3

SENSATIONS OF PLACE: ARTIST ALTERED ENVIRONMENTS

Liz Wells

Finnish photographer Pekka Luukkola is interested in exploring our responses to our environment and ways of suggesting this photographically. In Sense of Time he uses light to register movement. For ‘Rowing’ flares were attached to the oars of a boat, the photograph tracing shapes in the water as the rower curves round the forest boundary. Long exposure allows for the journey to be documented in a single image and shooting at twilight emphasizes the reflection of light.

what we see of a landscape is only superficial, whereas we can give it depth and a time dimension through what we feel and think about it. A photograph can record a landscape as it is, but it can also be an instrument for viewing it from a new perspective, assigning it new meanings or deriving new experiences from it.

(Luukkola, 2012: 7)

An image such as this is pre-conceptualized; the photographer as artist has imagined the image to be constructed in terms of the image content and mode of expression. However, until it is printed, it may not be possible to know exactly what has been achieved. Experimentation requires a willingness to take artistic risks and dedication to the purpose of finding different ways of seeing and telling. The making of such an image is complicated; it requires extensive planning. Luukkola tells us that he sometimes spends a month organizing a shoot. Expeditions involve consulting maps, visiting locations, checking the times of twilight and dusk, arranging transport (in this case a boat with specially designed oars as well as road access to the point of embarkation), keeping an eye on weather forecasts, making tests to determine exposure and where to place the camera to optimize the visual effect.

Photography has often been discussed in terms of photographs taken, and what they reveal about people, place and social circumstances. In this formulation,
photographs act as ‘windows on the world’, documenting how things appeared at a particular moment in time thereby offering opportunities for us to consider the specific phenomenological characteristics of individuals, events and environments. But, as a ‘medium’, photography ‘mediates’; in this respect all photographs are ‘made’ not ‘taken’, structured through processes that normally include content selection, framing, focus and editing. Photographs implicate the agency and authorship of the photographer. However, the notion of the constructed image explicitly suggests a staging of objects or events with attention paid to the qualities of visual rhetoric emergent from the inter-relation of pictorial form and content.

This chapter considers altered environments. It focuses on work by artists who fabricate, intervene or install in order to create scenarios that explore our responses to phenomena and express this metaphorically. Two key points underpin the discussion: first, it is not the case that an artist comes along, finds a static situation and animates it. Rather, the artist explores places through photographing, using pictures to express the results of an investigation. Second, environments are intrinsically mutable. Constant flux is most evident in rural areas wherein the effects of daylight or night, climate and seasonal change are always visible, contributing centrally within the visual poetics of imagery. Movement of light and dark, and the
Sensations of Place

consequences of weather are of course also evident in urban areas; for instance, the qualities of interior illumination change according to the intensity of natural light and how it is reflected within a space.

In order to explore ways in which artists deploy aesthetic strategies intended to highlight sensations of place, I shall focus primarily on engagements in open space. Here, the term ‘environment’ is deliberately used as an alternative to the more familiar term ‘nature’, which is sometimes taken to suggest that there is a parallel universe within which the botanical thrives, unaffected by human culture. In what is now widely accepted as the era of the Anthropocene, it is acknowledged that environments, however remote from urban centers, are impacted by human action, particularly the consequences of industrialization and communication systems. Rural areas have been changed through logging, mining, agriculture and human settlement with all that the latter entails in terms of transport infra-structures and telecommunications. Urban areas are by definition human constructs. The ecological impact of pollution and climate change is now widely acknowledged.

Our concern here, however, is with photographic modes of investigation, questions that might be explored and the interventionist methods whereby their findings and ways that responses may be communicated pictorially. Through altering environments by staging scenarios, interventions or installations, artists shift or de-stabilize our perceptions and presumptions. Through referencing multi-sensual responses to locations and events they invite us to reflect on aspects of places or scenarios depicted.

Land Art

In her essay, ‘The Mind at Three Miles an Hour’ writer Rebecca Solnit stresses the value of walking as a means of giving ourselves space for observation and philosophical contemplation. She develops her argument for slow engagement through reference to Western philosophers, including Jean Jacques Rousseau and Søren Kierkegaard, who reflected on our relation with phenomena (Rousseau) or cities (Kierkegaard). Her emphasis is on walking and thinking, a point that I have also taken up through discussion of the journeys and repeated visits to place implicated in photographic investigations. We experience land differently when we give ourselves time to explore and respond.

Artists’ responses to experiencing places and environmental phenomena have often taken the form of site interventions. Scale is particularly relevant when thinking about the import and impact of land art. For instance, Robert Smithson’s 1970 construction ‘Spiral Jetty’, at Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah, is 457 meters long and was planned as a permanent feature, albeit, of course, a mutable one, subject to the effects of climate, weather and water-movement. It was created through the (somewhat brutal) action of using a bulldozer to move earth from the shore into the lake. Arguably the sheer physical scale contributes to a sublime presence more akin to natural phenomena such as the mountains of the American West than to human-made sculptures that we might encounter in a gallery or an urban public
Sensations of Place

Space. However, since most of us cannot travel to the site, our encounter is not with Spiral Jetty itself, but with documentation in the form of photographs and video.

Other land art interventions are subtler, often conceptually founded in mutability with legacies of happenings documented photographically. In the 1970s Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta created what she viewed as ‘dialogues’ between the female body and the earth through recording the imprint of her body in places where she had lain; she knew that leaves and the earth would gradually re-cover any trace of her presence. Likewise, in a performative act ‘Boyhood Line’, 2015, British artist Richard Long enticed us to walk along a stretch of clustered stones that he laid on the Downs by the Avon Gorge in Bristol, UK, a city park area that he knows well from childhood. The stones are gradually being over-grown by grass and will eventually be re-absorbed, marked only by a statement on small (white limestone) slabs a few meters away at each end. Indeed, land art often implicates decomposition, leaving photographs to confirm what once could be seen.

