

THE HOUSE OF LIGHT AND ENTROPY. INHABITING THE AMERICAN DESERT

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I know the deserts, their deserts, better than they do, since they turn their backs on their own space as the Greeks turned their backs on the sea, and I get to know more about the concrete, social life of America from the desert than I ever would from official or intellectual gatherings. American culture is heir to the deserts...

Jean Baudrillard (1988)¹

It wasn't only Baudrillard. It is, rather, a short circuit. Baudrillard and Umberto Eco and then an article in *Art Forum*, and this time written by an American, Jane Tompkins (the article later became a chapter in a best-seller on the genre of the western in literature and cinema). Jane Tompkins considered why the western privileged the desert: "It chooses the desert because its clean, spare lines, lucid spaces, and absence of ornament bring it closer to the abstract austerities of modern architectural design than any other kind of landscape would."² It is not so much the meaning of the phrase that is surprising, but rather finding the concepts of western, desert, architecture, and modern side by side. Generally we study the western to better understand the role of the landscape in the formation of American culture. So, we think about America's past. We try to analyze how the epic or tragic genres were manipulated and utilized to construct a mythical rather than a historical past. We look upon the heroes of the western as an Odysseus and Aeneas: the western heroes' wanderings and incidents along the way seemed aimed at weaving a geography, thereby constructing a topology of these new spaces, just as the wanderings and the adventures of Odysseus and Aeneas had designed the map of the Mediterranean. In this context, the desert is just one of the possible landscapes, a fact that is confirmed by the presence, in both literature and film, of many other scenarios, such as prairies, mountains, lagoons and rivers. On the other hand, we cannot deny the automatic parallel drawn between the American desert and the western from John Ford onward. There is good reason for this. The desert in the western is a bare, wild, inexorable and fierce place, where one meets only Indians and criminals; literally, beings that live outside civilization and law. The perfect scene for representation of the epic imposition of order. The anthropomorphized landscape represents another enemy that the hero must defeat. John Ford speaks of

1. Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (London and New York, Verso, 1988), p. 63; originally published as *Amerique*, Paris, Grasset, 1986.

2. Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 76.



the desert as the main protagonist of his films.³ Again, in this logic, architecture and modernity had no place.

But what kind of modern architecture is being discussed? Jane Tompkins maintains that it is a *monumental* and *monolithic* architecture. Interesting; in fact understandable in historical terms: the idea of a natural monument has a long tradition in the culture of the western world. Nevertheless, the monument and the monolith are, to say the least, problematic figures for the modern. Thus it might be useful to read what Reyner Banham, historian and critic of modern architecture, has to say of the American desert:

...The desert measurably offers immeasurable space. It is therefore an environment in which 'Modern Man' ought to feel at home — his modern painting, as in the works of Mondrian, implies a space that extends beyond the confines of the canvas; his modern architecture, as in the works of Mies van der Rohe, is a rectangular partition of a regular but infinite space; its ideal inhabitants, the sculptures of Giacometti stalking metaphysically through that space as far as it infinitely extends. And modern man's last frontier of exploration, in case you'd forgotten, is space itself—which is how we came to be stumbling about lunar landscapes that are uncomfortably like the desert of the earth.⁴

Banham confirms some terms of the equation (the desert as a space of modernity) and adds new ones: the domestic and the future. The desert is the place where modern man should feel at home. (Note, however, that Banham's 'modern man' is not the average man: Banham cites Mondrian, Giacometti, Mies van der Rohe). The desert resembles both the alien surroundings discovered by space exploration and those described by science fiction, whose themes Banham often revisits.

Monument/house: the architecture of the modern struggles with these two irreconcilable terms. Could we hypothesize that the American desert is the place where this opposition is resolved or sublimated? Could it be that to inhabit the modern means to inhabit this desert that is also, and simultaneously, the stage on which the drama of the past unfolds and future events are projected? The American desert seems to be the place where past and future collapse into the present; it is also the place where the primitive and the futurist inhabit monumentality.

Two paintings by Mark Tansey: *Robbe-Grillet Cleansing Every Object in Sight* (1981); *Purity Test* (1982). In the first of the two monochromatic canvases the French writer and filmmaker Alain Robbe-Grillet, equipped with bucket and brush, kneels in the middle of the desert and scrubs the stones strewn across the ground. Looking more

3. For example, in an interview given in 1964 Ford says: "Actually, the thing most accurately portrayed in the Western is the land. I think you can say that the real star of my Westerns has always been the land", reprinted in Robert Lyons [ed.], *My Darling Clementine: John Ford, Director*, New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 1984, p. 139.

4. Peter Reyner Banham, *Scenes in America Deserta*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1982, pp. 61-62.



closely, one realizes that what look like stones are not stones at all but miniature monuments (Stonehenge, the Sphinx, the monoliths of Monument Valley...), elementary forms and icons of various types. Judi Freedman, in a recent comment on Tansey's works, writes: "Through his determined scrubbing, Robbe-Grillet attempts to strip these stones of their content, no doubt a reference to his wish to remove hidden meanings from every object."⁵ In *Purity Test* a group of Indians on horseback looks at Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) from a rocky promontory. About this canvas Freedman writes:

Smithson had sought to create a pure image. The Indians, unaware of the spiral's function as a work of art, attempt to decipher it as a symbol instead. These Indians and *Spiral Jetty* clearly did not coexist; instead they come together as two of Tansey's trajectories, not precisely oppositions but irreconcilable forces that meet on a plane.⁶

Smithson probably did not exactly intend to create a pure image, but I will address this later. What is interesting in Tansey's paintings is how the American desert becomes the "plane" on which irreconcilable forces meet: domesticity and monumentality, past and future, primitive and civilized, art and nature.

Even if Tansey appears to confirm these hypotheses, he does not help in explaining them. Thus we start all over.

The House of Light

But the work I do is with light itself and perception. It is not about those issues; it deals with them directly in a non vicarious manner so that it is about your seeing, about your perceiving. It is about light being present in a situation where you are, rather than a record of light or an experience of seeing from another situation.

