

JENNIFER HUNTER

## LANDING IN CALIFORNIA

California, like all human geography, is a territory and a concept, a real space and an imaginary site. Established in the sixteenth century by Spanish colonialism, maintained by Mexican nationalism, overlain by U.S. expansion, transformed by waves of immigration from the eastern United States as well as Europe, Asia, and Central and South America, California exists as much in myths of popular culture and the winds of neoliberalism, as in its urban centers, windy deserts, high mountains, rough coastline, and cultivated fields. To categorize art on the basis of a geographical boundary is to presume a national, historical coherence or correspondence between different works of art produced within that boundary. Similarly, to categorize art on the basis of gender presumes some quality or condition shared by a group of artists because of their gender. To think broadly about women artists working in California is to look for correspondences or connections between their works that might perhaps reveal a new conceptual and historical terrain.

Such is the goal of this essay, to examine cartographic and mapmaking interventions in land (as a concrete medium and as an ideological construct) and the state (as a social system, a political territory, and an economic condition) in the work of women artists working in California. By assessing geographical and, to a lesser extent, gender-specific influences on the work, it is possible to chart some of the historical and present relations that exist between women and the state, represented by

three conceptual frameworks: land as metaphor, land as the condition of labor, and land as environment.

#### Land as Metaphor

Metonymy is a linguistic term describing a rhetorical expression of substitution by association; for example, when a seal is used to denote a ship. The part-object or associated object stands in for the actual referent. The semantic structure of metonymic phrases also occurs in iconographic terms, in museum displays or collections. For example, when an object stands in for the person who owned it, or when a painting represents a particular art movement or historical era. The object represents both itself and a larger concept to which it refers and with which it is materially linked.

In the second half of the twentieth century, land itself has frequently been used as a metaphor in works of art—particularly in sculpture, conceptual art, and installation art. Fragments of earth (usually dirt, sand, and rock) have been brought into exhibition space as a way of pointing to a larger geography or territory beyond or outside gallery walls. Although the focus of this essay is the recent work of women artists working in California, I begin with a brief look at works by Walter de Maria and Robert Rauschenberg from the 1960s. This comparison, which may seem out of place in a book about women artists, allows

important distinctions to emerge concerning the use and the conception of land as a medium and as social space.

#### Art in the House

Walter de Maria and Robert Rauschenberg

In 1968, Walter de Maria exhibited his first Earth Room, a gallery space filled with earth piled 24 centimeters high. That same year Robert Rauschenberg produced his first *Red Sky*, a sculptural work that included a set of containers holding rocks, soil, and other organic material. Both artists established an oscillation between inside (gallery) and outside (rural location) that relied upon the metonymic quality of the earth as evidence of its own regime.

A relatively radical gesture at the time, the work contributed to new conceptions of land use, yet certain ideas remained unchanged. Land was represented in these works primarily as a formal resource or as an elemental substance without history. The artists addressed questions of the land that were more physical than cultural. Mediated through this instrumental lens, the work became purified of both use and exchange value. With an emphasis on thresholds and reflections, the artists emphasized the perceptual habits of an unadorned human body and human gaze to the completion of the work, intentionally or unconsciously representing signs of social specificity, and biography.

#### Women Geology: Vija Celmins

A similar kind of anonymity marks the work of Vija Celmins, who lived in California between 1971 and 1976, and is perhaps best known for her remarkable photo-realistic graphite drawings of the weathered surface of the Pacific Ocean. In these finely crafted small-scale images, the sculptural surface of the sea merges seamlessly with the surface of the paper, creating a vertiginous illusion of surface and depth. Besides the traditions of landscape painting and those of scientific illustration considerably account for the precision and form of Celmins's *Untitled Ocean Drawings* (1970s to 1976). If anything, the closely cropped views of the water have the quality of a portrait of a particular moment in time. Yet, their subject is so vast that the drawings always appear as a mere fragment of that which they truly represent. The same is the case with her star field paintings, where limited views of the night sky evoke an expanse far beyond the limits of paper or canvas. In these two-dimensional works, Celmins creates the substance within her own floating imaginary grid that divides the visible world into discrete but unique meridional units. The sections of ocean she draws appear literally lifted from the surface in which they were created—a metaphor for the means whole of the sea.

