



Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife Field Office
Brooks Dierdorff, Corvallis, Oregon, 2015, Inkjet Print, 24" x 36"

the aesthetics of eden

Brooks Dierdorff

Assistant Professor, School of Visual Art and Design, University of Central Florida,
brooksdierdorff@ucf.edu

My current research and artistic practice investigates the institutions that shape our ideas of the natural world. I am engaged in a photographic project that documents the interior office spaces of the United States federal and state park systems. Through investigating these seemingly mundane sites, I explore the relationship between idealized versions of nature –an imagined Eden– and the bureaucratic work required to produce and maintain them.

The US federal and state park systems continually strive to return to an idealized state of nature while simultaneously navigating the complex and often conflicting demands of environmental protections, land use priorities, public access, and a lack of funding. All of this labor to maintain and construct this idealized state of nature often takes place within the banal spaces of sparsely decorated offices. It is through my photographs that I seek to make these typically invisible spaces, visible.

Keywords Photography, Architecture, Art, New topographics, Wildlife, Wildlife management, Landscape, Wilderness, United States, State parks, National parks, Offices, Office interiors, Interiors, Bureaucracy, Power, Place

introduction

My current research and artistic practice investigates the institutions that shape our ideas of the natural world. I am engaged in a photographic project that documents the interior office spaces of the United States federal and state park systems. Through investigating these mundane sites, I explore the relationship between idealized versions of nature –an imagined Eden– and the bureaucratic work required to produce and maintain them.



f1_Ohio Department of Natural Resources Field Office

Brooks Dierdorff, 2015, Inkjet Print

The basis for this work comes from my interest in the state and federal park systems in the United States. While researching the state parks in the state of Florida, where I currently live, I learned that the park administrators mandated the year 1513 as the specific moment in history that should serve as the goal for all wildlife management decisions. 1513 was the year that Ponce De Leon landed on the east coast of Florida and this date indicates a point in time at which nature was not yet influenced by non-indigenous people¹. In interviewing rangers at various parks, I was initially struck by their open acknowledgment that this kind of return to the past was an impossible goal; the region's ecology has been impacted irreparably over the past five hundred years while entirely new ecosystems have developed in their place. So it would be neither feasible nor even desirable in some instances to reverse engineer these spaces. So, why then does this particular year continue to guide the mission and daily activities of these institutions? It seemed to me that rather than indexing an achievable return to the actual natural conditions of the region prior to European contact, 1513 served more as a symbolic ideal of an untouched tropical paradise. This type of symbolic ideal is ultimately also connected to a history of images and aesthetics. Edward Casey, author of Getting Into Place, writes:

"Wilderness is the natural world not on view, and especially not for human beings' enjoyment and exploitation. Landscape, on the other hand, is the natural world as collected in coherent clusters and placed on view. The most prominent instances of such collecting and displaying are found in landscape painting and photography, both of which regard landscape as an object of aesthetic enjoyment (196)".

I approach this topic from a background in photography, a media that has played a specific historical role in the framing of nature. As an artist, I am interested in situating my work in relationship to a longer history of artists and images through which nature and the

landscape has been imagined in the United States. Differing from the artists that have worked before me, I photograph the interior office spaces of park managers and employees for the purpose of making visible the spaces of wildlife management and control. It is within these sites that we confront the odd paradox between an idealized and aestheticized nature and the banality of its daily administration. In making these images, I seek to probe this paradox.

