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Landscape Photography's 'New Humanism'

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In a 2011 interview, the artist Trevor Paglen suggested that his photographic practice might be seen as an attempt to devise a 'new humanism'.¹ Paglen's reference here is Frantz Fanon but his remarks touch on a reformulation of humanism that could also include such thinkers as Roland Barthes. In his excoriating 1956 review of Edward Steichen's *The Family of Man* exhibition, Barthes pointed out that the selection and arrangement of themes on display function to naturalise social formations and values that are contingent. Thus, against the myth of an essential human nature which he associates with 'classic humanism' – and which he sees Steichen's exhibition as exemplifying – Barthes argues for a 'progressive humanism' that seeks 'constantly to scour nature, its "laws" and its "limits" in order to discover History there, and at last to establish Nature itself as historical'.² This proposition has become an important theoretical reference point for recent enquiries into the intersections between citizenship, human rights and photography.

In a forum on *The Family of Man* at the Museum of Modern Art in 2013, human rights scholar Thomas Keenan suggested that Steichen's project (and Barthes' reading of it) might still serve as a framework for analysing the afterlife of a universalist humanism in the expanding field of human rights. In Keenan's view, it makes little sense to conceive of human rights simply as historically and culturally contingent claims since their validity rests on their capacity to transcend the particular set of circumstances in which they were first made or applied.³ However, one also has to contend with the fact that human rights are at the same time socially constructed formulations that are open to future amendments or revisions. Rather than simply opposing an invalidated 'classical humanism' with a 'progressive humanism' in accordance with the structural logic of Barthes' text,

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it might be more useful then to think through their contradictory coexistence in contemporary visual culture. What would a reformulation of humanistic values mean for contemporary photographic practices that operate in situations where the most basic rights are denied and where humans are reduced to 'bare life'? While many of the images that are used in humanitarian campaigns routinely produce images of 'helpless victims', recent enquires into photography have sought to shift the focus away from the ethics of seeing or viewing images of suffering and onto an analysis of the unpredictable social dynamics of the photographic event.⁴

In Corinne Silva's *Badlands* (2008–2011) the photographic event is not centred on the depiction of human action but, rather, the traces of its effect which can be detected in the borderland territories located at the edges of Europe. The *Badlands* series documents two forms of architecture constructed by the denizens inhabiting the frontier spaces of Almería in southeast Spain. The first is the strange landscaped environs (most apparent in the fibreglass rocks, manicured lawns and artificial lakes) that decorate the luxury housing settlements of the region. The second is the improvised dwellings that irregular migrants fashion from the discarded refuse of agricultural polytunnels. Silva analyses the points of overlap between these two parallel worlds that seem to deny each other's existence. Informed by anthropological studies of transnational migration and the critical urbanism of architects like Teddy Cruz, Silva's expanded practice of photography foregrounds the collisions between natural and artificial ecologies that result from large-scale agricultural and property development. In *Badlands*, materials such as plastic point to the physical and symbolic malleability of the Almerían landscape. At once a product and metaphor of waste (both of natural resources and human life) plastic reveals the contradictory effects of globalisation in southern Spain. If the manicured golf courses, gated communities and Western movie sets express the dream images of a capitalist utopia, the tomato farms and the associated shanties housing irregular migrants from northern and sub-Saharan Africa, represent the underside of that fantasy and perhaps even its unravelling.

Starting in the 1970s, Almerían small-holding owners began to develop a system of polytunnel agriculture which allowed them to grow produce year-round in massive *invernaderos* – plastic-covered 'greenhouses'. Almost overnight a barren and largely infertile landscape was transformed into one of the largest and most productive vegetable growing areas in Europe. Today the plastic hothouses used to grow tomatoes covers an estimated 35,000 hectares of the province. The development of intensive agricultural practices has brought tremendous economic growth to the region with much of the profits channelled into constructing holiday homes and golf resorts for northern European tourists. This has led to the creation of spaces in which discontinuous populations and forms of capital are increasingly made to overlap with each other. In places like Roquetas de Mar, one

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of a series of beach towns that string out along the coastal highway of Almería, economic survival is tied as much to the 'legitimate' commercial activities of tourism as it is to the hidden and unofficial labour servicing the surrounding farms. Upscale gated communities populated by Britons, Germans and Scandinavians thus exist in uneasy proximity to a pool of largely undocumented migrant workers from countries such as Romania, Morocco and Ghana.