Like Rauschenberg and de Maria, Celmins experiments with the viewer's phenomenological rela-

tionship to land and water through a formal, almost abstract vocabulary. Yet, her works evoke the conceptual logic of a metonymic rather than a mimetic domain. Instead of creating sculptural works that compete with the scale of hills, valleys or lakes, she takes the viewer into an immense, but no less monumental, reading of the skin of the earth. Perhaps her most powerful work—and one that explicitly uses land as a metaphor, in the five-year project *To Fix the Image in Memory* (1977–1982). For this work the artist cast unique desert rocks in bronze and carefully painted these copies to exactly mirror the surface and color of the originals. Every vein, every crevice, every crack and marked surface of the rocks is realized with remarkable precision. The work is nevertheless not about the skill of the artist, but rather about the very act of being attentive: attentive to detail, attentive to form, and attentive to nature more generally. The moment of addition eludes when the viewer realizes that the rocks in Celmins's display are originals paired with reproductions is followed by a secondary recognition of the inherent history in the work. *To Fix the Image in Memory*, the artist herself has suggested, may take up where Jasper Johns left off, with his painted bronze feet cast and light bulb of the *eyeballs*.<sup>1</sup> In, unlike Johns's *Top sculpture* which continuously references mass produced and man made objects, Celmins's work is a circular statement, a

found and visual vocabulary about women and culture, about production and reproduction. The work becomes a value depending on how regarding receptional attention, but it is the attention—more itself, the “being of the image,” which becomes the final form of the work. Although Collins would no doubt deny an underlying sociological motivation to her work, her close attention to the land, the sea, and the sky necessarily brings to the attention of her audience the larger whole of which these elements are a part.

#### Border Topography: Anita Maza Soto

Like the work of de Mena and Smithson, the work of artist Anita Maza Soto addresses the formal relations of inside and outside, geography, topography, and mirrored reflections in the space of the gallery. Her later installations, done some twenty years later, are an important break from those earlier conceptual and minimalist experiments. For Maza Soto history, biography, and culture become central organizing factors in her use of land as metaphor. She brings earth into the gallery to reflect upon the relations between immigration and identity, memory and death, which are intimately tied to her experience as a Mexican American woman born in California of immigrant parents. While formal elements of Maza Soto's work parallel and indirectly rely upon works such as Smithson's *Sea-Stack Series*, they are equally indebted to a commercial tradition

of altar and shrine building in the Chinese/Chinese community in Northern California.

In the *Ofende by Dolores del Rio* (1984), Maza Soto pays homage to a secular icon of Hollywood cinema through an ornamental construction that takes the form of an altar. Presence of pink cascading water and lace frame the space of the altar and glorify the figure portrayed within. To honor her cultural argument about the role of del Rio as a central figure in Chinese history and in her own imaginary, Maza Soto develops a topographical map of cultural and institutional affiliations grounded in symbolically charged artifacts. Lace fans, figurines, and glamorous Hollywood photographs are placed opposite traditional playthings, trunks, and a Mexican national flag. Two sides of del Rio's life—Mexican and American—come together in a mirrored shrine surrounded by a carpet of crushed rose petals, earth, and brighteners. The work exemplifies the commercial tradition of creating women borders, living in the zone of California and, at the same time, living a transnational life. The particular condition of the immigrant who is not rooted precisely because she has more than one home, and yet is always defined by her relation to place, is here represented by the land she inhabits as well as by the topography of artifacts by which she is identified.

Maza Soto addresses the experience of migration more explicitly through her installation



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 Anita Maza Soto  
 Ofende by Dolores del Rio  
 1984  
 Installation view  
 Museum of Contemporary Art  
 Los Angeles  
 Photo: Robert R. Taylor

entitled *Border (1992)*. Regard as a domestic laborer, the work includes a large sheet of three-by-five paper which is covered a small piece of paper and inside which lies a suitcase packed with letters. Back, dark earth overflows the drier flowers and covers the floor around its base, as if spilling from a basket within. The unlikely presence of earth added into the crevices of domestic furniture involves both a burial and resurrection of land and life left behind. It also signals the burial of those who have disappeared in the transition across borders. On the wall is inscribed a story told by a young boy: "The coyote like land gods who helps others cross the border! put me in a sack in the back of a truck with potatoes and told me to be really quiet until he came. It was so hot I couldn't breathe. I cried with no sounds. After hours he came to get me. We had gotten across, but where was my mother? She had given me an address, but I didn't know how to get there and was afraid to ask for help." A child's individual memory is a poignant reminder of familial ties broken by economic hardship. Land becomes a metaphor not only of that which has been left behind, but also of the great distances covered in the process of migration, and the unfamiliar territory newly encountered.