Land art results from building or performance; it may be intended to leave a legacy on site as well as a record of what has occurred. For those who work primarily through photography the approach is rather different. Alterations are made for the purpose of creating imagery that will convey something of what has been discovered or experienced and suggest emotional responses. Photographers adjust environments in order to create pictures through fabricating scenarios, intervening in environments, or installation for the camera. Such alterations may be concerned primarily with drawing attention to characteristics of places, human attitudes and perceptions. As artists they may be questioning ways in which we view or treat our environment, or highlighting incongruities. They act as protagonists rather than as observers.

Seeing Differently

Altering environments invites us to ‘see’ differently, and, by extension, to think differently about the inter-relation of people, place and circumstances. Phenomena and sites acquire significance through what they represent and how they are represented. For instance, a lake may figure in our imaginations as a place of solace. However, as in the Finnish example with which this chapter opens, an intervention can enhance such affects. The flares not only ‘paint’ lines that reflect his movement through the water by boat, they also introduce a warm color into the classic blues, greens (and in winter, whites) of Finnish lands, thereby reminding us of more tactile experiences, for example, the heat of a fire in the cold of the north. For Luukkola fire is a symbol of life, reminding us of eras when sun and fire were the only available sources of illumination.

British artist Chris Wainwright frequently uses red torchlight to augment the colors of land and water, emphasizing contours, but in this case referencing all that red might represent – socialism (the red flag); a signal meaning ‘stop!’; danger; buoys marking the port-side limits of a channel off-shore or in estuaries. Ways in which we might interpret colors and other elements in altered environments are, of course,
culturally specific. In Europe the red flag symbolizes socialism; in the USA red is associated with the Republican movement.

Pictures staged in landscapes, urban or rural, using the specific characteristics of the environment as a backdrop are familiar to us from advertising photography within which location shoots are used to link consumer items with whatever we associate with a particular setting. The backdrop is not mute; rather it has been selected for ways in which it will dynamically interact with the primary content of the image, creating a visual dialogue that enhances the story told and renders it more complex. For example, British cultural critic Judith Williamson took an advert for a Porsche car as the starting point for discussing how the scenario ‘works’:

The gleaming Porsche, light reflecting off its curves, is seen against an urban backdrop that say both ‘smart’ and ‘bohemian’. The car is sleek, photographed from an angle that makes it look long and low, and has the exotic touch of a foreign number plate … a narrow street that looks like somewhere in Bloomsbury … the effect is at once specific, and generic: this is a cool, fast car in a city setting that suggests fashionable intellectual life.

(Williamson, 2006, p. 9)
Sensations of Place

We can imagine the type of advert that she describes; the visual vocabulary, and the grammar of this image within which the choice of setting is designed to not only to enhance the object but also to influence our response. As she remarks, by imagining a different setting we can identify some of the ideological associations that are being articulated not through what is seen, but through that associated with what is seen. We are sophisticated at decoding visual communications, and rarely pause long to consider exactly how imagery operates in terms of direct representation and the – in this instance, luxury – values that are being reaffirmed.

A number of photographers use similar visual strategies, deploying existing settings as elements within fabricated images, or as stages on which to build or locations within which to intervene more ephemerally. As consumers of advertisements we are, of course, sophisticated in reading such images. However, unlike propaganda and promotional materials, artists are not selling us an object or idea; rather they are inviting us to reflect upon the world of experience through seeing things differently. Their primary engagement is aesthetic, phenomenological and sometimes sociological, rather than consumerist.

The following three sections explore modes of altering environments as methods of drawing our attention to phenomenological characteristics of places. We focus on projects that take locations, exterior or interior, rural or urban, as both settings for and subject of explorations through fabrication, intervention or installation. Discussion inter-weaves artists’ intentions, methods and processes, aesthetics, meaning and interpretation. Some examples are playful, visual disruptions that do not seem to have any direct narrative intention in terms of social or environmentalist circumstances or implications. The improbability – or destabilization – is a joke rather than an intellectual or emotional challenge. In other instances, more complex references to cultural assumptions and taken for granted ‘knowledge’ are involved; projects may be socio-politically purposeful. Visual poetics highlight the multi-sensational nature of our responses.

Fabrication

Thus, for instance, artists including Noémie Goudal and Sarah Hobbs fabricate images for the purpose of provoking contemplation, inviting us to ‘see’ spaces differently and to reflect on our responses. The images stand in for experiences of actual places through provoking memories and invoking imagination. In Les Amants, 2009–2010, Goudal integrates landscape imagery and built environments. For instance, we contemplate a decaying barn within which she has unfolded a classically composed rural view structured around a path leading towards the horizon and vanishing point. But the world of painting is turned inside out as instead of the barn as a romantic agrarian reference within the landscape pictorial, the picturesque is bought inside, reminding us that barns are rough work spaces, and, in this case, no longer in use, superseded, perhaps, in an era of agri-industry. Of course this is a specific reading, not necessarily intended or anticipated by the artist. Indeed, we could regard her tactics as playful, intended to cause pause for thought but not
Sensations of Place

necessarily to imply socio-economic concerns. Meaning and interpretation are very open. We wonder how local people responded to a largescale banner, akin to a theatre backdrop, hanging in their urban street, within which flowing white fabric replicates a waterfall. The multiple fabrication provokes us to reflect not only on the orderliness of the matching terraced housing and by contrast with the wilderness of a rural waterfall, but also associates the flow of water and the flow of woven materials. Meaning is fluid, but the series title, *Les Amants*, suggests an emotional inter-relation, perhaps the inseparability of natural and cultural phenomena. In *Emotional Management*, 2009, Sarah Hobbs forges links that are philosophically more abstract, for example, juxtaposing ‘fluffy clouds’ that imply benign weather, or even a childlike Christian heaven, and the comfort of the pillows, the link emphasized through intense whites. We might associate cushions with soft-fall, the lightness of feathers, the pleasures of fantasy, sleep, dreams, transitions or death. We might remember cloud formations in classical paintings, whether religious, surrealist or romantic seascapes. Again, meaning is not intended to be precise; rather we respond with senses other than the intellectual.

