

READING INTO PHOTOGRAPHY

Selected Essays, 1959–1980



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Joe Deal's Optical Democracy

James Hugunin

Instead of fixing a proximate object, let the eye, passive but free, prolong its line of vision to the limit of the visual field. What do we find then? The structure of our hierarchized elements disappears. The ocular field is homogeneous; we do not see one thing clearly and the rest confusedly, for all are submerged in an optical democracy.

—José Ortega y Gasset, quoted
in *Northlight 4*

I had just set aside the fourth issue of *Northlight* (published by Arizona State University, Tempe), which is devoted to the work of Joe Deal, when in standing up from my chair I noticed I had unintentionally juxtaposed a reproduction of one of Joe Deal's photographs with another book with a print by Ansel Adams on the cover. I was immediately intrigued by the dichotomous juxtaposition. This essay was the result.

Modern physics conceives of matter as a field of energy, as a structure of probable events across space, rather than objects in it. Reality is then conceived as the organization of everything around us. Organization becomes rooted in structure. In classical physics space

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is conceived as continuous (Euclidean) with physical entities occupying volume and interacting with each other on a macroscopic level, whereas in modern physics interactions are carried out, according to probabilities, on an atomic level. More simply, classical physics is form-oriented, while quantum mechanics is structure-oriented.

How does this tie in with Ansel Adams or Joe Deal? Traditional landscape photography, as typified by Adams' work, implies a classical view of reality in that tonal values are used to render volumes in the space of one-point perspective. The organization of tones "draws" the illusion of physical bulk and the coherent interaction of all the pictorial elements. For Adams, light transforms raw matter, imparting various moods or possible "narrations" to the landscape. The resultant images can be seen as being consciously organized into a hierarchic arrangement of lights and darks. Through his zone system, Adams subjectively interprets tonal scale to match his pre-visualized (idealized) vision of the scene. He leads the viewer's eye on a planned journey through the illusion of three-dimensional space, where a large mass of darker value may beckon the eye, only to be led from this area to yet another point. A set of pictorial elements are ordered from "most important" to "least." Our eye is led through space in a way similar to the way a novel leads us through psychological space, that is, events build upon events. To borrow a term from dance, Adams "phrases" his compositions, building up climaxes and resolutions. The notions which readily come to mind with his landscapes are those of the sublime and the beautiful.

The antithesis of this type of landscape is currently being explored by contemporary photographers like Stephen Shore, Nicholas Nixon, Lewis Baltz, and Joe Deal; work by these photographers and others was packaged into "New Topographics," a recent exhibition at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House. In this new kind of landscape the beautiful is replaced by the mundane, the sublime by the ironic; the experience of objects situated in an ideal space is exchanged for the experience of seeing in itself. While Adams emphasizes the one-point perspective of a lens-produced image, Deal obfuscates spatial recession by eliminating the horizon-line and tilting the camera down.¹ He places the landscape onto what appears to be a flat plane perpendicular to the lens axis. Without the visual organization of a receding perspective, Deal's pictorial elements just hang there: up and down, and across.

The discrete elements in this grid structure are raw visual data which defy hierarchic arrangement.²

Specifically, in Deal's *View, Fountain Hills, Arizona, 1976* deep space is rendered flat, like a tapestry. The stones in the foreground are rendered with as much (or as little) emphasis as the buildings and trees in the background. A small stone, a tree, a building—all are subsumed into an overall visual field. The tactility of bulk is denied in favor of merely tonal elements that are without resistance or mass. The visual field is quite homogeneous.³ Deal's photograph is printed in flat contrast, and shadows retain plenty of detail. The drama of an Adams print is not to be found here, for Deal has replaced the metaphoric quality of Adams' landscapes with a deromanticized structure of spatial and temporal contiguities. The discordant spaces of our Southwest landscape, in places where man is only now replacing the natural with the cultural, is merely *catalogued* by Deal into a visual equivalent of a list or matrix of nouns. This matrix of pictorial elements is "objectively" determined and presented with a "passive (square) frame."⁴ Instead of a visual "narrative"—*beautiful* mountains near a *raging* river, under *ominous* clouds—Deal simply creates lists of nouns strung together by their fortuitous arrangement before the camera:

tree, grass, home, street . . .
 water, brush, cacti, street . . .
 cacti, road, ground, road . . .
 stones, dirt, stones, dirt . . .

