Memory fix

Christopher James Jordan

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MEMORY FIX

BY

CHRISTOPHER JAMES JORDAN

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Art in Imaging Arts

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To My Father
Through dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days. And after we are in the new house, when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood, motionless the way all Immemorial things are. We live fixations...

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*
I would like to thank many people who have inspired, challenged, or otherwise supported my efforts. First, I would like to acknowledge my patient, stimulating and insightful thesis committee, including Therese Mulligan, Angela Kelly, Patricia Russotti, and Elliott Rubenstein, each of whom has contributed uniquely to my artistic and intellectual development. Willie Osterman and Jeff Weiss have made indelible impressions on my methodology and approaches to working. Their influence was particularly felt early on, and continues to encourage new ways of being. Again, I mention Patricia Russotti, in addition to Greg Barnett, for inspiring my inevitable plunge into digital, with its wonderful technical intricacies. I would also like to thank John Roche for encouraging my writing pursuits in poetry, as well as the patient Tim Perkins for introducing me to the book arts. I would like to extend a general acknowledgement of thanks to the rest of the RIT faculty who have shared their enthusiasm and expertise along the way, including Jessica Leiberman, Dan Larkin, Myra Green, Andrew Davidhazy, Doug Nishimura to name a few, in addition to those I have forgotten to mention. I also thank (in no particular order) Bill Finger, Kristen Gleason, Tom Morin, Grady “Smitty” Defoore, Leyla Safavi, Ariya Martin, Leslie Grant, Michael Cheney, James Shaheed, Matt Tintello, Don Totton, Jeremy Stipano, Susana Reisman, Aki Miyoshi, the late Doug May, and the many others with whom I have shared my time in Rochester, in various ways. Thanks to Carol Barton for all the help with accordions and paper folding, along with Kari Horowicz of Special Collections at Wallace Library, for her help with artists books, and Roxana Aparicio Wolfe and the rest of the staff at George Eastman House. Next, I would like to thank Nick Johnson for inspiring my first serious efforts in photography. Then I would like to extend a most heartfelt thanks to my parents, for providing such wonderful encouragement through graduate school and over the years. I end by thanking Karen Schlesinger, for her love, support, and most of all, her patience.
MEMORY FIX

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis serves as the written accompaniment to the visual work comprising the exhibit: Memory Fix, examining notions of personal geography set within more generalized conceptions of place, memory and identity formation. Further, it explores the ambiguity between ways in which place is remotely documented versus intimately experienced. We live in a culture of displacement, where technologies paradoxically render far-away places more accessible, but also contribute to the distancing of the immediate and authentic. This displacement also extends to the world of image and depiction. Place-representations are emptied of original meanings and connotations through overexposure and mass circulation. Against this void the individual struggles to retain an authentic place-based identity, lest he or she face annihilation by the forces of techno-capitalism.

Recently, I revisited several ritualized walks from my childhood, specifically my walks to school. I photographed the old journeys and mixed the imagery with maps, aerial photographs, poetry, portraits of my father, and family snaps-shots. The backlit wall pieces, collectively titled Phases of the Son provides views of this psychological landscape from remote and astronomical perspectives. The book Walk to School revisits Brooklyn from the perspective of a reflective adult looking back upon a childhood setting. The book Another Horizon most directly addresses the poetic notions of place, reverie, and the gossamer barrier that divides internal and external concepts of place. Through its physical form as books and illuminated displays, my work gains authenticity through its engagement with the viewer through a multi-medial aesthetic experience.
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Illustrations</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Conceptions of place</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Evolving notions of sublimity</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mobility, displacement, and the mediated view</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Photography, authenticity, and expression</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Perceptions, provocations, and the inner eye</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Artist books: some reflections</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Discussion of works: <em>Walk to School</em> and</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Another Horizon</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Discussion of work: <em>Phases of the Son</em></td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Digital: the specter of photo realism returns</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Conclusion</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ILLUSTRATIONS

All illustrated works are by Christopher James Jordan, unless otherwise noted.

Figure

1. Catherine Opie, Skyway #10, Kiandra Franzen: Transformation, 2001  6
2. John Sexton, Oaks at Dusk, Carmel Valley, California, 1988  7
3. Roni Horn, When Dickinson Shut Her Eyes, 1994  9
4. Frederic Edwin Church, Cotopaxi, Ecuador, 1862  12
5. Napping in the Jetstream, 2003  18
6. Doug LaRoe, Cowboy on Computer, 1997  19
7. www.projectrsr.com, 2003  21
8. Patrick Nagatani, Alamogordo Blues, 1986  22
11. Minor White, Metal Ornament, Pultneyville, New York, 1957  28
12. Chimney Bluff Deadfall #4, 2003  31
14. Excerpt from Walk to School, 2004, p. 4  40
15. Excerpt from Walk to School, 2004, p. 5  40
16. Excerpt from Walk to School, 2004, p. 3  41
18. Phases of the Son, Phase #1, 2004  43
19. Phases of the Son, Phase #2, 2004  43
20. NASA, Apollo 11, Earthrise over Moon, 1969  44
21. Phases of the Son, Phase #4, 2004  44
22. Phases of the Son, Phase #3, 2004  45
23. Phases of the Son, Phase #6, 2004  45
24. Paul Klee, Senecio, 1922  46
25. Phases of the Son, Phase #6, 2004  46
Introduction

I have had a long-standing interest in geography, mapping and landscape photography. A critical analysis of my work prior to my thesis project, which could be characterized as expressive art photography in the mode of Minor White or Aaron Siskind, led me to research the underpinnings of modernist photographic practice and notions of the American picturesque and sublime. This work investigated not only the mannerisms of landscape representation, but prevailing attitudes toward the land itself, and how these inform one another. To this day, the so-called progress of American expansionism continues in daunting fashion as even newer frontiers are being uncovered. Now we have genetic engineering, remote sensing, smart bombs, super viruses, psychopharmacology, and cyberspace... the list goes on. Contemporary notions of sublimity can be understood in terms of privacy, security, consumerism, and the digital divide. The individual now faces annihilation by the forces of runaway technocapitalism. A relevant place-based art practice needs to be informed by these circumstances, either tacitly or explicitly.

My thesis work specifically explores the relationships between self and place, representation and authenticity, and most importantly, inner versus exterior projections of placed-based identity. Experience of place can be extremely varied, from an immediate bodily sensation of being, to a cool and aloof detachment. Place can refer to physical locations, but also internal but very real localities within the memory or psyche. Likewise, the numerous ways in which places are outwardly and inwardly represented, from maps to daydreams, to family snapshots, spans a full spectrum of psychological colors. My work contrasts the specificity of autobiographical imagery with the generality of remote and detached views, and how these may resonate through memory. Aerial photographs, maps, and technologies that once found home in the areas of science or military, are repopulated with warmth and sentiment, while the personal becomes fixed in geographic space.

While empiricism and positivism have exerted enormous influence on how information is gathered, dispersed and utilized in the sciences, they fail to fully convey the complexities of personal geographic space and memory. Likewise, the spectacle of
image/representation in our culture threatens to reduce authentic experience to displaced modes of imitation, subjugation, and qualification. Individuals constantly reposition themselves. There is a need for a landscape art that is expressive and autobiographical, poetic and transcendent, but which also acknowledges the complexities of image-based culture. Such an art could operate within the expectations of, and the attachments to, imaging systems like photography and digital imaging. The hope would be that any such realism afforded by an art like this, would gain its authenticity through an emotional and aesthetic moment prompted by the viewing encounter. Specificity of meaning resides in sympathetic projections of the viewer, as they recognize their own struggle for authentic position against the sublime of the technological, mediated, and increasingly distant.

The title of my exhibit is Memory Fix, the multiple meanings intended to convey, on one hand, the attempt to obtain a fix in the navigational sense, on something as fluid and abstract as memory, and on the other, the very human tendency to revise or fix our memories as we grow and appreciate them in evolving ways. Further, there is the idea of fixation in the psychoanalytic sense, which is appropriate in light the work’s orientation to object-relations psychology. Finally, as my work not only addresses place-memories and personal geography themes, but also disturbing technological and military sublime themes (and the struggle of ego self against these tensions), fix as target denotations are also relevant.

Mirroring our culture, my work is multi-medial; it utilizes visual, verbal and signatory systems (maps) in the hope of reinforcing a complex gestalt of additive and cross-referential meanings. The exhibit consists of six backlit transparency displays combined with two artist’s books, located on tables and pedestals. The wall pieces are collectively entitled Phases of the Son, referring to remote imagery of a celestial body (sun) in various stages of an evolutionary cycle. The play on words son versus sun repositions any empirical associations within a hierarchy that asserts the primacy of an emotional, psychological reading. The pieces are printed on Lambda Duraclear media, which offers a high degree of color saturation and tonal richness for a backlit display, not unlike what would be found in advertising or museum displays. The overhead lighting of the room is subdued to enhance the visibility of the wall pieces. Further, this
allows both the message and the illumination of these pieces to spill throughout the viewing space.