#### Land as the Condition of Labor

After the Mexican-American War, all native Mexicans were excluded from participation

in the California State Senate and in 1850 the California Land Law was passed depriving all Mexican residents of their property. Over one million Mexican landowners were forced to give up more than 14 million acres of land.<sup>1</sup> In effect, once the Gold Rush had transformed the state into a destination for immigrants from around the world, the California Legislature passed a law entitled "An Act to Prevent Free White Labor against Competition with Chinese Coolie Labor."<sup>2</sup> In effect the California legislature addressed an argument against further Chinese immigration to the U.S. Congress, asserting that "the white laborer cannot compete with the Chinese, who work under a civilized shade, use decent clothing, use education for his children." Admitting that the state supported the illegal removal of Chinese miners from their land claims, the legislature goes on to complain of their subsequent return, now displaced as laborers in the city. It becomes clear from the document submitted to the U.S. Congress that Chinese laborers were both more skilled and more industrious than their European American counterparts and yet were considered as inferior race that should be barred from entrance into the country, precisely because of their competitive advantage. Such fear of competition eventually led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

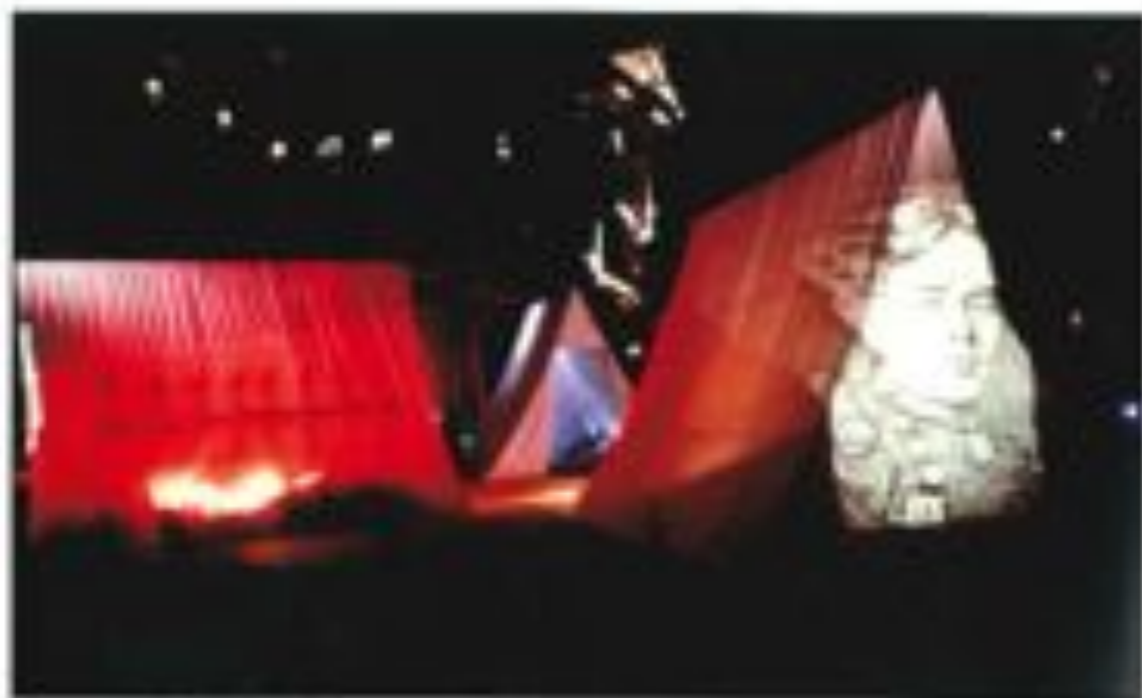
Despite these explicitly racist laws, both Asian and Latin American labor were considered vital

to the growth of California. Chinese labor was instrumental in building the Central Pacific railroad and Japanese labor was necessary for agriculture.<sup>3</sup> Cheap and subservient labor by Asian Americans and other ethnic minorities was accepted, but land ownership and competitive business practices were not. In 1900, citizens of California voted 3 to 1 for a law forbidding land acquisition by "alien ineligible for citizenship" at a time when citizenship for immigrants was limited to "free white persons."<sup>4</sup> Alien land laws remained on the books in California until 1943.