By contrast with Goudal and Hobbs, Oh Soon-Hwa’s interests have a sociological dimension that supports her pictorial story-telling. The style is not descriptive or photo-journalistic; rather, her pictures operate evocatively. In *Quiet Dream*, she deploys landscape as setting to conjure up sensations of place and homeland.

Oh Soon Hwa is South Korean, now based in Singapore. *Quiet Dream* explores the possibility of love and romance that young Vietnamese women imagine in their decision to marry foreigners. The images are fabricated; the panoramas intended to

Figure 3.3 Oh Soonhwa, *French Colonial House*, color photograph, archival inkjet print, 51.2 × 31.5, 2009
emphasis what she terms ‘the beauty’ of what the brides leave behind, the environment, family and friends that form part of their identity.

The project started under the more literal working title of *Girls from the Mekong Delta*. Returning home to South Korea she had noticed an advertisement for ‘Vietnam brides’. Researching this, she discovered that young women from Tan Loc Island in Vietnam were marrying Taiwanese or South Korean men, leaving their home island, but with the intention of sending money back; in their culture supporting aging relatives is a shared family responsibility. In 2012, 6,586 Vietnamese women married South Korean men, moving to live in poorer rural households that more modern Korean women would not accept. (Oh, 2014) The fantasy of marriage as a desirable destiny for young women is universally familiar. Here, we sense nostalgia for what has been left behind. The French Colonial House stands as ‘history’, and also represents an affluence to which the girls might have aspired, but have not attained. It also references European colonization in that region. *Quiet Dream* suggests contemporary forms of disempowerment. The seascape in ‘Tide Out’, with workers gleaning shellfish only accessible at low tide, points to variable work conditions. In both pictures the title contributes to anchoring meaning, for instance, reminding us of the limited hours in the day when such fishing by hand can be pursued.

The scenarios appear literal, but in fact each image consists of 3–7 frames digitally stitched together. Some elements were photographed on site; others not. The story rests on what the artist learnt, if not from the girls who have left, from the mothers and sisters left behind. However, the brides are re-constructed; often a sibling posed

![Image](Figure 3.4 Oh Soonhwa, Tide Out, color photograph, archival inkjet print, 51.2 × 31.5, 2012)
Sensations of Place

for her, emulating their sister’s wedding. The images are fabricated to suggest a scene played out at a particular place; the method is more complex than it first appears with multiple elements layered to create a final picture.

Why use such a complex method to create what at first glance appears as a straight image? A basic explanation is that the photographer was not present at the weddings and the girls are no longer in their home village to pose in their bridal dresses. More significantly, by situating the portraits of the missing young women in everyday settings, the photographer references history and economics to suggest reasons for their departure. The pictures are aesthetically traditional, setting up scenes for our contemplation; they are serene, harmonious in form. Through digital stitching, the photographer sets up a tension between contradictory implications: marriage as a dream of escape from social circumstances offering little economic hope, and yet, a sense of yearning and loss.

Intervention

Other artists make work through direct interventions akin to land art, but with the primary purpose of creating images that shift perceptions.

Anna Reivilä’s primary reference is ‘kinbaku’, which means ‘tight binding’. In Japanese religious tradition, ties connecting people with the sacred tying has erotic, spiritual and artistic associations. Bondage also references slavery, constraint and containment. ‘Containment’ is an ambiguous notion; on the one hand something

Figure 3.5  Anna Reivilä, Bond #13, photo print on fine art paper, 28.3 × 39.4 and 12 × 16.5, 2016
or someone is restricted, but on the other hand restraint may be minimalistic and aesthetically pleasurable, for instance, bonsai gardening. Reivilä is concerned with the ecological impact of human appropriation of open spaces. Her images depict trees or rocks around which ropes have been tied with careful knots and intricate patterns that both draw attention to the natural form of phenomena and suggest human impact.

Her decision to work in black and white (occasionally in muted color) emphasizes form without being ‘formalist’ in the sense of privileging the construction of the image over the implications of the image content. The intervention draws attention to specific individual characteristics of trees or rocks, here appearing to pose awaiting their portrait. Shapes and connections between like objects, for example, the twin trunks of a tree or the contrasting profiles and scale of rocks, become visible through the addition of the alien binding. The process involves expeditions to locations, researching ropes formed of natural textiles and exploring knots in terms of practical strength and symbolic associations. She then engages in a performance of looking and touching that is ritualistic in carefully weaving and tying the binding prior to making the photograph that will become the symbolic expression of her concerns.

Ilkka Halso, who is also Finnish, likewise explores attitudes to natural phenomena, although his concerns are more overtly socio-political. For the series Restoration, he built fictional shelters to nurture plants and trees, rocks and trees that had been adversely affected by human activity. His use of technical materials to counter
side-effects of our increased reliance on engineered infrastructures is intended as ironic. The aim was to question human confidence in technological solutions, especially given that both industrially produced materials and new digital technologies with invisible wire-less communication systems impact natural ecologies. The large scale of the artificially lit constructions, akin to greenhouses around trees and other phenomena, creates a sense of the monumental, thereby inviting us to think about the extent of the import of technological developments for botanical species.

*Restoration* involved on-site construction. Later series continue to investigate human estrangement from natural phenomena through digital amalgamation techniques, combining landscape photographs with computer-generated 3D modeling. Digital synthesis has facilitated even more ambitious and disorienting stretches of the imagination. The series title *Museum of Nature* suggests the extent to which the geographic and botanic have been appropriated for human purposes. We witness a mass theme park with forests, lakes and rivers artificially ’protected’ from pollution by the very type of urban structure that impacted it initially. Halso’s re-constructions are intended as a massive alert; environment is portrayed as endangered whilst ‘nature’ is presented as a consumerist artifice, a theatrical spectacle to be experienced as a roller-coaster ride through the tree-tops!