The artist's books are meant to be handled by the viewer. The two books are entitled, *Another Horizon* and *Walk to School*. Both are printed on a large-format inkjet printer, subsequently cut into strips and folded and glued into accordion structures. The text blocks are bound into covers that have been hand assembled with artist papers, selected specifically with visual and textural qualities in mind. The former, *Another Horizon* is a foldout accordion structure displayed on a long table. It may be opened, folded, sequenced and positioned as preferred by the viewer. It most specifically addresses the notion of reverie while walking, and the dominance of an internal, emotionally oriented vision in apperception of the external horizon. The second, *Walk to School* is also an accordion book, but the covers are bound, limiting viewing to a linear sequence, as if with a conventional book. This book addresses the notions of present versus past (going back), adult versus child, and the relationship between perception and the internal voice, contextualized within the dynamics of walking within a routine, familiar place – the walk to school.

My thesis project is essentially a reconstitution of personal geography through the use of photographic representation, symbolization and abstraction. I intend for my work to be transformational and experiential. Meaning is suspended where poetry ends and imagery begins. Pictures of everyday places... of houses, towns, roads, horizons, groups of people, as well as the places known to more distant cameras, can all be charged with projections, memories, and dreams. A gossamer barrier divides the internal and external landscape. I intend for my work to be readable insomuch as viewers project their own place associations upon the work, hopefully recognizing that they have yet to be annihilated.

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Chapter 1
Conceptions of Place

Place has been defined in numerous ways. The cultural, historical, and indeed, personal issues are complex. J.B. Jackson, the renowned landscape historian, suggests "a sense of place" is a term used so loosely that it doesn’t refer to anything at all.¹ My researches have led me across a vast frontier of conceptual approaches and understandings of place.

In a description of urban American life, J.B. Jackson emphasizes that a common sense of place, say the hometown, depends less on the physical or architectural features than a shared culture, a common sense of time, ritual and event. Shared timetables, traffic patterns, work hours, vacation schedules, and regular celebrations all mark the flow of time, providing us with a sense of collective history within a common setting.² Everyday places become visited ritually, often without tacit acknowledgement; they are tied to our daily routines to a degree that almost become an extension of the home. In a sense, these places are autonomic – like breath or pulse; an understanding and conscious awareness of these places is subconscious, yet constant and evolving. These vernacular, neighborhood places might be the school, church, corner store, office, etc.³ Reflecting upon these ideas, I began to look at the rituals that marked my childhood, similarly the various places my family has lived. One of most poignant was my daily walk to school, a ritual that many American children living in urban and small-town settings share.

J.B. Jackson defines place in socio-cultural terms as well as psychological. He places an emphasis on the human landscape: rural farming communities, towns, cities, neighborhoods, trailer parks, rather than a remote or pristine wilderness. When deconstructed, an understanding of these places, how they have come about, and the patterns of development they have followed, reveals important values and patterns of the social fabric. For instance, the ubiquity of trailer parks speaks to the vast number of blue-color families depending on temporary wage-jobs. The mobility of these homes reflects the posture of their inhabitants – poised to find the next job and perhaps relocate, a sense of permanence or rootedness is less central.⁴
This emphasis on the vernacular contrasts with more idealized notions of place—such as those perpetuated by reverent writers and artists like Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Ansel Adams, who celebrated the spiritual significance of the wilderness.5 Jackson states that he has little qualm with the views codified by these individuals. A walk in the wilds can indeed do wonders for one’s sense of metaphysical equilibrium. However, it is when certain ideologies of place are ordered hierarchically, as when worship of the wilderness is considered of higher order than a walk to the corner store for cigarettes or scratch tickets, that he has qualms. The vernacular is most of the time and should therefore beget most of our attention.

Similarly, writers like Grady Clay have contributed to a greater understanding of place, especially with respect to the urban environment. While Jackson perhaps looks more to social and cultural psychology for his theoretical underpinnings, someone like Clay more specifically addresses categorization and classification. His book, Real Places: An Unconventional Guide to America’s Generic Landscapes at first rings with the clever, perhaps renegade, posturing of Ed Ruscha’s work, as well as my own Random Survey Rochester. A systematic, matter-of-fact cataloguing of such places as “The Boon-docks, Town Creek, Growth Area, and Riot Scene” is undeniably fun to read and amuse over.6 Of course, the root of this irony lies in the way such observational approaches had been previously reserved for describing much more austere places, such as wild frontiers at the edge of civilization. Yet when one gets beyond this (as I admittedly had to), a deeper appreciation of vernacular place etiology soon takes hold. The provocation and posturing begins to melt into genuine analysis.

One artist working addressing vernacular place in a similar mode to Clay or Jackson’s writings is Catherine Opie. Her work has been described as a “visual road trip,” using photography and transportation as mediator of place7. The substance of her work, in my opinion, lies between the iconic and the personal through juxtaposition of the two. She chooses icons that are sometimes overlooked or taken for granted, but which engender a sense of identity or belonging to a place (fig. 2).8 For instance, in her study of Minneapolis skyways (cased-in passageways between buildings), she pairs straight forward and descriptive photos of the urban walkways, with eye-witness accounts, memories, poems, anecdotes of the residents and workers who use them on a
daily basis. In her work, objects perhaps too banal to register on the personal radar become charged with richer meanings and associations.

An avowed tree hugger, I acknowledge a certain fascination with the wilderness. My friends, family and I have found much enjoyment hiking, mountaineering, rock-climbing and creating art in these settings. For me, I think this is an issue of temperament and upbringing. An introverted person, I find a sense of calm in the outdoors, in isolation from other people. That being said, I also enjoy the company of other hikers and climbers. But this is when the outdoors becomes a social activity, sharing a sense of place (albeit mythologized to a degree) with one’s peers. I also acknowledge the influence of my family; “getting outside” has long been a posture associated with health and forward motion. Further, my parents, both artists, have drawn or painted in the landscape for as long as I can remember. This was considered a healthy, wholesome and fulfilling activity.

When I look at works by Hudson River School artists including Frederick Church or Thomas Cole, I am struck with a sense of familiarity – both with the Hudson River Valley as a place where my family has spent much time (and indeed, a place with an identifiable geographical look, with a certain quality of light), but also the idea of
transforming a scene into an expression, and the very sublimation of identity or self within the environmental setting. Undoubtedly, my fascination with photographers of the great Modernist landscape tradition, such as Ansel Adams and John Sexton, grew from such associations (fig. 3).

Fig. 3. John Sexton, Oaks at Dusk, Carmel Valley, California, 1988

Of course, criticism of work like this often stems from criticism of modernism itself, with its white male practitioners proclaiming universals of human experience. Indeed, critics like Deborah Bright also point out that the pictorial landscape conventions of the aestheticized landscape, most notably, depictions of the unsullied wilderness succeed primarily in perpetuating myths about the American landscape at the expense of those for whom history’s voice has been repressed. Even the New Topographers, namely Robert Adams, were not immune from the bug of aesthetics, couching their endeavors in the neutrality of social studies, yet nonetheless gracing the walls of museums and galleries. Admittedly, I have mixed feelings about such criticisms. On one hand, I understand the positions behind them. Yet on the other hand, I am also familiar with the sensitivity, dedication, and practice required for this art form, and admire the work when it is well done.

Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has written extensively about the human experience of place. Primarily, he defines place as pauses in movement through space, whether
physical, visual, or psychological. Mobility, the capacity to cover distance over time, is crucial to a child’s development of self and object-relations. Indeed, existentialists like Gabriel Marcel would say that to “be in the world” is the equivalent to having a body. The body represents the primary “place in the world” from which one senses, perceives, thinks, defines self, and thus, existence. Developmentally, the mother or parent is the only place of significance for the child, a primary home providing for all needs. The ability to move around is associated with freedom, competency and increased independence. Through growth, exploration and experience, the horizon expands to objects, faces, toys, rooms and far beyond. Through the direct experience of home and neighborhood, passing through its spaces, interacting with objects and people, experiencing the change of seasons, feeling the movements of expectation to fulfillment, tension to easement, accumulating memories, a profound intimacy is established with place.

A postman-turned-philosopher offers a poetic slant. Gaston Bachelard emphasized the importance of the inner landscape: “Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination.”

This subjective modality resonates with the work of artist Roni Horn, in her studies of Iceland. Representing the next generation of minimalists after the likes of Donald Judd (who she cites as a major influence), Horn infuses her work with personal meaning and literary reference, with ties to authors like Emily Dickinson and Jules Verne. Spending months alone exploring the Icelandic wilderness by foot and motorcycle affords Horn the opportunity to obtain a truer sense of self-understanding and inner geography through a gathering of experience in an isolated setting. To the average American, the Icelandic landscape would definitely seem dramatic, at least in the geological sense, with its smoking crevices fulfilling all sorts of creationist fantasies. Horn, however, resists such stereotypical conceptions by acknowledging them outright and remaining sensitive to what might fall outside the bias, within the reaches of her awareness. She operates in a mode she terms “letting,” where not only it is enough to be fully present in a place as observer, undistracted by artistic agendas, but rather, it is a
huge accomplishment. She mentions that it took her almost ten years before she felt ready to use a camera in Iceland. This condition of being present she likens to the verb form of place—*to place.* When she does create images, drawings, photographs, sculpture, and written passages, the work operates within the dialog between the observer and observed (fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Roni Horn, *When Dickason Shut Her Eyes,* 1994.