In 1943, as a result of the labor shortage created by World War II, agricultural growers and the federal government established the Bracero Program with Mexico, allowing large numbers of workers into the United States. In the more competitive postwar job environment, the U.S. government undertook Operation Wetback to send illegal immigrants and guest visiting workers who were no longer needed. In the process, both Mexicans and Mexican-Americans were sometimes indiscriminately rounded up, arrested, detained, and deported to Mexico after revocation of their civil rights. Such opportunistic programs have characterized California's labor policies in the past and continue in the present day under different guises. Given this history, it is not surprising that artists whose work takes labor in California as its focus choose to examine the topic critically.

#### Underground May Day

Way Sun's *L.A. Sun-Down-Town* (1988) is one such critical work addressing the complex history of Chinese immigrants in California, particularly in the city of Los Angeles. In collaboration with stage director Peter Brant and composer Tom Rowland, Way Sun's large-scale installation consisted of a staged scene that told a history of Chinese immigration and labor through metaphors of transition and translation. Viewers entered the installation by crossing a wooden bridge that led them to a sandy courtyard. Three viewers were led by directional lighting past a sequence of four white seats, reminiscent of those in which Chinese railroad laborers slept. Images of people and places, both historical and contemporary, were projected onto the seat walls that served as slide screens, allowing several specific histories to emerge: the 1843 Flood in China and the subsequent wave of immigration to the United States; the life of the Chinese railroad workers who lived along the Los Angeles River in the city; the city's Chinese massacre that took place in downtown Los Angeles; and the story of Homer Lee, a European American resident of Santa Monica who trained troops for the Chinese revolution.<sup>5</sup> In the center of the installation a hanging sculpture of Chinese groups played by falling grains of rice provided a subtle accom-



presented to a recorded musical score that included sounds of nature, speech fragments, and a narrative of historical events. Jan Swaleson suggests that the work addresses the need to research and understand suppressed history, commenting, "Forgotten for more than a hundred years, the laborers who built the railroads were given back their own images. Their place in the making of today."<sup>17</sup>

Way Sun's *Underground* (1995) addresses the history of agricultural workers, particularly in the orange groves of Southern California. Archival photographs of both Chinese and

Chinese American men working in the fields, picking fruit from the trees under the scorching heat of European American employees, become an artistic resource for contextualizing and representing commercial labor practices and humanity. What is often unacknowledged or unexplored about the history of California labor is how precisely ethnic differences were filtered by class and identity. Although Mexican American, Japanese American, Filipino American, and Chinese American laborers worked side by side and still faced similar forms of racial discrimination, low wages, and hard working conditions, workers

associations and strikes regularly were organized by ethnic affiliation and were sometimes necessarily competitive and clandestine. As in the case of the railroad laborers, the history of agricultural labor is hidden beneath the surface of the present. The last fifty years in Southern California have seen a dramatic shift from a largely owner-based agricultural landscape to a residential sprawl of urban and suburban housing, shopping malls, and freeways. The history of agricultural labor in the southern valleys of the state has been literally paved over by asphalt and cement. Uniting "underground," it must be unearthed by artists such as Sun to invite to be seen by the public at large.

#### In the Heat of the Sun: Expo Horizonte

If the labor history of Southern California is buried in San Jose, what of more recent labor struggles in Central and Northern California in the living here behind the work of many California Chinese and Chinese artists? It is impossible, in fact, to tell the story of Chinese/Chinese art in California without reference to the labor movement started by Chinese Exclusion and Open Chinese, around which the Chinese civil rights movement revolved. Art was considered an integral part of a larger program of social activism and grassroots mobilization to improve the lives of Chinese Americans in the United States. As a result, the years from 1911 to about 1977 wit-



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From *Horizonte*,  
curated by the author,  
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Los Angeles. Photo by  
© 2005 Wayne Sun.  
Courtesy of the artist.

ness as emphasis on public art that could reach a large audience, such as murals, posters, and linocutting. The work of activist artist Ester Hernandez often took the form of prints or silk screens that could be easily reproduced for distribution. Much of her work, including large paintings and installations, addresses the state of laboring classes in California or establishes symbols for women's struggles. From her own portrait of a young girl seated next to a bag of fruit, *California Special* (1985), to the abstract painting entitled *San Francisco Police Beating Dolores Huerta* (1988), the artist uses linocut to represent the daily and heroic struggle of workers, particularly women, who face oppression and discrimination.

