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## Editorial

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## EDITORIAL

This special issue of *Photographies* offers a selection of photographers' responses to the impact of rapid climatic, socio-political and economic change on local landscapes in England, former East Germany, Australia, southern Sinai, and Japan. These articles consider questions of environment, culture and representation. Some were submitted to the journal directly and others are responses to our 2012 specific call for contributions. These articles draw upon historical and contemporary analyses of environmental issues while posing questions about our relationship to place and about the photographic methodologies that might be employed to reflect upon this relation. Overall, this issue asks how photographers, as researchers and practitioners, mediate contemporary land-related issues.

While a number of scholarly studies and photographic projects in recent years have focused on "traumatic landscapes" in relation to the historical past — notably sites of ethnic genocide and population removal — the "open wounds" probed by the photographers in this issue are, by contrast, less preternaturally abhorrent in their formation. With the exception of natural disaster images referenced in one of the essays, the injuries to the landscape, and to the communities inhabiting those landscapes, that are discussed here resulted from a combination of explosive economic transformation, decision-making from distant corporate and governmental offices, and the weakening of local communities' abilities to resist changes imposed from without. For we live in a vastly scaled-up world where critical decisions about whether or not to invest in regional economies, to establish free trade and tourism zones, to quarantine districts for health reasons, are increasingly removed from those who will be most affected by them.

In his essay on media coverage of natural disasters, Dag Petersson notes that "what distinguishes a natural disaster story from one about political turmoil, civil war or industrial disasters is the absence of an active human or social instigator or responsible culprit. There is no one to take a clear stand against". But what the contributors to this issue of *Photographies* make clear is that the same might be said of globalized power arrangements. If a multinational corporation disinvests in a local economy, or if a national ministry of agriculture orders the total destruction of a district's livestock to eradicate a disease outbreak — healthy animals as well as the relatively few infected — how and where do we direct our outrage and our grief? Aren't corporations doing what they are supposed to be doing — maximizing profits through efficient production? Aren't governments doing what they are supposed, in principle, to be doing — overriding local short-term interests for what they view as better supporting the long-term health of the nation and global relations, even if this causes temporary loss? This is not to imply that corporations and governments are benign, nor is it, in some over-simple way, to suggest that the collateral damage to local ecosystems and communities is always trumped by shareholders and central planners. Rather, scenarios are complex; economic interests are often unclear, with stakeholders increasingly operating within complex global socio-political frameworks.

If there is a core question addressed in this special issue, it is this: how have photographic image-makers made their own decisions about what's at stake in representing

particular instances of traumatic landscape transformation? Petersson's discussion of the different dynamics of journalistic media, personal documentary, self-expressive art, and consumer video is apt in this regard. Whether covering natural disasters and their aftermath, or the locally destructive impacts of decisions made in distant boardrooms, courtrooms and ministry chambers, how the events and their outcomes "present themselves" to us is highly differentiated by their degree and type of mediation. All of the essays and photographic projects in this issue evince a range of conscious choices by their makers about modes of (re)presentation and their relative advantages and limitations. The contributors share the belief that well-made photographs can still play a powerful role in giving evidence of historical trauma, though not always in isolation. In several projects, the photographic is extended by the videographic so that the viewer is immersed in the flow of a "present", rather than contemplating a frozen past. No one expressive approach or medium is more effective than the next, but each is tailored quite specifically to the photographer's aims and the particular questions he or she wishes the viewer to engage with.

One of the key issues that cuts across many of the works and essays published here is the question of *time*. Landscapes themselves are time spatialized. While an archaeologist excavates a trench to measure and estimate passage of time at a given site, a photographer or videographer is limited to what can be recorded in a very limited timeframe by the camera apparatus. How does one deploy the reflective surfaces of physical things to point to what happened in the past (and is happening now) in this place? How does one make visible what is not easily seen on the land's topographic surface? How does one make a landscape *speak* of past and present?