James Turrell (1985)⁷

In 1898, John Charles Van Dyke, professor of art history at Rutgers University, sick with asthma, ventures into the great American deserts seeking relief in their dry climate. He will wander for three years, alone, suffering more and more and plagued by bouts of fever, to come out of the desert in 1901 with a manuscript, *The Desert*, the first celebration of the American desert and a future cult book.⁸ (fig. 1 e 2)

5. Judi Freeman, "Metaphor and Inquiry in Mark Tansey's 'Chain of Solutions'". In: Judi Freeman (ed.), *Mark Tansey*, San Francisco/Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Chronicle Books, 1993, p. 37.

6. *Idem*, pp. 46-51.

7. Julia Brown, "Interview with James Turrell". In: Julia Brown [ed.], *Occluded Front: James Turrell*, Los Angeles, Lapis Press and The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986, p. 23.

8. Although he became famous thanks to his book on the desert, Van Dyke has never been the subject of a true monographic analysis and has been overlooked in the history of art criticism. The only article that I have been able to find so far is Peter Wild's "A Western Sun Sets in the East: The Five



We can accept the reasons that cause Van Dyke to wander through the desert... "I was just ill enough", he writes in his autobiography, "not to care about perils and morbid enough to prefer dying in the sand, alone, to passing out in a hotel with a room maid weeping at the foot of the bed".⁹ It is more difficult to understand why he stays in the desert, since his health worsens instead of improving and the solitude torments him. Van Dyke presents it as an inescapable fate: "...I began to long for the sight of familiar faces, and the sounds of friendly voices. Still I kept on alone. There seemed no alternative".¹⁰ The same things that Van Dyke himself describes as the horrors of the desert transform it into the only place where it is possible for him to survive—or is it perhaps the only place where it is possible for him to *live*? "The weird solitude", he explains in *The Desert*,

the great silence, the grim desolation, are the very things with which every desert wanderer eventually falls in love. You think that very strange perhaps? Well, the beauty of the ugly was sometime a paradox, but to-day people admit its truth; and the grandeur of the desolate is just as paradoxical, yet the desert gives it proof.¹¹

This is clearly the writing of an art critic. From the seventeenth century on one of the major preoccupations of aesthetics has been to explain the "beauty of the ugly". The elaboration of the definitions of the Picturesque and the Sublime identified sources for the pleasure derived from the contemplation of the terrible scenes offered by an implacable nature (inaccessible peaks, stormy seas, immeasurable chasms...) and of the signs caused by the painful passing of time, or by poverty (wrinkled faces, corroded rocks, ruins, twisted trunks, beggars, rags...). Thus Van Dyke speaks as a connoisseur but proposes something more interesting than the gratifying description of a "difficult" landscape. He introduces other conditions necessary for enjoyment. First the present, the now, the particular historical moment; then himself as historical subject. Others before him could not have appreciated that desert; comparing his own capabilities of perception with those of the farmers and the Indians who lived on the fringes of the arid and desolate areas of the great American desert, Van Dyke comments:

A sensitive feeling for sound, or form, or color, an impressionable nervous organization, do not belong to the man with the hoe, much less to the man with the bow. It is to be feared that they are indicative of some physical degeneration, some decline in bone and muscle, some abnormal development of emotional nature. They travel side by side with high civilization and are the premonitory symptoms of racial decay.¹²

'Appearances' Surrounding John C. Van Dyke's *The Desert*", *Western American Literature*, v. 25, n. 3, 1990, pp. 217-231.

9. Van Dyke's autobiography is still not published, and I have not been able to read the manuscript. This quote comes from Richard Shelton, "Introduction". In: John C. Van Dyke, *The Desert*, 1901 (reprinted, Peregrine Smith Books), 1980, pp. xiv-xv.

10. *Idem*, p. xxvi.

11. Van Dyke, *The Desert*, p. 19.

12. *Idem*, p. 13.



He is forced into the desert by two ailments, the first physical (his respiratory difficulty), the second more subtle and insidious: discontentment with society. Certainly the dates correspond. Only a few years before, in 1893, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, in his famous speech given to the American Historical Association during the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, had declared the frontier closed and the conquest of the "greatest gift" ever offered to civilized man, the wild territory of the West from the Alleghenies to the Pacific, completed. The destiny of America was sealed. Certainly the great expositions celebrated not only the taming of the "Wild West" but also the rapid industrialization of the country, the growth in urbanization, the incredible changes in the standard of living brought about by mechanization. On the other hand, nationalism and the corresponding faith in industry, in the governmental system, and in the arts that were called upon to celebrate and represent them were challenged by the harsh realities that were a result of those same changes.¹³ There were also pernicious dangers—dangerous uncertainties undermining that same American individuality. As Turner himself had explained, was it not the frontier that had formed the character of the ideal citizen of the United States? Now that the glory of victory and the strenuous battle to conquer the land were over, what would forge men's spirits as strongly and purely? Would not this "high civilization", these new and immense riches provoke nausea, weariness and waste, weakening the fibre of the race? This is what Van Dyke believed. In *The Money God* (1908), a book in which he sharply criticizes contemporary American society from a socioeconomic and moral standpoint, he dedicates an entire chapter (appropriately titled "Discontent") to a list of the evils that afflict the newly rich: boredom, vacuity, neurasthenia and suicidal tendencies.¹⁴

Van Dyke is the American who moves with ease in the exclusive salons of the East and yet simultaneously declares that only in the desert does he truly feel at home. In *The Open Spaces* (1922) he writes:

What a strange feeling, sleeping under the wide sky, that you belong only to the universe. You are back to your habitat, to your original environment, to your native heritage. With that feeling you snuggle down in your blankets content to let ambitions slip and the glory of the world pass by you... At last you are free. You are at home in the infinite, and your possessions, your government, your people dwindle away into needle-points of insignificance.¹⁵

13. The classic thesis on this historical period is that of Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of American Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1982. See also the exhibition catalogue *The American Renaissance: 1876-1917*, New York, The Brooklyn Museum and Pantheon Books, 1979.