2 Jackson, 160.
3 Jackson, 158.
4 Jackson, 62.
5 Jackson, 90.
7 Catherine Opie: *Skyways & Icehouses* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2002)
8 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 341.
13 Tuan, 28-29, 138-139.
14 Tuan, 188, 137.
15 Gaston Bachelard, xxxii.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
Chapter 2
Evolving Notions of Sublimity

Pertinent to discussions of place, specifically with regard to place-identity relationships is sublimity, a psychological state associated with confrontations with the unknown. The first century (A.D.) Greek philosopher commonly referred to as Pseudo-Longinus described the sublime as “beyond nature,” capable of prompting a state of “ecstasy.”1 In the context of the great orators of Greek literature, the sublime “makes everything different, like lightning, and shows the all at once capacity of the speaker.”2 The sublime is related to the human capacity to transcend perceived limits, and thereby attain a sense of existential meaning or purpose. According to Longinus:

... man’s intentness on perceiving often everywhere goes out beyond the limits of what holds him in, and if anyone gaze around at life at its cycle, he will swiftly understand for what purpose we were born, by seeing how much what is ‘too much’ and great and fine holds more advantage in all things.... Therefore (heaven knows) somehow driven by nature to wonder not at small streams, even if they are clear and useful, but at the Nile... and still more at the Ocean.3

Further, he described a universe that is “turned upside down and torn apart,” subject to some greater force, outside the world.4 This conception of sublimity assumes an overarching and omnipotent unity that threatens to neutralize the many and specific.5 Confronted with the powerful and overwhelming, individual is thusly transcended and becomes one with all other things.

The eighteenth century English thinker, Edmond Burke, defines the sublime specifically with regard to terror, an emotion reigning loudly in the psychological hierarchy:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”6

Burke also distinguished the sublime in contrast to beauty. Beautiful things can be experienced pleasurably, while the sublime can only be experienced as abject terror, and
therefore cannot deliver delight. Further, beauty is superficial and ornamental, while the sublime silent, infinite and dark.

According to Immanuel Kant, writing just a few decades after Burke, sublimity is found in the formless and limitless. More importantly, he made the distinction that sublimity resides not in physical objects per se, but rather in the images or ideas provoked by encounters with such objects. Implied is a shift from the external to the internal. For Kant, the raging sea cannot be called sublime in and of itself. Rather, the sublimity is incited within the mind of the observer, as the various associations of terror and horror combine to elevate the sense stimulation to higher ideas, through reason. He is also credited with reducing the sublime from the terrible to the merely challenging – something that could be conquered through reason and morality, specifically of a Protestant kind. Here the universe is protected, the self transcended not by chaotic forces but rather a moral universe. While I agree that sublimity resides in the observer, I disagree with Kant that sublimity primarily “concerns rational ideas.” For me it concerns emotionality and primal response. Confrontation with fear awakens an awareness of authenticity within the psyche. It is the recognition of fear per se, for instance when we notice our hair standing on end, that stabilizes our autonomy amidst the void. The intrusion of rationality does eventually come into play, but only as emotions dissipate.

Burkean and Kantian notions of natural sublimity found expression in artistic works of the nineteenth century, specifically in depictions of the American landscape. In the paintings of Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt, and Frederic Edwin Church of the Hudson River Valley School (fig. 4), as well as the Photography of Timothy O’Sullivan and John K. Hillers we find small human figures almost completely engulfed by the expansive scenes. Nature was depicted as subject to its own order, operating independently from the seemingly insignificant influence of Man. Yet depictions of even the most omnipotent and self-determining phenomena are born of cultural context. During westward expansion of the Americas, pre-Darwinian theories of geology and natural processes were imbued with divine, Creationist overtones. The theory of catastrophism emphasized the significance of sudden, dramatic geological events,
providing a link between the natural world and God. Violent, fuming fissures and terrible, watery abysses were evidence of a furious geological divine tantrum. Explorer Clarence King conveys the terror of a distinctly Burkean order in his description of Shoshone Falls:

Suddenly you stand upon the brink, as if the earth had yawned. Black walls flank the abyss. Deep in the bed a great river fights its way through the labyrinths of blackened ruins, and plunges in foaming whiteness over a cliff of lava. You turn from the brink as from a frightful glimpse of the inferno…

While these depictions of sublimity are notable for their dramatic qualities, Barbara Novak emphasizes that those of silence can likewise provoke a similar transcendence. On the opposite side of the sonic spectrum, silence expresses a sanctified and mystical order beyond the comprehension of the rational mind. This is the sound of the endless sky or the ancient forest. Reflecting upon my own work, specifically the *Phases of the Son* series, I am struck by its quietude. The depictions of nebulae and astral phenomena are presented from a perspective devoid of air and the capacity for sound. Viewed from perches hidden from the farthest reaches of the self, even internal dialogs are hushed.

![Image of Frederick Edwin Church's painting Cotopaxi](Image)

**Fig. 4.** Frederic Edwin Church, *Cotopaxi, Equador*, 1862.

In the context of twentieth century modern art, critic Carter Radcliff places sublimity “outside the law,” violating social morality and neoclassical notions of order,
beauty and art.\textsuperscript{17} The sublime in modern art is secular, operating in the realm of a "blasphemous and drunken" individuality.\textsuperscript{18} The modernist painters Jackson Pollack, Barnet Newman, and Mark Rothko are widely considered practitioners of a renegade sublime. Rothko explored notions of vastness through the use of color-fields, open geometries, extremely large canvases, dark and vaporous color, and the omission of line.\textsuperscript{19} Viewers lose themselves in the canvases, contemplating the void through a transcendent aesthetic experience. Unlike the eighteenth century Hudson River Valley paintings, the Rothko paintings attempt direct provocations of the sublime, rather than mere depictions of sublimity with figures literally placed within the landscape. I would have to say the work of James Turrell, with his optically oriented ganzfeld pieces, as well as his controlled celestial observations, represents an extension of this mode of sublimity into a contemporary context\textsuperscript{20}. What I find intriguing is that even in a postmodernist context, his work remains a captivating exploration of the natural sublime.

Sublimity and postmodernist theory is a particularly complex intersection. Interestingly, it has been suggested that deconstruction is in itself, sublime.\textsuperscript{21} Critic Thomas McEvilley posits that we are living in what he calls a "post-sublime" world, whereby the infinite dangers that once enraptured us with their awesome power have been slowly whittled away through reason and discourse extending far beyond Kant’s initial shift in this direction.\textsuperscript{22} Further, he suggests that attempts to locate sublimity in postmodern discourse, say in discussions of other or gender politics ultimately serves to weaken it, for while these subjects may represent areas for alarm and social concern, they are not usually considered terrifying on the epic scale.\textsuperscript{23} Perhaps, but someone who has been violently oppressed or otherwise victimized will probably tell you a different story. Easily abstracted into overwhelming tides, oppressive cultural forces present very real threats to a healthy sense of self or autonomy, to say the least. In my opinion, sublimity hinges directly on the circumstances and emotional climate of the individual. Perhaps supporting a compatible perspective, contemporary art critic Bill Beckley writes that the sublime is primarily concerned with, in his words, "what it means to be a human."\textsuperscript{24} So with postmodern criticism of humanism, which was born out of skepticism for Progress and Capitalism, the romantic grounds upon which sublimity had previously
taken hold begins to crumble. Beckley suggests further that the survival of sublimity necessarily hinges upon an acknowledgement that there are powers, spiritual or otherwise that reside beyond the reaches of human discourse.

Whether on macro- or micro-levels, sublime terror has found realization throughout the evolving American scene, recurring as natural, geometrical, industrial, electrical, consumer and most recently, techno-capitalist versions. The development of the atomic bomb, especially its first weaponized use on Hiroshima is often cited as critical touchstone in the progressive march of technology. Prior to this development, technological advances and marvels were often beheld with reverential awe and optimism. While humans have used technology against themselves since the beginnings, never before had scientists be able to harness energy on such a grand, annihilating scale. The writer Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe suggests that the technological sublime draws power from its similarity to the natural sublime. A picture is painted with a clear hierarchy: human subordinate to machine, and technology appearing as if it is naturally occurring. What is particularly frightening is that the forces that threaten our annihilation have been born of our own efforts and have acquired a life of their own, indicating that we are indeed flirting areas previously held in exclusivity by the gods.

In the realm of techno-capitalism, we have become increasingly reliant upon the delivery of new products and their quick delivery to ensure sustained economic growth. The mass global market has become the new religion, while the costs continue to mount in terms of waste, pollution, and greenhouse gasses. The forces that drive this machinery now appear uncontrollable and overwhelming to the individual. Genetic engineering is a field where recent developments like cloning are casting ethical and philosophical shadows approaching sublimity. The question remains not if human beings will be cloned, but when. It is this sense of inevitability or resignation that operates as the sublime marker of our contract with Progress; we’ve been seduced and transfixed and we’re scared to death.

Postmodern culture can be described as multi-medial. A multitude of philosophies, viewpoints and voices are transmitted simultaneously on a variety of
modes such as television, radio, news media, and advertising. It is not unusual for conflicting or paradoxical messages to confront the individual simultaneously. Further, meaning may be coded within the syntax of the message, emerging through a process of re-contextualization and displacement, raising the level of complexity even more. In this climate I would suggest that competing notions like beauty, sublimity, skepticism, reverence, deconstruction and mysticism can and do live simultaneously in our awareness. We've learned to juggle. The situation may be describes as multiple radios playing, tuned to different stations, similar to a musical work by John Cage. While attendance to exclusive messages is difficult because of interference, we can jump between them, getting the gist of the general concepts. In addition, we might even recognize patterns formed between the additive layers of noise within the whole or gestalt. In my work, this unity refers not to a moral, cultural, or domestic (or familial) order, but instead a prevailing necessity for self and identity to transcend all of these.

