REPRESENTATIONAL SHIFTS:
Sublime Landscapes and American Culture

THESIS

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By

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ABSTRACT

This document offers a discussion of the sublime as a piece of the historic conceptualization of landscape. For the purpose of this discussion, the sublime is understood as a philosophical idea associated with the emotional or mind altering response of fear, awe or power produced by individual perception of the landscape. This emotional effect is tied to temporality, such that the experience of the sublime occurs for only a moment, which then passes. It is in this instant that a desire for representation of the sublime is manifest. Representation serves as a means of constructing an image or language of this experience. These captured moments present shifts in our relationship to nature, and our identification with the landscape. Historically the sublime has maintained a connection with the individual, but it has been the collective perception of nature that reflects on the culture of our society.

The singularity of the relationship between the individual and nature was historically altered with the insertion of technology into the landscape. Effectively, the concept of nature shifted from associations with the unaltered and uncontrolled wilderness, to the manipulated and constructed landscapes of our world today. Moreover, as perceptions have changed, registration of the sublime has shifted from the aesthetic landscape toward that of the anti-aesthetic. Technology as a product of the man-made, has contributed to these shifts, and in turn to perceptions of the landscape as a part of a
cultural identity. This document traces technological emergence within the context of nature, from the steam engine and factory of the industrial revolution, to the internet, satellite imaging and digital media of our current times. Technology can be seen in, and as a part of, representation of the sublime experience. These portrayals of the landscape serve as constructed realities based on individual perception. Today’s digital and information technologies seem to reach a threshold, from which the reality is no longer comprehensible and the imagination must take over. Thus as technology progress and society shifts, what becomes of our contemporary relationship to the landscape sublime?
Dedicated to the process, because it never stops.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF IMAGES</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUBLIME: PHILOSOPHY, EXPLORATION AND EXPANSION</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRONTIER MYTH MEETS FRONTIER REALITY</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE END OF THE ROMANTIC</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE SUBLIME AND THE ANTI-HERO: LANDSCAPES TODAY</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION: THE DYNAMIC IMAGE</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF IMAGES

Image 2: Sculpture at Sacro Bosco di Bomarzo 1542.......................................................... 8
Image 3: David Caspar Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Mist* 1818........................................ 14
Image 4: Thomas Cole, *The Falls at Kaaterskill* 1826....................................................... 19
Image 5: Theodore Davis, *President Grant and Dom Pedro Starting the Corliss Engine* 1876..... 21
Image 7: Alexis Rockman, *South Panel 1* 2008................................................................. 27
Image 8: Charles Sheeler, *Power House No.1- Ford Plant* 1927......................................... 29
Image 9: Robert Adams, *Pikes Peak from along Interstate 25 near Eden, Colorado* 1968........... 31
Image 15: Richard Misrach, *Target Debris and Bomb Crater* 1990....................................... 44
Image 16: Martha Rosler, *Gladiators* 2004......................................................................... 46
Image 17: Peter Goin, *Drain in a Human-made Swamp*..................................................... 49
Image 19: Emmet Gowin, *Hanford Nuclear Reservation* 1986............................................. 53
Image 20: David Maisel #9798-3, *The Lake Project*......................................................... 56
Image 22: Aerial View of the Salton Sea, Google Maps 2009.................................................. 61
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Image 23</td>
<td>Kim Stringfellow</td>
<td>Pumping Out Flood Water 2004</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 24</td>
<td>Kim Stringfellow</td>
<td>Flooded Trailer Park 2000</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 25</td>
<td>Kim Stringfellow</td>
<td>Abandoned Trailer 2000</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 26</td>
<td>Kim Stringfellow</td>
<td>Abandoned Tank 2000</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 27</td>
<td>Alexis Rockman</td>
<td>Concrete Jungle 1993</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 28</td>
<td>Movie still, The Salton Sea</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 29</td>
<td>Movie still, The Salton Sea</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 30</td>
<td>Ellen Kooi</td>
<td>Velsen Mist</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

*All I see turns to brown
As the sun burns the ground
And my eyes fill with sand
As I scan this razor line
Can I find, can I find where I’ve been?*
(Led Zeppelin, “Kashmir”)

This document proposes a discussion of the sublime as a part of a broad history related to perceptions of the landscape. As a means of focusing the topic, this discussion will revolve around the American landscape and the development of an American sublime. In establishing this framework, one might question what constitutes the sublime, and how one might think about its representation. These questions prompt the need for a set of parameters through which to define the sublime and view its effect on the cultural identity of the landscape. As a fleeting emotional response, the sublime is captured or constructed as representation of its momentary effect. The aforementioned lyrics of British musicians Jimmy Page and Robert Plant provide an example of the poetic description of the experiential sublime; the stanza describes disorientation and fear at the realization of the vastness of the landscape through which the speaker is wandering. Architectural theorist Richard Patterson writes, “The sublime is revealed as an essential separation of the subject from the natural world, a form of alienation, but a form through which the author discovers his own autonomy… The sublime articulates the lack of fit
between the subject and nature.” Patterson’s quote suggests the physical separation of humans from the concept of nature, but is also suggestive of the experiential mental relationship between the individual and their perceived environment. These parameters serve as a means by which the sublime historically has been equated with a registration of the American landscape.

The philosophical discourse of the sublime is explored in the first chapter of the thesis, with an emphasis on the texts by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. This is paralleled by an exploration of societal shifts, which reflect the evolving relationship towards nature. The emotional response of the sublime combines both a sense of fear with a sense of intrigue, which inspired exploration. The discovery of America provided a landscape of the vast and the unknown, generating the motivation for representation of a new sublime. The explorations of America lead to a belief in manifest destiny, and a celebration of the landscape as a sublime object. Technology, which allowed for the development of the steam engine and railroad, fueled desire for the fulfillment of manifest destiny, and provided access for expansion. The application of this technology into the landscape altered perceptions, and began to blur distinctions between the celebrated sublime of the natural with that of the man-made.

From exploration, the following chapter examines the frontier of the American landscape, and the mythology that became associated with it. Representation became of means of preserving a sublime aesthetic associated with the vastness and scale of the American frontier. However in reality much of the west was isolated desert, seen as

unaesthetic, and able to be manipulated and disrupted. As a result, the mythology of the frontier began to take on a new association, in which the vastness of the desert landscape was able to mask technological affect. Atomic weapons tests and industrial exploitation in the west shifted perceptions of the landscape, and subsequently representations of the sublime. Landscape architect and theorist, James Corner writes, “Representation provides neither a mirror reflection of things nor a simple objective inventory… Instead, representations are projects or renderings of reality that are drawn from and thrown onto the world.”

These momentary projections of reality shifted to portray a sublime associated with fear and apprehension, as an effect of technological insertion and lack of control.

The changing points of view of both the landscape and ideas of the sublime influenced the Earth Art of the Nineteen-Sixties and Seventies. This means of representation engaged the sublime as constructed object, but also through the portrayal of entropic decay. The aerial photograph extended upon the work of the Earth Artists, as a means of representing a framed reality of destruction and manipulation of the landscape. The perspective of the aerial image changed the reading of the landscape, such that the impact of technology was no longer a blur but rather a clear registration of the sublime as human-altered. These shifts in representation can be seen in parallel to changes in attitudes towards of America during the decades of the Sixties and Seventies. The mounting sense of uncertainty regarding politics, the environment and our lack of control over technological affect, effectively brought an end to the romantic, aesthetic

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2 James Corner, Taking Measure Across the American Landscape (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 18
The final chapter examines technology and representation as a means of illustrating an idea of our contemporary sublime. Technology continues to alter the experiential of the sublime, as a dynamic and evolving insertion into perceptions of the landscape. Today illustration of a contemporary sublime can be found in the landscapes that embody the character of literature’s anti-hero. The idea of the anti-hero is explored through the forgotten and abandoned landscape of the Salton Sea, which is expressed through different representational techniques. The thesis concludes by offering an argument about contemporary interpretation of the American landscape sublime, and how it relates to our current cultural identity.
SUBLIME: PHILOSOPHY, EXPLORATION AND EXPANSION

The ability of language to construct a textual illustration lent itself to documentation of perceptions associated with the sublime. Thus an understanding of the sublime begins with the written philosophies and discourse that contributed to its development. This history opens with an early shift in the human, contextual relationship to nature. In the first century B.C.E, Lucretius wrote De Rerum Natura, a poem in which he separates nature from the control of the gods, describing nature’s power and spontaneity as a separate force of the universe:

Then Nature, delivered from every haughty lord,  
And forthwith free, is seen to do all things Herself  
And through Herself of own accord,  
Rid of all Gods.³

Lucretius’ comments that nature, rather than the gods, was responsible for forces in the universe established a hierarchy in which nature resided in a realm above humankind. One could experience nature, but was unable to transcend to that realm, as nature was perceived with a sense of fear and awe, generated by a power that one could not fully understand or control.