Christopher Meerdo likewise questions socio-political implications within contemporary Western culture. He is interested in non-print photographic practices, and defines his approach as ‘hybridized’ (Meerdo, 2017). He deploys photography,
video and installation to investigate invisible data systems, drawing attention to ‘big brother’ aspects of the internet thereby questioning the corporate, military and state power systems behind the democratic veneer of world wide web. He is interested in personal memory and neurological mutability as related to ways in which we negotiate the inter-action of virtual and actual realities, and the mediating role of the photographic within this. Some projects include what appears as on-site construction, but, as with Halso’s recent work, are in fact digital manipulations. For instance, for images constructed in Iceland, 2013, he photographed the landscape from a distant high angle, then inserted lines or shapes derived from high-visibility white material. The effect is to disorient our sense of scale and space as we view a landscape with not quite synthesized elements that glow like ice yet disorient given their limited alignment within the contours of slopes and valleys. Although there is a cross-over in terms of image-construction method, we can distinguish between fabrication in the sense of constructing story-telling scenarios or imaginative fantasies, and the phenomenological concerns implicated in interventions.

**Installation**

In 2001 British photographer, Sian Bonnell undertook an artist residency in the Netherlands that resulted in the series *Putting Hills in Holland*. She
Sensations of Place

Figure 3.9  Sian Bonnell, *Putting Hills in Holland* #14, C-type photograph, 30 × 23.5, 2001

Figure 3.10  Sian Bonnell, *Beachclean* from the series *When the Domestic Meets the Wild*, C-type photograph, 24 × 20, 1999
photographed jelly molds inserted amidst the blades of grass, creating mini-mountains thereby making a humorous point about the flatness of the Netherlands. The absurdist juxtapositions seem lighthearted, but she was also interested in the increasingly artificial approach to agriculture that regiments much of the Dutch landscape.

In earlier work she explored contradictions between the rural and the domestic, for instance, contrasting the artificial colors of kitchen objects such as mops or pan scourers with the softer sensations of open landscapes. The brushes and dusters lined up on the shoreline create a sculptural arch that is simultaneously utterly bizarre yet visually pleasing as we enjoy that fact that, as with photographs of family or friends, they have been organized in terms of height. Conceptually, there is a striking disjunction between the benign seascape captured in the soft daylight typical of romantic painterly images and the intense colors and artificial fabrics of the scullery items that represent our dependence on mass-produced objects.

At first glance American photographer Thomas Jackson’s ‘swarms’ appear similar. In his installations, hyper-saturated plastic colors likewise stand out playfully against the more integrated tones and light of rural settings. He views his approach as an experiment in shifting visual significance through relocating consumer objects within the landscape. Initially his intention was to use items found on site to create sculptures in their original setting, building on site rather than operating through insertion of alien objects. Jackson states,

The hovering installations featured in this ongoing series of photographs are inspired by self-organizing, ‘emergent’ systems in nature such as termite mounds, swarming locusts, schooling fish and flocking birds. The images attempt to tap the mixture of fear and fascination that those phenomena tend to evoke, while creating an uneasy interplay between the natural and the manufactured and the real and the imaginary.

(Jackson, 2017, n.p.)

By contrast with Bonnell, he emphasizes the two-way dynamic of the interaction between object and environment; his work suggests both that the objects adjust our sensation of place and the rural re-orient our response to the objects. That the act of installation may draw attention to the extent to which we invest the landscape with romantic sentiment is perhaps reflected in the fact that the series was reviewed in Beautiful Decay (Ackay, 2015). Conversely the behavior of objects, especially when viewed on video swaying in the breeze, regenerates very ordinary everyday mass-produced items as poetic elements responding to their new setting in some cascade of visual and mobile rhythm and disorder as we adjust to glow sticks as fireflies or wonder at a swarm of paper cups. His work might also be interpreted in terms of environmental awareness; throwaway cups, dropped metal paperclips and burst balloons add to contamination and pollution.

Bonnell and Jackson are asking questions about our interaction with the environment. Installation strategies may also be used to investigate phenomena in
themselves. Myoung Ho Lee, from South Korea, has been photographing trees for ten years. He studies each tree through the four seasons before portraying it against a white canvas backdrop, with the support structure digitally airbrushed out, so that it appears to hover behind the tree, which is isolated like a botanical specimen. The process involves canvases approximately $60 \times 45$ feet and a production crew and cranes, a scale of construction more akin to cinema, theatre or opera that the subsequent prints downplay. Perspective is interrupted; we cannot look beyond the tree. The use of the backdrop recalls anthropological photographs wherein people were photographed front on and side view like botanical or biological specimens. The artist is using the artifice to emphasize the physical presence and beauty of each tree; although they seem flattened, no longer three-dimensional, they draw attention to form and detail within our environment.

**Slow Photography**

Artists alter environments through fabrication, intervention or installation, deploying aesthetic strategies and rhetorical references to suggest that which lies beyond visual evidence, in order to invoke sensations of place that invite us to think beyond that which we see. Altering environments suggests first, that photographers are reflecting on some aspect of their experience of place and second, that their imagery is pre-conceptualized. Pictures made through fabrication, intervention or installation involve a considered approach including experimenting in construction strategies.

The politics of place are always more complex than that which is manifest visually and therefore can be shown visually. Cultural histories and systems of power and influence may be indicated symbolically or discussed verbally but are not easily captured in a single literal photograph. Hence artists have adopted various means of altering environments, playing with the nuances and connotations of perceived structure and order through fabricating stories or fantasies, drawing attention to natural form through physical intervention or creating installations that variously draw attention the inter-relation of humankind and environment.

**Notes**

1 Contemporary environmentalists generally argue that human culture has impacted the physical world to such an extent that it no longer makes sense to talk of, for example, culture and nature, as if these are separate spheres with their own discrete ecologies. Rather we should question the extent to which cultural developments have both responded to and irreversibly impacted geology, geography and the botanical.