At its most idealized, the expectation of visiting a state or national park is one of sublimity and transcendence –linked to the experiences of witnessing nature's grandeur as a distinct visual entity. Not only do parks preserve and protect a given swatch of land, they also frame particular sites as worth seeing and often provide the terms of our visual encounters with nature through various interpretive methods (e.g. trail markers, signs, maps, postcards, scenic overlooks). The managing entities of the park in essence produce a manufactured and highly curated experience of nature for their visitors that has a history rooted in idealized notions of nature and aesthetics. In this paper I will share the conceptual framework of my artwork and expand on the cultural conditions that have produced this relationship between architecture, photography and the natural world.

creation of separate park spaces in the united states

The goals of the state and federal park systems have often mirrored that of the early European explorers seeking a paradise in the Americas. These explorers were often seeking The Garden of Eden when they sailed West from Europe². They sought, potentially, the place written about in the Bible from which human beings had been expelled. They sought a land full of richness, spices, fountains of youth, and natural beauty. They sought an idealized place, just as the Florida State Park officials now seek, like the Garden of Eden described in the Book of Genesis. To these explorers, The Garden of Eden was thought to have existed full-grown from the beginning of time and was seen as a place to discover as well as a place to which they could return. The Garden, being wholly natural and untouched since the expelling of Adam and Eve, was both wilderness and paradise. It would follow that in declaring 1513 as a state of nature to return to, the Florida State Parks also seek to return to a time period where the distinction between a cultivated park and a wilderness are made mute.

It was this vision of wilderness, of an untouched nature, of an Eden, that early European explorers sought out and that the US government sought to preserve in the United States in 1916 when United States president Woodrow Wilson signed into law the formation of the National Park System. The United States was expanding inevitably West and a few forward thinking US citizens and politicians thought it critical that some natural spaces be protected before being irreparably damaged by increasing populations or attempts at privatization. Thus began a significant period in the history of the United States and the beginning of government sponsored land and wildlife management at a national scale.

landscape photography and its relationship to the park system in the united states

In the context of the United States, photography was key to linking an ideal of a sublime natural landscape –dramatic and untouched– to national pride and a robust democratic spirit, shared among all viewers who visited them. Since the 1940s, photographers such as Ansel Adams not only popularized particular “must-see” park sites through his widely circulated images, but also the aesthetic conventions to produce such imagery. In general Adams's photographs follow the same conventions as landscape painters from the late 19th century in that the images combine the celebration and exaggeration of a landscape's aesthetic beauty while simultaneously composing his photographs through a rigidly formal technique. Adams relied extensively on the perfection of technical execution both in exposing the image and in manipulating the print exposure in the darkroom³.



f2_The Tetons and the Snake River (Grand Tetons National Park)
Ansel Adams, 1942, Silver Gelatin Print

For example in the well-known image, "The Tetons and the Snake River" from 1942, the image captures a mountain range and a curving and glistening river under a stormy and dramatic sky. Compositionally the image displays an exceptional formalism in its adherence to the "rule of thirds". If this image were to be divided into thirds both vertically and horizontally, prominent components of the image would line up precisely with those dividing lines and at their intersections. For example the tops of the mountain range align with the upper third dividing line of the image with the sky taking up one third of the image and the land taking up the bottom two thirds. The two bends of the river align exactly with the intersection points of vertical and horizontal dividing lines. As with the landscape painters of the 19th century, this compositional formalism emphasizes specific aspects of the image and leads the viewer's eyes to naturally rest on elements in the photograph placed at these dividing lines. The heightened contrast between black and white is another formal element in the image that accentuates the beauty and dramatic qualities of the landscape. Adams would nearly always accentuate these qualities during the darkroom printing process where he was well known for his expertise and attention to detail⁴. Clouds would be made near black with additional exposure and rivers would be near white. Patches of sunlight were added across fields where none existed in the negative and mountain faces were darkened to near black to contrast against the bright white snow on mountain peaks. Adams, again taking cues from 19th century landscape painters, portrayed the landscape not as it was, but as an idealized version of it. Adams photographed nature as the vision of Eden described in the Book of Genesis.

