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The New Global Topographers

A Generation of Photographers Documents a Changing Planet

by Lyle Rexer

David Maisel, *Terminal Mirage #236-1*, C-print (48 x 48 in.), 2005. Courtesy the artist and Von Lintel Gallery, New York

We're up in an airplane over Mexico City with Melanie Smith, who is shooting photographs and video of the vast smoggy sprawl that stretches to the horizon. The view is vertiginous, terrifying. We are at Guantanamo Bay with Jason Oddy, photographing the barbed-wire and chain-link fences that divide freedom from its enemies. We're in China with Edward Burtynsky, watching a new world take shape literally overnight in factories, shipyards, urban construction sites. We're inside the corporate boardrooms of global capitalism with Jacqueline Hassink, photographing the furniture as a clue to the organization of power and its presentation.

These are the new global topographers. Smith, Oddy, Burtynsky, Hassink, and a growing number of other artists, including David Maisel and Michael Wolf, are traveling the world to bring back views not of the unknown but of the all too-familiar: the proliferating structures of a civilizing world that are rapidly changing the planet as we know it. Their gaze is dispassionate but their engagements—political and environmental—are uncompromising. "I want to convey a sense of place," says Oddy, "and this may lead people to think about the underlying forces and systems that result in such places."

For Smith, Maisel, and Burtynsky, the hand of man is visible everywhere. Smith, a young English woman living in Mexico City who works in photography, video, and sculpture, went above the smog line to shoot the video *Spiral City* as a

way of dramatizing a world in which, as she puts it, "all the real is just hard-core raw material." She also shot aerial photographs of the city's poorest neighborhoods, to anchor her dizzying vision in the concrete conditions of poverty and exploitation. In contrast, Maisel seduces us into fear and loathing with beautiful aerial photographs of places such as the Great Salt Lake under environmental stress. In his patterned, abstract-expressionist maps of destruction, there is nary a building to be seen, and from this distance the end of the world never looked so good.

Burtynsky confronts the man-made world more directly but no less seductively. Early in his career, he revealed the topography of waste on which our industrialized world is perched in photographs of mountains of used tires and compressed scrap metal. His work has inspired a host of imitators, whose techno-apocalypses include everything from piles of cell phones to endless auto junkyards. His recent photographs from China take us into the process of production, into regimented factories full of uniformly clad workers, into shipyards forging hulls of unimaginable size, and to the Yangtze gorges, where dams are wiping out a dozen cities and remaking an entire region.

The new global topographers owe a clear debt to a group of American photographers of the 1970s dubbed the "new topographers"—Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and others who documented a changing America. But the more immediate connection is to the artists of the Düsseldorf Art Academy, including Bernd and Hilla Becher and their students: Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, and Thomas Demand. It's not an overstatement to call them the inaugurators of global topography.

The Bechers' deadpan catalogues of industrial structures, including water towers and factories, are imbued with a sense of estrangement and vague disquiet that prefigures many of the newer artists' work. In Gursky's mural-size landscape photographs of highway bridges and other ubiquitous edifices, the isolation is palpable. He often heightens visual disequilibrium through digital manipulation of scale and proportion, and has become increasingly preoccupied with perceptual ambiguities. Struth remains more epistemologically anchored, engaging sites such as Shanghai as much for their historical importance as for their spectacle. Beneath his patient gaze, however, Shanghai loses its particularity. We have a sense that we could be anywhere in the world, and that all places will eventually be the same place. Demand's photographs are often of places with historical importance (the courtroom at the Hague where Slobodan Milosevic is on trial, the tunnel where Dodie Al-Fayed and Princess Di died in a car crash), but rather than photographing the actual locales, he shoots featureless mock-ups of them. He turns photography's particularity against itself, providing detailed images of what are becoming fuzzy generic cultural memories.

Behind the suspicion that every place is becoming the same is the anxiety about where this transformation of the world will leave us. That anxiety has driven Oddy and others to seek out those places where decisions about our collective future are made, places that reflect our desire to impose order and exercise power. Oddy, who is influenced as much by French philosopher Michel Foucault as by the Düsseldorfers, has taken pristine photographs of the Pentagon's corridors, meeting rooms at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva, the self-enclosed world of the U.S. military base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and the empty streets of Playas, New Mexico, a desert town built for copper mining in the 1970s and now used for training exercises by the Department of Homeland Security. Yet his photographs are anything but didactic. His series on Soviet-era workers' spas built on the Black Sea, for example, poignantly shows the fate of an aparatchik's paradise. The huge, brutal buildings that once rewarded the New Soviet Man with some R and R are now deserted or uncomfortably adapted to commercial clients.

While it is true, as Oddy has remarked, that the photographic facts of a place are incontrovertible, the global topographers show us again and again that the meaning of those facts is ambiguous. Whatever their explicit attitudes, their images often refuse to be put into service against power and proliferation. Wolf's photographs of Hong Kong apartment buildings, for instance, show us urban life as a vast beehive,

but these friezes of vertical geometry are also weirdly thrilling. It's impossible not to be impressed by their symmetry and scope.

Even the notion of power itself may become a double-edged sword, politically ambiguous in the camera's objective gaze. The topography of New York-based Dutch artist Jacqueline Hassink is the interior landscape of global capitalism's corporate board rooms. In the world after Enron and Worldcom, we think we know what such places represent, how they express and conceal power through materials, colors, and architectural layouts. But in her series "Queen Bees: Female Power Stations," she turns the expectations upside down by pairing images of the conference tables and dining-room tables of Fortune 500 female executives. Interpretation becomes especially complex when she focuses on Arab businesswomen. What might have been read in a Western context as an indictment of the rigidifying power of multinational corporate norms becomes a meditation on the changing status of women in Arab society.

Photographers have always been globetrotters, harvesting views wherever they went. Think of Francis Frith, Felice Beato, Félix Teynard, and a hundred other Europeans who went to Egypt and points east during the nineteenth-century. Although many of these photographers documented the wonders of the natural world, they were cataloguers of the built world, too. Propelled by ambitious public projects, French photographers documented the bridges and public works of their own country and recorded the architectural transformation of Paris—a genre that reached its zenith with Atget's nearly street-by-street x-rays of Paris. The difference now is that the earth is a much smaller place. Where photography once showed us an expansive and exotic world, it now shows how quickly it is shrinking, and how similar it is becoming.

We will never recover the sense of boundless expanse—and visual innocence—that the world once held, yet, as many of the global topographers demonstrate, the built environment can still be an arena for beauty, if not for optimism. One of Oddy's current projects, "Sphere," has taken him around the world to photograph spherical structures, from planetariums to expo pavilions to nuclear reactors. In different ways, each one posits an escape route out of the maze of the man-made world. Each one adumbrates a utopia, and the perfection of a circle is its symbol. The photographs become not elegies for lost illusions but tentative celebrations of a spirit that might yet make the future possible.

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