Borrowing from linguists, we can say that Deal's organization of picture elements is an arrangement at the horizontal level of word chains, while Adams' work stresses the vertical dimension of metaphor.

Adams either deliberately excludes man-made objects from his compositions, or he deliberately emphasizes them. Deal does neither. He uses the natural/cultural opposition as a basic antinomy in his photographs, choosing landscapes in transition from one state to the other, so that "landscape" or "social landscape" does not aptly describe the work. "Topographics," with its connotations of surface, seems an adequate compromise term. It is from this natural/cultural dichotomy, this basic binary opposition, that Deal generates his imagery. It is through this self-conscious system that Deal forces objects to gradually lose their instabilities and secrets and renounce

their pseudo-mystery, that suspect interiority seen in Adams' prints and which Roland Barthes has called "the romantic heart of things." Deal strives toward a world that is neither significant nor absurd but, as Robbe-Grillet would stress, is simply *there*. Robbe-Grillet says in *For a New Novel*:

Let us consider first the opacity. It is, quite as much, an excessive transparency. Since there is never anything beyond the thing described, that is, since no supernature is hidden in it, no symbolism . . . the eye is forced to rest on the very surface of things: a machine of ingenious and useless functioning, a post card from a seaside resort, a celebration whose progress is quite mechanical. . . . A total transparency, which allows neither shadow nor reflection to subsist, this amounts, as a matter of fact, to a "trompe-l'oeil" painting. The more that scruples, specifications, details of shape and size accumulate, the more the object loses its depth.

Substitute "Deal's photographs" for "a trompe-l'oeil painting" and the quote seems to aptly discuss Deal's "topographics."

It is this very "thereness" of the objects in Deal's photographs which has been mistakenly read as only satire on modern housing, trailer courts, and so forth. Deal himself said: "I think that a lot of the people looking at the photographs in 'New Topographics' think that the photographs are satirical. It really depends on your attitudes to different building styles and is really more of a result of what the viewer brings to the work than what the photographer intended to put there."⁵

This immediacy or "thereness" of Deal's images is enhanced by rendering distance (paradoxically) as close-up. Viewing his prints we do not fix our gaze on any one point nor move about the composition in a strictly determined manner. Rather, we take in the complete field of elements, including the boundaries, in a holistic fashion. We avoid focussing our eyes as much as possible. The actual "object" perceived is really our entire visual field.⁶ Thus, the content of our perception is not strictly the surface at which hollow space ends (the print), but the whole hollow space itself from the cornea to the limits of vision in the print:

In pure distant vision, our attention, instead of being directed farther away, has drawn back to the absolutely proximate, and the eyebeam, instead of striking the convexity of solid body and staying fixed on it, penetrates a concave object, glides into a hollow.⁷

In Adams' landscapes the content of perception is not perception in itself, but an ideal construct of volumes in space delineated by chiaroscuro. Composition is built up by the macroscopic interaction of volumes in space. Deal's discrete elements lack any physical interaction, that is, they are not hierarchically arranged. Instead, Deal's imagery imparts the germ of totality to each element in his photographs; Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "total part" is integral to this development of holistic vision. In biology, DNA strands are "total parts," capable of reproducing the entire organism. Similarly, a part of Deal's imagery contains all the visual information necessary to produce the whole photograph. And according to Deal's interview in *Northlight 4*, each of his prints are only parts ("total parts") of the whole series of photographs he has taken.