While being informed by and in some ways indebted to this legacy of landscape photography, my own work, and the especially the photographs of the park office interiors, lies in opposition to this vision of nature put forward by Adams. Instead of emphasizing the aesthetic beauty of the landscape and exaggerating or dramatizing nature for an emotive effect, my work instead focuses on the mundane dramas of park system bureaucracy. On a formal level, I make use of a 'deadpan' documentary style of photography to probe the paradoxes of wildlife management. This choice in approach follows, in part, a lineage begun by US photographers of the New Topographics movement in the 1960's and 70's, that sought to deconstruct the formal and ideological tenets of previous generations of landscape photographers. New Topographics photographers utilized a deadpan aesthetic in the attempt to rid photography of the singular subjective viewpoint, emotionalism, and individualism that they saw as the basis of prior approaches. Instead, they approached landscape as a set of aesthetic conventions to be critically examined and clinically depicted, translating nature's image into a form of information lacking in affect. The deadpan aesthetic puts emphasis on seeing beyond the limitations of an individual perspective and emotionalism and offers a seemingly more objective mode of viewing the world and the landscape⁵.



f3 Park City 19, Subdivision Phase III

Lewis Baltz, 1979, Silver Gelatin Print

The photographer Lewis Baltz was considered at the forefront of the New Topographics movement. Instead of photographing the untouched beauty of the American West, Baltz photographed the American West as a bleak landscape under the assault of human encroachment. For example in the photograph "Park City 19", *Subdivision Phase III*, the epic mountain ranges portrayed in Adam's photographs morph into piles of grey dirt shaped and pushed into place by bulldozers; snaking rivers are transformed into the tracks of absent machinery; and the dramatized layers of black and white storm clouds become a flat and monotone grey. Baltz's formal and compositional techniques, equally practiced and intentional as those of Adam's, are used instead for the purpose of showing a distressed and manipulated landscape. Baltz uses the formal compositional strategies of landscape photographers like Adams, but substitutes emotion for an austere documentation. But the formal banality of Baltz's photographs belie a drama of their own. The landscape is becoming forever changed and Baltz, with an unflinching eye, documents the slow destruction of a once untouched nature. Eden is being bulldozed and a subdivision is being erected.

the aesthetics of eden

Taking cues from the approach of New Topographics like Baltz, my photographs of the interior office spaces of park ranger offices use formal compositional devices for the purpose of accentuating the juxtaposition between an idealized and aestheticized nature and the banality of its daily administration. My work, however, differs from Baltz and other New Topographics photographers in that I am not photographing the result of the human manipulation on the landscape but the source. Instead of a bulldozed Eden on view in the photographs of the New Topographics movement, my images portray an Eden that has been slowly, methodically, and quietly transformed into a highly curated public park. Where the New Topographics photographers transposed nature with affect to nature without affect, I photograph the aesthetics of nature as information displayed in an office interior as a way of thinking about, and making visible, the administrative goals and the labour of managing nature. Most of this labour takes place within the banal spaces of sparsely decorated offices.

These offices are typically located in double-wide trailers scattered off of service roads in austere cinder block buildings flanked by storage and equipment sheds, in the cramped quarters of visitor centers, next to gift shops, information desks, and educational displays. For example at Blue Springs State Park in the state of Florida, the visitors center is at the end of a cleanly paved road near the clear Blue Springs for which it gets its name. The administrative offices, or "field offices", on the other hand lie off a dirt road hidden from the main paved road behind a line of trees. The term field office, for those who don't know,

defines a park office space located within the boundaries of a state or national park. The field office is the local control center, separate and distinct from the visitor center. Field offices, as opposed to the visitor center, are not meant to be seen by the public and are generally utilitarian. The one I visited at Blue Spring State Park was located down a winding road with signs stating only park employees were allowed to enter. When I interviewed one of the rangers there for this project we sat on a picnic bench outside of the small field office building, which was a tan colored doublewide manufactured trailer.