One of Hernandez's best-known works, *San Maid* (1981), has been reproduced on posters and sold at art venues and museum bookstores throughout the country. A parody of the *San Maid* brand of tissues, the image shows a skeleton dressed in a red bonnet with curling dark locks, holding a basket of grapes labeled "unnaturally grown with insecticides, pesticides, herbicides and fungicides." Reversing the notion of a naturally grown product, the work draws our attention to the real conditions of large-scale agriculture business. In 1985 the artist produced a room-sized installation, bearing the same title as her earlier *San Maid* screen print, that makes the working conditions of field laborers more

explicit. In the installation, a tall hanging screen made of vertical panels painted on two sides hangs above an endless chain. One side of the panels shows an agricultural worker who is picking grapes, wearing a hat, gloves, and bandana for protection against poisonous residues left on the fruit. On the other side is the image of the San Maid skeleton. Below lies a circle of sand and rocks within which are placed family memorabilia, including a laborer's hat, a bandana, harvesting implements, and photographs. Careless to an foot above the circle creates the sense of a sanctuary or memorial. Given the health risks agricultural workers face due to exposure to poisonous residues, the other side serves as a monument to those who have died as a result of their labor. Just so in the work of May Lee and Anahita Mera-Solim, the sand and stones in Hernandez's installation function as a message for the land upon which so many Californians have labored.

In the work discussed in this section, geographical regions of California provide the context for the exploration of labor history and the relation of women to that history. Even in the case of May Lee's work, which focuses largely on the labor of Chinese men, the women who supported this labor are not invisible. They leave a delicate web of references to archival images and text throughout. The work of all three artists also arises in a context of second-wave and third-wave feminism (1970-1990), a period when women's

labor contributions have been increasingly championed by activists and the mainstream. Unlike middle-class feminists who sought to leave the confines of a domestic life in search of *gender employment*, however, women of the poorer classes labored outside the home by necessity. This *difference of class*, which in California is often correlated to ethnic differences, produced distinct forms of feminist art practice. May Lee and Ester Hernandez address the largely invisible history of both men and women who work the land, transforming the economy and shape of California.

#### Land as Environment

Since the late 1970s, with the rise of environmental activism and the recognition of Earth Day in 1970, California as a state has paradoxically been at the forefront of environmental reform and home to a record number of environmental abuses. Artists have responded by joining protest movements to the producers and designers of agribusiness, by affectionately painting disappearing forests, deserts, or coastline, by reducing their own uses of hazardous materials, and, in some cases, by taking the project of remediation of the environment into their own hands. Artists have also responded by drawing our attention to the relation of humans to specific sites, threatened environments, and the "development" of the land.

#### Seeing the Earth: Betty Freeman, Barbara Shook, Helen Hartman, Blake Goto

Annually, Los Angeles and Long Beach harbors alone receive more than 4 billion gallons of petroleum products on 1,000 tankers, and expatriate roughly 200 spills of between 1,000 and 10,000 gallons each.<sup>16</sup> The technique used for cleaning the spills—with steam ejected from high pressure hoses—is known to cause considerable ecological damage itself. In response to the 1974 Santa Barbara oil spill—one of the worst in U.S. history—artist Betty Freeman documented the devastation in a series of photographs. *Seeing Cleaning Santa Barbara Shore* (1974) offers one of the first visual accounts of a major ecological disaster by an environmental artist in California. Her photographs depict a small figure dressed in protective clothing carefully cleaning individual shores, surrounded by a wasteland of oil blackened shoreline, suggesting both the facility and the necessity of human response to such catastrophe. Although most of her artistic interventions in coastal ecosystems have taken place outside of California since her student days, she is an important figure in the early environmentalist approach to art practice along the coast.