Some photographers may bring along their own fully-formed concepts, *a priori*, that indicate to them where to plant their tripods. Others may find themselves in a place where they intuit an uncanny paradox, then do the research, after the fact, to discover more fully what they are sensing. These contrasting approaches are evident in the projects of Mark Curran and Dawn Roe. Curran looks at local landscapes and "sees" the imprint of global capital. Taking his own experience of the rapid economic transformation of his native Ireland as a starting point, Curran seeks out those places where local communities have been traumatized by the forces of global competition, creating social and psychic damage among those left behind. In the *Extracts from EDEN* project, he trains his cameras on the Lausitz, the former "energy heartland" of East Germany, located near the Polish border. After German reunification, local industries that had been protected by the communist state were opened up to global investment or immediately dismantled because they could not compete with cheaper, better products made elsewhere. What resulted were substantial migrations of young people looking for work in the West. Curran focuses on the human fallout from the takeover of the Tagebau, the largest open pit coal mining territory in Europe, by a Swedish energy conglomerate.

As an outsider, Curran adopts the dual roles of translator and ethnographer, making photographs and videos and taking field notes based on interviews in German with native informants. Curran's objective is to "re-present the 'wounded' landscape of the Lausitz". But where is the original wound located? As mining machines scraped away the earth, centuries-old villages were obliterated and their populations relocated. Though population displacement in the region preceded the creation of the GDR in 1949, it is unfolding at an accelerated pace and scale since reunification. It was important for

Curran to research and interview subjects of different generations: those who had memories of the GDR “workers’ utopia” and who witnessed reunification, and those who came of age after 1989 and were shaped by the subsequent devastation of the region.

Starting from the position that still photographs inevitably evoke the past while moving images evoke the present, Curran reflects on his combination of projected still photographs of the disappearing Lausitz (dismantled residential buildings, abandoned industrial sites, mining works) with extended video portraits of the local subjects he interviewed and quoted texts. The projectors are mounted so that viewers cast their shadows on the projected images, disrupting passive spectatorship and becoming involuntary collaborators in this particular drama of capital’s creative destruction. As such, the installation offers a particular experience that differs from the experience of encountering works from the project in other modes such as online or book publication.

In her series *Goldfield Studies*, Dawn Roe also chose diverse photographic and video formats to tell stories about a famous mining region in Victoria, Australia. Like Curran, Roe was an outsider encountering a local landscape that had been the epicentre of one of the largest gold rushes of the 19th century. Goldfields is legendary in the chronicles of Australia’s explosive boomtown growth, much as is Sutter’s Mill in California’s. But the Goldfields Roe encountered in 2011 was a densely forested bush-land punctuated by decaying mining works and shafts. As she researched more of its history, she discovered Aboriginal sites and myths related to the landscape, as the region had been densely populated before English settlement.

In contrast to Curran’s historical materialist framework for interpreting the traumatic history of the Lausitz, Roe embraced her intuitive pleasure in the “palpable intensity” of the “vast empty woodlands” of Goldfields, engaging in self-devised interventions in the landscape to point to its mining and Aboriginal pasts. Roe investigates the Goldfields forest as a site of re-imagining and rewriting; a place to puzzle out the paradox of time and how cultural memories of the past can enrich the poetic perception of the present. In one set of actions, she wraps gold fabric around the shaggy trunks of pine trees and photographs them against a lowering sky. In another, she floats pieces of gold fabric in a dark forest stream where miners once panned for nuggets and flecks. These actions infuse the forested site with connotations of esoteric ritual, creating more questions than delivering answers about what actually happened there. While photographs of the forest alone could lull a viewer into nature’s timeless reverie, the “clunky” (Roe’s adjective) gold wrapping disrupts that seamless fantasy with its anti-aesthetic and awkward presence. Unlike Curran, Roe has no particular investment in Goldfields as a historically contested place, but uses it as an occasion to reflect on “the discrepancies between space as experienced in the past, and as represented in the present”.