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., 177-178.
5 Ibid.
7 McEvilley, 62.
8 McEvilley, 63.
10 Ibid., 308.
11 McEvilley, 67.
12 Ibid.
13 Kant, 307
16 Novak, 39.
18 Ibid.
20 Ganzfeld is a term describing a perceptual phenomenon whereby human vision, when denied linear and tonal stimulation falls dormant, contributing to an experience resembling blindness. It is also refers to a folk musical group I belonged to in the early nineties, namely *Blue Ganzfeld*.
21 J.M. Berstein, quoted in McEvilley, 82n84.
22 McEvilley, 77.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 4, 5.
26 Ibid., 6.
29 Ibid.
Chapter 3
Mobility, Displacement, and the Mediated View

The very history of the United States has fostered a culture of mobility and displacement. The religious dictums of Manifest Destiny were seen to justify the westward conquering of Native American territories. Dreams of paradise, fertile farmland, abundant riches (particularly gold) fueled the compulsion to seek and gobble greener pastures. America was the Promised Land, built upon puritanical principles and dreams of abundance and security. Transportation systems expanded to more effectively control, consume and transport the vast riches. Similarly, the horizon itself has become an important symbol, representing not only distant localities but also personal goals. The American capitalist spirit imbues this symbol with notions of optimism and economic improvement, motivating forward motion or expansion.

Easily, within this climate, a culture of displacement is borne. As we have become increasingly attached to our mobility, the once-attractive notion of permanence has become overshadowed by fears of being tied down. With the promise of greener pastures elsewhere, appraisals of our immediate location become informed by comparisons to distant places, either real or imagined. A cure for stagnancy and restlessness is conceptualized by a quick change-of-scene or new beginning, effectiveness not withstanding. I am reminded of the lyrics to a song by the musical group Rush, reflecting upon this tendency: “We’re only at home when we’re on the fly...”

As I begin to reflect upon my work and the issues of time, place and memory, I am struck by the simple irony that, once again, I have moved. Since my birth in 1970, in Washington, D.C., I have inhabited 22 separate dwellings. The towns and cities have all been on the eastern seaboard, and include Washington DC, Brooklyn NY, Hanover NH, Spring Glen NY, Waterville ME, Brighton MA, Brookline MA, Somerville MA, Medford MA, Woburn MA, Rochester NY, and finally, Albany NY.

I have often been jealous of friends and acquaintances who grew up in one place. From my perspective, they seem to have a sounder sense of personal history, know more
people, have a more rooted sense of connection. It has been suggested that children of migrant farm workers suffer in part due to their lack of consistent home turf, a place by which they can measure their growth and experience, as well as a venue within which they can form intimate connections. This is what is implied when people say with pride: “I was born and raised in Albany.” They are of these places: it is felt in their bones. Perhaps, while a certain mobility is essential for healthy human development, too much may lead to a sense of displacement. I don’t want to harp on whether it is better or worse for families to stay put (many other factors would have to inform such a judgment) but rather, suggest that such migratory patterns resonate profoundly through a sense of self, history, and personal geography.

Fig. 5. Napping in the Jetstream, 2003

Further, the virtual mobility afforded by technology has also accelerated this process. The technologies of print, cinema, television, and most recently, the Internet, have become the broadcasters of this image-based culture, and arguably, have displaced more immediate, authentic notions of place. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe describes such a landscape,

... filled not with land, but with toys and images from elsewhere that stand for everywhere. Everything in it aspires to the placeless, the absolute condition of which is the image without a ground, to which all contemporary objects aspire.
Their ground is electronic technology, a world of ideas and invisible processes. You can’t make muddy colors on video, and the techno-sublime is without mud.⁴

Cyberspace completes the symmetry of American landscape mythology. As did the Western survey photographs, it draws strength from the compelling notion of the new frontier. With the geographic advantage afforded by our browsers, illusory landscapes are magically navigated by the efforts of a single finger. While providing new channels for communication and information exchange, this turf is also well suited for corralling business. In another sense, the Internet has provided a surrogate reality or frontier.

![Fig. 6. Doug LaRoe, Cowboy on Computer, 1997](image)

One artistic piece plays directly on the notion of website as place: www.nonplace.com. Websites represent the embodiment of paradoxical non-place.⁵ The actual location of the site is an anonymous server, located who-knows-where, interconnected through many degrees of separation from one’s own laptop. Yet, plugging in the coordinates re-creates an analog of place in a private viewing space almost immediately. The creators of this site play upon these ironies, purposely offering very little substance or content the pages.

In his *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord speaks to the unifying forces that reduce human experiences to forms more easily aligned with the world of image and commodity.⁶ Similarly, Martha Rosler has stated, the “industrialization of experience has served to empty the actual experience of its content, and make it a carrier of another experience altogether.”⁷ With respect to the American landscape, many places have
fallen subject to this reduction, functioning more as icon than real, and serving to communicate mythologies imbedded within our geographical history. As early as the late 1800s there is evidence of this tendency. Robin E. Kelsey has suggested in his recent article on Timothy O’Sullivan that as early as the King and Wheeler survey expeditions of the American West, it was recognized that photography’s most useful function was its ability to convey cultural impressions of the land, rather distilling useful scientific information.8

There is a crucial paradox underlying the relationship between place-representation technologies and human experience. While we may be dazzled by expanded views, we are simultaneously confronted with a sense of insignificance and detachment. While recognizing (or even lamenting) the roll of technology in our lives, we are also complicit in its dominance. In the words of David Nye, we have become “both the all-seeing observer on a high tower and the ant-like pedestrian inching on the pavement below.”9 This view conjures notions of Michel Foucault’s panopticon, whereby technologies fulfill the aims of surveillance and control.10 Afforded this top-down perspective, we function simultaneously as observer and observed, dominant and subordinate, detached and connected. The fulcrums of most paradoxes point inward; their resolution manifests within in our being.

I’ve been fascinated by aerial photography, remote sensing, and the Global Positioning System (GPS) as they epitomize what Donna J. Haraway, noted writer on the history of science, has termed the “god-trick,” or view of everywhere from nowhere.11 Initially born of intellectual inquiry these technologies found developmental traction in the military sector. High-resolution satellite imagery served to enforce compliance with arms control treaties. GPS, also a technology born of the Cold War, was conceived to facilitate the navigation of intercontinental ballistic missiles. It has since found widespread use in professional sectors, such as forestry, geology, archeology, and maritime navigation.

For my third quarter walkthrough, I explored the dual functionality of GPS, mapping, and Internet technologies to explore ideas of place and personal meaning. Drawing inspiration from my interest in the photographic surveys of the West, while
poking fun their objective, positivist tones, I pursued my own photographic survey of the Rochester, NY area, enabled by GPS. My goal was to explore the territory between mediated and detached representations of place, and the inevitable subjective associations that occur when one encounters the unknown (fig. 7).

Random Survey Rochester (RSR) features ten sites chosen through chance operations, taking a cue from John Cage. To target or locate these places, I used a map in conjunction with a hand-held GPS receiver. I made images of the locations and presented this work on a website, deep within cyberspace. In light of GPS’s original Cold War applications, the arbitrary fashion by which the sites were chosen may resonate ominously. And while the chance operation may suggest a relinquishment of responsibility, it also affords confrontation with places I would not have otherwise experienced. In addition, this approach removed subjective biases I might have toward one location over another. If indeed I acted as indiscriminately as an incoming missile, I nonetheless remained an inquisitive, reflective, and experiential human being upon my detonation.

One particularly fascinating artist who has addressed the darker side technology, and especially the spectacle of disaster is Patrick Nagatani. The country of his heritage,
Japan is the only nation to have suffered the wartime use of nuclear weapons, and is also highly prone to disastrous earthquakes. This heavy dose of sublime of a natural, technological, and perhaps arbitrary order has impressed significantly in Japanese culture. (One need look only as far as the *Godzilla* movies for evidence of this.) In such images as *Alamogordo Blues*, which refer to locations of nuclear test sites in the American Southwest, Nagatani utilizes pop art idioms, juxtaposing references to consumer culture, such as tourists lounging in Adirondack chairs equipped with their Polaroid Cameras, comfortably poised to catch the sunny rays of nuclear fission on the horizon (fig. 8). I think it is particularly effective that the medium is not rendered completely transparent; on the contrary, Nagatani seems to emphasize the fishing line used to suspend the physical props, emphasizing the pastiche, which is of course in the grander scheme, a reference commodity culture itself.12 Likewise, with my *Phases of the Son*, I decided to retain the apparent qualities of multi-layered collage, in spite of the digital capabilities at my disposal to render these more transparent.

Fig. 8. Patrick Nagatani, *Alamogordo Blues*, 1986

The apocryphal truths of positivism have also influenced how places have been represented in map form. Unsurprisingly, maps have too often been afforded an
unquestioned authority with respect to accuracy. In his book *How to Lie with Maps*, Mark Monmonier discusses how mapmaking is inevitably a compromised pursuit. From issues of projection, scale, and signs, there exists a “cartographic paradox”: in order to present information in a useful fashion, he claims an accurate map must “tell white lies.” Depending on the purpose of the map, and the cultural/historical context, maps may contain mistakes or deliberate falsifications. As with the written word, he emphasizes that the user must beware. Yet the public largely takes the authority of maps for granted; the typical user is “cartographically illiterate.”