Centuries later, the hierarchy remained, but the question of control over nature had shifted. The end of the fourteenth century in Europe marked the beginning of the

³ Lucretius, De Rerum Natura. Translated by William Ellery Leonard. Provided by the Internet Classics Archive. MIT 2000
era of Renaissance Humanism. The poetic philosophies by Italian scholar Petrarch, described the changing relationship towards nature, as one no longer necessarily of fear, but rather of wonder towards natural phenomenon. He wrote, “Men go about to wonder at the heights of the mountains, and the mighty waves of the sea, and the wide sweep of the rivers, and the circuit of the ocean, and the revolution of the stars.” This sense of wonderment was paired with new understandings of mathematics and aesthetics, which would inspire humans to reconstruct natures. Emerging technologies which developed from a greater knowledge, and understanding of natural systems, allowed for the representation of nature though the art of the built landscape. It was during this era in which many of the villas and gardens of Europe were erected, and would stand as representations of a relationship of increasing control towards nature. Of these constructions, Petrarch wrote that landscapes were the living mirror off the human ego. This suggested that not only was the relationship towards nature now expressed through a spiritual sense of wonder, but also that nature could be manipulated to express the desires or attitudes of mankind. While these landscapes were in part a reflection of human articulation, they were also constructed in an image of god. The power of the church and religion was influential in the philosophies and beliefs of Humanism. Nature was seen as god’s creation, which possessed a divine sense of power and awe. It was through this spiritual connection, that inspiration was manifest, and gardens were erected in celebration of both god and humankind. In the book, *Unnatural Horizons* Allen Weiss writes:

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Image 2: Sculpture at Sacro Bosco di Bomarzo 1542
During the Renaissance the new metaphysics of art was in great part based upon the notion of the representable order of nature. The subsequent imaging of the world became a function of the profound affinities between mathematical research and aesthetic production... Henceforth, there would be a reciprocal relationship between the mimetic activity of art and the perception of nature, and nature would be seen according to the work of art.  

The understanding of mathematics and systems in nature allowed for a precision and realism in artistic representation of nature. Weiss’s quote suggests that as artistic expression became a means of understanding the landscape, perceptually the expression of nature became equivocated to the construct or manipulation of the land.

While the era of Humanism saw the constructed landscape as a religious representation nature’s sublimity, by the eighteenth century the developing language of the sublime had become the construct of individual intellect. From a philosophical interpretation, the sublime was seen as a unique encounter with reality that often opened a gateway to the imagination. It became important that this encounter occur in a perceived sense of solitude, as communal experience of any account threatened to rob the sublime of its singularity and shift it into the realm of the beautiful. The contrast between conceptual perceptions of the beautiful and the sublime became part of the evolving discourse. In the context of the landscape, the beautiful was understood as the aesthetic of the cultivated or pastoral, while the sublime was understood as the aesthetic

5 Weiss, Unnatural Horizons: Paradox and Contradiction in Landscape, 24
6 David Nye, American Technological Sublime (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994), introduction
7 Francis Ferguson, Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation (New York: Routledge, 1992), 47
of the terrifying, experienced from a distance. The adjective of terrifying became associated with the landscape sublime due to the perception of massiveness or scale, and the inability of the human mind to sense this comfortably. These developing parameters of the sublime resulted in the writing of two critical texts that established a theoretical basis for later interpretations and representations of the sublime.

The first of these is Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* written in 1757. Burke’s idea of the sublime adhered to the associations of wonder and awe generated by nature, with attention placed on the human reception and human presence within nature and the landscape. Burke’s text deals with distinctions between the sublime and the beautiful, which he believed were able to be gauged by the differences in human responses. In Burke’s perception of the sublime, the human relationship to nature is objectified:

Anything, which can occasion pain or terror, or some kindred passion, is then a potential source of the feeling of the sublime. This feeling can be occasioned in two different ways. First, when the perceptually overwhelming properties of objects test and strain our perceptual faculties so as to cause a weak state of preconscious pain; and second, where dangerous objects are encountered from a position of safety, thus causing a weak or moderated state of terror.

Burke’s *Enquiry* attributes the sublime to the realm of the individual, while placing the beautiful in the realm of society. He wrote, “Sensations of the sublime and the beautiful operate to produce two radically different sorts of effects: inducing social cohesion or a commitment to society in the beautiful and precisely the reverse, or a commitment to

8 Andre Corboz, Landscapes Abused- Missbrauchte Landschaften (Vol.8 Zurich: Institute Landschaftsarchitektur, 2007), 27
self and self preservation in the sublime.”

Later in 1764, Immanuel Kant wrote *Observations on the Feelings of the Beautiful and Sublime*. There are similarities in the philosophies of Kant and Burke; parallels exist in their associations of the sublime with the individual, and one’s emotional sense of estrangement. Kant wrote, “Nature most excites the ideas of the sublime in its chaos or in its wildest, most irregular disorder and destruction, if only it allows us to perceive magnitude and power.” In contrast to Burke’s ideas of the sublime, Kant focused on the subjective relationship between the individual and the object or environment. The notion of subjectivity implies that perception of the sublime can be attributed in part to a sense of individual self-transcendence. Thus in developing a philosophical discourse, Kant understood the sublime experience as a sentiment of the mind; the emotional response that constructs an individual’s sense of reality. In his writing, Kant defined two types of sublime that the individual perceives. The first being the mathematical, which he describes: “Nature is sublime in those of its phenomena whose intuition brings with it the idea of its infinity, not because it is infinite but because it makes us judge as sublime, not so much the object, as our own state of mind in the estimation of it.” Thus the object itself needs not be infinite in actuality, but it is able to generate a mental perception that suggests a sense of vastness or the incomprehensible.

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10 Francis Ferguson, Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation (New York: Routledge, 1992), 8

11 Jan Rosiek, Maintaining the Sublime: Heidegger and Adorno (Bern, Switzerland; New York: P. Lang, 2000), 22

12 Francis Ferguson, Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation (New York: Routledge, 1992), 85
As a counterpart to the mathematical, Kant also identified the dynamical sublime, which implied an experiential threat of anger or mortality, often generated by scenes of the power of nature, or of war.\textsuperscript{13} The dynamical sublime also relates to a registration of a reality, which is then extended upon by an experiential moment of transcendence. The notion that the sublime was connected to a mental registration or through a non-physical transcendence, would inspire later visual representations of the landscape.

The language and explanation of the sublime motivated painting of the landscape, as a representation that captured the moment of emotional phenomenon. The act of landscape painting was an abstraction of place, a sublime that was produced by the artist’s perception. These images were the attempt to preserve the temporal experience of the sublime. Representation excited and encouraged exploration, as part of the sublime association with a journey into the unknown. With the discovery of America, a new landscape was encountered, which possessed a magnitude that evoked the sublime of fear, intrigue, and a sense of power. America’s landscape of mountains, deserts, and uncontrolled wilderness contained an unknown vastness that heightened the anticipation of exploration. This new landscape and its sensational experience became an object of sublime desire. Encounter with the American landscape would become a part of the developing identity of the young nation.

By the start of the Nineteenth century individual experiences of the American sublime began to be viewed as a collective perception of the landscape. These mutual emotional responses produced a sense of unity and pride in the wonderment of the

\textsuperscript{13} Rosiek, Maintaining the Sublime: Heidegger and Adorno (Bern, Switzerland; New York: P. Lang, 2000), 23
nation’s landscape. As the country grew and expanded westward, the American identity would become attached to notions of the sublime, producing representations of a relationship between society and the landscape. Vivid descriptions of the vast forest, desert, and mountain landscapes of the country would later give rise to a kind of mythology associated with the American frontier. In *Landscapes Abused*, Eyal Weizman writes:

The nineteenth century, obsessed with its emergent nationalism, used landscapes as vehicles for the construction of the national citizen. Landscapes, acquired through occupation, unification, or acquisition, were domesticated and familiarized through the dissemination of a unified narrative. A specific way of seeing was thus imposed on the landscape…”14

While the writings of Burke and Kant spoke to the experiential phenomenon of the sublime (ideas which resonated with a sense of the American landscape), their writings did not offer the distinctly *American* narrative Weizman alludes to. By the middle of the Nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution was beginning to transform the country, contributing to shifts in interpretation of the landscape sublime as a means of communicating a narrative of the American identity.

