual conventions of these popular modes of topographic landscape.

associated his images with a line from Thoreau's *Walden*, and used a line from Thoreau for the title. "The line is the preservation of the world." The line expressed a powerful truth, but it seems to make the most sense in the individual context of Thoreau's photographs. And Adams' landscapes are similarly depicted as scenes of nature.

Illustration No. 31, *Walden*, Thoreau, *Walden*, 1849, p. 24.
 Eugene Atget, *Millerton*, N.Y., 1907, p. 24.

Robert Adams, *Photography and the American Scene*, N.Y., 1939, pp. 15-16.



THE TOPOGRAPHIC GARDEN

Not surprisingly, many photographers have loved gardens.... Gardens are in fact strikingly like landscape pictures, sanctuaries not from but of truth. An etymological detail that Kenneth Clark raises in his discussion of landscape--paradise is the Persian word meaning "a walled enclosure"--stands I think as perhaps the best possible synopsis of what a photographer sees through the finder of his camera just before he releases the shutter. His view is of a safe wayside for travelers, built from the local geography, but still and clarifying.¹

In a book of Eliot Porter's color photographs of nature, Porter associated his images with selections from Thoreau's Walden, and used a line from Thoreau for the title: "In Wildness is the Preservation of the World." The line expresses a powerful truth, but it seems to make the most sense in the uncivilized nature of Porter's photographs. Ansel Adams' landscapes are similarly eloquent arguments for saving natural

Illustration No. 5: Eugene Atget, "Chateau de Savigny," n. d.
Eugene Atget, (Millerton, N. Y.: Aperture, 1980), p. 81.

¹Robert Adams, Beauty in Photography, (Millerton, N. Y.: Aperture, 1981), pp. 16-18.

environments. In topographic photographs of the built landscape, the theme of "wildness" is less evident, just as the forces of nature are less apparent in the city. Robert Adams' analogy of garden and landscape is especially apropos for the urban photographer of natural forces.

The city is a place where the earth has been overlaid with a grid. Through maps the surface is ordered. It is an environment in which nature has its place; it is an amentiy, and desired to be orderly, like the meticulously-designed buildings, and the calculated flow of traffic. Planted trees, mowed lawns, trimmed hedges, and arranged flowers represent the correct harmony with nature. There is a person called a Landscaper, whose role is to create a pattern for vegetation, a design of cultivated order; and there are city and other maintenance departments who war to keep wayward nature within its bounds. Weedy sidewalks and alleys are regarded negatively.

The commercial photographer, as much as ever with us, crops out the overgrown lot next to the factory, an eyesore which does not suit the purpose of the picture. Well-kept grounds help make the property more salable; colorful blooms and a few branches to fill the sky soften the stark taste of new construction. In these clean views, nature is carefully groomed not only by the groundskeepers, but also by the photographer: the ethic of orderliness is doubly imposed. The pictured environment is one in which the capriciousness of nature has been briefly checked to suit a popular preference for the appearance of order.

The landscaper designates borders, within which the wilderness will be contained and tamed, and calls it a park, or garden. The photographer refines the landscaper's design further, to create an organization above and beyond the physical garden, a pictorial garden. The ability of the photographer to designate a garden does not depend on physical manipulation of plants in earth but in air. The landscaper is only making a temporary image of a garden, anyway. Whether it is a garden of a second, or of a few years, it is still a fleeting conception of a space on earth. The photographers of the American West made edged images of wild places, of land at the frontier of Western cultural awareness; in a few years, topographical boundaries were officially recognized, and

government gardens, National Parks, were drawn off.