At the same time as Spain has opened itself up to European tourists and investors it has increasingly shut itself off from its immediate neighbours in the Global South. With Spain's signing of the Schengen Agreement in 1991, entry visa requirements were suddenly imposed on non-EU passport holders, restricting their access to legal avenues of employment and protection from the state. As a result, the Gibraltar Strait, which had for centuries facilitated bi-lateral flows of cultural and commercial exchange, has essentially become a one-way street. Thus, while European tourists can make a casual day-trip to Tangiers, Moroccans wishing to travel in the other direction are required to present special visas which are almost impossible to obtain. Yet rather than simply preventing the arrival of African immigrants these restrictions have made the journey north a more dangerous and precarious undertaking. Scenes of refugees washing up on the shores of Mediterranean beaches have meanwhile become familiar to us. One particularly shocking image taken by the Spanish photojournalist Javier Bauluz shows a white European couple sunbathing on the the playa Zahara de los Atunes, oblivious of the body of the African man that has washed up on the shore. Bauluz gives us an image of radical indifference or blindness in the face of a humanitarian



Javier Bauluz, *Immigrant dead on the beach of Zahara (Cádiz)*, 2000. Courtesy of the artist.

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crisis that is surely troubling, but the photographer's own presence in this scene is disturbing too since it implies an inability or unwillingness to act except through modes of witnessing that are themselves mediated by the camera.

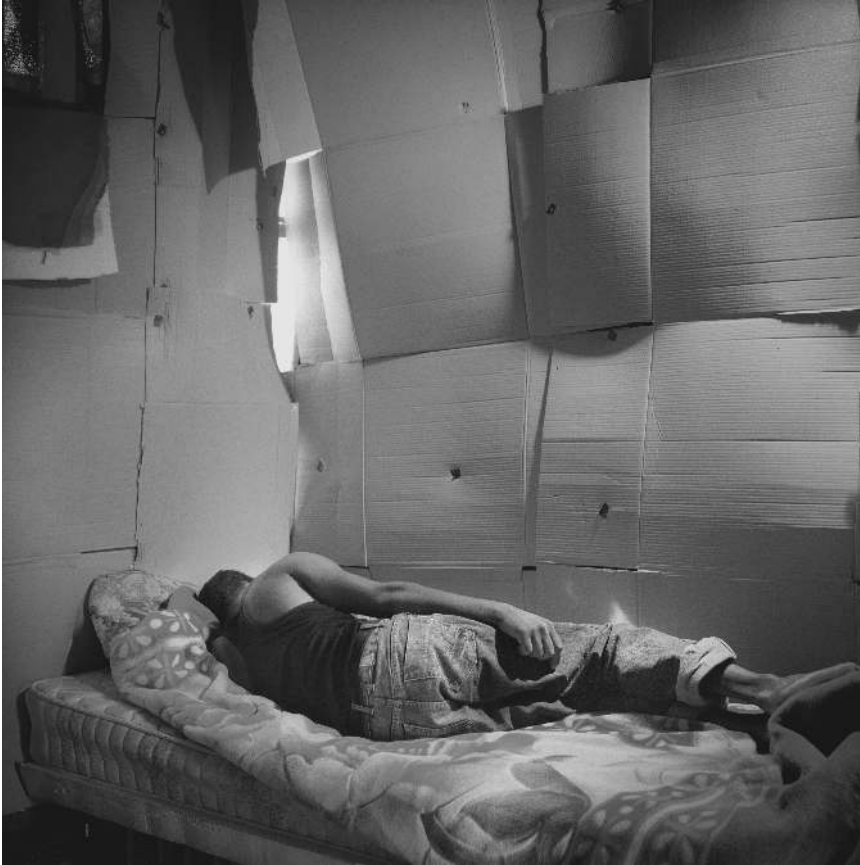
The tragic deaths resulting from the hardening of borders along the political equator represent only one part of a larger problem. While European nations wall themselves off from 'undesirable populations', the EU adherence to a neo-liberal ideology of 'free market' economics has made its member states ever more reliant on supplies of cheap and expendable unskilled labour. Following the lead of the United States, a growing number of European nations have developed an extensive informal economy within their own borders. Thus, in an effort to stay competitive within a global export market the Spanish government has conveniently turned a blind eye when it comes to the unofficial flow of immigrant labour. As the anthropologist Tod Hartman notes, undocumented migrant workers in Almería are there:

to perform the necessary and equally unexceptional task of filling in the gaps in a regional economy that 'locals' no longer wish to occupy. What is perpetuated by the flexibility of informal structures is a hyper-accelerated reproduction and turnover of cheap labour in the interests of capital – a process in which the state is nothing if not complicit.⁵

The racialised division of the area's labour force means that migrants of sub-Saharan origin receive the lowest wages, earning somewhere between €20 and €35 a day for work inside the greenhouses.⁶ Often stigmatised in the Spanish media as sources of crime, many of these workers live in makeshift shanties fashioned from the discarded materials of the surrounding polytunnels.