There are a number of artists who have exploited the inherent ambiguity of maps. Wim Delvoye created a series of imaginary maps depicting non-existent places. The work blended recognizable landmasses with nonsense names, such as Oost-Ku, and Tonx. The intent was to tackle the cultural implications of place names and territories. The painter Jasper Johns betrays the legibility of the map through his painterly and expressive explorations of its most general forms.

One of my more favorite photographers Abelardo Morrell similarly reworks the map in various conceptual and expressive permutations. One example features a photograph of map of the United States crumpled in such a way that a basin is formed in the Midwestern region and filled with water forming a lake. Another features water and Vaseline slathered over wood forming the shape of Africa, again transformed by photographic means into gleaming gelatin-silver tones.

In the 1970s Roger Welch explored the notion of the memory map, when exploring family histories. These very unscientific “folk maps” featured captions written in magic marker on wood representing vague recollections of places and events. Many parts of the map were left blank, denoting gaps in memory. More recently, Nina Katchadourian created 3-dimensional sculptural forms from 2-D maps by meticulously cutting out the lengths of roadways. For example, the US highway system was removed from the rest of the country, and woven into a complex sculptural form, then displayed within a glass orb. The resulting jumbled mass belies its original message as roadway, and assumes almost biological connotations, such as masses of capillaries. The work is
quite arresting in its visual form: the new beauty of the roadways betrays the original intent of the ink on paper—the mere, ephemeral, depiction of roads.20

Douglas Huebler worked in a post-minimal, conceptual mode in the 1960’s and 70’s. He uses a system of documentation, maps, diagrams, photographs, and descriptive language, to trigger the formless form of the work, which is essentially a train of thought rooted in a specific set of parameters (fig. 9). The pieces exist in the gallery of thought, a series of hypotheticals that require the viewer’s active imagination to realize.

Fig. 9. Douglas Huebler, *Site Sculpture Project: Variable Piece no. 1, New York*, 1967

Similarly, Hamish Fulton uses documentation to record and conceptualize time, place and physical movement (fig. 10).21 Not unlike to Richard Long, Fulton is a walking artist, but his allegiance to content versus images modality is much stricter. For instance, he states on his website, perhaps to distinguish himself from the materiality of Long: “Only art resulting from experience. A walk has a life of its own and does not need to be materialized into an artwork. An artwork may be purchased but a walk cannot be sold.”22 The materiality of his work serves primarily as documentation, a means to communicate his intentions, but cannot be considered the work itself. It is interesting to note, however, that he does have gallery representation and this supposed mere documentation of his work is for sale.
Finally, Ed Ruscha and Bernd and Hilla Becher have been eye-openers with respect to the use of image sequence as well as the ironic play upon scientific realism, folding the dryness of scientific documentation upon itself.\(^2\) The cool, detached commentary through my website *Project RSR* rings similar to Ruscha with his quasi-scientific cataloguing of ordinary places, like *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations, Thirty-four Parking Lots*, and *Every Building on Sunset Strip*, with its accordion fold-out structure. Admittedly enjoying the conceptual territory of these approaches, I soon grew tired of them and wished for something more self-expressive, and without the cynicism I perceived.

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1 Ibid, 25.
3 Tuan, 32.
4 Gilbert-Rolfe, 90.
9 Nye, 285.
14 Ibid., 1-3


18 Smith, 15.

19 Ibid., 15.

20 Bender, 40.


Chapter 4
Photography, Authenticity, and Expression

There have long been misunderstandings regarding photography and realism. Since its origins, photography has more or less enjoyed a privileged reputation as a transparent truth teller.¹ The references to Niépce's “heliography” and Talbot's “Pencil of Nature,” implied that the sun itself, via technology, indeed provided a direct tracing of the natural world.² Also, photography has long been used as an analogue for human vision, even though the similarity breaks down when one looks at the particulars of human optical physiology (sensation), and especially perception.³ Interestingly, a Naturalist such as Peter Henry Emerson in the 1870s recognized this. He advocated the use of differential focus to convey a similitude to a more authentic visual experience⁴. H. P. Robinson, and much later the f:64 realists, insisted on images of uniform focus. This debate rumbled through the history of photography, culminating with Modernism and straight photography, where efforts were made to shore up photography as a unique artistic medium, standing in contrast to painting and the graphic arts. Here, practitioners such as Edward Weston championed techniques emphasizing, again, the camera’s supposed strength as truth teller and revealer of natural beauty. This understanding suggests that the truth attainable courtesy of photography is more authentic and objective than even what the eye can behold.

Of course, a viewpoint that privileges representation over direct observation is problematic. Allan Sekula wrote that photographs exist as “physical traces of their objects,” implying that at the most, only a residue of authenticity remains.⁵ Further, Roland Barthes has stated that what is recorded by the camera has occurred “only once,” suggesting that any referent that may have existed, is now long gone (at least in the sense of objective outside reality).⁶ Not only has the object and the moment it has occupied passed into the cycle of history, but so has the perceptual and cultural context against which it defined itself at that point in time. While we attempt to mechanically seize the fleeting or ephemeral, we discover that our vessel is as porous as a sieve: the reality or authenticity slips away, leaving visual ingredients that can be subsequently used in a variety of meaningful recipes. Indeed, the deciphering of a photographic image is not a direct experience. Rather, it involves a complex discourse. Meaning is
constructed through a multitude of processes: perceptual, intellectual, and emotional, involving codes, semantics and contexts surrounding the cultural functionality of the photographic image/text. As Allan Sekula would put it, photographic literacy or the ability to decipher meaning from a photograph, is a learned activity.7

Still, even armed with this rational understanding of photographs, we are nonetheless easily duped. In spite of all we know the tenacious myth of photographic realism, its “uncanny realism” holds fast.8 How is this possible? Sarah Kember points to photography’s ability to incite an aesthetic moment for the viewer.9 Culturally, we have projected upon photography an emotional charge or attachment, as with a fetish. And this surrogate appears emotionally convincing. However, unlike the positivist understanding of realism, based on notions of so-called objective vision, this refers to an emotional or inward realism. This is the warmer realm of sentiment and affect where the viewer is moved, stung, or piqued internally, as with Roland Barthes' notion of punctum.10 Thusly armed with this sentimental power, the photograph can trigger a cascade of very real associations, emotions and memories. This is an especially important consideration when photography is used, as it is in my work, to articulate a denotation of memory itself.

Fig. 11. Minor White, Metal Ornament, Pultneyville, New York, 1957
For a while now, I have been confused about how to categorize and conceptualize, the expressive art photographers, beginning with Alfred Steiglitz and continuing to Minor White, Aaron Siskind, Harry Callahan, Wynn Bullock and many others. Most often, this group of artists is included in the lineage of purist/straight photographers, and when their work is challenged critically, it is usually upon similar grounds, primarily addressing the issue of authenticity and reality via photographic means. Indeed, Minor White has even professed: “The spring-tight line between reality and photography has been stretched relentlessly, but it has not been broken. These abstractions of nature have not left the world of appearances; for to do so is to break the camera’s strongest point – its authenticity.”

I wonder what White would have said if he could have read Sarah Kember’s article? Perhaps he might have recognized and more clearly articulated what he meant by “authenticity.” Authentic to the eye in the external, scientific sense, or perhaps, authentic to the I in an interior, emotional sense? I’m sure he wouldn’t have gone as far as to suggest sentimentality, instead insisting upon universals and metaphysics. While this difference may reflect changing cultural understandings of photography, I think it may also reflect differences in male gender roles between the 1950s and the 1970s–1980s. In my judgment, in the 1950s it was more socially acceptable for a male to sublimate emotionality and vulnerability into the cooler language of metaphysics than into the hot potato of sentiment and emotional intimacy. I wonder if White would have charged Roland Barthes with being a sap? After all, Barthes states: “… [I] was interested in Photography only for ‘sentimental’ reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think.” Yet, somehow I doubt this, for White, a homosexual man struggling with issues of intimacy in a very straight world, certainly dipped his fingers far into sentiment on occasion. One can see this in his Sequence 17, which featured tender and intimate portraits of male figures.

The expressionist mode of photography of the 1940s and 1950s stood in contrast to the documentary and more literal uses of photography that were popular at that time. Instead, this work emphasized the interior drama of the photographer made manifest in the exterior form of the photograph. Symbolism, abstraction, and formalism were
utilized to create images that were concrete expressions of (and byproducts of) a personal and spiritual search for self-revelation and discovery. In the words of Siskind: “The reason I’m making pictures is out of a necessity to order the world, which is really ordering myself.” This mode of photography can trace a direct lineage to Stieglitz’s Equivalents, photographs that acknowledged the literal (clouds), but also celebrated the joys of looking and seeing, and further, how the resulting imagery can be understood as the equivalent of the photographer’s feelings, wrapped up in the act of photographing. For Minor White, his individual images and sequences served as visual koans: riddles by which the mind could become expanded intuitively through a meditative state. Here, the subject matter or literal referent is acknowledged but is given secondary importance. Instead, the emotive and intuitive responses read into the often highly abstracted imagery were moreover considered the more primary subjects. Viewers were often enticed into such a reading by the lushness and beauty of the finely crafted prints.