Like Curran, Roe augments the photographic documentation of *Goldfield Studies* with video and sound installation. In a darkened space, three screens on different walls show slow pans of the same forest landscapes frozen in the stills while the audio track plays ambient sounds of the wind and birdcalls. The video triptych gives the sense of time as flow, as continuous unfolding in the present tense through duration and repetition. Roe draws on Hollis Frampton’s notion of “infinite cinema”, where photographic stills are fragments excised from an infinite flow of “all the appearances of the world”. Similarly to Curran, Roe asserts the notion that the still is a fixed, stable artefact of the past that can be held and possessed, “whereas the moving image simultaneously presses

together past and present, continually replacing one for the other". Roe is intrigued by the notion of time in the photographic still as magical time, the time of mythic or religious ritual and eternal nature.

Mythical associations along with perceptions of beauty are, of course, culturally specific (Burke and Kant both associated beauty with taste). Within Western philosophic traditions beauty has been associated with that which is managed or manageable, literally and/or conceptually, whereas the sublime has been associated with that which seemingly lies beyond our control, whether melting glaciers in the Arctic or billowing clouds above the oceans. Whilst the earth operates within a planetary system that has its own momentum beyond our full comprehension, we are simultaneously aware that human action impacts upon planetary ecosystems.

The title of Nicholas Hughes' series, "Aspects of Cosmological Indifference", reminds us precisely of our relative insignificance within a much larger system. Indeed, through these Turner-esque skylscapes, in fact made in a scanner, Hughes questions aesthetic perceptions and existential responses to the notion of cosmos. The imagery mimics the sublime hues of the sky in different weather and seasonal conditions, whilst the photographer keeps a watchful (ethical) eye on his own environmental footprint. At one level, the project may be viewed as responding to our relative insignificance. At another level, in terms of photo method, it offers an example of poetic modes of interrogation within which the micro stands in for the macro in non-literal yet highly evocative ways through which romanticism can be questioned. Abstraction brings us down to earth!

Bringing a more pointed political perspective to the role of myth and storytelling in creating landscapes for tourist consumption, Ahmad Hosni opens his essay, "Faulkner in Sinai", with a meditation on William Faulkner's hand-drawn maps of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, the fictional landscape of his most celebrated novels, set in the Deep South, a region traumatized by a civil war that destroyed the old social order, by economic depression and subservience to the industrial north, and — most cripplingly — by the bleeding wound of race. Faulkner continually updated his maps of Yoknapatawpha as new novels were published, creating a uniquely Faulknerian South through successive storytelling that was intended to illuminate the white southern mind for a (largely) northern audience. Hosni uses Faulkner's maps to make the point that every south has a north and that this is no less true of South Sinai's relationship to its two colonizing neighbours: Egypt and (for 15 years) Israel. The "map" of South Sinai that Hosni draws, like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, is not a place defined by geographic coordinates but is produced by the militarily strategic and global-commercial agendas of its two dominating "norths" that are, themselves, in conflict.

The earliest "map" that Hosni references is that of the mythic Sinai, the biblical site of the Hebrew people's generation-long Exodus from Egyptian bondage to settlement in the Promised Land, and where the law was given to Moses. The biblical Sinai is characterized as "the wilderness", an in-between space whose only salient feature is a holy mountain. Emperor Justinian I built St. Catherine's monastery at the ritual site of the burning bush miracle discovered by St. Helena in the 4th century. Mount Sinai is, in Hosni's words, "an event-place" rather than a topographic one but it entered mythical time through the Hebrew Bible and global spread of Christianity. Byzantines, Crusaders, devout pilgrims and colonial explorers worked diligently to locate the actual

Mount Sinai, but to no avail. “Nevertheless, to seek a destination is to fix a place.” Pious devotion, and later tourism, would demand it.

For centuries South Sinai was populated by tribes of Bedouin Arabs, as was much of the desert Middle East until modern times. Traditionally, the Bedouin were semi-nomadic herders who were gradually pressured into more sedentary ways by successive colonial powers (Ottomans, Europeans, Israelis, Arab national governments) who wanted to take ownership of the land for more lucrative exploitation. In the Western imagination, romantically rendered by painter Eugene Delacroix, the Bedouin were as wild and savage as the desert they inhabited. Their systems of kinship and clan allegiance were alien to “civilized” Westerners but because the Bedouin knew the landscape intimately, European armies, explorers, and, later, land developers, were dependent on them as guides and hosts. Bedouin are still highly valued as scouts in the militaries of the Middle East.