A series of photographs taken by Alfredo Caliz in El Ejido give us a sense of the living conditions of migrants living and working in the tomato farms. In one image we see a migrant worker sleeping in a makeshift enclosure with walls made out of cardboard packaging. These haphazard spaces index, in a directly material way, the precarious existence of the men housing them. Yet this form of documentary photography risks portraying the migrants as anonymous victims of capitalist exploitation. Equally problematic are the images where Caliz seems to individualise suffering through the conventions of photographic portraiture. By contrast, Silva's exterior shots of the workers' shacks situate these structures in relation to the surrounding built environment. Hastily assembled out of plastic sheets and wooden crates, these ramshackle dwellings form a direct counterpoint to the imposing villas and mansions that the artist photographed in the nearby housing developments. Drawing on a variety of architectural styles (English country home, modernist cube, Moorish *alcázar*) with little or no regard for regional specificity, these houses could just as well be located in a Californian golf resort or a high-security settlement in Israel. In Silva's photograph titled *Castle X* a newly constructed white apartment building is framed by a concrete wall painted

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Alfredo Caliz, *A migrant worker sleeps in a makeshift room between the greenhouses*, 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

the same colour. Devoid of ornament, shrubs or trees, the rectilinear building looks sterile and vacant. Space is compressed and the eye has very little relief from the flat undifferentiated surface that dominates the visual field. The frontality of the image invites us to see these homes as extensions of the walls that enclose them. In offering protection from the outside world these fortress developments function also to incarcerate their residents.

The political scientist Wendy Brown argues that the proliferation of wall building in recent times points to a set of anxieties stemming from the weakening of borders and the decline of state sovereignty under the pressures of globalisation. Transnational flows of capital, people, ideas, goods and violence compromise the integrity of national borders. Responding to the unhooking of boundaries, contemporary walls 'produce a spatially demarcated "us", national identity, and national political scale when these can no longer be fashioned from conceits of

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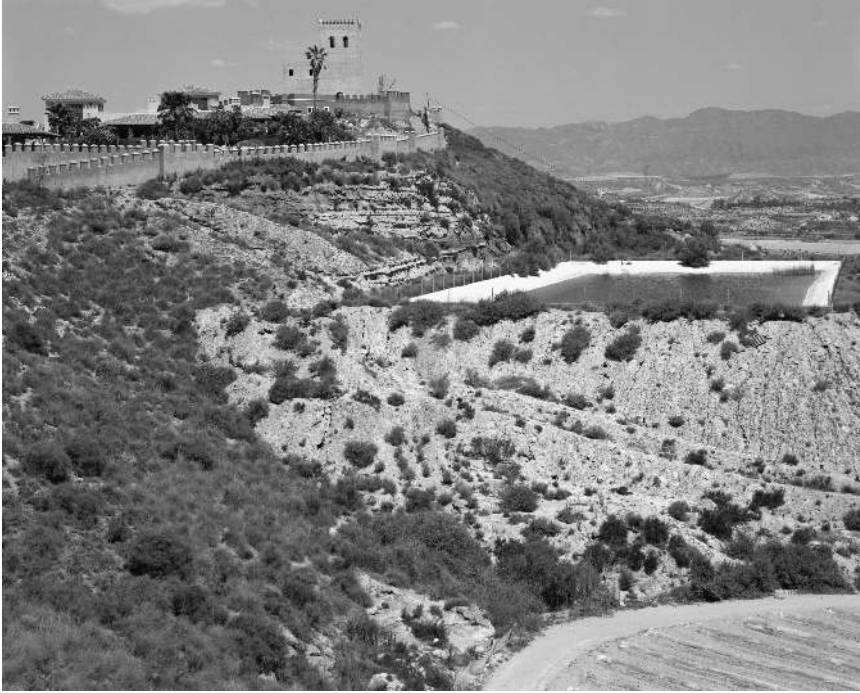