Such activities have an existentialist tone echoing the sentiments of philosophers such as Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, emphasizing the experience of the individual. Further, emotions become the supporting evidence for self. A sense of self is measured in tension and contrast with the cosmos, through an evolving relationship. I would add that while existentialism has often been discussed in terms of the bigger questions, such as a unified cosmology, the struggle for authenticity also resonates against the mediated aspects of postmodern culture. If we are complicit in our dependence on, and disdain for media-saturation, we must also search within this paradoxical territory for authenticity, which may be mirrored (and most definitely, modeled) from both without and within.

My work with photography and digital imaging, especially with respect to a sense of place, certainly references the idea of an interior drama made manifest. When I worked more exclusively in gelatin silver, I felt a close emotional connection to the black and white image. Working in the dark, with chemicals and methodical processes helped to foster an air of craftsmanship. This role, sanctioned if you will by my fascination with the practices of Modernist masters including Ansel Adams, Minor White, and current artists, like John Sexton, became very important to my understanding of myself as an artist; in some way, I was apprenticing to these masters (fathers?) with
the hope of one day reaching a similar sort of craft and self enlightenment via the practice of photography. In this light it should be clear why it was so difficult for me to break away into new and different methods of working.

Similar to artists like White, my expressive photographic pursuits found me exploring the lyrical and musical qualities of imagery rather than mere representation, as in my Chimney Bluff series (fig. 12). I sought personal, spiritual and metaphysical charges that I hoped would be recognizable by others inspiring to a certain synecdoche, whereby single images or parts referred to concepts much grander or important. Yet the problem with this kind of work is that the intended denotations are often not the ones most readily recognized or accepted. The imagery can instead appear obscure and ambiguous, without any clear signposts. Indeed, as the writer Andy Grundberg has criticized: “... after asserting that an apparently transparent image of the world is imbued with an individual vision or feeling, it has difficulty defining what that feeling is.”17 Sometimes the rock remains a rock, the tonal values remain just zone system flourishes, or worse the image is dismissible as a knock off, old fashioned, or irrelevant. Clearly some new approaches were going to be necessary to realize my intentions.

Fig. 12. Chimney Bluff Deadfall #4, 2003

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1 Sekula, 454.
2 Ibid., 454.


10 Ibid., 213.


12 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 21

13 White, 62.

14 Green, 53.

15 Ibid., 55.

16 Macquarrie, 4.

17 Andy Grundberg, “Ansel Adams: The Politics of Natural Space,” in *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography, 1974-1989* (New York: The Aperture Foundation, 1990), 33. As an aside, it should be noted that I was reluctant to include a quote by Andy Grundberg, primarily on personal grounds; I met him at SPE and found him to be a Class A jerk, completely impersonal and dismissive. His talk was equally unimpressive.
Chapter 5
Perceptions, Provocations, and the Inner Eye

Perception is the mechanism by which meaning is formed around sense stimulations. Operating in the realm of psychology and linguistics, it mediates between inside and out. In her discussions of visual poetics, Johanna Drucker has written about the idea of an interior eye in relation to "performing" the outside world within. Similar to the voice inside our head, the "l'oeil interieure" apprehends an endless visual stream of narrative images.¹ This not only has pertinence in the areas of memory images and daydreams, but also the apprehensions of new sense stimuli. Arguably, the distinctions between them can be ambiguous.

The presence of interior dialog implies an internal distancing device – the ability reflect even upon one's own consciousness. Yet on the other hand, sometimes we are overtaken by experience itself. Maurice Merleau-Ponty has written: "Perception is not first perception of things, but perception of elements... of rays of the world, things which are dimensions, which are worlds, I slip into these 'elements' and here I am in the world, I slip from the 'subjective' into Being."² This suggests a process, a contention requiring direct engagement. By citing these somewhat opposing states, I suggest a complex inner visual life that is part narrative (imaginary, and thusly, mediated), and part direct experience (authentic being). With respect to memory, this issue is similarly complex, as we have discovered that memory is a constructive process. Even the most vivid memories may be racked with gaps, readily filled with substitutive or compensatory imagery. There is even a wish-fulfilling or revisionist tendency to this process. Perhaps a sense of personal history, and by extension a memory of place, is best understood as a gestalt of mediated and authentic parts, turning upon one another.

This notion of two worlds or two frames of reference, inner and outer, finds roots in object relations theories and self-psychology. Largely psychoanalytic in orientation, this understanding posits an external world of observable objects, and an internal psychic world of mental representations of objects.³ The definition of object usually refers to another human being, as with the child's primary caregiver, the mother. However, objects can also be physical things or places, provided they hold an emotional
charge or fulfill a need. These objects are then psychically possessed, or owned by means of an internal representation of the objects. When the outside world (or culture) is itself highly representational (being mediated), the issue becomes even more complicated, as inner and outer worlds become less distinguishable.

With respect to apprehension of place, the gaze outward also implies a gaze inward. Similarly, external vastness is perceived by way of the internal vastness we contain within our psyche. Closer in, so to speak, Gaston Bachelard has written of the house as an external representation of internal consciousness, and vice versa. This basically speaks of a double inversion, a two-way street; we perceive the outside, or “extensity,” by way of the internal, but we also perceive our internal selves by way of the external, which is then perceived by way of the internal, and so on. Uta Barth has explored this “extimacy” with her photographs, especially drawing attention to perceptual processes that often go unnoticed. The boundary between internal and external is slippery, Barth exploring the territory “between” the identifiably external, and the tacitly “housed” or internal. This also resonates with the work of Roni Horn, who refers to a reciprocity between self-mediated-by-place, and place-mediated-by-self.

My work Another Horizon most directly addresses this notion of extimacy. Horizons have typically been associated with future, goal, effort. With respect to the American landscape, the horizon has been associated with Manifest Destiny, the promise of distant kingdoms elsewhere. Yet, the horizon simultaneously refers to ambitions external and internal. The space between here and there may be represented by psychological currency: gain, loss, happiness, disappointment, intimacy, isolation. Associations may be positive, negative or neutral. During the time of my adolescence, the time of this particular walk to school, my horizons were particularly charged psychologically. My text referring to the horizon, (“It hardly touched the ground”) evokes the free-float of this period, combined with a fixation on the sky with its implied remoteness, isolation. Yet, as I remember, staring off to the sky was also an enjoyable experience, an escapist and meditative experience. The sky was cold and crisp, like the fall air I filled my lungs with, while trudging to school.
While Minor White supposedly relied on the perceived authenticity of photography, more recently, acknowledging the critical theory around photorealism, Uta Barth’s images instead gain impact by drawing attention to the perceptual process directly. What interests me about Barth’s work is that she succeeds in this direct provocation of perceptual experience while still using photographic means. Her tactics include the use of extreme blur to obscure the connotative associations with identifiable things (to borrow from Roland Barthes), instead directing attention to basic visual elements like textures, surfaces, and light. Both of my books Another Horizon and Walk to School, I utilize selective blurring of image details (clouds and buildings reduced to tonal values) as well as the addition of digital noise, to provoke a looser, perceptually-based reading, to evoke a fog of consciousness, and to obfuscate the gossamer barrier between inward and outward oriented vision.

Another technique I have begun exploring is the combination of image and text in the context of the artist book. Simon Morley discusses how text and image engage a viewer in distinct perceptual mechanisms. Image allows for a less definitive, open interpretation of information, permitting “freedom of mental and sensual movement” of the eye. I would add that of the visual, photographic images particularly operate in slippery fashion due to their propensity of secondary meanings and the cultural expectations we have of them. Traditional text on the other hand limits eye movements to the regimens of the text block. Further, written meaning unfolds (usually!) in a logical fashion according to the rules of language and syntax. Morley suggests that image processing is more intuitive or right brain oriented, while text processing is more logical and left-brain. This is explanation is an oversimplification of very complex processes which actually do use both halves of the brain. Regardless of the specifics, many artists recognize and respond to the tension between text and image with respect to meaning and form.

When words and images operate simultaneously from the same source, such as with image/text, a parallel processing of information ensues. Sometimes, as in the case with Magritte’s The Betrayal of Images (ceci n’est pas une pipe), what Morley terms “collisions of meaning” can occur, because the relationship between signifiers and signifieds is arbitrary and can easily become disjointed. This tendency is particularly
useful territory to artists interested in interrogating the nature of language, culture and meaning.