2 These categories have been identified for the purposes of discussion here, but they should not be seen as discrete groupings; there are overlaps in terms of work processes and tactics as well as intention and meaning.
Bibliography


Sensations of Place

Single Artist Spotlights

Adam Ekberg

For the past decade, Ekberg has photographed carefully constructed scenes that seem totally implausible. On medium- and large-format film, he documents absurd moments such as a magically lit disco ball hanging from a bare tree in an isolated forest, a flaming aerosol can in an empty orchard, a stoic vacuum cleaner sitting in an arctic landscape. In addition to these convoluted set-ups, Ekberg also records moments that are exceedingly fleeting: cigarette smoke hanging above the kitchen table, a soap bubble resting on grass, a pineapple joyfully vaulted into the sky.

These moments are playful. Candles, sparklers, balloons, euphoric bursts of air, liquid, and light all mark Ekberg’s body of work. And yet, if Ekberg’s photographs are a time of play and celebration, sadly no one came to the party. On the surface, Ekberg’s images contain moments of elation, but empty spaces devoid of company abound. Absence feels ever more painful by the conspicuousness of Ekberg’s own complex and fragile staging. Without a visible human figure, only the solitary camera bears witness. In place of cheer, a persistent loneliness lingers.

A theme of death persists in Ekberg’s larger body of work. Shortly before Ekberg attended the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, he produced a series of photographs of empty interiors of funeral homes, prompted by his experience working with the terminally ill. “I realized death was a moment you could not represent,” Ekberg has reflected, “and any effort to do so literally was problematic for me.” It begs asking, are Ekberg’s recent photographs instances of festivity, or do they anticipate the last, dying breath of the object? The moment just before the balloon loses its final ounce of helium? The moment before the spark burns out? The moment before the last bubble bursts?

Margaret Hankel
Sensations of Place

Figure 3.11  Adam Ekberg, *A Disco Ball on the Mountain*, archival pigment print, 40 × 30, 2005. Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York

Figure 3.12  Adam Ekberg, *An Aerosol Container in an Abandoned Peach Orchard*, archival pigment print, 50 × 40, 2012. Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York
Figure 3.13  Adam Ekberg, *Vacuum on a Frozen Lake*, archival pigment print, 50 × 40, 2005. Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York.

Noémie Goudal

Noémie Goudal (b. Paris, 1984) is a French photographer and video artist currently working in both Paris, France and London, England. A graduate of the Royal College of Art in London, she completed her Master’s of Arts in Photography in 2010. Her work has since been exhibited in group and solo exhibitions in museums and galleries around the world, including a solo exhibition at the Foam Museum in Amsterdam in 2015.

Goudal’s body of work skirts the barrier between the earthly and celestial. In the recent series *Observatories* (2013–2014) and *Southern Light Stations* (2015–2016), earth and sky connect in still, quiet spaces that are as beautiful as they are enigmatic. In *Observatories*, structures made of materials resembling stone or concrete stand amidst empty fields or still bodies of water. Resembling ancient pyramids or planetariums, these towers appear ruinous and neglected, overtaken by the natural elements. In *Southern Light Stations*, moon-like discs of clouds, stars, or smoke hang suspended above an isolated land- or seascape. Goudal’s constructions are mysterious, but incite curiosity. Despite the landscapes being uninhabitable, the shallow foreground of these prints—be it stone, sand, snow, or water—beckons the viewer to enter the space.

With references to science, linear perspective, and observation, Goudal confuses the empirical world with the metaphysical one, seamlessly blending the real with the abstract. Shooting with film, Goudal first constructs her disks and towers out of paper print-outs before photographing them on location. Evidence of these fragile constructions can be found in the details: cables that support the disks of *Southern Light Stations*, seams that bind together the paper and wood constructed observatories. What feels heavy and enduring in *Observatories* and *Southern Light Stations* is actually quite light and impermanent. But Goudal’s mission does not seem to be deception. The result of her fabrications is something otherworldly and sublime; in fusing the surreal with the earthen, Goudal creates an alternative reality defined by a haunting ambiguity.

*Margaret Hankel*
Figure 3.15  Noémie Goudal, Observatoires – Observatoire IX, Lambda print on Baryta paper, 47.25 × 59, 2014
Figure 3.16  Noémie Goudal, *Observatoires – Observatoire VI*, Lambda print on Baryta paper, 47.25 × 59, 2013

Figure 3.17  Noémie Goudal, *Southern Light Stations - Station I*, lightjet print, 87.8 × 66.1, 2015
Figure 3.18  Noémie Goudal, *Southern Light Stations - Station VI*, lightjet print, 84.25 × 66.1, 2015
Matt Siber

Matt Siber is an American photographer currently living and working in Chicago, Illinois. Siber earned his Master’s of Fine Arts in Photography at Columbia College Chicago in 2006. His photographs have been exhibited in galleries and museums around the world and belong in the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago and Museum of Contemporary Photography.

Siber’s work of the last fifteen years investigates the proliferation of advertisement and text in public spaces. In Series I and II of Floating Logos (2003–2008), Siber digitally removes the supportive structure of large, corporate signs as they appear, like monuments, along highways and roads of the rural Midwest. Without poles for support, logos float like mystical icons, connecting commodity to landscape. Fluorescent signs like “McDonalds” and “Denny’s” glisten and sparkle, while other billboards like “Cheese” and “Jesus” loom. While the structure of the signs is conspicuously absent, the seamlessness of Siber’s digital alterations ironically elicited inquiries to the artist from companies seeking to have their own “floating logos” manufactured. (Respectfully, he declined).1

Produced simultaneously to Floating Logos, Siber’s eight-year series, The Untitled Project (2002–2010), digitally alters urban and suburban environments by removing text as it appears on advertisements, signs, and billboards. The Untitled Project is presented two-fold: the cityscape, followed by a recto print of the alienated text, converted to black and kept in the same location as it appeared in the original image. What is left in the photograph is a strange and decorative world devoid of written language. Siber removes the ability to “read” in the conventional sense, but his photographs retain the world of visual language, signs, and symbols. Some remain recognizable, whereas others appear entirely transformed. Road signs on expressway become flat green rectangles with symbolic blue shields and arrows, while billboards become murals of abstract color-field painting.