Corinne Silva, *Castle X*, Almería, Spain, from the *Badlands* series, 2011 (c-type print, 101 × 81 cm, edition of 6 + 2 AP). Courtesy of the artist.

national political or economic autonomy, demographic homogeneity, or shared history, culture, and values.⁷ Yet, far from offering unequivocal security, the assertion of physical boundaries expresses a fantasy of impermeability that is itself symptomatic of the ‘eroding lines between the police and military, subject and patria, vigilante and state, law and lawlessness’.⁸ Brown’s focus is not only the geopolitics of hardening borders, but also the irrational anxieties and fears that feed into the desire for walls in the Global North. Gated communities might be seen as an extension of the large-scale walling projects initiated by powerful nation-states. Indeed, for their wealthy inhabitants they would seem to gratify a wish for protection that the state seems less and less able to fulfil, particularly given the First World reliance on undervalued labour of illegal immigrants. In the political discourse of regressive nationalism, the immigrant is typically figured as an invading force that seeks to take what is rightfully the nation’s own: its safety, its jobs, its wealth. Yet, whereas once this threat was posited as something external to the homeland, now it is seen as emanating from within.

In *Accidental Topography III* Silva photographs residential complexes under construction in the La Envía gated golf community in Almería. Standing imposingly on the slope of a rocky hillside the unoccupied concrete buildings

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Corinne Silva, *Accidental Topography IV*, Desert Springs gated golf community, Almería, Spain, from the *Badlands* series, 2011 (c-type print, 127 × 101 cm, edition of 6 + 2 AP). Courtesy of the artist.

aren't dissimilar to the citadel urbanism of new settlements in Israel. Those state-sponsored islands of 'territorial and personal democracy' are strategically positioned on hilltops overlooking Palestinian villages. As the Israeli architect Eyal Weizman points out, this 'politics of verticality' constitutes a departure from a linear division of a territory to the creation of three-dimensional boundaries that cut across the horizontal plane.⁹ While Israel represents an extreme case, the gated communities of southern Spain can be seen as evidence of the extent to which the 'fortress city' (to borrow a phrase from Mike Davis) has become a central organising principle of the neo-liberal restructuring of residential space. *Accidental Topography IV*, another photograph in the *Badlands* series, taken in Desert Springs gated golf community, features a Moorish-style castle with a massive walled fortification. There is a strange irony in this recycling of the past since it is now Spanish and Northern European property investors who are replicating the architecture of tenth-century Al-Andalus.

The allusion to the Alcazaba summons up the period during which much of the Iberian peninsula was under Islamic rule. In a historical reversal, Spain now occupies the Moroccan ports of Ceuta and Melilla, using fences to restrict and monitor border crossings by Muslim immigrants. It would be easy to see the gated

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Corinne Silva, *Desert Oasis VI*, empty lot, Almería, Spain, from the *Badlands* series, 2011 (c-type print, 127 × 101 cm, edition of 6 + 2 AP). Courtesy of the artist.

housing developments of Almería as hermetic spaces in which a wealthy and mobile class of expatriate property owners can construct their own corporate micro-communities. In reality, the situation is more complex, for just as the tomato farmers have been placed at the mercy of global economic forces beyond their control the ‘migrant golfers’ (as the artist calls them) have also been made vulnerable by the sharp decline in property markets.

Silva’s approach to imaging landscapes in which human presence is implied rather than directly pictured is informed by the New Topographics photographers of the 1970s. A term first used by the curator William Jenkins to characterise the methods of a number of young photographers he had chosen for the exhibition at the International Museum of Photography in 1975, the New Topographics are seen as eschewing Romantic conventions of the picturesque. As opposed to a tradition that idealised nature as a separate realm of untouched purity, photographers such as Robert Adams, Stephen Shore, Lewis Baltz and Nicholas Nixon focused their cameras on the human-altered landscapes of 1970s urban America. Their stark images of disused mining sites, standardised tract houses, empty small town streets and warehouses captured a post-industrial topography that was surprisingly photogenic even if it could not be called beautiful in any traditional sense. Bernd and Hilla Becher, who were also included in the New

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Topographics exhibition, used photography to document industrial structures that were vanishing from the landscape. Their factographic method was built on the premise that the history of a landscape could be rendered legible through an attention to the built structures used to extract its resources: 'The economic structure of a region, the way the minerals are deposited, and the kind of mineral involved, as well as the working conditions that result from this all culminate in the "style" of the structure.'¹⁰

