Indivisibility

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Categorizing

A man straightens up after a day's work in the strawberry fields of Watsonville. After so many hours stooped over the rows of dirt, leaves and fruit, the world looks big again, and he looks at the blueness of the sky, the clouds moving in from the Pacific not far to the west, the Santa Cruz mountains in the east, and the subdivision at the edge of the field. As he waits for a friend to sort something out, he lets his eyes rest on the Virgin of Guadalupe charm hanging from the rearview mirror. His mind drifts again, first to his friends who work in the rose fields up the coast a few dozen miles and their thorn-gashed hands, then to the official miracle of Guadalupe: the appearance of her image in a cloak full of fresh roses in the winter, and the unofficial one: those Castille roses weren't native to Mexico anyway; then he thinks of Mexico, the border, the INS, and his mother's kitchen, which has a bigger, handsomer image of this Virgin in it. His friend comes, guns the engine, and the black smoke of unburnt fuel comes out the tailpipe. Ahead of them the truckload of strawberries takes off in the opposite direction, and the fruit of their labor will end up in margaritas, in supermarkets, and even in the farmer's market in Boston, where only those who read the fine print will realize they aren't buying local produce.

This is the kind of story that is easy to recount in print, but it is seldom told in photographs anymore: because photographs exist in compositional genres, and even this small story keeps slipping out of genre, though its main one must be landscape—not only the landscape of the strawberry fields, but also of the oilfields which fuel the car, maybe homes, hospitals, borders, the metaphoric landscapes of the Virgin of Guadalupe's cloak of roses, and the supermarket's neat indoor hills of produce. About twenty-five miles down the coast from Watsonville is Carmel, where Edward Weston and his peers homed formalist photography of nature in which cameras would follow compositional genres rather than narrative continuities. A documentary photographer might have brought together the strawberries, the worker, the car, his home, as Walker Evans brought together still life, domestic interiors, portraits, and group portraits with images of the cotton fields to portray the lives of sharecroppers in Alabama. His work insisted that a comprehensive portrait move among these genres. But landscape photography is dominated now by the vision established in Carmel in which each image stands alone, and none refers to these narratives of production, interpretation, and history of place. In them, landscape has become a walled garden, separate from the world around it.

Photographs can be more complicated, however. One of Ansel Adams's most famous pictures appears in Edward Steichen's The Family of Man as *Mt. Williamson*. It portrays an arid field of boulders before a luminous mountain and is as neat an allegory as one could want of the universal truism about the rough road to the good. It is, of course, about something very specific extracted from Adams's social documentary work at the Japanese internment camp Manzanar (about a hundred and fifty miles due east of Watsonville) and is more properly titled *Mount Williamson, the Sierra Nevada, from Manzanar, California*, 1944. Though Adams made many pure, isolated landscape images, history and his followers have codified his work and developed the representation of landscape further. This practice parallels the national park system, which creates real walled gardens as subjects for this conceptual one: certain expanses of land set aside as islands of the natural for aesthetic experience. Formalist photography and the idea of a nature apart suit each other perfectly. Each draws meaning not from connections, which it frames often as contamination, but from segregation, a world sorted into categories. In the public imagination, out of these two sets of walls comes a third, marking off nature as a place for pleasure and leisure and epiphany, a place separate from the rest of experience. Procrustean categorizing has its uses. It lets things be contained, defined, controlled, and it allows mastery, but in a procrustean bed, the subject is always being stretched or hacked at to make it fit. Giving the subject rather than its frame priority means establishing instead flexible parameters and tolerating its unmasterable, amorphous sprawl.