14. On the neurasthenia and other "illnesses of civilization" in America see Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origin of Modernity*, New York, Basic Books, 1990.

15. John C. Van Dyke, *The Open Spaces: Incidents of Nights and Days Under the Blue Sky*, 1922 (reprinted, Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1991), pp. 20-21.



It would be unjust, however, to reduce Van Dyke's living in the desert to an escape from civilization or a "nostalgic" return to the roots of the American experience. In this case the desert would simply be revalued as the last "wild" space left in the United States, whereas his encounter with this area has more of the character of an aesthetic revelation. *The Desert* belongs in the wider context of the conception of the work of art previously elaborated by Van Dyke.

The Desert originally had a subtitle that has strangely disappeared in the most recent reprints. The complete title of the 1901 edition is: *The Desert: Further Studies in Natural Appearances*. The "further" refers to a previous work by Van Dyke, *Nature for Its Own Sake: First Studies in Natural Appearances* (1898), which in turn represents the continuation of a discussion begun some years earlier in *Art for Art's Sake: Seven University Lectures on the Technical Beauties of Paintings* (1893). In the introduction to this last, Van Dyke asserts his intention of writing on the subject of painting from the artist's point of view, ignoring the opinions of the metaphysicians and the public. He proceeds by clarifying the greatest misunderstanding between the artist and the public. The average person, Van Dyke explains, asks for the expression of "ideas" or "stories" in painting without appreciating the "...pictorial beauty which of itself is the primary aim of all painting".¹⁶ The painter is neither writer, scientist, philosopher, historian, nor preacher; he does not possess the same qualities and background, nor does he strive for the same goals. "As a Painter", writes Van Dyke, "he has one sense and one faculty, both of which, by the necessities of his calling, are perhaps abnormally developed. The sense is that of sight, and the training of it has enabled him to see more beauties and deeper meanings than the great majority of mankind. The faculty lies in his ability to make known, to reveal to mankind, these discovered beauties and imports of nature by the means of form, color, and their modifications."¹⁷ The artist doesn't reason; he observes. The artist does not recount what he thinks abstractly but presents what he sees concretely. According to this logic, landscape painting, a pure play of forms and colors, light and shadow in which even the title is superfluous to complete "pictorial" enjoyment, is celebrated as the highest practicable genre while that of history is degraded as "illustration". Van Dyke admits that the idea exists in painting but he specifies that the "pictorial idea" is understandable only through the sense of sight to the exclusion of all the other senses and functions as a stimulant to our emotions more than to our intellect.

If the artists of Greece had been forced to represent the ideal and those of the Renaissance to become educators and decorators, modern art has become the "means of sympathetic and emotional expression given to the individual man".¹⁸ In Van Dyke's discussion such a change justifies "that essentially modern product, the

16. John C. Van Dyke, *Art for Art's Sake: Seven University Lectures on the Technical Beauties of Painting*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893, p. 6.

17. *Idem*, p. 8.

18. *Idem*, p. 25.



landscape",¹⁹ one that differs from the classical or romantic landscape in which the painter gleaned his subject matter from the historian, from the poet, from the novelist. In the past, for example, "The desert existed not so much for its white light, rising heat, and waving atmosphere, as for the home of the roaming lion, or the treacherous highway of the winding Bedouin caravan".²⁰ The contemporary painter has rejected such associations to concentrate solely on the beauty of form and color in a nature considered independently of human actions.

It is tempting to trace a parallel between Van Dyke's oeuvre and biography and those of his more famous contemporary Bernard Berenson. Both are Americans. Both write and travel a great deal. Both can be considered "connoisseurs" rather than art historians. We know how Berenson combined a literary criticism modelled after that of Walter Pater with the scientific methods of Morelli in order to fashion innovative attributions. Van Dyke, with equal fastidiousness, presented to the American public (in twelve slim volumes published in 1914 with the title *New Guides to Old Masters*) the most important collections of paintings conserved in European museums. In 1923, with *Rembrandt and His School*, he scandalized both critics and collectors by reducing the nearly eighty paintings traditionally attributed to Rembrandt to fifty, basing his findings on the minute observation of microscopic technical and stylistic discrepancies. Ernst H. Gombrich, Roberto Salvini and many others have demonstrated that Berenson's oeuvre must be placed within the milieu of the theories of visual perception developed in the aesthetics of Konrad Fiedler, Adolf von Hildebrand, Alois Riegl, and Heinrich Wölfflin.²¹ The sources of the "pure visibility" of Van Dyke (*Sichtbarkeit* in the terms of the Viennese school) are not as clear.²² As a means of maintaining the independence of his own impressions about the work of art, Van Dyke intentionally refused to read contemporary literature. Nevertheless, he continually cites John Ruskin and seems to consider him much more than just a simple point of reference.

The obsession with sight, the almost hallucinatory concentration of the gaze had already been one of the central and more modern elements of Ruskin's thought. Ruskin has already been spoken of as a "visibilist" before the letter, and Rosalind Krauss has recently made Ruskin's childhood the point of departure for a study on modernism and the modernist vocation of looking.²³ For Ruskin the child, "playing"

19. *Idem, ibidem.*

20. *Idem*, p. 26.

21. I am referring to: E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, 1959, reprinted, London, Phaidon Press, 1977; Roberto Salvini, *La critica d'arte della pura visibilità e del formalismo*, Milan, Garzanti, 1977; Philippe Junod, *Transparence et Opacité: Essai sur les fondements théoriques de l'Art Moderne*, Montreux, Editions l'Age d'Homme, 1976.

22. As I have already mentioned, the history of art criticism has overlooked Van. However, see Craig Hugh Smyth and Peter M. Lukehart, *The Early Years of Art History in the United States*, Princeton, NJ, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, 1993, regarding art history in the United States during these years.

23. Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1993.



meant the fascinated and fixed observation of the decorative motifs of the drapes and the carpets at home. The total polarization of the essence of being in sight, which he theorized and practiced throughout his career, is an open window on abstraction. The world of tangibles and meanings dissolves into pure form and color. Ruskin invokes *the innocent eye*:

The perception of solid Form is entirely a matter of experience. We see nothing but flat colours; and it is only by a series of experiments that we find out that a stain of black or gray indicates the dark side of solid substance, or that a faint hue indicates that the object in which it appears is far away. The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the *innocence of the eye*; that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify, – as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight.²⁴

He doesn't seek this visual innocence only in painting. In the end, for Ruskin, the act of seeing is more important than the process of reproducing. In *The Elements of Drawing* he affirms: "I believe that the sight is a more important thing than the drawing; and I would rather teach drawing that my pupils learn to love Nature, than teach the looking at Nature that they may learn to draw".²⁵ Observing nature is an act closer to reading than to drawing; a way of reading, however, in which the characters take on the appearance of decorative, symbolic and hieroglyphic motifs. So, for Ruskin, writing and travelling are the actions that correspond to seeing. To travel means to see, to see implies to describe, "as plainly as possible", exactly that which one sees.²⁶ This is Ruskin's mission. This is the lesson mastered by Van Dyke.

There remains, however, a fundamental difference between Ruskin and Van Dyke. Even though he preaches the abstraction of the gaze, its concentration on pure form and pure color, Ruskin does not relinquish theorizing a superior level of "vision" and interpretation in which nature, beings, and things become invested with symbolic significance. Ruskin cannot ignore the moral question, nor can he forget his own religious conception of nature. The pleasure obtained from his burning visual passion is justified by the fact that observing nature for Ruskin means observing God and all His works. Seeing is also an act of adoration. We know how much Ruskin was perturbed by the scientific thought of the time that more and more distanced itself from the biblical version of creation. In spite of his love for geology he asked that the

24. Quoted in Christopher Newall, "Ruskin and the Art of Drawing", *John Ruskin and the Victorian Eye*, exhibit catalog, New York, Harry N. Abrams Inc, in association with the Phoenix Art Museum, 1993, pp. 81-115:94.

25. *Idem*, p. 81.

26. For these themes see also Lindsay Smith, *Victorian Photography, Painting and Poetry. The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.



geologists leave him in peace. He claimed to hear the clinking of their hammers at the end of every line of the Bible.

Van Dyke looks at nature for nature, no sentimentality. In the introduction to *Nature for Its Own Sake*, Van Dyke explains:

The word "Nature", as it is used in these pages, does not comprehend animal life in any form whatever. It is applied only to lights, skies, clouds, waters, lands, foliage... Nature is neither classic nor romantic; it is simply—nature. Nor is it, as some would have us to think, a sympathetic friend of mankind endowed with semi-human emotions. Mountains do not "frown", trees do not "weep", nor do skies "smile"; they are quite incapable of doing so. Indeed, so far as any sympathy with humanity is concerned, "the last of thy brothers might vanish from the face of the earth, and not a needle of the pine branches would tremble".²⁷

Nature for Its Own Sake is not a book meant for painters. The question of representation has been completely surpassed in that everything is already there, present: a scene whose elements, colors, and lights need not be selected or rearranged. After having dispensed with the question of meaning —, like art, needs no interpretation because it has no hidden thoughts and teaches nothing — Van Dyke eliminates the mediating figure of the painter. What remains is the observer, or better yet, the eye of the observer. In these books in which Van Dyke systematically explores nature, the narrator has neither a body nor any sense other than that of sight. Heat, cold, thirst, hunger, encounters, dialogues, desires: everything is suppressed in order to give room to the "plain description" of what is seen. Numerous scientific observations are utilized to clarify the mechanisms of perception: digressions on the theme of refraction, reflections on the effects of humidity in the air, considerations of the processes of erosion that have brought to light materials of a certain tonality, analyses of the changing of colors brought on by the shifting angles of the light rays with the rising and the setting of the sun. Van Dyke describes what *appears*. He knows the current thesis on the mechanism of perception: he cites Charles Blanc, Eugène Chevreul, and the experiments of the French Impressionists.

The American desert is the house of light and color. This is the great aesthetic revelation that Van Dyke experienced. Everything in the desert is colored, even the air. Van Dyke speaks of yellow, saffron-colored, rose-colored, azure, steel blue, ruby-red, topaz, lilac, and violet air. The colors are saturated, so intense as to appear distinct from any substance. The absence of humidity and the presence of dust particles suspended in the air create dense fields of color completely

27. John C. Van Dyke, *Nature for its own Sake: First Studies in Natural Appearances*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989, pp. ix-x. To this first study on "natural appearances" Van Dyke adds (in addition to *The Desert*), *The Opal Sea: Continued Studies in Impressions and Appearances*, 1906; *The Mountain: Renewed Studies in Impressions and Appearances*, 1916; *The Grand Canyon of the Colorado: Recurrent Studies in Impressions and Appearances*, 1920; and *The Meadows: Familiar Studies in the Commonplace*, 1926.



independent of the form and real position of things. The desert is also the house of illusions. A whole chapter of *The Desert* is dedicated to them, and it is exactly the improbability and the abstraction of these illusions that enchants Van Dyke: "And there we have come back again to that beauty in landscape which lies not in the lines of mountain, valley and plain, but in the almost formless masses of color and light".²⁸ Living in the desert means inhabiting a space defined by light, imbued with color. The desert is the house of pure visibility; this is why Van Dyke feels at home there. Total triumph of the visible. Complete evacuation of meaning. Art/Nature: no longer in opposition, but a simultaneous happening. On the "plain" of the desert the mediating figure of the painter becomes unnecessary: there is no need for imitation or representation. The "innocent gaze" of modern man recognizes and inhabits this space as a space of pure perception, an artistic space and no longer a natural one. The nature of the desert is in fact denatured by a gaze that no longer "reads" form and its meaning but strives to perceive only the abstraction of light and color.