The literary movement of American Transcendentalism provided an extension of the philosophy of the sublime, and resonated with the experience of the nation’s landscapes. The first meeting of the American Transcendentalists was in 1836. Transcendentalism was a religious, philosophical and literary movement, whose founders were interested in new ways of conceiving the human condition. Their philosophies were influenced by the writings of both Burke and Kant, with particular interest in the

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Image 3: David Caspar Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Mist* 1818
subjective transcendence and intuitive reasoning proposed in the writings of Kant. They were intrigued by the Kantian belief that, “The experience of the universe was molded by
transcendental forms inherent in the mind.”15 The idea that the universe and the human
mind were connected through experiences, redefined nature for the Transcendentalist as the projection and symbol of a Universal Spirit, which was also inherent in all human beings. This suggestion eliminated all sense of hierarchy between humans and nature, such that the individual and the natural world were both conceptually integral in the eyes of the Transcendentalists. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a leader in the Transcendentalism movement, wrote, “Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me…” He went on to say; “Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight, does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both.”16 Emerson’s quote suggests that emotions of the sublime were generated though conscious human transcendence, and that the power to produce feelings of the sublime resided in humans and within the natural world.

Because of this, a romanticism became associated with the Transcendentalist understanding of the sublime, which they saw as part of the American landscape. The romantic sublime enhanced the desire for exploration and encounters with the unknown, as a means of experiencing another piece of this Universal Spirit. American author and Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau wrote:

16  Waldo Emerson, Nature (Boston; New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1893), 17
Every sunset, which I witness, inspires me with the desire to go to a West as
distant and as far as that into which the sun goes down, he [the sun] appears to
migrate westward daily, and temp us to follow him. He is the Great Western
Pioneer whom the nations follow. We dream all night of those mountain ridges in
the horizon, though they may be a vapor only, which were last gilded by his rays.17

The Transcendentalist’s writings produced a narrative of the sublime, which embraced
the wonder of the American landscape, and the citizen’s capacity to spiritually embrace
it. The drive to explore and experience the American landscape was fueled by the
romanticism and intrigue that had become associated with the sublime. Technological
advancement of the Industrial Revolution provided access to the landscape, which
resulted in its incorporation into the experiential. For the Transcendentalists the
integration of technology to the encounter with nature was seen as a physical
manifestation of their progressive philosophies and motivations. Technology as a part
of the Transcendental ideology represented an “explosive new force directed against
outworn conventions of thought and behavior.”18  The recognition and celebration of
technology began to shift the romantic sublime towards the effects of a technological
sublime. Historian Allen Weiss writes, “The previous experience of the natural sublime,
central to the romantic imagination, was assailed by the interference of a new modality
of wonder and terror, that of the technological sublime.”19  Both the railroad and steam
engine were behind the shift towards a landscape sublime that integrated the man-made

17  Allen Weiss, Unnatural Horizons: Paradox and Contradiction in Landscape Architecture (Princeton
Architectural Press, 1998), 86-87

18  John Kasson, Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America (New York:
Grossman Publishers, 1976), 117

19  Allen Weiss, Unnatural Horizons: Paradox and Contradiction in Landscape Architecture (Princeton
Architectural Press, 1998), 95
with the natural. These advancements provided for access and also possessed a sensation of the sublime generated from power and speed. These man-made objects not only made landscapes suddenly accessible, but also altered the experience. There was a visual sublime associated with motion, and perception of distance, as the landscape passed by. And there was also a stimulating sublime generated by the physical force of the engine’s speed. The railroad and steam engine literally blurred the view of the landscape, and at the same time, perceptions of the American sublime blurred distinctions between concepts of the natural and the man-made. The sublime of scale associated with the mountains and horizontal expanse of the west, became perceptually scaleless through the acceleration of the train. Suddenly ideas of an American sublime were caught between the powerful stimulus of the natural frontier and the stimulus of the power and speed of movement produced by technology. While these two experiential stimuli operated within the same context, the insertion of the railroad and industrialization into the landscape was causing a transformation of America. Questions arose in regards to artistic representation of the sublimity of the American landscape. As a result Nineteenth century artistic expression was divided between those who chose to express technology as a part of the representation of the sublime, and those who chose to exclude it.

In questioning the role of technology in the human reception of the sublime, a group of artists known as the Hudson River School held the belief that certain technologies did not belong in the representations of the sublime American landscape. The school was comprised of American painters, working in the mid to late 1800s, shortly after the height of the Transcendentalists movement. The school’s founder,
Thomas Cole, was well read in Emerson and the Transcendentalists. Cole and his fellow artists were inspired by the notion of harmony between humans and nature, as well as a sublime found in representation of human presence on the American landscape. Their works depicted an idea of the American landscape sublime, which embraced the human presence and perception of wilderness, and the vastness of the cultivated landscape.

Landscape painting for the Hudson River School took inspiration from nature, but was meant to portray the minds perception of experience. Often depicting the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York, these representations were constructed and framed moments of place, generated from the artists memory and meant to evoke the transcendental encounter with the sublime. These images of America’s romantic wilderness, were compositions of numerous scenes from the artists memory. The Hudson River School painters explored the landscapes of New York, collecting visual data from which to use in their renderings. These paintings became re-presentations of the landscape; constructed images produced by the artist, and meant to alter the viewers metal state of perception towards the experiential of the sublime.20

And yet their portrayal of the sublime primarily excluded the industrial achievements of the time. For the Hudson River School, painting was a means of capturing the feelings of excitement and optimism mixed with fear and awe generated in response to changing perceptions of America’s landscapes. In the Public Broadcasting Station’s documentary, “I Hear America Sing” Thomas Hampson states, “They were enamored with the spiritual sublime. Like the vast nation that lay before them, the

20 This approach of gathering visual data, for the construction of representation that evokes the sublime landscape, is later taken over by technology as a means of presenting a contemporary sublime.
Image 4: Thomas Cole, *The Falls at Kaaterskill* 1826
Hudson River painters depicted a New World wilderness in which man, miniscule as he was beside the vastness of creation, nevertheless retained that divine spark that completed the circle of harmony.”21 The Hudson River School paintings often depicted humans in sublime moments within the American landscape, reaffirming that the sublime was a result of human presence and experience of nature. There was a conscious effort on the part of the Hudson River School painters to eliminate representation of technology or industry in their depictions of the landscape. While they recognized industrial progress and its presence in the celebrated culture of the young nation, they rejected its presence in their representation of the American landscape.

In contrast to the Hudson River School painters, others saw in the railroad and steam engine, a sublime which combined both the powerful experience of the landscape with the technological experience of speed and power, producing perceptions of a distinctly American sublime. Historian David Nye wrote in *The American Technological Sublime*, “Not limited to nature, the American sublime embraced technology, where Kant had reassured that the awe inspired by a sublime object made man aware of their moral worth, the American sublime transformed the individual’s experience of immensity and awe into a belief of national greatness.”22 The concern with the embodiment of national pride, produced representations of this new sublime that included the vastness of the American landscape and the power and force of man-made industry. The railroad became a means of experiencing the sublime, as the scenery produced by it blended together the

21 Thomas Hampson, “I hear America Sing” A PBS Documentary, Directed by David Horn (Educational Broadcasting Company: 1997)

22 David Nye, American Technological Sublime (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994),
Image 5: Theodore Davis, *Our Centennial- President Grant and Dom Pedro Starting the Corliss Engine*  
1876
natural and man-made sublime.  

In *The Machine in the Garden* Leo Marx writes:

> Objects of exalted power and grandeur elevate the mind that seriously dwells on them, and impart to it greater compass and strength. Alpine scenery and an embattled ocean deepen contemplation, and give their own sublimity to the conceptions of beholders. The same will be true of the system of railroads. Its vastness and magnificence will prove communicable, and add to the standard of the intellect of the country.

As the quote suggests, technology did not replace the natural object, which had been the source of power and grandeur, but became one of them, adding to the mind’s perception of the sublime. Thus technology became a part of landscape representation; it was seen as arising out of nature, and belonging to the condition of an altered landscape.

After visiting an engine room in 1848, author Walt Whitman wrote, “It is an almost sublime sight that one beholds there; for indeed there are few more magnificent pieces of handiwork than a powerful stream engine swiftly at work.”

For many, machine technology was able to arouse the same feelings of sublime emotion as was once produced solely by the phenomenon of nature. Art historian Giuseppe Panza di Biumo writes:

> Bridges suspended over empty space and denying gravity, the vertical mass of skyscrapers, the shapes of chemical refineries and steel works, with their great cylinders, spheres, smokestacks, and pipes resembling gigantic veins, and wharves whose horizontal lines mark the surface of the sea; these are the forms that create the feeling of an identity with nature.