In the United States, there are people close to the land, known in some places as dirt farmers, who depend upon the produce of the garden for survival. For the other classes of people, the garden is pleasurable and wholesome, but not essential to life. The daily bread comes from agribusiness. Yet the city garden is not intended to provide food, anyway, and maybe there is something vital about it. Its virtues just are not announced with Broadway glitter. Charles Pratt wrote:

One of the common uses of a surfeit of money is to buy a piece of distant natural paradise and make it just like home--home being fancier and bigger than anything in sight. So a garden is made; its care the employment and concern of local gardeners, who maintain it for the random pleasure of its owners. Most of the time they are far away doing terribly important things. The gardeners are fixed, the owners are grandly mobile. Used this way, wealth makes two classes--those who maintain the garden but live just outside its walls, in the local real world, and those who have willed the garden and from time to time use it to rest from all those important labors far away. But, in truth, it is the gardener who is most likely to be within the walls at that one moment when the strawberries are most perfectly ripe and who knows where on the river to catch the most fish. Meanwhile, the distant owner thinks incessantly of the garden he has made in a land which he will never know.¹

The garden's beauty is of the unpretentious; its essence resides in humble things, and in inexorable forces. A garden ornamented to excess, too grandiose, too proud, is never sublime until it falls to ruin. And there are unplanted gardens outside the walls.

It is doubtful either Edward Weston or Eugene Atget--neither prone to intellectualizing--thought of a photograph as a garden. Though it oversimplifies things, the two early 20th century photographers exemplify two main directions in the modern topographic garden: of pure nature, the "wilderness"; and of the built environment, the "street." Weston's school, with the principles articulated in the manifestos of the F-64 Group, includes Ansel Adams, Brett Weston, Paul Strand's late pictures of nature, Eliot Porter, Paul Caponigro, Andreas

¹Charles Pratt, The Garden and the Wilderness, (New York: Horizon Press, 1980), p. 49.

Feininger, Wynn Bullock, and more recently William Clift. Atget's school is harder to identify, because most street photography includes people in some way, and thus, as was commented earlier, engages other issues which preempt the garden. There are examples within the oeuvres of the photographers Andre Kertesz, Bill Brandt, Robert Frank, and Harry Callahan; more extensive work by Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans, Art Sinsabaugh, Dorothea Lange, and Wright Morris; and current photographs by Lee Friedlander, Roger Merten, Henry Wessel, Jr., Steven Shore, William Eggleston, Lewis Baltz, and John Gossage, among others.

Certain characteristics seem apt in contrasting the photographs of Weston and Atget: exclusion versus inclusion, singularity against plurality, the close-up versus the medium view. Their attitudes towards their subjects were quite distinct. Susan Sontag has quoted Weston:

Whereas the painter, according to Weston, has always "tried to improve nature by self-imposition", the photographer has "proved that nature offers an endless number of perfect 'compositions', -- order everywhere."¹

Weston's priority of absolute form in nature--towards refined beauty--concentrated the garden into individual, self-contained images. Weston's photographs are marvelous for their design and topographic density, yet, as isolated cuts of nature, they did not conceive a whole system. His views of roots had only retinal roots in the world. Sontag continues:

Weston's images, however admirable, however beautiful, have become less interesting to many people, while those taken by the mid-nineteenth-century English and French primitive photographers and by Atget, for example, enthrall more than ever. The judgement of Atget as "not a fine technician" that Weston entered in his Daybooks perfectly reflects the coherence of Weston's view and his distance from contemporary taste. "Halation destroyed much, and the color correction not good," Weston notes; "his instinct for subject matter was keen, but his recording weak, -- his construction inexcusable... so often one feels he missed the real thing." Contemporary taste faults Weston, with his devotion to the perfect print, rather than Atget and the other masters of photography's demotic tradition.²

¹Susan Sontag, On Photography, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 100.

²Ibid., p. 101-2.

Weston's concern for the graphic qualities of the print led him to distill nature too thoroughly, leaving no rough edges. The viewer of photographs of the Weston school knows better--knows the world is not so ideal, and that this is a limited vision. The photographs of the wild are ultimately too civilized to be full tokens of the real.