While Siber’s fascination with landscape and text immediately calls to mind the work of Walker Evans, his digital interventions completely undermine the notion of the straight, documentary photograph. Despite heavy digital alterations, however, it is curious to observe what meaning is retained through the restructuring of information. By transforming landscapes, Siber demonstrates the degree to which society itself has transformed the world into one marked by consumption and advertising.

Margaret Hankel

Notes

Sensations of Place

Figure 3.19 Matt Siber, *Denny’s*, archival inkjet print, 32 × 40, 2005
Figure 3.20  Matt Siber, Cheese, archival inkjet print, 50 × 40, 2006

Figure 3.21  Matt Siber, Untitled #19, archival inkjet print, 50 × 40 each, 2003
Sensations of Place

Figure 3.22  Matt Siber, Untitled #14, archival inkjet print, 50 × 40 each, 2003
Interviews

Laurent Millet in Conversation with Kelly K. Jones

Jones: How did you arrive at your practice of building things to then photograph them?

Millet: It seemed to me that a making a photograph was not enough. I had the feeling that I need to build the world I was going to photograph in order to believe in these images.

The pleasure of making things involves a lot of different experiences, contexts, knowledge. It is like living different lives. Photography and cinema are impure by essence, they absorb everything, I knew I could stand on them to link all these different lives I was going to live.

Jones: Are these photographs proof or documentation of a performance?

Millet: As Duane Michals writes, “this photograph is my proof”. But for others, these photographs are quite autonomous from the moment and space where they were conceived. The performance serves the image.

Jones: Often, you photograph yourself interacting with your installations. Are these to be considered self-portraits?

Millet: I often consider my constructions as self-portraits more than my physical presence which is more a convenient way to action things. In some cases, I am putting myself in the skin of another person.


Millet: It is a kind of fiction allowed by the use of photographic images, in which time and space are “out of joint” (Hamlet). To build a small world of mine I need to endorse different jobs, or identities. The work is everything you say but serving the goal of building and image. What is important is that images are a matter of imagination.

Derrida was talking about the cinema as an art of ghosts …

Jones: What are some of your inspirations? What artists, writers, poets have had great impact on your way of thinking or making?


Jones: Is the wire to become human or is the human (you) to become the wire or are you both becoming a drawing?

Millet: We both become part of a photogenic drawing.

Jones: Your work serves to challenge our understanding of two-dimensional photographic space. Can you talk about your work on the principle of perception?
Millet: I like to get the viewer into the image by some sort of seduction, a dysfunctional illusion of space and time. Which is what a good image is always for me.

Jones: Are you a magician or scientist?

Millet: The tricks are well known by the public, and I like to show them explicitly, but yes magician. Or, maybe something close to the shaman, as any photographer is connecting us with absent entities.

Jones: Talk through, if you would, your process. There is very clear method to your practice and yet the work is quite poetic. How much of your practice is play or improvisation?

Millet: There are too many expectations, so the play is difficult. But improvisations, yes. They are combined with tension, with the lack of preparation, with the surprises found on the site of the shooting. I always find something more than I was able to conceive at first. I improvise because I am overwhelmed by the potency of things surrounding me. If I don’t improvise, there is no way I can do what I want.

Jones: Is anything lost or damaged when your three-dimensional installations are translated into two-dimensional images?

Millet: Sometimes by mistake, but most of the time no, this change of state is just a question of optical point of view.

Jones: You are working in a very “analog” or “low tech” way. What does this method offer that high-tech does not?

Millet: The history of photography is so rich with different methods for recording reality. Each one of them involves a different relationship with this reality, and produces a different recording of it through the lack and strengths of process. I use each process for its peculiar relationship with reality.

Furthermore, there is a vertigo coming from the use of the numerous chemicals contained in the photographic processes. It is like a reduction of the substances contained in the world, I make an image with metal, with part of an animal, part of a plant. The nature participates actively to the elaboration of the picture.

Jones: Are the visual traps (in Je croyais voir un piège/I thought I saw a trap) built to ensnare the viewer or the artist?

Millet: Both!

Jones: I read many of these works as steps in a larger experiment or investigation. Are you or the works pursuing a singular answer?

Millet: Not exactly. There is something close in my mind from the Flaubert novel, Bouvard and Pecuchet. Fields of knowledge bring excitation. A belief that knowledge can bring us to a new life but at the same time the mind so curious is unable to handle properly the science he wishes to master and everything fails each time.

So, this is the repeated and different story of illusionistic relationship with life and representation because too much based on images and not enough on judgment.
Jones: You have mentioned the influence that Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* and the “concept of refuge” has had on you. Are you creating a refuge in your work?

Millet: Maybe, but not with the regressive aspect that the term implies. Bachelard says the refuge brings enough comfort, security, with oneself, that it allows to actively expand the dreamery within the world, and invent new poetic associations.

The refuge he talks about is a place where one can reconciles with oneself and the world.

Figure 3.23  Laurent Millet, *Somnium*, photography, 2015
Figure 3.24  Laurent Millet, *Please hold the line*, photography, 2008

Figure 3.25  Laurent Millet, *Je croyais voir un piège*, photography, 2012
Sensations of Place

Thomas Jackson in Conversation with Kelly K. Jones

Jones: While there is certainly tension between the natural and the manmade in your work, there is also a tension in and around process. Can you speak to this deliberation between “retouched image” and “real time image”?

Jackson: When I started out doing the sculptural work, it was a foregone conclusion that retouching would be a part of the process. Since the images I was envisioning were so outlandishly fictional, I couldn’t see how else to create them. Stage one of the process would be to build and photograph a piece on location, but the magic wouldn’t really happen until I’d scanned the film and digitally removed the stands, strings and other supports holding the sculptures aloft. If I didn’t like the placement of certain elements, I would simply move them around, or erase them altogether.