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These man-made industrial creations were massive, registering fear though power, and awe produced by speed and manipulation of the landscape. These images of technology became a part of a conscious cultivation of the perceived American sublime.

Despite the rapid progress and elation towards technology, there was concern for the potential consequences of industrialization. This came about through the realization that the fear once generated by an idea of nature could become the fear generated by humankind. These concerns were expressed at the time, but not to the extent to which the romantic, technological sublime of the American landscape was damaged. Nineteenth century writer Thomas Carlyle was one of those concerned with the consequence of technology. He wrote, “We remove mountains, and make seas our smooth highway; nothing can resist us. We war with nature; and by our resistless engines, come off always victorious, and loaded with spoils.”

Carlyle was concerned with the devaluation of the natural landscape in favor of the material technology, fearing that rapid industrialization would lead to conflict and degradation of the American landscape. However despite the suggestion of negativity, many saw the integration of technology and the landscape as a heightened sense of the sublime. Leo Marx wrote: “The sentimental guise of the pastoral ideal remained of service long after the machine’s appearance in the landscape… It enabled the nation to continue defining its purpose as the pursuit of rural happiness while devoting itself to productivity, wealth and power.”

To the extent that the negative impact was ignored, in its place the blurring of distinctions between technology and landscape caused both to be seen as emerging pieces of the grandeur, expanse and

27 Leo Marx, The Machine and the Garden (Oxford University Press, 1964), 171
power of the American sublime. The Nineteenth century marked the development of a relationship between the frontier and the insertion of technology, as a reflection of our relationship towards the American landscape.
Image 6: Robert Adams, *Burning Oil Sludge* 1974
Manifest Destiny; this phrase was promoted through representation of the American landscape and the power associated with the forces of human intervention and natural phenomenon. Manifest destiny was the belief that the United States had a “divinely ordained” right to expand across the continent, from the Atlantic seaboard to the Pacific coast. There was also financial gain behind motivations for manifest destiny. The speculation of development and resource extraction inspired expansion and continued to alter perceptions of the landscape. The expansion and fulfillment of manifest destiny eventually lead to the end of the sense of the western frontier’s infinite vastness. In 1869 the first transcontinental railroad reached the California coast, and in 1910 the Jeffersonian territorial grid reached this same threshold. While physically these events brought an end to perceptions of the immensity and unknown of the landscape, there was a subsequent solidification to the mythology of the frontier. Representation of the frontier enhanced the sublimity associated with the landscape and fed into the myth of America’s vast and endless west. Ironically, the same technologies that were being celebrated as part of the American sublime, were contributing to the realization of the frontier limits, as distances shrank and the unknown became common knowledge.

In this odd overlap, the obsession with exploration persisted as a part of a sublime desire for adventure. A mentality transpired, obsessed with further exploration and the
Image 7: Alexis Rockman, *South Panel I* 2008
extension of manifest destiny beyond the United States. Fiction produced a narrative that embraced this exploration to the unknown landscape, and beyond to imaginary landscapes of the terrifying and desirable. H.P. Lovecraft’s 1936 novel *At the Mountain of Madness* tells the story of exploration to Antarctica, and the horrifying yet irresistible experiences faced in the adventure into the unknown. The narrator writes:

> Lake replied curtly that his new specimens made any hazard worth taking. I saw that his excitement had reached a point of mutiny, and that I could do nothing to check this headlong risk of the whole expedition’s success; but it was appalling to think of his plunging deeper and deeper into the treacherous and sinister white immensity of tempests and unfathomed mysteries which stretched off for some 1,500 miles to the half known…”

Lovecraft’s science fiction again hinted at the potential problems and consequences of increasing human and technological impact, similarly echoing the earlier warnings of Thomas Carlyle. But these warnings seemed to exist only as story or fiction. For the majority of Americans, with increased exploration and intervention came increased development. Highways were built, towns cropped up, the automobile was mass-produced, effectively shifting the human relationship towards an expanding sense of control and manipulation of the landscape.

Photography began to take over as a dominant means of representing the altered American landscape. In 1927 American painter and photographer, Charles Sheeler, was commissioned to photograph the newest Ford automotive plant in Michigan. At the time it represented the largest, most advanced industrial complex in the United States. Sheeler wrote, “I found it to be an unbelievable establishment… It defies description, the
Image 8: Charles Sheeler, *Power House No.1- Ford Plant* 1927
subject matter is incomparably the most thrilling I have had to work with.” The intent of Sheeler’s commission was not to advertise the car but rather to promote the image of Ford as a “quiet colossus, as the great American machine.” Through the photographic image industry became an extension of the sublime landscape; a continuation of the blurring between the man-made and natural landscape. This blurring generated the perception that despite technological intrusion, the condition of the landscape remained undamaged. The vastness of the landscape, especially of the west, was viewed as unchanging despite human and industrial driven progress. The sense that human impact barely altered the larger landscape, added to the mythology of the frontier. It seemed the landscape’s sublimity of scale was undaunted by advancing technological development, effectively condemning parts of the frontier as an ever forgiving landscape.

This mentality generated increasing manipulation with little concern for the consequences or effects. The degree of manipulation became a product of value, in which landscapes on the west were appreciated either for aesthetics or functionality. Many of the western landscapes (especially the deserts of New Mexico, Utah, Nevada and Eastern California) were seen as unaesthetic, but available for technological experimentation and large-scale resource extraction. The cultural condemning of the west for what would become experimental destruction seems at odds with the idea of the frontier landscape as part of the American identity. However, the two fed into one another ultimately reaching a pinnacle with the development of the atomic bomb. Artist

Patrick Nagatini writes, “The scientists in the middle 1940s saw [in the deserts of the West] only an abandoned stage waiting for a new drama; it was the perfect atmosphere.”

The frontier deserts became testing grounds for the spectacle of the atomic bomb, an object that would dramatically redefine the sublime. At the time of the development of the bomb, the idea of the sublime still maintained associations with power, productivity and a sense of the unknown. The intent was for the bomb to be perceived as conveying a similar sense of the sublime, becoming another piece of the identity of America. Tests of the effects of the bomb were documented and then re-presented as part of the idea of the sublime imagery of the unfathomable. These representations were captured using photography and video, technologies that at the time were seen as advancements in the realm of landscape representation. Despite the destructive force of the bomb, the documentation of the tests read as sublime, for the act of destruction and danger was distanced from the viewer. In response to these tests, Allen Weiss writes (in a fashion that echoes the sentiments of Edmund Burke): “that for an object to be perceived as sublime the act of destruction [detonation of the bomb] must be far removed, and its precise circumstances must be forgotten. Henceforth, it can be ascribed to any anonymous power, to a forceless transcendence.”

Danger was perceived in representations of the bomb tests, but perception from a removed location created the emotional response of the sublime. While this registration of the sublime object is similar to Burke’s philosophies, the bomb produced a markedly different sublime. This was a purely technological

32 Janis Parry with Patrick Nagatani, Nuclear Enchantment (University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 8
33 Allen Weiss, Unnatural Horizons: Paradox and Contradiction in Landscape Architecture (Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 70
Image 10: Nuclear Weapons Archive, Ivy Mike Mushroom Cloud Test, 1952
sublime; a man-made technology with unbelievable power. However, despite the tremendous force of the bomb, the frontier desert landscapes still seemed undaunted. The isolation and expanse allowed for little to no registration of the effects. The desert as the condemned landscape, continued to hide consequence of technology within its vastness. Earth artists Michael Heizer wrote that, “The desert is less nature, than a concept, a place the swallows up boundaries.”34 Thus the west not only swallowed up boundaries, but also responsibility. There was a perceived justification in the degradation of the desert, as its isolation and expanse seemed to allow for the man-made machine to manipulate the landscape without consequence.

The nuclear tests in the desert began to shift perceptions of the sublime towards association with the anti-aesthetic. The desert sites chosen for bomb testing were sought out for the fact that they presented the “unbeautiful” landscape. This notion along with the eventual release of the bomb in WWII altered understandings of the sublime. Detonation of the atomic bomb introduced a new fear into the equation, this was not only a technology and power that could alter the landscape, but one that could alter human lives. David Nye wrote, “The atomic bomb undermined that sense of the world as always already there. Nature and human existence ceased to be pre-given and became contingent. This shift in perspective had already begun with the death camps and carpet bombing of civilians, but the invention of the atomic weapons made it more nearly absolute.”35 The nuclear era resonated in perceptions of the sublime especially in regard

34 Robert Smithson, Robert Smithson: the collected writing (Edited by Jack Flam; University of California Press, 1996), 109
35 David Nye, American Technological Sublime (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994), 228
to a fear of pre-apocalyptic devastation. By the late 1950s the relationship towards the American landscape had shifted towards the anti-aesthetic, and a sense of “the end” generated by the power and destructive force of the atomic bomb.