Manzanar also appears in a photograph by Virginia Beahan and Laura McPhee taken half a century after Adams worked there. This time the camera has pulled back from the mountains to straggly apple

trees in the middle ground and sagebrush and rusty wreckage in the foreground. The sublime is here, but so is history, and so is agriculture. Beahan and McPhee's photographs straddle the divide between formalism and documentary, between narrative and composition, between the informational and the aesthetic. These photographers stick largely with landscape—with relatively natural space seen at middle or long distance, and a horizon for order—but they shoot along the line where the definitions blur and make photographs that don't respect the wall around the formal garden. They refuse the aesthetic languages of documentary, slipping its subjects into photographs that claim the beauties of formalism. Their images show us a world in metamorphosis, where categories melt and mutate, where subjects slip from genre to genre, where a new earth is being made out of fresh lava that buries houses and the old earth is being buried under construction of others. This is a world where natural sites become shrines, and shrines become works of art that represent the landscape; where stone is carved into both sculptures of bodies and homes for bodies; where water is sometimes holy and sometimes for irrigating crops; where sometimes nature and people serenade each other with their additions and emendations and sometimes threaten each other.

At the beginning of *No Ordinary Land*, we see the earth making itself. At the end we see it being harnessed and channeled to make the human infrastructures that insulate us from the elements. In between, the body's labor and the spirit's beliefs reshape it materially and conceptually. This is a pictorial account of the transformative nature of the world, in which categories cannot contain subjects as fluid as water and lava, and the answer to what anyplace is, is plural. Thus the boy in the foreground of an Icelandic body of water is playing, but in the background geothermal power is being produced. The landscape speaks of both leisure and labor, nature, culture and production, ancient forces and modern centralization, the chthonic and the technologic. These are landscapes that have been interpreted before the photographers got there to add their own layer of interpretations: Iceland has had its trees removed and its geothermal power harnessed, Costa Rica has become the site of miracles and butterfly farms, New Jersey has been paved, canalized, and set afire.

Need and imagination are at work everywhere in these landscapes. In some, natural phenomena become representations. Thus a Hawaiian eclipse becomes a painting of an eclipse at a flower show. The wild orchids of the rainforests become domestic flowers cultivated for social purposes—and though the eclipse is now a painting, the flowers are still real; that they are cultivated blurs the border between the made and the born, culture and nature. Hunting animals for food becomes hunting for sport, and practice for the sport involves target shooting, so the real animals are represented by lifesize plastic sculptures used as targets. The poet Marianne Moore wrote of "real toads in imaginary gardens." Here are molded panthers, deer and boars in a real garden, with a birdhouse in the distance to remind us that not all creatures are prey. The deer is brought into culture as meat or trophy. The wild bird, however, is given a humanlike home of its own. Both animals thus serve human purposes without ceasing to be wild. Real—and holy—water flows from under a mural of a maiden walking alongside a waterway in Costa Rica. Sometimes the natural world is offered up to the supernatural, as in the offering of flowers to a Buddha, but sometimes the gestures of devotion and the flowers are offered back to the earth, as with the blossoms on the volcano's lip in Hawaii. In these images, humans are not more powerful than nature, but they have very nearly equaled it. But when they have covered nature over or tamed it, they miss it and add images of it to their constructs, bringing the outside into the inside.

The photographs portray not the binary story of touched/untouched, but the subtle histories of kinds and layers of touches in the landscape, not an authoritative story but a plethora of divergent versions. Perhaps what is most outstanding about the images gathered here is their refusal to simplify. Almost every landscape seems to be a nexus, a place where multiple impulses, forces, and practices come together. Places that are damaged are still beautiful, as are working places, and the most conventionally beautiful kinds of landscapes—oceans, mountains—have signs of human presence pulling them back from the Otherness they often signify in photographs. The work insists on restarting a complex conversation about the ways our lives are intertwined with the spaces and substances of the earth, a conversation that seems to have its origins behind the camera, with two visions and voices rather than one shaping each image.