It has been said that Van Dyke's entering the desert and losing himself in fascination corresponds to entering and losing oneself in the infinite galleries of the greatest of all museums. I believe instead that Van Dyke stepped into a space that could be entered only in that particular historical moment: the impossible space of representation. Van Dyke's eye does not see but "inhabits" light and color. It seems that this is what impelled the first generation of American modernist artists to go to the desert. For Georgia O'Keeffe it was the only possible home. In the twenties she wrote from Taos, New Mexico: "I am West again and it is as fine as I remembered it – maybe finer – There is nothing to say about it except the fact that for me it is the only place".²⁹ The desert, she continued is "...*painting country*. Out here, half your work is done for you".³⁰ A reaction confirmed in the negative by Stuart Davis:

I spent three or four months there [New Mexico] in 1923—until late fall—but did not do much work because the place itself is so interesting. I don't think you could do much work there except in a literal way, because the place is always there in such a dominating way. You always have to look at it.³¹

First Possible Conclusion

Q. What do you mean by an architecture of space?

A. I am interested in the weights, pressures, and feeling of the light inhabiting space itself and in seeing this atmosphere rather than the walls.

28. Van Dyke, *The Desert*, op. cit., p. 127.

29. Quoted in Roxana Robinson, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, 1989 (reprinted New York, Harper Perennial, 1990), p. 36.

30. *Ibid.* On Georgia O'Keeffe in New Mexico see also Christine Taylor Patten (text) and Myron Wood (photography), *O'Keeffe at Abiquiú*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995.

31. Quoted in Katherine Plake Hough and Michael Zakian, *Transforming the Western Image in 20th Century American Art*, Palm Springs, CA, Palm Springs Desert Museum, 1992, p. 26.



Q. Are you talking about volume?

A. Atmosphere is volume, but it is within volume. Seeing volume as a whole is one thing, but there are densities and structuring within a space that have to do with a penetration of vision and a way of seeing into it.

Q. Seeing, as opposed to being inside it?

A. You can inhabit a space with consciousness without physically entering it, as in a dream. You can be in it physically and see it in that manner also. But whether you're in a space and looking at it or outside and looking into it, it still has qualities of atmosphere, density, and grain so that your vision will penetrate differently in some areas than others. Some areas will be more translucent or more opaque, and other areas will be free to the penetration of vision.

[...]

Q. Are there references for the use of color or density of light or the particular experience you're creating? It is something that you have seen elsewhere or experienced before?

A. A lucid dream or a flight through deep, clear blue skies of winter in northern Arizona – experiences like these I use as source... Spaces within space, not necessarily delineated by cloud formations or storms or things like that, but by light qualities, by seeing, and by the nature of the air in certain areas.

Interview with James Turrell (1985)³²

It is possible to align minimalist criticism of the museum and architecture with the choice of the American desert as the site for works of art that, as Turrell explains, are not “objects that go up an elevator into an eastside apartment”.³³ The work of art is no longer subordinated to or contained by an architecture, be it that of the museum or of the house, but creates in and of itself an atmospheric architecture intended to be inhabited by light and by sight. James Turrell has been at work for years on the construction (reconstruction?) of Roden Crater in the Painted Desert of Arizona. He utilizes a natural formation, the cone of an extinct volcano to create a “powerful place”. A series of spaces – “bunkers” excavated in the crater – will be filled with light. Roden Crater is not just an invitation for us to redefine our notions about art, architecture and living through the mere use and manipulation of light and space. Roden Crater will be an architecture suspended between geological time and astronomical time. Situated in a desert that “uncovers an enormous quantity of time”, the crater will become a celestial observatory.³⁴ Balanced between a remote past and an infinite future Roden Crater questions us about its essence: is Turrell restoring the ruins of an ancient natural monument or is he creating an impossible monument to the future? One cannot help but recall the “New Monuments” of Robert Smithson.

32. Julia Brown, “Interview with James Turrell”, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-19.

33. *Idem*, p. 13.

34. On Roden Crater see *Mapping Spaces: A Topological survey of the Work of James Turrell* (published on the occasion of an exhibit at Kunsthalle Basel), New York, Peter Blum Editions, 1987.



The House of Entropy

I have a ranch on the north end of the range overlooking the Rio Grande called Ayala de Chinati. This has two small houses which I've thought a lot about, but done little about, since I hate to damage the land around them. Here, everywhere, the destruction of new land is a brutality. Nearby a man bought a nearly untouched ranch 3 or 4 years ago, bulldozed roads everywhere so he could shoot deer without walking and last fall died.

Donald Judd ³⁵

It seems that in the desert it is difficult to concentrate on architecture in the present and independent of its surroundings. The same can be said about the landscape. One looks at the ground and at the boulders and thinks of their past and their future: this is perhaps because the desert seems to be a lesson in geology. There are no trees, bushes, grasses, or mirrors of water to dress the skeleton of the earth. There is no sign of youth or laughter, nothing of the reassuring or the picturesque. There are only bare bones on which it is easy to read the processes of erosion and calcification. And the time spans are vast; they are counted a thousand years at a time. How long did it take to dig this canyon? How long did it take to pulverize the less resistant rock surrounding the monoliths of Monument Valley? How long did it take to dry up what was once a whole sea on whose banks rose cities and villages?

One of the most beautiful chapters of *The Desert* describes in extraordinarily poetic and agonizing terms the process of the evaporation of an ancient sea (known today as the Salton Sea) that left behind it a chain of beaches upon which can be seen the traces of settlements created and then abandoned in the search for water. Van Dyke speaks of the incredible beauty of the light and colors perceived from the bottom of its dried basin. This is one of the landscapes that most fascinates Reyner Banham, an aficionado of Van Dyke. The strange thing is that Banham, like everyone else, is unable to verify the truth of Van Dyke's statements. Due to accidents during drainage and irrigation projects, the ancient sea was flooded by the waters of the Colorado River from 1905 to 1907 – that is to say, shortly after the publication of *The Desert*. Van Dyke had foreseen the vulnerability of that precarious beauty. Banham is ambivalent about the event. He complains vaguely about this casual destructive action, but he can't quite condemn it:

Salton Sea, calm as death under its veil of mist, reflecting the stranded trivia of human construction in its mirror-smooth surface. This accidental sea may indeed be – Hell, no. It is! – as beautiful as the back shores of the Venetian Lagoons. But it

35. Donald Judd, "Ayala de Chinati". In: *Donald Judd Architektur*, Edition Cantz, 1992, pp. 55-63:60.



is not the same beauty. It will be forever shot through with the irony that this beauty is the product of a careless human ambition to produce something entirely different.³⁶

From 1963 to 1964, J. G. Ballard wrote *The Drought*, the account of an ecological cataclysm, one that is easily imaginable in the near future. The accumulation of pollution has caused the formation of a film on the surface of the seas and oceans of the earth, which impedes the evaporation of water and thus also the formation of clouds and rain. The catastrophic drought that results is experienced by the reader through the eyes of the protagonist, Dr. Charles Ramson, who witnesses the drying up of the large river next to which rises the city in which he lives. The area is evacuated and Ramson is among the last to leave. At first he hopes to isolate himself in these new sterile lands, "putting an end to time and its erosions".³⁷ He lives in a houseboat, marooned on the sand, in which he has collected mementos. The most important of these is a paperweight of limestone that as a child he had cut out from the gypsum of a hill, the shell fossil imprisoned in the surface of which carries a "quantum of jurassic time, like a jewel". In the end he is forced to depart, leaving the city prey to fires and partially submerged in the sand. Fish, birds, and human beings have perished by the thousands. His departure is the beginning of a long voyage toward the "bitter sea", in search of water but without possibility of salvation. At the end of the story, Ramson returns and ponders the meaning of his return journey. Initially he believes he is returning to the past to take up the thread of his previous life. He then realizes that the dry river bed is carrying him in the opposite direction:

...In the opposite direction, forward into zones of time future where the unresolved residues of the past would appear smoothed and rounded, muffled by the detritus of time, like images in a clouded mirror. Perhaps these residues were the sole elements contained in the future, and would have the bizarre and fragmented quality of the debris through which he was now walking. None the less they would all be merged and resolved in the soft dust of the drained bed.³⁸

The novel ends with Ramson entering a state of living death, and he never realizes that it has begun to rain again.

Ballard has never really visited the United States. In an autobiographical fragment he explains that, all things considered, he prefers not having seen them; in this way he succeeded in avoiding all the clichés of the American landscape in his stories: "I had to invent my own landscape, and I invented something which was much truer to myself and also much closer to the Surrealists (who were my main inspiration). In

36. Peter Reyner Banham, "The Man-Mauled Desert". In: *Desert Cantos: Photographs by Richard Misrach*, exhibit catalog (Albuquerque, NM), The University of New Mexico Press, 1987, pp.1-6: 3-4.

37. J.G. Ballard, *The Drought*, 1965 (reprinted London, Triad Panther Books, 1985), p. 81.

38. *Idem*, p. 152.



fact, I had to invent my own America".³⁹ It is unsettling to realize just how much this imagined America is immediately recognizable and believable; the coincidence between the description of the progression of the drought in Van Dyke and in Ballard is perturbing up to the last "surreal" detail: the basin of the Salton Sea becomes accidentally inundated and Ramson doesn't realize that it has begun to rain again. Both accounts are pervaded by a sense of ineluctability and inanity. The landscape that Van Dyke sees and the one that Ballard imagines seem suspended, like Turrell's crater, between the past and the future, between geology and astronomy. This is not to say that they are in the present; rather, they create a present in which the past and the future collapse on the plain (so to speak) of the desert.

The Surrealists are not Ballard's only inspiration. In 1956 when he is still just beginning his career as a writer of science fiction, the famous Independent Group exhibition *This Is Tomorrow* opens in London. Science fiction, with other images of popular culture after World War II, is a central part of the exhibition and has from the beginning fascinated the members of the Independent Group: Eduardo Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton, John Voelcker, John McHale, Peter and Alison Smithson, and Reyner Banham.⁴⁰ Ballard already knew the group; like them he was interested in looking at consumer goods, advertising images, popular cinema and "the media landscape" with a new eye. It seemed to Ballard that the research of the IG had something in common with that of the new science fiction. This is what impelled him to visit *This Is Tomorrow*. Years later he will still remember very clearly the impact of the show:

Richard Hamilton had on show his famous little painting... And there were a lot of other Pop artifacts there, which impressed me a great deal. It struck me that these were the sorts of concerns that the SF writer should be interested in. Science Fiction should be concerned with the here and now, not with alien planets but with what was going on in the world in the mid-'50s.⁴¹

Through the exhibit Ballard becomes friendly with Paolozzi, Hamilton and Banham, some of the members of the IG.

Even though Ballard is interested in the experiments of the IG, he disdains the science fiction sources utilized by the group. Ballard does not like the robots, the spaceships, the futuristic weapons and technology, or the genre of space fantasy. He focuses on the processes of deterioration and transformation of the environment and

39. J.G. Ballard, "From Shanghai to Shepperton", *Re/Search* 8/9, 1984, pp. 112-124:118.

40. On the relationships between Ballard, the IG and Smithson, see Eugene Tsai, "The Sci-Fi Connection: The IG, J.G. Ballard, and Robert Smithson". In: *Modern Dreams: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Pop*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1988, pp. 70-75. On the subject of the IG, see Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*, London and New York, Routledge, 1988; Anne Massey, *The Independent Group. Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain, 1945-1959*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1995.

41. Quoted in Eugene Tsai, "The Sci-Fi Connection...", *op. cit.*, p. 73.



on how they affects their inhabitants, as in *The Drought*, or in *Terminal Beach* (in which the protagonist, the anti-hero Traven, goes to and stays in the deserted place where a nuclear bomb has exploded), or again in *The Cage of Sand* (set in a Florida that has become a desert). Ballard's gaze is an entropic one. The desert that fascinates him is that of *Mad Max II* (*The Road Warrior*, 1981, by George Miller) and not that of *Star Wars* (1977, by George Lucas). It is the desert after a catastrophe, in which can be seen the signs, traces and monuments of a banal, everyday, domestic past (the paperweight with the imprisoned fossil, a jewel of time). It is the desert of de-evolution. Ballard's desert is populated; strange figures roam it, archeologists of the future. They unearth residues of the present – of their present and of ours: cars, machines, houses. They are uncertain; like Ramson, they do not know whether they are contemplating their past or their future.