As an instrument of topographic analysis, photography remains a valuable tool through which to map the shifting relation between the human and the natural. However, examining a landscape purely in terms of its built topography becomes increasingly problematic in a global digital era characterised by the immaterial flow of financial capital. In the case of real estate, value lies increasingly in the liquidity of the asset and its ability to circulate as a sign within an image economy. Yet as Saskia Sassen points out, 'part of what constitutes real estate remains very physical' and anchored to a material site.¹¹ It therefore becomes a matter of unpacking the paradoxical identity of landscape – its double status as 'both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside that package'.¹² In *Badlands* this paradox comes to the fore in those photographs which play on the slippage between natural and constructed environments. *Accidental Topography I* pictures a desert terrain that once served as the location for Spaghetti Westerns in the 1960s. In films such as Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* the desert landscape of Cabo de Gata-Nijar became the setting for a fictional Mexican border town. The location has since been transformed into a Wild West theme park that also combines references to the African wilderness through life-size models of safari animals. Another image in the series similarly draws attention to the plasticity of the landscape that one finds in the new leisure spaces of Almería. At the Desert Springs and El Toyo golf resorts the rocks are fibreglass, many of the flower varieties are imported and the grass glows an unnatural green. Here 'nature' is consumed not in any direct way but at the level of cultural signifiers. In this regard Silva's use of pastel tones contrasts with the New Topographics predilection for stark, black-and-white prints. Whereas the latter engages in the rhetoric of documentary objectivity, the soft pinks, creams and browns of the *Badlands* photographs soothe and seduce the eye.

Perhaps more than any other image in the *Badlands* series, *Desert Oasis VI* allegorises photography's relation to a landscape which is less a product of natural processes than human interventions. During the latter half of the eighteenth century – a period that not coincidentally also marks the apogee of humanist thinking in Europe – landscape painting imaged an Arcadian ideal that effaced the presence of the very social order which gave rise to it. Noting the prevalence of Romantic landscape pictures with lakes or reflecting pools, W.J.T. Mitchell argues that in such scenes Nature appears to be 'representing itself to itself, displaying an identity of the Real and the Imaginary that certifies the reality of our own

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images'.¹³ In other words, the incidental mirroring of the world in nature reflects art's own mimetic capacities. Working against this Romantic tradition, in *Desert Oasis VI*, Silva de-naturalises the landscapes of Almería, drawing attention instead to the cultural meanings and values encoded in the physical transformation of a place in gardening and architecture. It is commonly asserted that the name Almería derives from the Arabic word for mirror. Playing on this etymology, Silva foregrounds the landscape as a screen upon which an ideal social order is projected. Like the image of the villas that we see in the water in *Desert Oasis VI*, the reflection given back to us in these landscapes is reversed and distorted, suggesting once more the slippage between sign and referent.

Notes

1. Stallabrass, Julian, 'Negative Dialectics in the Google Era: An Interview with Trevor Paglen'. *October* 138 (Fall 2011), pp. 3–14.
2. Barthes, Roland, 'La grande famille des hommes' ('The Great Family of Man'), in *Mythologies* (Paris, 1957), pp. 173–176.
3. Keenan, Thomas, 'MOMA Forum on Contemporary Photography', 10 April 2013, <http://uat.moma.org/visit/calendar/events/17885>
4. This shift in focus is developed by Ariella Azoulay, who argues that 'the photograph is merely one event in a sequence that constitutes photography and which always involves an actual or potential spectator in the relationship between the photographer and the individual portrayed'. See Azoulay, Ariella, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (London, 2012), blurb.
5. Hartman, Tod, 'States, Markets, and Other Unexceptional Communities: Informal Romanian Labour in a Spanish Agricultural Zone', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14: 3 (September 2008), p. 498.
6. Hartman, 'States, Markets, and Other Unexceptional Communities'.
7. Brown, Wendy, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).
8. Brown, *Walled States*, p. 22.
9. See Weizman, Eyal, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London, 2007).
10. Hilla Becher cited in Lange, Susanne, *Bernd and Hilla Becher: Life and Work* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), p. 51.
11. Sassen, Saskia, 'The City: Between Topographic Representation and Spatialized Power Projects', *Art Journal* 60: 2 (Summer 2001), p. 16.
12. Mitchell, W.J.T., 'Imperial Landscapes', *Landscape and Power* (Chicago, 2002).
13. Mitchell, 'Imperial Landscapes', p. 16.