Finally, Morley defines four categories of image-text relationships commonly found in art practices.\textsuperscript{18} With \textit{trans-medial} relationships, either the text is subordinate to the image, or vice-versa, one serving a supporting role. Examples would be illustrations supporting ideas in a textbook, or labels supporting visual art in a gallery. Second, the \textit{multi-medial} relationship, allows text and image to work more closely, as in advertisements or comic books. Text and image carry the weight more equally, yet there is still something of a hierarchy, where one tends to anchor the meaning of the other. In \textit{mixed-media} relationships, the words and image share the same space, and their relationship to meaning and code is often shared and scrambled between them. This is often found in advertising, or work that explores the use of signs. Finally, there is the \textit{inter-media} relationship, where text will be used primarily for its visual qualities, as in calligraphic works.

\begin{enumerate}
\item Michael St. Clair, \textit{Object Relations and Self Psychology}, (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, Inc., 1986), 1, 5.
\item Ibid., 32.
\item Bachelard, 17.
\item Martin, 31.
\item Ibid., 32.
\item Ibid.
\item Roni Horn: \textit{Inner Geography} (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art and Roni Horn, 1994)
\item see Yi-Fu Tuan, \textit{Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977 and 2001).
\item Martin, 33.
\item Ed. Russell Ferguson, \textit{Uta Barth} (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995)
\item Simon Morley, \textit{Writing on the Wall, Word and Image in Modern Art} (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 9.
\item Ibid.
\item Morley, 10.
\item Morley, 10-14.
\end{enumerate}
Chapter 6
Artist Books: Some Reflections

Beginning with the Renaissance and culminating in Modernism with critic Clement Greenberg’s insistence on pure optical experiences in painting, word and image have generally been sequestered in the visual arts. The mainstream academic arts have been divided into distinct practices along technical and theoretical grounds. However, the many exceptions to this tendency, in symbolist, dada, surrealist, constructivist, pop, and conceptual practices, there remains a tension between word and image which many artists have risen to interrogate, more recently in American postmodernism. Most recently, digital imaging has opened the playing field to a whole gamut of creative people of numerous disciplines to mix, match and blur the distinctions as they please.

The multi-medial form of the artist book has been a particularly fertile medium for questioning traditional image/text roles, as well as the traditional role of the book. Considered somewhat outside of the mainstream, artist’s books and magazines (‘zines) often functioned as venues for cultural criticism. The artists working in this way are numerous, and include Ed Ruscha, Clifton Meador, Scott McCarney, Lisa Lewnz, groups like Class Action, Critical Art Ensemble, among others too numerous to mention. While in some fashion, my book Walk to School stands as a critique (albeit indirectly) of unabashed positivism, I have not engaged in overt interrogation of language, signs and codes. This is not to say that I’m opposed to this, but would rather engage the visual and verbal more expressively, similar to that of a songwriter’s use of lyric and melody in counterpoint. My approach and tone (although in a MUCH more novice fashion) might be considered closer to that of book artist Keith Smith, who combines image, text, and book forms to convey meaning of deep personal significance.

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1 Ibid., 16.
2 Ibid., 16.
4 Drucker, The Next Word, 5-32.
Chapter 7
Discussion Of Works: Walk To School and Another Horizon

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has written about conceptualizations of place with respect to spatio-temporal illusions\(^1\). They become particularly resonant with respect to the dynamics of walking, a function of time and distance. The crux of my thesis work had me revisiting several ritualized walks from my childhood from my home to my school. I wondered what would happen if I went back, both psychologically and physically, to my childhood walk towards a historical destination – the school? Here, distant memory becomes materialized in the physical locality of the present. One of my intensions with this work is to simulate perceptual shifts with respect to time, place and memory.

The first of these walks is located in Brooklyn, N.Y., and consists of a short stroll down the residential 14\(^{th}\) street to Public School 107 on the corner of 14\(^{th}\) street and 8\(^{th}\) Avenue. The second walk is located in Hanover, N.H., consisting of a mile-long passage through residential and commercial areas of my adolescent hometown. I photographed each of these walks extensively, in some cases in a regimented fashion at specific points along the way, while in others, according to my whims. In Hanover, my father and I made portraits of one another along the route. The book Walk to School emerged from the Brooklyn material, while the imagery in Another Horizon was distilled from a series of sky images I made on the Hanover route late one afternoon. The remainder of the Hanover images found its way into the wall series Phases of the Son.

The two books Another Horizon and Walk to School primarily use image and text in a multi-medial fashion, as described earlier. As a lover of both photography and poetry, my ambition was to create a visual poem whereby the images and text not only carry equal weight with respect to meaning, but also contribute to an amplification of a gestalt or whole, which transcends the parts. Like the lights roving around an old movie marquee, the individual flickers anticipate one another, melding into a greater meaning. Further, the multi-medial aspects that engages disparate but parallel processing (verbal and visual) more closely resemble life experience within a culture that is saturated with words and images\(^2\). As a result, the piece gains a contemporary edge.
In *Another Horizon*, the more illustrative of the two books, the poem unfolds through a series of images that could very well have been imagined in response to the text alone (fig. 13). The simple and playful interchange between the two provides an additional layer of meaning, which once again refers to the content and symbolic order. When the horizon “rolls and tumbles across the sky,” the image reinforces this by offering a swirling, sinuous form across the sky. The blurred sky images, with their symbolic horizons, stand in contrast to the more literal horizon snapshots on the left, which sit comfortably anchored in simple white borders, not unlike in a photo album. The snapshot images serve as the fulcrum, offering something of an outsider’s view of the scenes upon which the projections of alternate horizons are being made. One may look at the scenes literally, or instead join the narrative being provided simultaneously by both author’s interior voice and interior eye.

![Fig. 13. Excerpt from Another Horizon, 2004, p. 2.](image)

In *Walk to School*, a serial construction with narrative threads, the text again functions additively with image. Sometimes text anticipates image, fixing its meaning before the page is turned and the image seen. A good example would be the stanza beginning with “a new day becomes a coup d’œil, a forward gaze, a sidelong glance,” and proceeding the image of the man pushing the stroller, glancing sidelong at the red door (figs. 14, 15).
Here, the text provokes the reader’s own conception of “new day, sidelong glancing,” which is then met with the depicted man’s own version on the next page. Perhaps resonating sympathetically, the comparison hopefully sparks some kind of authentic resonance in the viewer.

Other times the text leverages double meanings, denoting time and place remembered, but also elements of mapping, the fixation of coordinates in a remote, technologically sublime sense. This is reinforced by the grid and target elements of the image, which then refer back to the double meaning of the text (fig. 16). The last text element, “when I walk to school,” serves to anchor the whole drama within the innocent sentiments of a child walking to school, seemingly unaware of the other more adult-like perspectives presented.
The choice of working in book form has been significant for me. The book, especially the accordion form, allows for a time-based structure. The unfolding of the pages evokes the unfolding of time and quite literally, space. Imagery is revealed as one "walks" through the book, on a poetic and conceptual journey. Further, this serves to mimic the experience of simultaneous perception, whereby observation, integration and reverie begin to orbit one-another in the flow of consciousness. This paradoxical folding of disparate perspectives generates a new topography – one that signifies an existential awareness of being, within an autobiographical context. This resonates with the writings of Tony Hiss, who writes of a "fluid body boundary," where the difference between self and surroundings becomes diminished.3

In Walk to School, the repetition of page turning, in conjunction with the serial sequencing of the imagery, imparts a circular quality to the temporal elements. I am indebted to Carol Barton, with whom I have taken a workshop for demonstrating how many forms the accordion and sculptural book forms can take on. I have started at the beginning, so to speak, and hope to explore additional forms, particularly the tunnel book. In addition, Barton's work also serves as an inspiration in terms of content, exploring geographic and perceptual themes, although realized in much more advanced book form.

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1 Tuan, 125.
My series *Phases of the Son* continues to probe the dual functionality of visual technologies to both mediate and authenticate a sense of personal place. It frustrates positivism by obscuring its readable signs, as well as by obfuscating the context within which it normally fixes itself. At the same time, it hitches a ride on the remaining technological sublime, which is left surprisingly intact after this collision. It then repositions these scattered remains in the realm of the autobiographical, psychological, and experiential. Visually, these pieces are an outgrowth of an as-yet unfinished series *Remote/Intimate Sensing*, which merges photographs of the body with aerial photographs, forming new, personal topographies (fig. 17).

![Remote/Intimate Sensing #3, 2004.](image)

A sense of place can acquire deep meaning for the adult through the steady accretion of sentiment over the years.¹ Feelings of comfort, familiarity, ambivalence, loathing seem to occupy the very physicality of its streets, buildings, trees and air itself. Yet, this important information is not content readily transcribed by the mapmaker. Maps and aerial photography have long been used as representations of place, yet the
information they communicate is hinged within codes specific to the medium – one must learn to read them, and perhaps have some special training to decipher the intended meaning. Yet this generic, unspecified perspective usually offers little with respect to an immediate human experience of place. This is not to say maps are unable to provoke any sort of reverie or sentiment; actually quite the opposite for some people. For this work, the maps and aerial photos do represent the physical geography of my autobiographical drama, yet I have chosen not to share this clearly. Instead, the maps and photos are shredded and abstracted, frustrating an easy deciphering. They function as symbols and pictorial elements rather than rational, positivist fixations.

Fig. 18. Phases of the Son. Phase #1, 2004.
Fig. 19. Phases of the Son. Phase #2, 2004.

Sometimes the symbols are specific. For instance, the map-shreds signify geographic displacement, and a challenge to positivism. In other instances, such as with the cosmic corona, the moon views, and the glowing fire-balls, the symbols take on more generalized functions, providing a background tension rooted in the techno-sublime (figs. 18, 19). Other times, I utilize almost direct appropriation, for instance the famous NASA image Earthrise over Moon (figs. 20, 21).

For me, images of distance space carry a frightening edge as they imply the unknown, and perhaps, a one-way trip. As mechanical views, they also signify the
absence of an authentic human witness. They also signify our mortality... if we could have been there, we probably wouldn’t live long enough to share the views with those back home. Another mortality is implied. As discussed earlier, remote sensing technologies were developed closely with military and aeronautical purposes in mind.