Although Atget's photographs are of the built environment, mostly, places considered to be civilized, with the order there is disorder, the actual state of affairs. Atget's method was the direct, simple approach of the 19th century topographic landscape: medium-distance views, with the intent of clear depiction--in Szarkowski's phrase, "precise and literal description."¹ His photographs are not so much striking individually, as they are cumulative in effect. His subtle message is in the choice of locale, in his definitions of what could be a "place", and in his unforced appreciation of his subjects. Atget's world is not timeless, but recognizes the process of change. One could speak of the ecology of Atget's photographs. A bunch of things exist together in a place; there is wholeness, not that everything which affects this micro-ecosystem is represented in the photograph, but that there has been no principle of exclusion. If there is harmony in the photograph, it is music not of heaven but of the earth.

Atget was a photographer of gardens, formal and informal. The stuff of gardens is vegetation and arrangement; Atget recognized gardens where the arrangement was not a landscaper's. Too, his views of the formal gardens at Versailles are often dominated by out-of-control plants. He knew overgrowth is not anarchy. And if photography must invariably beautify, then it seems fitting to depict that which is familiar and common and without pretension. Sontag has argued:

Notwithstanding the declared aims of indiscrete, unposed, often harsh photography to reveal truth, not beauty, photography still beautifies. Indeed, the most enduring triumph of photography has been its aptitude to discovering beauty in the humble, the inane, the decrepit. At the very least, the real has a pathos. And that pathos is--beauty.²

¹John Szarkowski, Walker Evans, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971), p. 13.

²Sontag, On Photography, p. 102.

The evidence of the ecology of the city is not hidden, it is simply unnoticed. The civilized eye is trained to overlook scrawny city trees, weeds, lumpenfoliage. Adams writes:

Photographers who can teach us to love even vacant lots will do so out of the same sense of wholeness that has inspired the wilderness photographers of the last twenty-five years.... Beauty, Coleridge wrote, is based in "the unity of the manifold, the coalescence of the diverse." In this large sense, beautiful photographs of contemporary American will lead us out into daily life by giving us a new understanding of and tolerance for what previously seemed anarchic and threatening.¹

Though they are vacant lots, and spontaneous, they are verging gardens.

Yet there are critics with questions about the value of documentary photography. How, exactly, does a topographic landscape contribute in any way to resolving the problems of modern society?

Allan Sekula has written:

What I am arguing is that we understand the extent to which art redeems a repressive social order by offering a wholly imaginary transcendence, a false harmony, to docile and isolated spectators.²

Sekula sees a problem when photographs exist within the framework of the artworld, characterized as it is by an elitist sensibility and implicit support for the status quo--an institution to be opposed. The use of Atget's photographs today by the art establishment, for example by The Museum of Modern Art, has nothing to do with what Atget intended, however. Sekula has made a second argument:

Walter Benjamin recalled the remark that Eugene Atget depicted the streets of Paris as though they were the scene of a crime. That remark serves to poeticize a rather deadpan, nonexpressionist style, to conflate nostalgia and the affectless instrumentality of the detective.... I cite this example merely to raise the question of the affective character of documentary. Documentary photography has amassed mountains of evidence. And yet,

¹Adams, Beauty in Photography, pp. 105-7.

²Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary," Current Perspectives, p. 231.

in this pictorial presentation of scientific and legalistic "fact", the genre has simultaneously contributed much to spectacle, to retinal excitation, to voyeurism, to terror, envy and nostalgia, and only a little to the critical understanding of the social world.¹

While Sekula is correct that much photography labeled documentary is flawed, the best work, such as Atget's, is not dogmatic, and thus does not contribute to critical understanding on the terms of an explicit ideology. Photographs which hew to the correct line of the moment are not about the world but about society. Sekula would prefer photography which shows the plight of workers, the contradiction of the capitalist system. Fine, they are important. Yet even when the new order replaces capitalism, people will still live in cities, and within nature. Paradise is after all a garden. Alan Trachtenberg has written:

The quarrel is not between a picture that is formalist and a picture that is humanist, but between a viewing which is passive, and a reading that is active and reflective.²

To the active viewer, Atget's photographs are urging gardens.

tradition of the topographic landscape. In the volume *The American Movement*, by Leo Friedlander, published in 1976, Friedlander has called the book "maybe the most important thing to come out of the whole bicentennial." The American Movement is a world which demonstrates how photography can be used with ideas in a sustained manner, sufficient to sustain an awareness, and still intrigue the eye.