In the 1960s fears of the atomic era produced a desire to reestablish a peaceful connection between humans and nature, reminiscent of the writings of the Transcendentalists. Interest in aerial photography became a means through which to re-view the American landscape. In much the same way the railroad and steam engine had altered the way in which landscape was seen, the aerial view presented new means of experiential recognition. In a railcar, landscapes become something of a blur, a registration of distance and speed. While in a plane (despite the tremendous speed) the landscape is seen clearly and photographically, rather a registration of distance and scale. This shift in technique produced mappings, surveying, and forms of artistic expression, which would begin to depict and register human manipulation of the landscape. No longer would the vastness of the west swallow up affects, rather these conditions became a part of a new kind of knowledge, and a revisal of associations with the landscape sublime.

The visual change upon the landscape, along with social changes that were occurring in the 1960s, impacted what would become the Environmental Art movement. The decade of the Sixties saw the development of a culture that embraced what American literary critic, Frederic Jameson described as, “A time when everything was possible: this period in other words, was a moment of universal liberation, a global unbinding of
energies.”36 As a part of the Environmental Art movement, exploration into Earth Art became a means of re-presenting an idea of the sublime landscape. This movement was lead by a group of artists, characterized by their interest in the physical construction and representation of the landscape sublime. This was a sublime, not produced solely by natural phenomenon or through the effects of technology, but constructed by humans and time. Earth Art was influenced by manipulation of the landscape at a scale, which would produce a sense of the sublime. This practice would eventually move art outside of the gallery and into the landscape. Construction of these pieces of Earth Art took place primarily in the deserts of the American west, often the same landscapes that had been used for nuclear testing. The shifting sense of the sublime towards a notion of the anti-aesthetic landscape, along with perceptions of solitude already associated with the sublime, became intriguing concepts to the Earth artists. Their constructed landscapes suggested that the sublimity of vastness, scale and phenomenon need not only belong to the natural landscape, but could also belong to the constructed landscape. Michael Heizer’s *Double Negative* is one such project that began to embody these associations of the sublime. *Double Negative* is fifteen hundred feet long, thirty feet wide, and fifty feet deep. It remains in the desert to this day. John Beardsley wrote of *Double Negative* that, “It is over a quarter of a mile from end to end- and in the great scale of the landscape that it occupies- it also addresses itself to a particularly American conception of space. *Double Negative* in fact, provides the experience of awe inspiring vastness, solitude, and silence

Image 13: Michael Heizer, *Double Negative* 1969
that has long been associated with the sublime.”\textsuperscript{37} There was a physicality to the work of the Earth Artists; in a sense they were attempting to set in place an armature within the landscape, which through relinquishing control, would emulate the same effects of grandeur, vastness, power and solitude. Photographic journalist George Gerster writes, “The pioneers of earth art behaved in a bluntly manipulative manner towards nature; by drilling, dynamiting, and bulldozing, they subjected the land to their will in grandiose gestures of showmanship.”\textsuperscript{38} In a sense the Earthworks artists were continuing the condition of manipulation to these desert landscapes. Michael Heizer describes his own early motivations, stating, “I wanted to make an American art that was transcendental… At the same time huge new planes were being built. There were a lot of American things that were happening and if you were an artist you were thinking about those things.”\textsuperscript{39} Heizer’s motivations and manifestations came from a desire to be able to manipulate the landscape and to heighten the sublime experience, which conveyed a sense of scale and also reflected the temporality of experience. Robert Scull, a supporter of the Earth Art movement, wrote “They are scratching something in the earth to let us know that they were here, that they are more than just scientific phenomenon that happened through accident, that through their specialized kind of thinking, their specialized kind of brains, their specialized kind of poetry, that there is some meaning beyond what scientists say we

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37} Suzaan Boettger, Earthworks: Art and Landscape of the Sixties (University of California Press, 2002), 195
\item \textsuperscript{38} George Gerster, Gestures and Births: Works and Stages in American Land Art”. Anthos. Vol. 27 no. 2 (1988): 24
\item \textsuperscript{39} Brown, Michael Heizer: Sculpture in Reverse (Museum of Contemporary Art Las Angeles, 1984), 10
\end{itemize}
Like Heizer and other Earth artists, Robert Smithson was also searching for the meaning Scull alludes to. Smithson was also engaged in the exploration of the sublime through Earth Art and other media. Smithson became interested in representing the consequences of human impact on the landscape, and how it can in turn present a type of sublime reaction.

Aside from the larger land art pieces, Smithson also worked through the media of photography and collection. In both his *Non-Site* projects and his photo-essay *Tour of the Monuments of Passaic New Jersey*, Smithson revealed a type of landscape sublimity that was less concerned about the aesthetic or functional landscape, and more about what their representation suggested or evoked. He became fascinated with entropy and deterioration, writing that the best places for art were the sites: “that had been disrupted by industry, reckless urbanization, or nature’s own devastation.” Smithson and others became aware that the human impact and destruction to the landscape had effectively brought an end to the mythology of the frontier. Smithson wrote, “Nature is simply another Eighteenth and Nineteenth century fiction.” Artists like Smithson began to realize that size and scale were not enough to maintain the sublime; their representations would need to shift to embody the senses of fear, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Thus it was no longer sufficient to just be operating within these landscapes to produce the effect of the sublime, but rather that the depiction of the abuse and manipulations on the landscape

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40 Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and Landscape of the Sixties* (University of California Press, 2002), 113
could become a powerful means of generating an emotional sublime. Smithson wrote, “The American deserts of the Sixties were the sites of relentless tests of nuclear devices, disintegrating matter at an enormous scale. Here science and technology are stamping the most staggering marks on the land, and also stacking tremendous heaps of residues. These effects were compounded by events like the Vietnam War, and the assassination of JFK and Martin Luther King Jr., which would alter perceptions of America. Smithson’s early interest in entropy became a metaphor for the mood of the late 1960s. Historian Suzaan Boettger wrote, “It described the public’s apprehension over the deterioration of nature from pervasive pollution to the country’s slackening economic pace under the burden of the Vietnam War, and on a social level, a late Sixties society that was itself undergoing disruption.” The nation was, in a sense, was rediscovered in the late Sixties and Seventies; a discovery that lead to the recognition of abuse to the once celebrated frontier and brought an end to the romantic sublime.

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43 Suzaan Boettger, Earthworks: Art and Landscape of the Sixties (University of California Press, 2002), 51
Image 15: Richard Misrach, *Target Debris and Bomb Crater 1990*
“When did dread replace our notion of a new and hopeful era? I can tell you exactly when, in 1968 when the U.S. commanding officer of recapturing the Vietnamese capital of Ben Tra told reporters, *we had to destroy the town to save it.*”\textsuperscript{44} The transition into the 1970s marked an era of change and shifting cultural perspectives for the nation. There was a mounting sense of uncertainty in the politics of the United States, which would carry onto realizations of our lack of control over technological affect. In *Concrete Jungle*, Mark Dion writes, “This was a war against chaos. In the 70s that was especially the mentality. Chaos was threatening to exterminate the city.”\textsuperscript{45} This notion of chaos affected the latter half of the Earth Art movement, as artists began to shift their work from representation of the monumental sublime to the devastated sublime now found in the American landscape. Representation of the landscape revealed that this devastation was produced by an uncontrolled, man-made, technological force. This was seen earlier in Robert Smithson’s increased interest in entropy and decay of systems. The optimistic technological sublime had been replaced by a sublime of fear and intrigue generated from the chaos and a lack of control. Smithson wrote. “With such equipment construction takes on the look of destruction… They seem to turn the terrain into

\textsuperscript{44} Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman, *Concrete Jungle: A pop media investigation of death and survival in urban ecosystems* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Juno Books, 1996), 14

\textsuperscript{45} Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman, *Concrete Jungle: A pop media investigation of death and survival in urban ecosystems* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Juno Books, 1996), 167
unfinished cities of organized wreckage. A sense of chaotic planning engulfs the site.” Technology had stood as a symbol of power over our human concept of nature, and this was slowly being broken down by a conscious confrontation with the fallacy of control over the man-made. While one can diagram human behavior around a need to perceive the world and landscape through a sense of organization, Smithson and others were presenting the failures of an attempted ordering or control.