Working & Believing

A WOMAN STEPS OFF THE END OF A TRAIL INTO THE HIGH SIERRA and drops her pack, pulls her keys out, and gets into the truck in the parking lot at the end of the road, near the dam. The dam fills up Hetch-Hetchy Valley, the first valley north of Yosemite Valley. The battle to keep it undammed transformed a mountaineering club into the world's first environmental activist organization. They lost this battle, but they have gone on to fight many more wars. (Though the bottom half of this valley is now a lake created by a concrete dam, it is more serene than Yosemite with its colossal tourism infrastructure, if more profoundly physically altered.) She writes for the organization and bought her truck out of money they gave her for a book. Like most environmentalists and landscape lovers, she drives a lot, and she tries to think about where the trail ends and the road begins, tries to connect the poetry of wandering with the prose of fossil fuel consumption. When she gets home in a few hours she'll take a shower in water from this dam, in snowmelt pumped down to a city where it never snows. And the things she's been thinking about will make all the objects around her murmur: her shower speaks of mountains in winter, the heap of mail waiting for her of trees, pulp mills and printers. Her coffee speaks of the *fincas* in the tropical highlands, and the sound of cars all night is a sound gnawing at the Arctic Wildlife Refuge, which she's never seen but knows is part of the same story as her gas tank now. All murmur of the vast systems of production and consumption that begin and end in the landscape. In the middle of the city, these landscapes are still with her.

A Sri Lankan diptych by Beahan and McPhee speaks of this: a roomful of drying tea facing the green terraces of a tea plantation. The black tea forms a kind of landscape against the skylike white wall, and hovering in that flat heaven is, rather than a celestial body, a square blackboard full of tallies, tracking the transformation of the curvilinear slopes into the grid of manufactory and the abstraction of profits. But the open terraces of the tea farm are still there implicitly, in the leaves and in the imaginations that connect them to their source.

In the European tradition, there are three kinds of landscape painting: the pastoral, the georgic or agricultural, and the historical. The first is the painting of landscape as a refuge from history and the labor of making, as a retreat to cyclical time and the simple life described in Virgil's *Eclogues*; it finds a place in painting from Giorgione onward to the picnickers and contemplatives of nineteenth-century painting. Virgil's *Georgics*, his instructive poem of agricultural life, has its equivalent in images—illuminated books of hours, paintings by Breughel, Constable, Millet, Grant Wood, and social realist depictions of agricultural labor, sowing and harvesting. History painting gives lie to the pastoral, since sometimes history happens in a landscape—Hannibal crosses the Alps, Washington crosses the Delaware. In all three, the subject is ultimately human, just as it is in Judeo-Christian representations of visions and visitations in the landscape.

I have always thought of that peculiar American genre of the uninhabited scene as a kind of history painting in which history has not yet happened. In the earliest American landscape photographs, those of the United States Geological Survey (made by men fresh from the battles of the Civil War), a figure or figures in the foreground enter the scene, like actors at the beginning of a play. This promise of a history that has not yet begun has become the covenant between the American imagination and its territory: an expectation that landscape should be the great Other to humanity and history, a promise that there is a world outside the social (belief in virgin wilderness requires forgetting the pervasive presence of Native Americans, whose transformations of the landscape are often invisible to unaccustomed eyes). This representational tradition of virgin wilderness came to be central to the American celebration of nature as a place of spiritual uplift. With that the American landscape ceased to be a precursor to history and became something else: religious painting. It's a vision in which spirituality is opposed to utility, and its visionaries must thus see nature's spaces and creatures as utterly separate from work, resources, food, and history. It's what Emerson was talking about when he wrote, "The noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God. It is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead the individual back to it." This fantasy of nature without biology was refined further in John Muir's rebellion against the backbreaking labor of life on his father's farm. He insisted with Emerson that the sustenance we ought look to the natural world for is spiritual, and that the spiritual is apprehended only visually. This transcendental stroke blotted out the intermediary landscapes of production and our more visceral relationships with the earth.

This American devotion to the virgin landscape also comes out of Genesis. Americans are deeply attached to stories of the Fall, whether they locate paradise in a golden age of family structure or a prehistory of virgin wilderness, an unpeopled paradise. And this

vision of a natural world utterly apart—a world whose meaning comes, paradoxically, from its separateness—has come to be the dominant image of landscape. This is particularly so in popular photography, in that vast market made out of the codification of Ansel Adams's wilderness images as gospel truth—calendars, posters, cards, books—which, in turn, seems to confirm in the popular imagination the reality of this world apart. Actual recreation, meanwhile, most often appears as bitter irony, as people who seem to be, in Woody Allen's words, "two with the universe": Diane Arbus's nudists and everyone from Roger Minick's to Richard Misrach's tourists succeed the pastoral's pipers and lovers (except in product ads for four-wheel drives, Power Bars, kayaks and so forth). Agriculture is seldom a subject any more, perhaps because it is no longer as emblematic as, say, Millet's gleaners or perhaps because this working relationship is irrelevant to a cult of nature apart (except when portrayed in documentary photography as exploitation of people or land). Represented thus, landscape becomes a luxurious irrelevancy, a playground or a temple for those with the time and inclination; it is no wonder many dismiss environmentalism as elitism.