In his photographs and publications which preceded this book, Friedlander exhibited a mastery of individual class depiction. By juxtaposition, reflection, angle, lighting, perspective, he has created photographs which are anecdotes, jokes, scenes, small dramas, ironic

Illustration No. 6: Leo Friedlander, "Frank Lake, Jr. Capitol Grounds, Phoenix, Arizona," p. 4, Leo Friedlander, *The American Movement*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), Plate 5.

¹Ibid., pp. 235-6.

²Alan Trachtenberg. "Camera Work", Current Perspectives, p. 229.



THE AMERICAN GARDEN

Amidst the photography of recent years, there is one project which exemplifies the currency and best practice of the photographic tradition of the topographic landscape. It is the volume The American Monument, by Lee Friedlander, published in 1976.¹ Szarkowski has called the book "maybe the most patriotic thing to come out of the whole bicentennial."² The American Monument is a model which demonstrates how topographic photographs can deal with ideas in a sustained manner, continue to function as documents, and still intrigue the eye.

In his photographs and publications which preceded this book, Friedlander exhibited a mastery of insightful clear depiction. By juxtaposition, reflection, angle, lighting, composition, he has created photographs which are anecdotes, jokes, scenes, small dramas, ironic

Illustration No. 6: Lee Friedlander, "Frank Luke, Jr. Capitol Grounds, Phoenix, Arizona," n.d. Lee Friedlander, The American Monument, (New York: The Eakins Press Foundation, 1976), Plate 5.

¹Ibid.

²Maren Stange, "Szarkowski at the Modern," Current Perspectives, p. 71.

observations. In much of his work, however, the pictures exist without context-- other than the romantic notion of the heroic street photographer, detached, alienated, finding aesthetic content under the very noses of the boobs for the benefit of the cognoscenti. Like a comedian's string of jokes, it was fun but did not lead anywhere. Self-Portrait,¹ Friedlander's first book, was about that ethos, and punctured it neatly. But it was a book for people interested in photography per se.

In The American Monument, Friedlander's depictive strategies serve a more profound program, a document of the various kinds and conditions of outdoor monuments in the United States at the time of the Bicentennial. Singly, as earlier, the photographs can be clever, to be figured out. As a group, they are a social critique, to be contemplated. A photograph of a monument from the wrong side-- the non-facade side-- or one which shows overgrowth around a statue, or soda cans, or a tarnished, pigeon-marred surface, can be read as a belittling of the monument by the photographer. Many such views make a larger case: evidence less of the photographer's attitude towards monuments, and more of society's. At the time of the Bicentennial and its concurrent recycling of the rhetoric of historical myths, here are tokens of those myths. It is a catalogue of what has been considered fit to be honored in the past, and how the honor has been fashioned. Judging from the state of some of the monuments, we may not believe in some of the causes quite as much these days.

Friedlander has completely shaped the content of the book, but he has done it in quiet ways. His choice of monuments avoids repeating postcards, and stays away from the "Monument Avenues"; he searches out the smaller conceptions of honor. He does not religiously idealize the monument by cutting the foreground and backing the statue plain; he shows what is behind and around the monument: the monument's garden. Monuments are often the centerpiece of a garden, with borders marked by a fence or curb. Monuments exist in a space which has been reserved for a function outside that of everyday activity; rather than of

¹Lee Friedlander, Self Portrait, (New City, N. Y.: Haywire Press, 1970).

the timed, they are of the timeless. The garden mediates between the daily traffic and the more spiritual sensibility of the monument. Many of the photographs are about how the garden performs this mediation. On occasion, branches and leaves all but obscure the monument; as the monument is the grounds to have a garden, so the monument is the grounds to make a photograph of the garden.