It was later in his career that Smithson began to question his art as more than the *reaction* of entropy and decay, and instead its potential for *activism*. Smithson and others questioned the possibility of art and representation as a means of promoting or adding to the process of reclamation. For much of the nation’s history, the landscape has been manipulated without a sense of the consequences, as the vastness of site seemed to conveniently swallow up human affect. However by the 70s technological advancements were allowing for the perception of human impact. The photograph and the airplane, which had been around for decades, became tools for presenting a “new” American sublime. Representation of the damaged and devastated landscape became a means of not only presenting our relationship to nature, but of potentially motivating change and reclamation of these landscapes. Reclamation efforts had been instigated beforehand, however many were non-site specific and often were approached under the false pretence that reclamation could return the landscape to a previous ideal condition. At the time, most of the general public bought into this attitude, believing that nature was self sufficient, and that we were able to return the landscape to a sense of its pristine

46 Robert Smithson, Robert Smithson: the collected writing (Edited by Jack Flam; University of California Press, 1996), 101
condition, or back to the images of Nineteenth century paintings. The realization of the fallacy behind many reclamation efforts motivated artists and others, to not only depict the devastation of the landscape, but in turn to represent the reality that these places were forever altered. While the idea of art as motivation for environmental remediation seemed to have potential, artistic expression as an actual piece of the reclamation process was cautioned against. There was a sense that art as representation of these sites could become yet another means of masking the consequences of human impact on the landscape. Robert Morris wrote:

The most significant implication of art as land reclamation is that art can and should be used to wipe away technological guilt. Do those sites scarred by mining or poisoned by chemicals now seem less like the entropic liabilities of ravenous and short sighted industry and more like long awaited aesthetic possibilities? Will it be a little easier in the future to rip up the landscape for one last shovelful of a non-renewable energy source if an artist can be found to transform the devastation into an inspiring and modern work of art?47

Morris’s quote began to question the intent and motivations behind his and other artistic endeavors. Did art belong in the process of reclamation? It was perhaps more effective to operate solely in the mode of representation of the landscape. This in effect slowed the Earth Art movement, as photography began to take on an increasing role in representation of the landscape sublime.

The media of photography in the 1970s shifted to present a radically different image of the landscape. David Maisel wrote, “Photographers of the so called New Topographics movement showed us an essentially man-altered landscape, so overbuilt with motels. Mobile home parks, suburban housing tracks, telephone cables and

Image 17: Peter Goin, *Drain in a Human-made Swamp*
industrial parks, that nature was all but completely removed from the picture.48 The sobering realization of the country’s unprecedented expansion across the landscape influenced artistic representations. The landscape had become increasingly intruded upon by technology, industry, and the man-made. Maisel, a photographic artist, and others were documenting these shifts, often from the vantage point of the aerial photograph. New techniques and camera styles allowed for dramatic and vivid imagery of the landscape through a less familiar lens. Photographs of the landscape from this perspective showed the dynamic and changing state of a site rather than capturing a static scene from memory, as was the case with landscape painting. With the aerial photograph, the landscape did not seem so forgiving; our impact was no longer hidden in a vastness that was difficult to perceive. This process of viewing and documenting the landscape from the air was revealing in itself to the artists, as well as to those who perceived their work. On photographing the landscape from above, artist Peter Goin wrote, “The more I learn about how a landscape is transformed, the more I realize that the earth is now a human artifact, with precious little wilderness to find.”49 Emmet Gowin, another artist, would echo Goin’s sentiments, writing, “I came home with an absolutely churned sense of conflict over how beautiful this landscape felt, while so undeniable terrible… When I look at the American landscape, I feel with great sadness that we did this to ourselves.”50 Others shared in Gowin’s realization of landscapes damaged beyond repair, and that

48 David Maisel, The Lake Project (Nazraeli Press, 2004), 2
49 Peter Goin, Humanature (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 21-22
Image 18: Frank Gohlke, New Topographics Exhibition 1975
effectively nature had been reduced to something of a memory. The desire to present this
nightmarish condition of the landscape grew, with the belief that perhaps the sublime
destruction portrayed in these images would somehow inspire action. Many artists began
to solely photograph the devastated landscape. David Maisel wrote, “We had dreamed
of building cities, fields of glittering towers, urban fantasies meant to house our hopes of
progress; now we seek out dismantled landscapes, abandoned, collapsing on themselves.
Rather than creating the next utopia, we uncover the vestiges of failed attempts, the
evidence of obliteration.” Reception of the photographic image was meant to read
through a similar uncovering of the landscape condition. These photographs upon first
glance present an aesthetic and sense of imaginative wonderment, reminiscent of the
romantic sublime. However, the second glance registers the reality of what these images
depict; a sublime of shock, discomfort, and alienation.

Many of the images of the American landscape, produced at this time, could
be seen as illustrations of what philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard describes as
representations of the un-presentable; a notion which constituted his idea of the sublime.
In “The Sublime and the Avant Garde” (1984) Lyotard wrote, “It is essential to this
feeling [the sublime] that it alludes to something that can’t be shown or presented…
The sublime is not strictly speaking something which is proven or demonstrated, but a
marvel, which seizes one, strikes one, and makes one feel.” The aerial images of the
American landscape, especially the works of Maisel and Gowin, did not show the actual

51 David Maisel, The Lake Project (Nazraeli Press, 2004) 2
52 Jean Francois Lyotard, The Inhuman: Reflection on Time (Stanford, California: Stanford University
Press, 1991), 90-97
Image 19: Emmet Gowin, *Old Hanford City Site and the Columbia River, Hanford Nuclear Reservation* 1986
machinery or man-made technology causing devastation to the American landscape, but rather presented an almost beautiful image, in which the imagination must take over to perceive the actual effects that serve as the cause. Author Robert Sobieszek wrote, “Maisel has succeeded in mapping the fictive terrains of the unconscious, of nightmares and hallucinations.”⁵³ There is a discomfort experienced in the simultaneous visual and mental perception of these images, and there is a sense of guilt felt in finding the images beautiful before the realization of what they present.

These shifts in perception and in the representation of the American landscape, were accompanied by changes in the historical language which had defined these same landscapes. Words such as wilderness and pristine no longer held their traditional associations with an untouched and unknown landscape. When once these terms referred to places no one had been, they now took on the association of places no one wanted to go. As evidence of this condition, in the Center for Land Use Interpretation’s publication, The Nevada Test Site: A Guide to America’s Nuclear Proving Ground, they describe a nuclear test done in 1957 in which, “Seven hundred troops participated in ground maneuvers. These soldiers were later proven to have been seriously irradiated in the test. It [the site] has been called pristine by the Nevada Test Site archeologists because it has hardly been touched since the test.”⁵⁴ The quote illustrates this shift in meaning and context of a language historically associated with nature. The redefining or altered association of these terms illustrates the perceptual changes in attitudes towards the

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⁵³ Maisel, The Lake Project (Nazraeli Press, 2004), 3

⁵⁴ Mathew Coolidge, The Nevada Test Site: A Guide to America’s Nuclear Proving Ground (Culver City: Center for Land Use Interpretation, 1996) 27
American landscape. Michael Heizer wrote, “Part of my art is based on an awareness that we live in a nuclear era. We’re probably living at the end of civilization.” The sense of this pre-apocalyptic mood has not only altered our relationship to nature, but shifted reception of the American sublime to a sense of discomfort and devastation. In effect the sublime has been given over to landscapes of human manipulation.

55 Andre Corboz, Landscapes Abused- Missbrauchte Landschaften (Vol.8 Zurich: Institute Landschaftsarchitektur, 2007), 34
Image 20: David Maisel #9798-3, The Lake Project
THE SUBLIME AND THE ANTI-HERO: LANDSCAPES TODAY

Today the imagery of the American landscape, as the celebrated and vast expanse, able to swallow up human effect, has become an illusion. The current devastated state of our landscapes is in part a result of technological intrusion, which has often come at the expense of nature. And yet, information and digital technology have contributed to an increasing diversity and quantity of representation depicting the current state of the American landscape sublime. Artist David Maisel writes:

In ever increasing numbers, images show us the world we inhabit. And with the last century behind us, it is evident that the triumph of humanity over nature is not the cause for celebration that it once was thought, nor can we in anyway view wilderness as a phenomenon isolated from the effects of culture. Our expanding impact on the land has become so pervasive that the boundaries between nature and culture have been all but utterly eradicated. The dystopian has replaced the pastoral.56

The dystopia Maisel describes, and the discomforting effects produced by representation of our devastated landscape, are heightened by notions that we live in a pre-apocalyptic era, resulting from overconsumption and the threat of environmental collapse. Denise Markonish, editor of the book Badlands, writes: “The literary accounts of ‘the end’ are a cultural barometer for the ways in which society feels the crushing weight of the planet, a civilization in decline.”57 Thus our contemporary sublime exists within this sense of dystopia and destruction, and produces an awareness of the entropy in both natural and

56  David Maisel, The Lake Project (Nazraeli Press, 2004), 2
57  Denise Markonish, Badlands: New Horizons in Landscape (Massachusetts: Mass MoCA, 2008) 17
technological systems.