On a fundamental level the field offices offer separation from the external world and from the nature they are helping to shape and present to a public. The offices are often small, but what they lose in space they gain in comfort and security –separated from an often-disordered nature they know they cannot always control. The field offices are a place not occupied by or accessed by nature. It is the symbolic division of nature and culture made physical. The office walls serve as the space between the artless earth and the skillful body. Every office in every building is in this respect a compromised formation: a middle ground between nature and culture⁶. The field office is a place where nature, like the park visitor, is kept out. The dichotomy between nature and culture is maintained and reinforced.

The bureaucratic work performed in the field office seems caught in a paradox: on the one hand, the impossible goal of a return to an untouched nature; on the other hand, the complex and often conflicting demands of environmental protections, land use priorities, public access and accountability, facilities maintenance, field research, and budget restrictions, to name a few of the line items on the agendas of most park employees.



f4_Blue Springs State Park Field Office

Brooks Dierdorff, Orange City, Florida, 2016, Inkjet Print

What becomes clear very quickly when you begin to speak with park employees about their daily work schedules is the amount of administrative work required to produce and maintain the image of nature for visitors. Instead of nature in its wild state, it emerges as an accumulation of information organized according to the logic of a bureaucratic system all performed within the space of a banal office. Instead of Ansel Adams's vision of a glistening river set in front of a winding and glistening river, in my visits to field offices around the United States I experienced an Eden that is located under the fluorescent lights of an office and within the folders, specimen collections, charts, graphs, posters and books. It was in the beige walls, the grey-blue carpet, in the dark brown sheen of the desk veneers and in the patina of the decades old metal file cabinets. What exactly are the aesthetics of a bureaucracy that manages nature and can the logic of a bureaucracy be reflected in its aesthetics? How does the logic and aesthetics of a bureaucracy affect how nature is managed? I photograph the field office interiors with these questions in mind and I see the process of photographing these spaces as my method of visual research.

Through my artwork I have worked to further acknowledge and challenge traditional notions of how human beings relate to nature, all with the intent of exploring what new ideas, contradictions, or insights the work can evoke for a viewer. In accentuating the quotidian realities of office life in the parks, the photographs foreground the paradoxical demands for purity and economic rationality placed on wilderness sites. By looking at nature through sites of land and wildlife management, I seek to move us towards a consideration of the specific quality of work required to produce such a curated nature and how this reflects our past, as well as what this can tell us about our culturally held beliefs moving into the future.

endnotes

1. Angel Gurria-Quintana., "Imagining Eden" *World Policy Journal*, (New York: WPJ, Winter 2015): 6. <http://wpj.dukejournals.org/content/32/4/10.full.pdf>
2. Gurria-Quintana., "Imagining Eden", 10.
3. Beaumont A. Newhall, *The History of Photography*. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 192.
4. Newhall, *The History of Photography*, Op. cit.
5. Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 36.
6. Edward S. Casey, *Getting back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place World* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 112.

bibliography

- _Casey, Edward S. *Getting back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place World*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993.
- _Cotton, Charlotte. *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2004.
- _Gurria-Quintana, Angel. "Imagining Eden". *World Policy Journal*, Winter 2015. <http://wpj.dukejournals.org/content/32/4/10.full.pdf>
- _Newhall, Beaumont. *The History of Photography*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982.

CV

Brooks Dierdorff. Is an artist working in photography, video, sculpture and performance. He has exhibited his work both nationally and internationally at galleries that include Salander O'Reilly in New York; Punch Gallery in Seattle; the Disjecta Interdisciplinary Art Center in Portland; High Desert Test Sites in Joshua Tree, California; Johalla Projects in Chicago; the Ulrike Hamm Gallery in Bissendorf, Germany; and The New Gallery in Calgary, Canada. His work has been written about in publications including Daily Serving, Visual Arts Source, Oregon Arts Watch, and Justice League PDX. For 3 years Dierdorff was co-director of Ditch Projects, an artist-run exhibition space in Springfield, Oregon. He received his BA from the University of California, San Diego in 2007 and his MFA from the University of Oregon in 2012. Currently Dierdorff is Assistant Professor of Photography at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, Florida.