In 1974, artist Barbara Shook took the notion of environmental cleanup and transformation even further with her groundbreaking *Crossroads Community project in San Francisco* (also known as *The Farm*). One of the few community-based



**Cloning.**

Exploiting the slope of the sea + life in the margin + cloning + silty clearing + leaving alone/creating life + meeting the creation of Santa Barbara in 1955, in 1960 + silty clearing another wall, then another + clearing for a decade + clearing the San Marcos wall in 1970 + clearing for two decades + meeting with other lives from the shoreline on Cabrero Island after the Taron Island wall in 1980 + clearing + clearing for a sports court + on Island Island for three walls in 1980 + repeat + two + spring in San Francisco in 1980 + and over the Russian National spring, 1897/1980 on the western coast of Japan + meeting up + the margin + the margin + the slope

Billy Bennett  
1987

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integrative urban projects to be directed by a woman. Greenwold Community shared the experimental and pedagogical methods of other conceptual and activist art of the time. Located below a set of intersecting highways, the farm was set in a row of abandoned buildings transformed by Sheek into an experimental commons for the growth of plants, animals, and ideas. There were a series of gathering spaces: a farmhouse, a theater, a school without walls, a library, a darkroom, and a healing center. According to the artist, The Farm drew public attention to the availability of a low-cost tract of open land that

was subsequently purchased by the city of San Francisco for use as a neighborhood park.<sup>14</sup> As a result, where there was once a barren lot, there now grows a lush green garden, with trees and vines. Conceived as a microcosm of human existence with the natural environment, local economy, city planning, politics, and recreation, the project developed from Sheek's notion of "life frames," a conceptual view for what the artist calls "life-scale environmental performance sculpture" designed to highlight the experience or awareness of life itself. In 1973, the artist developed an ongoing project called "The

Living Library"<sup>15</sup> that consists of an international cross-culturally linked network of individuals whose "urban-ecology" parks with accompanying curricular materials for ecological and cross-cultural education. In conjunction with this project, Sheek has created a traveling installation called *A Garden of Knowledge*, which has been displayed in New York and Houston. By emphasizing the diversity of plant, animal, and cultural life around the globe, the exhibition invites viewers to be more attentive to their own local flora and

fauna, and to consider the relationships between humans and the built environment. Taking a holistic approach, Sheek is a model for other artists who wish to integrate community and environmental activism in an experimental form.

Developing a visual vocabulary for the assessment and critique of land use has been the central focus of artist Felice Hartman who, in collaboration with her husband, Newton Harrison, has studied environmental conditions and environmental policies in California and worldwide.



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Looking to the Future

Based at the University of California, San Diego, the team has focused their attention on the ecological and political impact of human agricultural systems on natural systems. Motivations on the Sacramento River, the Delta and the Bay at San Francisco (1977) examined how agricultural lands of California's Central Valley will eventually erode and be reduced to a flat level as a result of excessive dam building and water diversion. The artists explicitly criticize government and taxpayer subsidies that perpetuate inefficient, intensive irrigation practices which, at the time, accounted for 82 percent of water usage in the Central Valley.<sup>10</sup> The Sacramento has also used radio, posters, and billboards in the city of San Francisco to inform the public about environmental degradation. As with all of their projects, Sacramento Billboards sought to link the natural ecosystem with the human ecosystem including wasteful uses of resources, flawed water legislation, aggressive consumption practices, and mass media advertising.

The Harrisons' largest, most comprehensive project to date is *Lagoon Cycle*, a study focusing on food production and waterbirds. Begun in 1976, it continued to grow in complexity and size until 1981, culminating in a 100-foot-long mural that focuses on seven different sites. The South Lagoon (1977) is a study of the Colorado River watershed from the Gulf of California to the Commercial Divide. Aerial photographs of mighty, well-maintained

low delta structures that reshape the natural environment are accompanied by an almost poetic but devastating look the system of dams and human-made waterways is not only damaging to the previously thriving ecosystems in this area, but is the result of a self-perpetuating system of federal cronyism as a general suspended notion of progress.