The landscape of the Salton Sea serves as an example of our contemporary sublime, and how its perception reflects on our current cultural identity. The Salton Sea is a constructed landscape, produced by both technological and natural processes. The Sea itself is perceived as a landscape of errors, which generates a sublime condition that is difficult to comprehend. In its ancient history, the Sea was formed by natural processes; however it later dried up in the arid climate of the California desert. At the start of the last century, the Sea was re-formed through an engineering misjudgment. Subsequently much of its history has been a continued series of errors. The Salton Sea lies one hundred twenty miles east of San Diego and thirty miles north of the Mexican Border. The Sea is fifteen miles long, thirty miles wide, and lies two hundred thirty feet below sea level. The Salton Sink, the ancient lake bed that would become the Salton Sea, sits within the desert landscape and fertile soils of the Imperial Valley. In the interest of taking advantage of the soil fertility for agricultural production, in 1901 engineers for the California Development Company successfully diverted water from the Colorado River into the Imperial Valley. Agricultural developments and investments rapidly sprung up around the Salton Sink. However by 1904, sediment deposits caused blockage of the diverted canal. With the potential loss of a tremendous amount of money and pressure from potential lawsuits, three bypass cuts were made in the canal to continue the flow of water into the Imperial Valley. Unfortunately 1905 began a year of unprecedented rain.
fall, contributing to massive flooding, which eventually caused the Colorado River and its tributaries to breach the weakened canal. Thus the entire flow of the Colorado River spilled into the Salton Sink, effectively creating the Salton Sea. In documenting of the Sea’s History, Kim Stringfellow cites Henry Cory, the engineer responsible for finally containing the flood, who estimated: “the volume of earth washed down into the sink during the nine months of 1905, was four times the amount excavated for the Panama Canal.” It wasn’t until 1907 that the breach was finally contained and the deluge ended.

With the Sea formed, agriculture relocated and continued in the surrounding areas. The rest of the land adjacent to the Sea fell subject to the same condemning as other western desert landscapes; such that during the 1940s areas around the site were used by the military for bomb testing and experimentation. It wasn’t until the 1960s that the landscape was realized as a destination. By this time, the military presence was gone, and there was a developing wildlife, of fish and bird species, which transformed views of the Salton Sea to a potential landscape for recreational and commercial use. Thus for a brief period of what seemed like success, the Sea became a popular tourist and recreational destination, prompting the construction of the Salton Rivera resort community, and the Salton City PGA golf course, a combined investment for the time of almost a million dollars. However by the 1970s attendance rates were staggeringly low, due primarily to the Sea’s mounting environmental problems.

59 Kim Stringfellow, Greetings from the Salton Sea: Folly and Intervention in the Southern California Landscape 1905-2005 (New Mexico: Center for American Places, 2005), 9
60 Kim Stringfellow, Greetings from the Salton Sea: Folly and Intervention in the Southern California Landscape 1905-2005 (New Mexico: Center for American Places, 2005), 14-18
Image 22: Aerial View of the Salton Sea, Google Maps 2009
and chemical runoff, combined with high levels of salinity, which were contributing to numerous deaths of the abundant wildlife, resulted in the progressive abandonment of the Salton Sea. Artists Kim Stringfellow writes:

Eventually the deaths [of thousands of fish] were attributed to eutrophic conditions caused by periodic algal blooms, which were stimulated by nutrient rich agricultural runoff containing excess amounts of nitrogen and phosphorus from fertilizers…this eutrophic process now periodically overwhelms the entire ecology of the Salton Sea, creating a prime habitat for botulism and other bacterial infections.61

Accumulating negative press, describing these conditions of the Salton Sea contributed to its abandonment, eventually becoming a forgotten landscape. “Soon all that was left of the Salton City’s ring-a-ding days was the space-age roof of the Yacht Club looking forlornly out over vanished marinas and half submerged telephone poles.”62 Author and historian Clara Jeffery notes:

The Salton Sea is the largest body of water in America that no one has ever heard of. It has swallowed up towns, so the telephone poles and school buses rise out of the water far offshore. It is bountiful- one of the most productive fisheries, bordered by farmland, and is perhaps the most important stop for migratory birds on the pacific flyway- but it is a place best known for its death.63

The tension between life and death at the Sea produces a sense of perpetual entropy, and its forgotten abandonment feeds into a sublime of apocalyptic fantasy. The landscape creates a sense of confusion and lack of control surrounding the place.

Conditions at the Salton Sea become a re-presentation of our contemporary

61 Kim Stringfellow, Greetings from the Salton Sea: Folly and Intervention in the Southern California Landscape 1905-2005 (New Mexico: Center for American Places, 2005), 20
62 Clara Jeffery, “Go West Old Man: Where the American Dream does Down the Drain” Harper’s Magazine November (2002), 58
63 Jeffery, “Go West Old Man: Where the American Dream does Down the Drain” (2002): 52
relationship to nature. Its state of abandonment has produced the decay of both natural and man-made systems, which generates an image of a battle between these two forces (nature and the man-made). And yet there seems to be no clear winner only that in their interrelationship, they seem to both be losing. The sublime generated by the environment of the Salton Sea is not one of fear and awe produced by perception of the iconic landscape, associated with a sense of power and control. It is rather a sublime of fear and discomfort produced by the comprehension of devastation, which is intensified through the dichotomies of life and death, and nature and technology.

The Salton Sea has become the landscape of literature’s anti-hero; the protagonist, who exists in opposition to traditional heroism. The character of the anti-hero is morally complex, and difficult to side with or against. The idea of the anti-heroic landscape possesses a similar complexity. The Salton Sea represents a landscape that combines the entropic and devastated with a sense of the apocalyptic, produced through both abandonment and imagination. As the landscape of the anti-hero, the Salton Sea appears at first to lack a sense of identity, but in actuality is has become the character of the contemporary sublime. This identity embodies a sense of cultural disillusionment in the image of destruction and over-production.

The dichotomy of this landscape becomes a part of the individual experience, which is perceptually enhanced through data and digital information technologies. The image of the Salton Sea’s landscape is easily accessed through digital photography, GIS, or satellite technology. It is through these representational techniques that a confusion and intrigue surrounding the site is produced. From the satellite imaging and aerial
perspective, the landscape in its abandonment becomes readable. This view shows from a
distance, the manipulation and intervention to the landscape in its entirety; a registration
of the sublime at the macro-scale. Programs like Google Earth provide an ease and
accessibility to this visual experience. The collection of data and ability to “zoom in and
out” in what seems like real time, is a manipulation of information in order to produce
a constructed reality. This effect offers a sense of scale, but also scaleless-ness as the
ability to “move through space” alters one’s perception by producing a sequence of
images and embedded information that become difficult to comprehend. This moment
of the incomprehensible forces one to abandon information and transition to imagination.
However, images of the Salton Sea are also generated by a digital camera, as another
means of data collection, which engages the immediate and tangible conditions of the
sublime. The visual experience or image from the ground can be used in the construction
of the sublime at the micro-scale. This serves as a means of framing the landscape to
reflect individual sense of estrangement and fantasy.

The sublime of the micro-scale is traced through Kim Stringfellow’s recent
photographic portrayal of the Salton Sea. This exploration begins with the framing of the
image. In her essay “At the Limits: Landschaft, Landscape, and the Land” Ginger Stand
writes, “In fact the frame’s the thing. Move your camera viewfinder across the scenery,
trying to find the best view. The elements compose themselves—sometimes beautifully;
sometimes not—into landscapes each time the box halts.” She goes on to write, “We
want to believe the land is there, beyond the frame, contiguous with what the rectangle
Stringfellow’s photographs of the Salton Sea are intentionally framed, capturing images of abandonment and what appears to be a forgotten civilization. There is a registration of the process of decay, and yet the framing of the image produces a moment in which the landscape seems frozen in its condition of devastation. The images evoke a sense of the failure of civilization and a perpetual state of entropy. These captured moments, as a series, are reminiscent of Smithson’s *Tour of the Monuments of Passaic New Jersey*. Stringfellow’s image *Pumping out Flood Water*, seems hauntingly familiar to the image Smithson described in New Jersey:

> This constituted a monumental fountain that suggested six horizontal smokestacks that seemed to be flooding the river with liquid smoke. The great pipe was in some enigmatic way connected with the infernal fountain. It was as though the pipe was secretly sodomizing some hidden technological orifice, and causing a monstrous sexual organ [the fountain] to have and orgasm.  