But the most dramatic transformation in the history of South Sinai has been the rise of the modern tourist industry along the Red Sea coast over the past 40 years. Ironically, the first to develop the industry were the Israelis after they captured the Sinai peninsula in the 1967 War (it was returned to Egypt by treaty in 1979). With significant new access to the beaches and coral reefs of the Red Sea, the Israelis developed the fishing port of Sharm el-Sheikh as a resort with hotels and restaurants, diving outfitters, and (unintentionally) easy access to drugs that attracted young hippies and free spirits from Tel Aviv and the West. When the Sinai was restored to Egypt, the Egyptian government continued the development of South Sinai’s coastal tourism with funding from international investors.

As an Egyptian, Hosni recognizes the political delicacy of documenting the impact of recent tourist development on the South Sinai, with funding from the European Union. As an outsider himself, and target of suspicion as a cosmopolitan Egyptian, Hosni posed as a tourist guidebook writer and relied on his trusted Bedouin guide to finesse access to his subjects. The early 21st century “map” of South Sinai that Hosni draws for us in his essay and photography features a glittering coastal strip of international tourist hotels, restaurants and amenities, rimming a vast and economically dependent hinterland with few resources and high unemployment. Bedouin teens and young men compete aggressively for desirable jobs as tour guides or taxi and bus drivers. This younger generation of males lives suspended “between” two worlds, neither of which is home: the shiny resorts for foreigners to which they’re not admitted, and a “wilderness” whose places they once knew by heart but no longer possess. To the tourists and the resort developers, the Bedouin are invisible except as service workers or emblems of the timeless savage picturesque made safely accessible (camel rides, posed pictures, woven handcrafts). To both the Egyptian and Israeli governments, the Bedouin are a burden and a threat, as drug smuggling, human trafficking and weapons-running offer attractive alternatives to chronic poverty and humiliation.

The final two contributions to this issue of *Photographies*, from Rupert Ashmore and Peter Bennett, focus on the storied landscapes of Cumbria, a predominantly rural county in the far North West of England that includes the Lake District National Park. Tourism plays a major role in the Cumbrian economy with the Park receiving almost 16 million visitors annually, many from abroad. The Lake District was celebrated by 19th century aesthetes and poets — notably Wordsworth — for a picturesqueness that was deemed

to emanate directly from the nature of the region. Well before photography's invention, guidebooks listed special vantage points where the formal and aesthetic qualities of the landscape could be admired. It is probably safe to say that these landscapes, formed by an ancient volcanic massif with dramatic granite outcroppings (fells), lakes and rolling green countryside dotted by hamlets and farms, are among the most photographed and painted in the UK. The Park is also a critically important wildlife sanctuary, and one of the major tourist attractions is the family home of Beatrix Potter, whose tales of Peter Rabbit and Squirrel Nutkin constructed the English rural idyll for millions of children around the world.

Ashmore and Bennett take this bucolic English landscape heritage as both a given and a provocation in their projects. For Ashmore, the iconic English farming life of rural Cumbria was shattered in 2001 by the outbreak of highly contagious foot-and-mouth disease (FMD). Suddenly, a pastoral Eden was transformed into a charnel house as the Ministry of Agriculture demanded that farmers within three kilometres of known FMD cases slaughter their livestock. The EU imposed a worldwide ban on British exports of meat, animal products and livestock and the quarantine frightened away tourists as public rights of way across the countryside were closed by government order. By the time the crisis ended less than a year later, over 10 million sheep and cattle had been killed (80% were estimated to be disease-free) and the cost to the UK economy was estimated at \$16 billion.