Robert Smithson, in America in the sixties, like the IG in England in the fifties, uses science fiction, including Ballard's, to formulate a new aesthetic. We know that Smithson opens his famous paper *Entropy and the New Monuments* with a quote from a science fiction novel by John Taine, *The Time Stream*: "On rising to my feet, and peering across the green glow on the desert, I perceived that the monument against which I had slept, was but one of thousands. Before me stretched long parallel avenues, clear to the far horizon, of similar broad, low pillars".⁴² For Smithson, the images evoked by Taine weren't science fiction; instead, they suggested a new kind of monumentality that had much in common with the works of Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Sol LeWitt, Dan Flavin. The new monuments celebrated an "inactive history", the future as the "obsolete in reverse", the universe transformed into an "all-encompassing sameness". What in physics is called entropy. (LeWitt prefers the term "sub-monumental", especially when referring to his proposal to insert a fragment of goldwork by Cellini in a block of cement; is this Ballard's fossil?).

Less well known is the beginning section of *The Artist as Site-Seer or a Dintorphic Essay*, a work of Smithson's that long remained unpublished. Here, Smithson quotes Ballard's *Terminal Beach*: "The system of megaliths now provided a complete substitute for those functions of his mind which gave to it its sense of the sustained rational order of time and space...".⁴³ Smithson is interested in the recurring appearance of monoliths in Ballard's desert, in particular those described in another story, *The Waiting Ground*. There, inscriptions are chiselled into great rectangles of stone. They are, Smithson explains by quoting Ballard, "strings of meaningless ciphers...intricate cuneiform glyphs...minute carved symbols...odd cross-hatched symbols that seemed to be numerals".⁴⁴ Smithson

42. Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments", *Art Forum*, 1966, reprinted in Nancy Holt (ed.), *The Writing of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations*, New York, New York University Press, 1979, pp. 9-18:9.

43. Robert Smithson, "The Artist as Site-Seer; or, A Dintorphic Essay". In: Eugene Tsai (ed.), *Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawings, Collages, Writings*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1991, pp. 74-80:74.



asks himself if there is a language at the root of these monuments, just as mathematics lies at the root of geometry. The characters are enigmatic. Do they allude to a lost language of the past? or one readable in the future? Of what is the monumental monolith a memory? Smithson explains that it is a monolith to whose aesthetic we have been accustomed by "The much denigrated architecture of Park Avenue known as 'cold glass boxes,' along with the Manneristic modernity of Philip Johnson, [which] have helped to foster the entropic mood".⁴⁵ What is *Spiral Jetty's* perfect geometry a memory of, with its complex crystalline formation destined to disappear in a post-apocalyptic landscape? A future scenario that dissolves in a prehistoric, deserted past? Smithson's spiral is enigmatic, like the monolith of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) that appears for the first time in the desert, at the dawn of civilization, and then again in space in the age of spaceships.

It is strange that even though Banham knows and esteems Ballard, he does not relate Ballard's stories to the American desert or to the chain of entropic associations that Smithson, Judd, Michael Heizer, Walter DeMaria bring to bear on that scenario. Instead, Banham looks to Frank Herbert's *Dune* or Ray Bradbury's martians. Strange, but not coincidental: Banham is not much interested in Land Art or Minimalism. He defines Smithson's sculptures in the desert as "pure creative will exercised on a defenseless landscape".⁴⁶ For Banham the most spectacular artifact in the American desert is the solar telescope at Kitt Peak:

...It looks, so hugely and imperturbably elegant sitting there at the junction of earth and sky, humming busily to itself as all large enigmatic machines should. Its forms are as clean-cut as those of an abstract concept... And it leaves an image of absolute clarity on the retina of memory, a monumental sign of human presence inscribed on a background of empty air, above a brown desert of unfathomable beauty.⁴⁷

Compare to this:

...The desert earth works of sculptors like Robert Smithson, or John Heizer [sic] are trifles, as is the minimalist sculpture of an artist like Robert Morris. I happen to know that Morris is an admirer of Stonehenge, so that he might also see the point of all this as a henge of technology, shaped and textured very like one of his own sculptures, but multiplied not only by the sheer factor of size, but also by the factor of purpose whose absence cripples so much modern art.⁴⁸

It seems that Banham's modernist moralism keeps him from grasping the extent to which these *earth works* obey the logic of the American desert.⁴⁹

44. *Idem*, p. 75.

45. Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments", *op.cit.*, p. 11.

46. Peter Reyner Banham, *Scenes in America Deserta*, *op.cit.*, p. 86.

47. *Idem*, pp. 188-189.

48. *Idem*, p. 188.

49. For Banham's cultural and educational background, see Nigel Whiteley, "Banham and 'Otherness'. Reyner Banham (1922-1988) and his quest for an *architecture autre*", *Architectural History*,



Yet Banham intuitively grasps the entropic fascination of the American desert. He roams the desert preoccupied with the aesthetics of its ruins, with the state of preservation of its monuments and the future of its buildings. He is fascinated by the meticulous perfection with which the train station of Kelso has been preserved, a perfection that renders it not so much an oasis in the desert as something preserved in a bubble beyond time. He compares it to the ungainly ruins of Marl Spring or of Government Hole, which he defines "a sick joke". He looks at Las Vegas, which had already fascinated Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, as the symbol of the impermanence of man in the desert. It appears to him as an image from science fiction, a human encampment on a hostile planet, doomed to perish from the very beginning: "...it is already beginning to fade", writes Banham, "as energy becomes more expensive and the architecture less inventive. It won't blow away in the night, but you begin to wish it might, because it will never make noble ruins, and it will never discover how to fade away gracefully".⁵⁰ Banham offers many other examples, but two are particularly significant: those which refer to the architectures of Frank Lloyd Wright and Paolo Soleri. This is how Banham concludes the chapter dedicated to them:

In the end, it seems to me, neither Wright nor Soleri has produced structures that are, in any normal sense, sympathetic or proper to the desert. Both brought an inherently alien vision with them and imposed it on the desert scene, and the results are, in their way, as foreign as the mad townscape of Las Vegas.⁵¹

Perhaps Banham is once again blinded by his functionalist interpretation of modernism.