As we know, ICBMs achieve low orbit before deploying their nuclear warheads. Perhaps the target, lying prostrate below looks like an aerial photo, its inhabitants undecipherable from the grid of patterned shapes and forms. Displacement from familiarity, comfort, immediacy and love operate at the heart of the technological sublime. Amidst the void, I have warmed the chill with emotional, tender and sentimental things.

Originally, I intended this work to concentrate primarily on my walk to school in Hanover, as with the Brooklyn piece. I had paced the walk and identified 20 locations along the way, representing each of the 20 years passed since I regularly made the walk. At each of these points I made photographs of the path ahead. While on shoot and in my usual state of reverie, I thought that it would be nice to make some portraits of my father. In passing, he had mentioned his willingness to help me with my project. So, I devised a game by which we would photograph one another by flipping a coin at each of
the 20 locations. Heads: my picture. Tails: his. So, in this way, I generated plenty of footage for potential projects. I labored over many conceptions, but one day I just started making these images, as the pull was strongest in this direction.

Like most kids, my teens were particularly difficult. I also suffered from depression, as did my father. Like most boys, I was culturally encoded to excel, grow up strong and capable, and to moderate my sensitivity. Of course, there was a cost. Like many boys, I felt lost, longing for a mentor to provide some guidance on what seemed like a difficult path. Our society has not typically taught men to utilize their nurturing capacities to full extent, and my father and I both suffered for it. To some extent, this piece serves an emotional desire to repopulate the fearful and sad associations I have with this geography/history with a more intimate and comforting paternalism. This is, of course, an articulation of childhood needs informed by the insights of an adult. And indeed, my father and I are now much better for it.

The detached, positivist vision is thusly disarmed and re-anchored in specific, human elements... a photograph of my father’s wedding ring, his glasses (not his eyes!), the doorstep to our house, the dormer of my bedroom window, lawn chairs. These facets are also combined with symbols of masculinity, such as beard shavings, heavy-booted
footprints, hands. The composition takes on formal aspects as would a series of headshots with the circle of a face framed within a 2 1/4 viewfinder. These are portraits of my father and I, through a special psychographic mapping or projection if you will. In addition, I was probably ushered to this composition, on some level, by a childhood viewing Paul Klee’s Painting Senecio. I remember my father sharing a reproduction of this image with me while writing his art historical text on the artist, and we had a good laugh about the two squares for a mouth. There are direct references to this image in the image Phase #5 of the series (figs 24, 25). Finally, the choice of a glass globe as the primary visual element refers to the concept of crystal ball, which can afford all-seeing glimpses into the future or the past.

Fig. 24. Paul Klee, Senecio. 1922.
Fig. 25. Phases of the Son, Phase #6, 2004.

Phases of the Son is a sequence, but also a series. As with the sequences of Minor White, it builds meaning through a progression of perceptions. It also relies upon seriality through the repetition of a common motif: the circle or sphere within a square. Within the similarities are differences of course, which induce cross-comparisons that additionally reinforces the temporal experience of viewing. Further, the serial and appropriative aspects also resonates in a postmodernist sense foreshadowed by Walter Benjamin’s The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, whereby authenticity in art becomes the rarified commodity in a context of endless duplication.
There are additional reasons for the circular form, primarily symbolic and poetic. Primary are denotations of wholeness and fullness. Robert Bly among other writers of the mytho-poetic men’s movement, stress the importance of attaining maturity in all of one’s psychosocial capacities. Such as man is aware of a healthy and effective balance between the emotional, spiritual, rational, vulnerable, magical, powerful, nurturing, utilitarian, loving. He can live within these healthy masculine spaces with compassion and effectiveness. Similarly, a man’s belly is often spherical! Gaston Bachelard says in his phenomenology of roundness:

... images of full roundness help us to collect ourselves, permit us to confer an initial constitution on ourselves, and to confirm our being intimately, inside. For when it is experienced from the inside, devoid of all exterior features, being cannot be otherwise than round.6

Finally, my choice for backlit display was informed by several ideas. First, I have often been drawn to the slick look of backlit advertising displays in airports and the like. I thought it would be interesting to see how personal imagery might resonate within such denotations. Further, I remember viewing a series of backlit astronomy displays in a science museum. As my imagery is imbued with cosmic references, in an ironic play upon positivism, this seemed appropriate. Finally, I really liked how the images looked on screen with respect to color and saturation. A backlit Lambda Duraclear print would preserve a similar appearance.

1 Tuan, 33.
3 Green, 60.
6 Bachelard, p. 234
I have chosen Adobe Photoshop as the deck upon which to composite the collages that comprise my thesis work. From fragments of photographs and scanned objects, I have sought an additive gestalt that speaks to autobiography, place and cultural context. The use of digital itself has important implications to consider, as it permits the creation of photographic imagery from scenes that never existed, so to speak.

One can look at Keith Cottingham’s *Fictitious Portraits*, digital constructions of a boy-like figure of uncanny photorealism (fig. 26).¹ The authenticity Roland Barthes ascribed to the photograph, which at the very least tied the signifier to its referent (the “here it is” aspect), is now called into question.² At the time of Barthes, the technological limitations of photography ensured at least some direct linkage to a moment in time and place. But with digital, this is no longer the case. Yet the issue is not so simple.

According to Martin Lister, the historic arguments regarding photographic realism have been resurrected and recast in discussions of analog versus digital.³ Here,
photography is once again positioned as a trustworthy analogue of reality, while digital
by contrast is considered the medium of transformation, synthesis and artificiality. A
celebration of photography’s so called realism, which was used to distinguish
photography from painting, is now being used albeit in a less subtle fashion to
distinguish photography from digital. Furthermore, when we realize that photographic
images are rarely encountered in their discrete and isolated form, but instead within the
stream of mass media (and thus, subject to reproduction, repositioning and
recontextualization), the nature of digital images as artificial composites begins to look
less radical by comparison. In addition, drawing from Walter Benjamin’s reasoning,
images have been used in multi-medial ways for decades as text and image have
functioned integrally in print, television and cinema. From this perspective,
photographs and digital images can be seen along the same historical continuum. Digital
technology increases the facility of manufacturing and disseminating imagery by
removing technological barriers that previously limited the progressive thrusts of analog
forms of photography and print.

It seems that even with the challenge to photography by digital, we still invest in
photography its mythical power to authenticate on the emotional level. We even prefer
our digital snapshots to look like their old chemical cousins. Epson has largely built their
whole inkjet business around this need. A family album of jpegs on a computer lacks the
sentimental resonance of a dusty old photo-album of fading prints. Why such an
attachment? Barthes suggests that society requires something of a capacitor or
compensatory heat sink for the storage of collective pathos, and that photography serves
this function: “For Death must be somewhere in a society; if no longer (or less
intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image [the photograph]
which produces Death while trying to preserve life.” On the other hand, with his
declaration of photo-realism as an “obstinate bit of bourgeois folklore,” Alan Sekula
suggests that such an investment implies a macro investment in the maligned capitalist
social order, of which he is an advocate for change.

It comes to little surprise that great effort is expended to make digital art look
like photographs: parts seamlessly joined within the two dimensional space, the surface
glossy and smooth. Artists like Johann Simens exploit this cultural tendency by creating
virtual, fantastic and surreal imagery, packaging it not within the cultural container of painting, but rather *photography*. Digital is picture-perfect because it leverages and exploits a cultural investment in photography, literally resonating with photo-realism.8

I'm not so interested in fooling anyone into some slick trick, or interrogating the definitions photorealism, rather than in engaging viewers in multiple layers of meaning. Certainly my images could be considered *photographic*, perhaps in reference to the flat, glossy surface and identifiable photographic referents, such as the "Earthrise" image in *Phases of the Son*, for example. I also intend the work to refer to a reality of its own, but hopefully the work remains clearly composite imagery, collage-oriented.

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4 Ibid., 219.
6 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 92.
Conclusion

Through gained appreciation for the vernacular and autobiographical, I soon realized that something as ordinary as my walk to school could be anything but mundane. After all, my interest in place and in photography for that matter stems primarily from my personal experiences, associations, and — dare I say — *sentiments*. While I find greater satisfaction in the more expressive versus conceptual modes, my recent work represents a significant shift for me with respect to the use of pictorial conventions. Prior to graduate study, I felt that the expressive black and white image when pushed far enough could transcend the conceptual baggage associated with its practice. I was reluctant to shed the measures and standards by which practitioners of this work were tested. Eventually, out of the need to address the challenges of the MFA program, I eventually resigned to explore new avenues, and for that I am now grateful. With the digital works and the artist books, the message has become much more informed and specified, and certainly more culturally and personally relevant.

My understanding of landscape history and representation has changed profoundly over the past two years. The most dramatic realization with respect to my work is that my interest lies with the psychological underpinnings of place (and place representation) with respect to memory, and personal identity formation. This object-relations orientation, featuring the interrelation between inward and outward, self and other, and the dynamic and ambiguous barrier between the two, is an area I intend to explore further, perhaps more directly.

Do I consider this work successful? Am I proud of it? Yes, as a worthwhile beginning. When I look at the work, I realize that I’m still very close to it, very attached, very fixed. The reformulation of my whole approach to place representation has been quite an intellectual and artistic stretch for me. It has required some intense work, especially around my personal history and relationships with family members. It has required many hours of reading and writing, as well as long nights perched before my *cathode ray alter*. Where is the work going? I sense further explorations of this road, albeit with some shifts, but inevitably informed by my work on *Memory Fix.*
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