The environmental historian Richard White writes about nature and work in an essay titled after a logging-town bumper sticker: "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?" He declares,

> Most people spend their lives in work, and long centuries of human labor have left indelible marks on the natural world. From pole to pole, herders, farmers, hunters, and industrial workers have deeply influenced the natural world, so virtually no place is without evidence of its alteration by human labor. Work that has changed nature has simultaneously produced much of our knowledge of nature. Humans have known nature by digging in the earth, planting seeds, and harvesting plants. They have known nature by feeling heat and cold, sweating as they went up hills, sinking into mud. They have known nature by shaping wood and stone, by living with animals, nurturing them, and killing them. . . . Most environmentalists disdain and distrust those who most obviously work in nature. Environmentalists have come to associate work—particularly heavy bodily labor, blue-collar work—with environmental degradation. . . . This distrust of work, particularly of hard physical labor, contributes to a larger tendency to define humans as being outside of nature and to frame environmental issues so that the choice seems to be between humans and nature.

This is another accomplishment of *No Ordinary Land*: portraying the landscapes of labor and inhabited landscapes not as scenes of a fall from grace, but something much more ambiguous. Nature is not a victim in this book, nor a virgin, and work is not a villain. The sites we see are not the clearcuts that have become the environmental trope for work in nature, but sites that are often harmonious, often ancient: the irrigation ways and tea slopes of Sri Lanka, fruit orchards, flower farms, old salt wells, as well as slash-and-burn agriculture in the tropics, and power plants in the north. There is no before and after in this work, neither the apocalypse of ecocide nor nostalgia for archaic practices and unpeopled paradises, only a long, complex during. And time itself becomes the subject in one of the most complex diptychs here, that of the Chumash cave in Santa Barbara and the Sri Lankan mosque. The cave is painted with wheel-like celestial bodies that suggest a map or chart, since most traditional people carefully charted the movements of sun, moon, and stars to measure time. And with this comes a reminder that even modern units of time, days and years, are still measurements of the motion of the spheres; the mosque's clocks, which indicate times for prayer, speak of a time that is ultimately the time of the earth's daily rotation. Disembodied time is a measure of objects' motions in space. And with this hint, that even the most transcendent and abstruse religion with its modern materials and inscriptions is tied back to the earth, the artists remind us that just as no landscape is out of reach of the human, so no human activity or space is out of reach of these landscapes. All of it is linked.

Note: The first anecdote describes a generic worker in the strawberry fields of Watsonville, now a political hot spot where unions and environmentalists have been addressing the rights of farmworkers and the dangers of methyl bromide, a deadly, ozone-depleting toxin used to sterilize the soil of strawberry fields. A huge portion of the strawberries consumed in the US come from this central California location, and I saw Watsonville strawberries in the Boston farmer's market myself in June of 1997. The Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to the Mexican Indian Juan Diego on December 9, 1531, and afterwards; when the bishop of the area wouldn't believe that he had seen her on a nearby hillside, Juan picked roses at her behest, filled his cloak with these out of season blooms and returned. The roses themselves convinced the Bishop, and when the cloak was emptied the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe had miraculously appeared on the inside of the cloak, which is still vividly colored and on display in its church in Mexico.

The second anecdote describes me, as readers will no doubt have noticed, on an excursion a few years ago. Estelle Jussim and Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock's book *Landscape as a Photograph* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) first called my attention to the decontextualization of Ansel Adams's Manzanar mountainscape (which was marvelously recontextualized by *Unspoken*, 1994, an installation by Kim Yasuda at the Friends of Photography). And Richard White's superb essay "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?" appears in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, edited by William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1996); the passage quoted appears on p. 172.