I was pleased with the initial results of this approach, until I started showing the images around and everyone seemed to say the same annoying thing: “Is it real?” Some people’s enthusiasm would deflate slightly when I told them the truth, others wouldn’t care one bit, but either way, the question alone—and the confusion it revealed—made me realize I’d tapped into something intriguing about how people were processing the images. That struck me as a rich vein to mine, and what better way to do so than to make images that, at first blush, appear manipulated, but upon closer inspection are nothing of the sort. After the third or fourth image in the Emergent Behavior series, I set out to create new work that was free of digital manipulation. It took a lot of trial and error, but after about a year of incremental progress I got there.

Jones: In a previous life you edited and reviewed books. Was there a particular book (or author) that influenced your move to pick up the camera or your Emergent Behavior series?

Jackson: For a number of years I edited the book review section for a magazine in New York. While the focus was on non-fiction and literature, the section always opened with a lavish picture book of some description. Amidst the architecture, home design and fashion titles that crossed my desk, it was the photography books that grabbed my attention.

I loved the scale and lavish detail of Andrew Moore’s Russia and Robert Polidori’s Pripyat and Chernobyl. Gregory Crewdson’s Beneath the Roses turned me onto staged photography.

Edward Burtynsky’s Manufactured Landscapes was particularly exciting. I was thrilled by the way he could force the viewer into the uncomfortable position of finding beauty in scenes of environmental degradation.

Andy Goldsworthy was big too, as was Vic Muniz. It’s funny that most of the photographers I’m drawn to are men; I hope that’s tempered by the fact that many of my favorite sculptors and installation artists are women: Tara Donovan, Monica Grzymala, Cornelia Parker and Janet Echelman among them.

Jones: Did your previous editing experience influence any particular series or ideas about images? Is there a particular book or author of great influence to you?
Jackson: For some reason I’ve always felt drawn to humor writers and satirists of the early to mid-20th century: James Thurber, E.B. White, Ring Lardner, Evelyn Waugh and the like. I’ve always revered those guys for the way they addressed matters of the utmost seriousness—love, war, sex, death—in refreshingly unserious ways. I’ve tried to carry a similar spirit of thoughtful absurdity into my own work as much as possible.

Jones: Are you really a sculptor (vs. a photographer)?

Jackson: I’m a bit confused about that myself. Either I’m a sculptor who uses a camera or a photographer who uses sculpture.

Jones: There is both beauty and an anxiety in your current work. What do you find so striking about this pairing of fear and enchantment? Is this connected to the sublime?

Jackson: I feel a strong affinity for Romantic-era painters, and I share their reverence for the awesome power of nature, as well as their ambivalence towards industrialization, commodification and other byproducts of modernity.

If W.M. Turner, Caspar David Friedrich et al were alarmed by the rapid changes occurring in the early 19th century, one can only imagine what they’d think of the world today. The absurdity of pink plastic cups and bright orange cheese balls would probably render them speechless.

In a way that’s the crux of what I’m trying to do with these images. I want to juxtapose the sublime with the lowliest, manufactured junk that permeates our world today. I’m not a luddite by any stretch, but I do want to point out that perhaps human progress isn’t everything it’s chalked up to be. I’m questioning whether our gains justify our losses.

Jones: How do you choose what “manufactured” objects to work with? Are you making a statement about consumerism or expressing environmental concerns? Or, is this all about formal attributes?

I suppose what I’m asking is: are you interested in the nature of the material that you photograph or in the way the viewer recognizes the material in the photograph?

Jackson: All of the above.

I am certainly addressing consumerism and environmental concern, but from a satirical perspective more than a didactic one. I am picking out objects that I find to be the silliest, tackiest representations of our consumer culture, and imbuing them with an inexplicable collective intelligence. A red thread that runs through all my work is the growing divide, as I see it, between ourselves and nature.

We revere the outdoors, we love to go frolic about in it, and we profit mightily from its resources, but we don’t really see ourselves as part of it. To me, all that cheap manufactured stuff is emblematic of that disconnect.

As to the nature of each material, I try to pick things that are very set in their meanings as cultural objects—paper plates, marshmallows, post-it notes, etc.—which enhances the impact of thrusting them into absurdly out-of-context situations. The real fun comes in imagining how each material would behave as
Sensations of Place

a living thing. Obviously plastic party cups would fly aerodynamically, tapered end forward, and it goes without saying that tasty little cheese balls would cluster around trees for safety, right? Makes perfect sense to me.

**Jones:** Can you talk about the process of constructing and installing these sculptures? What does your timeline and process look like?

**Jackson:** Most of my shoots are daylong affairs. I’ll start as early in the morning as possible, and try to be finished by early evening. If I can I’ll build the installation in such a way that the components can be moved around on their monofilaments, like clothes on a clothesline. That way it’s easy to make last minute adjustments. The photography stage is actually quite brief. I usually shoot in the gloaming, when the sun has dipped below the horizon but there’s still ambient light. Sometimes I’ll use strobes to enhance the dimensionality and color, unless I’m shooting in the wind, in which case I’ll rely on available light alone.

**Jones:** How much of this is improvisation or performance in the field?

**Jackson:** I’ve tried, on numerous occasions, to map out images in advance. I’ll visit the locations multiple times, take lots of snapshots then make sketches of how the installations will look. Once I’m in the field, however, things tend to become fluid. Variables like wind, unexpectedly high tides and other natural forces can come into play. But the bottom line is I’ll never know how a piece will interact with its environment until I’m standing there looking at it. Consequently, I usually emerge from a shoot with a very different result than that which I originally envisioned, which is probably the way it should be.

As Cindy Sherman said, “If I knew what a picture was going to be like I wouldn’t make it.”

**Jones:** Do you have a team that you work with when you’re on site?

**Jackson:** Starting out I always worked alone, but nowadays I usually bring in help. The assistants I work with have two primary roles. The first is to help me build and photograph the sculptures, which can be a frenetic, repetitive and physically demanding process. The second is to kindly but firmly tell me to stop whining and get back to work when I inevitably decide, halfway through the construction process, that the whole thing is a waste of time and that we’d probably be better off cutting our losses and going home. I believe every artist knows that feeling very well.