Banham maintains that Wright has built dwellings too light for a climate that demands thick walls to temper the extreme changes in temperature. This objection is perfectly consistent on the part of Banham, the author of *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (1969) among other books. However, if we consider Wright's houses as entropic monuments, their "lightness" takes on a completely different meaning. The first house built by Wright in the desert was Ocotillo Camp, an encampment built in 1927 with the help of his "apprentices", so that he could closely monitor the progress of a project – never realized – for the San Marcos hotel. The camp was situated in a commanding position, on a vast rocky summit. The design followed the "character" of the Arizona desert landscape. Here Wright transforms his preferred straight line into a broken line to achieve harmony with the dominant lines of the "astounding" scenario of the desert. Wright draws inspiration from the desert: "The great nature-masonry we see rising from the great mesa floor is all the noble architecture Arizona has to show at present and that is not architecture at all. But it is

v. 33, 1990, pp. 188-221; Alan Colquhoun, "Reyner Banham. A Reading for the 1980", *Domus*, Milan, 1988, pp. 18-24.

50. Peter Reyner Banham, *Scenes in America Deserta*, op.cit., p. 43.

51. *Idem*, pp. 86-87.



inspiration".⁵² Wright explains in his autobiography that the encampment is the most suitable kind of home:

...A camp we shall call it. A human inhabitant of unmitigated wilderness of quotidian change – unchangeably changing Change. For our purpose we need fifteen cabins in all. Since all will be temporary we will call them ephemera. And you will soon see them like a group of gigantic butterflies with scarlet wing spots, conforming gracefully to the crown of outcropping of black splintered rock gently uprising from the desert floor.⁵³

The shacks, of simple lumber, had entrances and ceilings covered with canvas cloth hung from a frame and were connected to a low fence painted dusty rose. The isosceles triangles of canvas at the ends of the roofs were scarlet like the flower of the ocotillo, a desert plant. Even though everything was short-lived, it had been built and planned with great care. And everything disappeared within a year. Banham relates that only fragments and traces remain on the rocky promontory. The encampment had been specifically planned for this result, a disquieting site of the archeology of the modern. Wright is proud that the image and the idea of his camp were preserved by something essentially modern and mechanical – photographs published in German and Dutch magazines a couple of months after it was completed.

A similar strategy was subsequently used for the construction of Taliesin West, Wright's winter residence in the desert, built years later on more solid foundations. But once again, Wright insists on lightness and on the idea of encampment. Even if the walls and fireplaces are made of solid local stones, held together by cement, the coverings are made of impractical cloth through which the rain enters freely. The theme is again that of impermanence. Wright's house is ready to become a ruin, an enigmatic monument. One of his apprentices points to a mysterious recurrence of a geometric motif. Large rocks found in the general area had been brought to the camp and set up as sculptures. On those rocks one could see pictograms traced by "prehistoric campers".⁵⁴ One in particular represented two interwoven spirals at right angles. This interlacement, combined with a red square, will become the mark of the Fellowship created by Wright. The enigmatic symbol appears on the Fellowship's letterhead and the road signs that lead to the way to the camp. It indicates the entrance. It can be seen in other forms in the construction of the camp itself.⁵⁵ Even if one does not want to stretch the interpretation, it is impossible not to draw certain parallels. Wright does not mention entropy explicitly, but what other message could we glean from his architecture? These are houses and at the same time monuments, designed and constructed with an eye to the past and to the future. Inspired by the ancient architecture of geological

52. Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography*, New York, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943, p. 309.

53. *Idem*, p. 310.

54. Curtis Besinger, *Working with Mr. Wright: What it was Like*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 47.

55. Donald Leslie Johnson talks extensively on Ocotillo Camp and Taliesin West in *Frank Lloyd Wright versus America: The 1930's*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1990.



formations and the works of its prehistoric inhabitants, they prefigure the remains that they will leave behind: fragments in the case of Ocotillo; heavy walls of stone covered and marked with mysterious hieroglyphs in the case of Taliesin West.

Paolo Soleri was one of Wright's apprentices. He enjoyed a certain degree of popularity during the seventies and early eighties thanks to the gospel that he preached together with his architecture. For a long time Soleri succeeded in convincing young architectural students to work for free on the construction of his fantastic and impossible project, Arcosanti, near Phoenix, Arizona. The idea was to create a high-tech, high-density community – gigantic, but compact and ecologically correct. Arcosanti is only one of the "arcologies" that Soleri dreamed up and designed. His arcologies are an answer to entropy and are situated in uninhabitable locations. Novanoah I, for example, is intended for continental platforms or the open sea, while Babelnoah is destined for a flat coastal region. Arcoforte rises from reefs, Logology on hills, Arkkibuz in the desert (probably that of North Africa), Veladiga on top of a dam...there is even one in space: Asteromo. The only arcology that was ever started is, in fact, Arcosanti, a city for 25,000 people built on a rocky terrain similar to the landscape in which the Indians built their pueblos. Clearly the ancient indigenous people are one of Soleri's reference points. Another is undoubtedly Piranesi: compare the plan of Arcosanti to that of "Un Ampio e Magnifico Collegio". (Banham compares living at Arcosanti to camping amid the great ruins of the Baths of Caracalla.) Piranesi, dark poet of the ruins of ancient Rome, an impossible architect, is an appropriate source. Arcosanti will never be completed but will always remain in a state of ruin, an entropic monument, a ruin of the future like those described by Smithson. Perhaps it is not coincidental that *arcology*, the neologism used by Soleri to designate the monumental habitations of the future, sounds so much like *archeology*.