Smithson’s combination of text and image, produces a narrative that belongs to the sublimity of his framed landscapes. Similarly, Stringfellow’s images generate a story, but one which the absence of text forces the imagination to create an associated narrative that reflects individual perception. This emotional response of the sublime becomes intimately personal. The images as a collection produce a mental juxtaposition of past and present, which is framed through perception of the reality and fantasy of the site.

Framing of these images registers a sense of the sublime, which is then heightened through the intensity of color. The photographs are developed such that the color reads as

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Image 24: Kim Stringfellow, *Flooded Trailer Park* 2000
extraordinarily vivid and super saturated, which exaggerates the sublimity. This stylized color enhances the contrast and juxtaposition of conditions on the site, producing a kind of discomfort, which is akin to the beauty and terror of the sublime. This use of color is similar to the imagery in David Maisel’s aerial landscape photographs. In both artistic representation, the color often seems uncharacteristic of the associated landscape, which adds to the confusion and allows for the imagination to take over.

Stringfellow’s images do not however, move beyond this effect, her intent seems to be to engage the imagination through the sublimity surrounding the Salton Sea. She produces a constructed reality of the landscape, from which representation of a constructed fantasy can become manifest. The latter can be seen in the paintings of Alexis Rockman. He employs a similar use of color that is of an intensity that contributes to the sublimity and surrealism of his images. These paintings are particularly attune to the sense of apocalyptic fantasy, portraying disturbing images composed of fantasized elements that are brought together to create an image of the future of our landscapes. The paintings are generated purely from fantasy, but posses a familiarity in his use of domestic items, cultural symbols, and recognizable environments. The images become profoundly sublime through their associations with the dysfunctional, and loss of control. Both Rockman and Stringfellow seem to share a mutual interest in capturing the human impact on the landscape as a part of a continued representation of the contemporary sublime. Rockman’s works are often concerned with the failures of technology and projecting a kind of nightmarish image of our future landscapes in the wake of technological collapse. The images by Stringfellow combine the failure of
Image 27: Alexis Rockman, *Concrete Jungle* 1993
technology with a perception of the failure of civilization. People are not shown in her captured moments of the Sea, only remnants of human presence, which exists now in a state of permanent decay.

However in our media saturated world, film becomes another way in which we perceive the contemporary landscape. In *The Accelerated Sublime*, Claudia Bell writes, “film emblematizes the role of nature for the postindustrial dweller.” Though Bell’s quote references contemporary film, the Salton Sea has a history of representation or allusion in film. The novel *The Winning of Barbara Worth* written in 1911, which dealt with the flooding formation of the Sea, inspired a later 1926 silent film. Then in 1942, Paramount Studios produced a World War II film, entitled *Wake Island* at the active Naval Air facility just outside the Salton Sea. In recent film, the 1993 movie *Fugitive Nights* references the conditions of the Sea, describing the landscape as a place where, “many of the migrant workers, particularly Asian boat people, liked to fish the salt water for local corvine, using illegal gill nets. The cops figured that anybody hungry enough to eat the mutant fish from the selenium loaded water- polluted by agricultural waste- should be welcome to it.” The notion of film thus becomes an interesting media from which to observe representation of our sublime landscapes. Film serves as a projection of reality, a fantasy in itself of what the world could or might be. As a continued sequence of images, film is able to construct a mood or affect of the sublime, which extends beyond the normal temporality associated with its experience. The 2002 motion picture, *The Salton Sea*, provides a focus for the discussion of film as a means of representing the

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contemporary sublime.

Aside from the obvious reference in the film’s title, the landscape of the Salton Sea exists within the main character’s memory, and also as a metaphor of our cultural identity. Danny, the main character’s invented identity, is the classic anti-hero within this “anti-heroic” landscape. The characteristic of the Sea’s landscape produces an atmosphere and sublimity that is incorporated into the film as representation. The actual Salton Sea is shown in Danny’s memory as a place that begins as a cherished thought, and digresses into a nightmarish place of death and terror. Imagery of the Sea shows the dying fish and lifeless trees, alluding to the decay and death that become important to Danny’s development as the anti-hero. The story revolves around Danny’s memory as he transforms his life and identity, becoming a part of a methamphetamine addicted culture of our society. In the role of the anti-hero he question’s his character as, “the avenging angel or plain old Judas?” Coming to the conclusion that, “you decide”.\textsuperscript{67} The climax of the film takes place in a meth lab outside of the Salton Sea, where Danny finally enacts his vengeance and absolves the guilt he associates with his memory of the Salton Sea. The film concludes with a shift in the perceived identity of both the anti-heroic character and landscape. In the final scene Danny discards the symbols of his previous identities into the Sea, an action that seems appropriate, as the Sea itself is so associated with death. Thus the metaphor of our cultural relationship to the landscape is not found in the symbolic act of vengeance, but rather in the shift in perception of the anti-heroic character.

\textsuperscript{67} The Salton Sea, 2002
Through its history, the sublime experience can be attributed to ones perception, and the alteration of ones mental state. The conceptualization of the sublime American landscape has been a product of representation, which serves as a construction of reality. This construction is offered as the experiential, which is able to engage ones imagination. Images of the American landscape have shifted from celebrated icon, to ready-made object, to scenes of apocalyptic fantasy. Through these shifts the notion of scale, and the registration of temporality have persisted as parameters through which the sublime is loosely bound.

The insertion of technology into the landscape historically altered perceptions of the natural, while subsequently becoming part of experiential of the sublime. Today information technology allows for multiple ways in which to view the contemporary landscape, but has also allowed for a digital saturation of landscape representation. Author Ginger Strand writes: “We don’t have a real connection to nature anymore, so we look at landscape pictures instead.” As a result, much of how we perceive the world currently passes by in a state of distraction. The speed and pace in which we interact with the world around us adds to this condition. We move through our landscapes at a much faster rate, which comes at the expense of experiential richness. Modes of

transportation and ease of access produce this sense of speed, but in fact we physically experience our landscapes less, as visual contact and communication occur digitally and can be preformed from our home or i-phone. Thus registration of the contemporary sublime serves as a means to re-activate the landscape image, and break the state of distraction.

This re-activation can be seen as a product of the dynamic image. Current technology facilitates the dynamic image, through multi-media and a registration of the sublime at multiple scales. This digital and information driven technology is not the inserted technological advancements, which physically altered the American landscape, but rather a mental or visual insertion into perceptions of the landscape sublime. The satellite, computer, and internet provide a collection of data, which is able to be manipulated to construct a representation of reality (or fantasy) associated with the sublime. From this, other means of representation become manifest; photography, painting, the built object, and film provide examples of potential representations of the dynamic image.

Film in particular becomes important, as it is able to extend the temporality of the sublime moment. The landscape of film is able to engage the atmosphere of the sublime through the sequencing of images and the projected sense of reality. Scale, as the other parameter of the sublime, is also altered through the dynamic image. Access to the satellite view of the landscape shifts the sense of size and magnitude historically associated with the sublime. The once imperceptible vastness of the American frontier, is given way to an infinite perceptibility of the landscape, in which the physical registration
of scale no longer matters.

And yet, the ability to “zoom in and out” of the landscape is not enough to sustain this sublime. In order to break the state of distraction, the dynamic image relies on the imagination to take over. This occurs through an alteration of the mind’s experience of the landscape. The dynamic representation of today’s devastated landscapes (places like the Salton Sea) becomes a means through which one’s mental state of perception is shifted. There is an initial registration of shock, which momentarily breaks the state of distraction, followed by a constructed imagination of an often apocalyptic future. The information of reality, and the resulting projections of fantasy, enhance the dichotomy of these landscapes. In their entropic state, they present the decision: to side with the anti-heroic landscape, or side against it. But, for now, “you decide.”

In a sense, this indecision relates to our current cultural identity. There is a registration of disillusionment in the landscapes’ representation, and yet a fascination in what the image presents. For now the American landscape sublime exists in between the digital and data driven reality, and a imagination of fantasy.
Image 30: Ellen Kooi, *Velsen Mist*
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