Ashmore investigates the role of photography in framing the crisis, noting that the iconic press image, shown repeatedly, was also the most sublimely shocking: classic pastoral landscapes defiled by the columns of smoke from burning piles of animal carcasses. (The noxious stench is not hard to imagine.) But Ashmore pushes beyond the sublime iconicity of these press photographs to highlight projects by photographers working locally and outside the journalistic media, that show a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the psycho-social "trauma" inflicted on the those whose ways of life were most affected by the calamity. Without visual bombast, the photographs focus on the aftermath of the crisis: deserted pastures, a disinfectant mat at a road junction, bloated carcasses in a farm yard awaiting disposal, an individual clad in a white biohazard suit in a luminous panorama of empty fields. The impact of the imagery was, of course, particularly charged for those directly and indirectly affected (within agricultural and food retail industries, but also tourism, leisure and, indeed, everyday pastimes as rural footpaths were closed for walkers) and in this respect was time-specific. Avoiding the mass appeal of spectacle, these images continue to bear historical witness to the emotional impacts of the FMD disaster on the "Cumbria beyond the Lake District": the shock of the sudden and total disappearance of livestock along with their genetic lineages, the shame and isolation of being labelled "contaminated"; the seeming arbitrariness and indifference of bureaucratic cull orders and reparations; the loss of a sense of purpose; the eerie silence of the empty landscapes.

In his photographic series *Going Away*, Peter Bennett finds his motifs in the tidal flatlands of coastal Cumbria that are of little interest to tourists headed for the uplands of the Lake District. Bennett is fascinated by the liminality and instability of these shallow tidal estuaries that are equal parts land and sea, where the tide ebbs and flows across hundreds of metres of shallow waters and where the surface sands are in perpetual motion, covering and uncovering the detritus of abandoned construction, gravel

beds, and shoreline vegetation. Unlike the vividly picturesque landscapes of the Lake District with their well-marked scenic routes and tourist amenities, the coastal flats are largely barren spaces, defined by impermanence and danger as shifting quicksands make walking perilous for the inexperienced. Bennett likens the continuous change of the tidal landscape to the chemical instability of photographic emulsion, especially when aged by time or light-blasted by overexposure that “bleaches out” detail and creates a subtle colour shift toward cyan. By lowering the horizon line in a square frame, Bennett diminishes any sense of terra firma as the visual weight of the land is minimized and its surface is swallowed up by the luminous power of the sky. The delicately tinted palette of the photographs gives them a dream-like quality, like the eternal return of the tides that sweep away the day’s traces of futile human activity. Though Bennett doesn’t reference this, for those who recall the 2004 Morecambe Bay tragedy, when over 20 Chinese immigrants accidentally drowned while harvesting cockles, it is the exquisite beauty of these photographs that makes them sinister.

This issue aims to open up and question photography and photographic method in relation to environmental trauma whilst simultaneously engaging theoretical questions relating to ontologies of still and moving imagery and also to contexts of making and of viewing (in this instance, reading). When most people hear the words “landscape photography”, they assume that the images will celebrate and affirm the beauty of the natural world whether as postcard pictorial or through the more serious documentation of publications such as *National Geographic*. Of course, the glories of nature should be celebrated and enjoyed, but not at the expense of questioning our collective stewardship of the planet and its life forms that have been irreparably damaged, especially over the past century. Visual eulogies for a vanishing Eden only take us so far. While occasions for collective grieving, they can mask or distract us from examining and soberly reflecting on the complex economic and social changes that produce these traumatized landscapes. Not all human activities and communities are equally culpable in the destruction of natural and social ecosystems and, as this issue’s contributions indicate, those who live closest to the landscapes in question end up “wounded” as well and it is their stories that need to be told.

The Editors

Note: All the photographic projects included in this issue were shot in colour. Due to restrictions on the number of colour pages in the printed version, here the majority of images have had to be reproduced in black and white. Please see the online version for full colour. Please also see:

[http://www.peter-bennett.com/peterbennett/photographs\\_section/01\\_goingaway/01\\_goingaway01.htm](http://www.peter-bennett.com/peterbennett/photographs_section/01_goingaway/01_goingaway01.htm);

<http://www.markcurran.org>;

[http://www.nicholas-hughes.net/aspects\\_image\\_1.htm](http://www.nicholas-hughes.net/aspects_image_1.htm);

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