We can begin to understand the complete structure of Joe Deal's esthetic output. The basic natural/cultural opposition is built up into individual photographs, which are in turn only elements of a larger whole, which are also only elements in the larger cultural nexus. The result is a vast fabric of elements capable of infinite extension. "The photographs I am making now are a lot more about the subject, they are repeating themselves in that each photograph is an addition to the one just before it, modifying a larger body of work."⁸

Well, all this sounds quite impressive and innovative, yet painting has been concerned with these problems of reflexive vision for years, and the trend toward painting surfaces rather than volumes begins in earnest with Velásquez, is picked up again with the Impressionists, and is carried through Cubism and Modernism. The course of "development" in painting has run the continuum from painters painting first things, then sensations, and, finally, ideas. The continuum runs from concerns with external reality, to the subjective, and finally to the intrasubjective, that is, the *contents of consciousness* itself. Thus Deal's professed "objectivity" is actually a phenomenological investigation into the interiority of vision itself. Deal's "detachment and reluctance to intrude personally in any way into the photograph" is a denial of the subjective, yet his presence as "investigator" behind the images is readily avowed by him:

One of the things I've often thought I aspire to is a disembodied eye. That of course is a delusion. But invisibility is an important quality of how my own personal prejudices enter into the work. Transparent might be a bet-

ter word. My presence in the work is always there, but not in the sense that it is calling attention to itself or proclaiming its importance in interpreting for the viewer what was before the camera.⁹

Of course, Ansel Adams' photographs proclaim the importance of the subjective control over the image; his eye is the servant of his emotions and intellections. His photographs are not investigations that result in an exposition of our interior visual processes, but celebrations of our sensations and our joy of seeing things. It is this joy of seeing *things* which modernist painting has given up for the investigation of perception itself.

It is this trend toward the intrasubjective in painting which has lent credence to the notion that photography's true path must parallel painting's, that "tough" photography must assimilate what's "tough" in painting. The result is that a great deal (pun not intended) of energy is expended by critics and curators in describing significant links in the chain of development along the lines of painterly vision's transformation from illusionistic depth to that of pure surface, and the transference of this trend toward purely formal concerns into the explication of the development of camera vision. Certainly, Atget and Ruscha are in a sense precursors of the type of photography seen in "New Topographics."

But in general, equating painting and photography ignores the fact that photography, as a different medium than painting, presents contextual problems and a myriad of sociological considerations which are foreign to painting. Other lines of development within the history of photography can be posited with as much justification as that of the formal problems of illusionistic space versus the flat support, or of subjective versus intrasubjective. For example, what about the obvious tradition of photography as a means toward social critique? Deal is the first to admit his work has no political content:

There are examples, like W. Eugene Smith who had definite goals and tried to change things as a result of his photography. It worked for him and it worked for others, Hine, Riis, they had those kinds of goals. But I don't feel that I am operating as a conscience of a larger public as much as a conscious eye. One of the things that makes the photographers in "New Topographics" different is that they are not only not involved in cultural problem solving, but they are refusing to be involved in personal problem solving through their photography, either.¹⁰

Consequently, to push only one stylistic trend as the one continuous thread running through history, to support one trend in photography as being the only way into the realm of "tough" photography, is to be esthetically and critically lobotomized. The very pluralism of the modern vision stressed in "New Topographics" is denied on the level of critical theorizing; a less "proximate" view of the problem of modernism itself would yield to a broader more distant overview, a critical democracy emergent along with an "optical democracy."

Notes

1. James Hajicek, ed., "Joe Deal: New Topographics" (an interview with Joe Deal), in *Northlight 4* (Arizona State University, Tempe), May 1977, p. 9.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
3. José Ortega y Gasset, "On Point of View in the Arts," in *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968) p. 111.
4. *Northlight 4*, p. 13.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
6. "On Point of View in the Arts," p. 112.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
8. *Northlight 4*, p. 14.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 16.