While Friedlander's visual strategies are a nonverbal commentary on the subject, they do not stray. The issue is the monuments and their gardens, and extraneous subjects are not introduced. The captions are limited to name of monument and location. In the prints Friedlander avoids technical mysteries, film effects or darkroom tricks to be puzzled over. For the viewer to be thinking of these photographs in terms of their manufacture--in the sense of "action painting"--would weaken the work. The inquiry ought not be "how", but "what" or "why." Similarly, photographs which were showpieces of the commercial photographer's virtuosity--large format, square to the frame, clean, lighted for a sculptural effect--were also unsuitable. These photographs are inherently special cases, and have a sense of falseness about them for their idealization. A large format camera might have been used, but Friedlander chose not to. One of the virtues of the small-camera, "informal" style is that a viewer can realize: I could take that picture, if I thought to do it, or if I got lucky. There is less of a barrier for the viewer to think about monuments. Of course, the fact that the book is very expensive and not easily accessible to the public reduces the audience for it; but that situation is less a function of the photographer, and more a consequence of the level of support of the society for creative photography.

Like old issues of Life, or photographs by Ansel Adams, The American Monument will have staying power; people a hundred years from now will find the images as fascinating as many of the photographs from the last century seem today. Photographs have sustained life when they are full of information: not necessarily about the great events of history, but of the everyday--little things which time and distance intensify in meaning. It is interesting that early photographs

made artistically--i. e., influenced by other arts--have aged poorly, whereas the well-made topographic work is today as strong as ever. For many observers, the photography of the early 20th century of greatest interest is not the variety of experimental work of that time, but Atget's photographs, and the contemporary early work of Berenice Abbott and Walker Evans. The qualities which enhance a longevity of interest in a photograph seem to be clarity of depiction, effacement of the role of the artist, and perceptive inclusion of detail; The American Monument has them all.

There is a folk truth that a good photographer need go no further than a block from home to find good pictures. (For several years, it is said, Andre Kertesz has not even left his apartment.) There is also a real truth that much of importance in photographic history has been done by cross-country travelers. From Roger Fenton to Timothy O'Sullivan to Evans to Cartier-Bresson to Robert Frank, photographers just passing through have produced major work. Friedlander went many places to compile this book. In the same way as Evans for American Photographs, and Frank for The Americans, the idea of America is central, so travel was necessary for breadth. Like his predecessors, Friedlander avoided the trap of the moving photographer--the superficial--because he did not travel to uncover the exotic, but to find the common; the icons familiar to every town. At the present level of image saturation, the photograph of the strange has greatest interest at first glance, followed by decline. Perhaps it is simply that enough photographs have been taken that we have seen the quirks of everywhere on the globe--the initial survey has been pretty much completed--and now there is a need for reports which probe more deeply. The bizarre becomes banal and a cliché so quickly. By using common objects as the matter, there is not that initial jarring impact, but the photograph may survive familiarity.

There is a photograph in The American Monument of a subject in Richmond, the Bill "Bojangles" Robinson monument. The view is medium-long range, showing the brick and curb garden, and simply designed--the side of a row house and the top foliage of a tree serve as

a dark backdrop for the bright highlights of the statue. The reason the monument is at the corner of Adams and Leigh, however, is a story: Robinson, once he became famous, returned to Richmond and gave money for a stoplight at the intersection, so children going to school could cross safely. A viewer would need to know the story to fully appreciate the fact that Friedlander has included the present stoplight in the picture. One suspects more of the photographs include the details of such stories. They are responsive to many kinds of scrutiny.