**Jones:** I find the backgrounds of your images to be just as dynamic as the installations. How does a specific sculptural object connect to a specific background?

**Jackson:** I look for landscapes with features the installations can play off of: intriguingly shaped trees, stream beds, sloping hillsides, far off horizons, etc. More often than not the landscape comes first, mainly because finding a location and securing permission to shoot there can be challenging. Once that’s locked in, I settle on the material that seems to click, which can be based on color, shape, or how I expect it to react to environmental conditions. The ultimate goal is for the piece to be simultaneously in harmony and in conflict with its environment.
**Jones:** You’ve spoken about how you’ve selected some of the sculptural objects … but I’m also interested in your sites. The background, if you will. How do you select and gain access to these landscapes?

**Jackson:** Getting permission to create my pieces, which usually involves building a lot of off camera infrastructure, can be difficult.

The beach is easy, because local and state permitting agencies tend to not care about people driving poles and stakes into the sand. Things get trickier when you go up into the trees.

Ideally I like to shoot on private property. On a few occasions I’ve gone rogue and done shoots on government land without permission, in the desert or in the mountains. To do so is to flirt with the possibility I’ll put hours into a piece only to be shooed off by a park ranger, but that has yet to happen. Sometime my shoots fail on their own, however. Late last year I drove 6 hours to a remote location in the desert, where I attempted to create a sculpture out of helium-filled, reflective mylar balloons, à la Anish Kapoor. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong. Despite being attached to long monofilaments, strong winds kept forcing the balloons to the ground, where they bounced merrily against tiny thorns embedded in the desert floor. The drive home that night was very long.

**Jones:** Do people ever get confused by your work or misinterpret your intentions?

**Jackson:** Often times people will interpret the work in a very literal or simplistic way, or they’ll mold it to specific concerns of their own. When I was making “Take Out Containers no. 1” on a beach near San Francisco, a passing lady asked, “Is this about all the garbage floating around in the Pacific?” But with equal frequently someone will articulate my intentions with far more eloquence than I’m capable of myself. So it all evens out in the end.

**Jones:** You talk about Photoshop as if it’s an addiction. Why the love/hate?

**Jackson:** There’s a lot of amazing photography out there that relies on digital manipulation. The distinction that needs to be made, in my opinion, is whether the digital component is integral to the work or not.

If you take the images of Loretta Lux or Simen Johan or Anthony Goicoleia, the answer is clearly yes, but I decided that when it comes to what I do, the argument wasn’t there.

In short, I concluded, if these things could be made in the real world, then they absolutely should be. Which is not to say that I don’t slip from time to time, and succumb to the urge to erase a distracting monofilament, or relocate an errant marshmallow. Photoshop gives you god-like power over your images, and the temptation to use it can be strong. But for me to do so is to remove the process of actually making the images from view, which runs counter to how I want the work to be experienced. Each piece is meant to have its own denouement. From viewing distance, it might look inexplicable and quite possibly “fake,” but step closer and it begins to reveal its secrets; a ghostly line of string here, a wire there, etc.
In a way I’m leaving a trail of breadcrumbs for the inquisitive viewer to follow. The irony is that my work, to a large degree, was born from Photoshop, which makes it feel all the more poetic to leave it behind.

**Jones:** Why so clean and seamless? Are you trying to fool us or prove a point about Photoshop?

**Jackson:** The short answer is yes, I am trying to fool you.

By the same token, I am trying to make images that demand closer inspection. I want to figure out what a person’s snap judgment will be, then force them to come to the opposite conclusion.

**Jones:** Let’s push past the visuals of swarming for a moment and dive deeper into the psychology. The “swarm intelligence” (a “spontaneous intelligence” where diversity of thought or knowledge produces higher aptitude than is possible from individual) and “swarm behavior” (a kind of “groupthink” where the swarm mimics to avoid collision and align with the whole). Can you talk about this related to your work?

**Jackson:** I have some video projects in the works that touch on these topics, but up to now my interest in swarms has focused less on the science, and more on how we perceive them viscerally. To me they’re a perfect metaphor for our complicated relationship with nature. They are beautiful, yet discomfiting. They exemplify the uncanny as Freud defined it: mysterious, yet strangely familiar. It’s their ineffable quality that I find irresistible.

**Jones:** Swarming has obviously hugely influenced and inspired you, but I also see something of gravity and even dark matter in your work (especially given your previous series related to science fiction). Can you talk about this?

**Jackson:** I modeled a whole series, entitled “Nebulae,” after Hubble Telescope imagery. The goal was to replicate massive interstellar gas and dust clouds (aka nebulae) with backyard smoke bombs. A number of the *Emergent Behavior* images are inspired by outer space as well, namely “Marshmallows no. 1” and “Cups no. 2,” which, to my delight, was once described as a “frat party being sucked into a black hole.” Dark matter appeals to me for a lot of the same reasons I’m drawn to swarms, in that it’s little understood and hard to quantify. I’m particularly interested in a phenomenon called gravitational lensing, in which light traveling through space is bent by the pull of gravity. On occasion I’ve achieved an approximation of that effect (visually, I mean) by shooting long exposures in high wind, which warps and distorts the installations in intriguing ways, often making them appear larger than they actually are.

**Jones:** Surely you’ve run into hikers, campers, hunters – perhaps animals – while on site constructing and photographing. Any strange encounters?

**Jackson:** I’ve seen a lot of wildlife out there: coyote, flying squirrels, eagles and more. When I was constructing *Tutus no. 1*, a pod of whales swam so close to shore I thought I was about to witness one of those mysterious beaching events. As for people, they always want to know what the heck I’m doing, in which case I send my assistant to talk to them because dammit, I’m busy.
Figure 3.26  Thomas Jackson, *Cups no. 3*, archival pigment print, 38 × 30, 2014

Figure 3.27  Thomas Jackson, *Tutus no. 1*, archival pigment print, 38 × 30, 2015
Figure 3.28  Thomas Jackson, *Glow Sticks no. 1*, archival pigment print, 38 × 30, 2012