The American Monument is a model, finally, in the way that the photographs' ability to evoke is directly determined by the activity of the viewer. Their richness is a function of the viewer's imagination. The collection does not explicitly address universal concepts of memorialism, American myths, urban design, gesture and sign in statuary, or the garden, but these are in the photographs if the viewer brings them. They are reflections on a reflective subject. They call upon the viewer's power of observation. Photographs which can intensify the experience of walking down the street are about living. They revivify the glance we formerly failed to note. In the felicitous comment of photographers, the photographs "work".

VERGING GARDENS

The photographs represented in the Plates, a selection from the larger body of work entitled Verging Gardens, are modern topographic landscapes. Like their precedents, they document their subjects. As views of the built landscape, architecture is an important element. The lay of the land is a component. Clarity of depiction and the inclusion of details are vital to their conception. Unavoidably, the Plates, as copy prints, have less density than the original prints, and less immediacy, and so do not fully convey the sense of the images.

In Gardner's photograph, all a scene of man's doing, nature is present only conceptually: man is shown to be merely an accelerating agent for natural tendencies. By a bold visual device, Atget makes nature manifest. Atget photographs a tree so it intrudes upon another picture, one the viewer knows might have been made of the building beyond the tree: a clean unobstructed view of architecture. The dialogue between tree and building is more pronounced with the tree dominant, than it would have been with the building foremost. The natural elements in the picture are not peripheral trappings, but organized into a garden, and thus they become an idea.

Ruskin said the painter's pathetic fallacy was anthropomorphizing natural objects. The painting was not of the appearance of the found scene, but introduced extraneous visual characteristics. Photography turns the painter's misceue into virtue, through Stieglitz' concept of equivalence, which recognizes a resonance of gesture in nature. In Friedlander's photograph of a statue, a deliberately anthropomorphized record of gesture, the plants in the garden also gesture. The convention of the figure in the landscape reappears, with a twist; the figure is a part of the landscape. Rather than a person humanizing a wilderness, it is a garden betokening the ecology of the city. And in truth, color prints are like the stuff of gardens: bright and transitory, and of resilient stock.

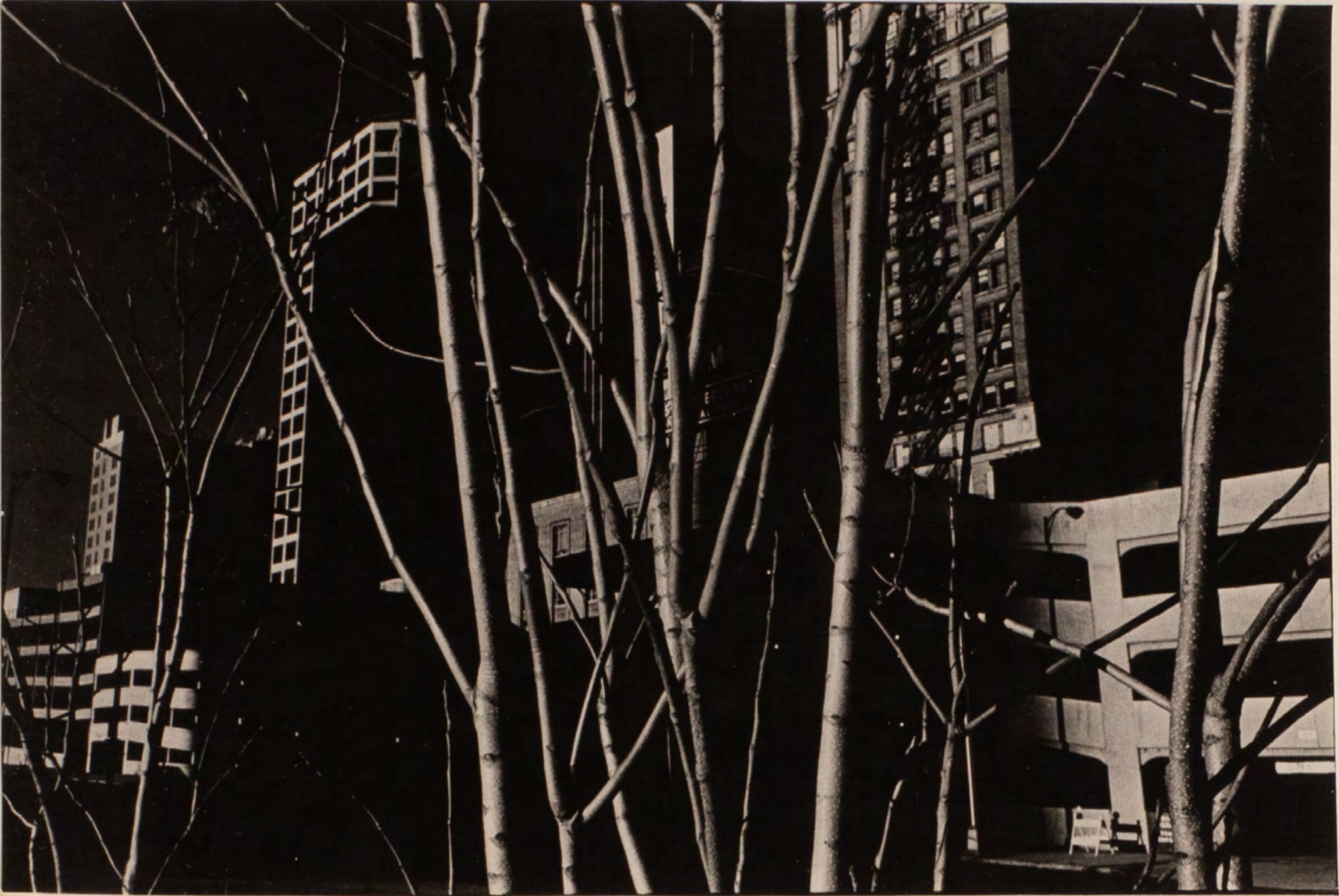


Plate 1: Topographic Garden 1979
Silver bromide print 6 x 9 in.



Plate 2: Topographic Garden 1979
Silver bromide print 6 x 9 in.



Plate 3: Topographic Garden 1979
Silver bromide print 6 x 9 in.



Plate 4: Topographic Garden 1980
Silver bromide print 6 x 9 in.



Plate 5: Topographic Garden 1980
Silver bromide print 6 x 9 in.



Plate 6: Topographic Garden 1980
Color coupler print 13 x 19 in.



Plate 7: Topographic Garden 1980
Color coupler print 13 x 19 in.



Plate 8: Topographic Garden 1980
Color coupler print 15 x 19 in.



Plate 9: Topographic Garden 1981
Color coupler print 13 x 19 in.



Plate 10: Topographic Garden 1981
Color coupler print 13 x 19 in.



Plate 11: Topographic Garden 1981
Color coupler print 13 x 19 in.



Plate 12: Topographic Garden 1982
Cibachrome print 9 x 13 in.



Plate 13: Topographic Garden 1982
Cibachrome print 9 x 13 in.



Plate 14: Topographic Garden 1982
Cibachrome print 9 x 13 in.

NOTES ON THE EXHIBITION

Verging Gardens was exhibited from April 30 - May 13, 1981, at Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, 907 1/2 West Franklin Street, Richmond, Virginia.

Included in the exhibition were 40 photographs: twenty-three color coupler prints on 16 x 20 paper, and seventeen silver bromide prints on 8 x 10 paper.

Particular attention was paid to the lighting in the installation. The gallery room had skylights, and in addition extra floodlights were used. During daytime viewing, the effect was that the photographs were evenly and thoroughly illuminated by light of mixed color temperatures.



Plate 15: View of Exhibition Installation 1981



Plate 16: View of Exhibition Installation 1981

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