While the Harrisons' work is largely analytic, some of their later river projects have included concrete proposals for the restoration or transformation of specific sites. The *Arroyo San Felipe: A Separation for Pinedora and Don's Gate: A Refuge for Pinedora* (1974-81) included a plan to release the water of the Arroyo San Felipe from its artificial course and to restore its native woodland ecosystem. In 1985, after public debate and media exposure, the city of Pinedora included the Don's Gate project in their master plan.<sup>11</sup> The transformation of public policy through artistic practice is precisely the outcome Helen and Newton Harrison desire for their land-based research projects.

Bella Cote and her husband, Tim Collins, were both led to environmental art practice, at least in part, through an encounter with the social and ecological philosophy of Bruce Mack's *Greenways Conservancy* project. Cote, who visited The Farm, became fascinated by the life of the swallow-tailed butterfly and went on to study the winged habitats and diets of various species found in the



Bay Area. Her interest developed largely from a powerful memory of butterflies from her childhood in Japan and led her to create several installations that served as gardens for the support of the butterfly life cycle. Her first landscape installation in downtown San Francisco's Yerba Buena Gardens, *Butterfly Garden* (1991), Cote created, in

the artist's own words, as "winter gardens for butterflies."<sup>12</sup> The project drew attention to the fact that many of the plants that support the butterfly life cycle are considered weeds in traditional gardens. Cote devised a maintenance plan which included only organic techniques. Above all, the artist hoped to contribute to a larger ecological

10. *Sacramento Billboards*. The site photographs include the view from the mountains to the Delta and the Bay at San Francisco (1977) and the Sacramento River (1977). (Helen and Newton Harrison)

11. *Don's Gate*. Aerial photograph of the site and the proposed project (1985). (Helen and Newton Harrison)

12. *Butterfly Garden*. The site photographs include the view from the mountains to the Delta and the Bay at San Francisco (1977) and the Sacramento River (1977). (Helen and Newton Harrison)



**Ample Opportunity: The Community Dialogue**

**Nine Mile Run - 1997  
 Community Dialogues**

- Reconstructive Art
- Ecosystems Restoration
- Discursive Democracy

**Program subjects:** History Control and Public Policy    Soil, Slog and Habitat  
 Urban Stream Restoration    Sustainable Open Space

project that might include the development of a wildlife corridor through the city and the state.

Bruce Case has continued to work on the analysis of local habitats and ecosystems. In collaboration with Caltran she has completed a number of projects that include analysis of watersheds, such as the Brooklyn watershed and a project for the Three Rivers Art Festival in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her work explores the relationships between human development and plant and animal life, bringing that which has

been pushed to the margins by human expansion to public attention.

The *Nine Mile Run Gateway Project* (1997-98), involving film, hot husband, and two other collaborators, focused on the polluted flood plain area to and around Pittsburgh. An experiment in public discourse, the project provides the opportunity for community members to consider the meaning, function, and ecology of postindustrial space. As Gates states, "we were before what nature means within the context of our urban environ-

ment . . . we need to work within the community to identify a socially acceptable solution that is economic, aesthetically rich and ecologically sound."

On the Road: Catherine Opie  
 and Susan Schwaberting

If anything has changed the look of the California landscape in a dramatic way in the last fifty years, it has been the growth of the highway system that, like so many roads and arteries, winds through the heart of cities and branches across the body of the state. This network of open road—provocatively named a "freeway"—became an expansive metaphor for escape from the fetters of a traditional, geographically rooted life.

Between 1994 and 1996, photographer Catherine Opie produced a series of platinum prints of freeways. Better known for her color saturated and richly detailed portraits, Opie in this series turns to a black and white landscape format using a large (17 x 27 in.) horizontal negative ground at an intimate 20 x 44 in. Despite these small size, Opie's stark and majestic images of the freeways' concrete arches and curves evoke monumental scale. The beauty of their form recalls August Sander's influential photography of the early century, as well as the emphasis in the work of Eugène Atget. Whether fascinated with structural techniques or the streets of Paris, the documentary impulse of these photographers, which Opie shares, locates their images within a

precise historical moment. When industrial and architectural landscapes are pictured as unhabited spaces, an uneasy quality emerges, a simultaneous truthfulness and anticipation that allow the image to overflow its documentary limits. Opie and these other photographers use time—in the form of an evacuated moment—as if it were itself a formal element of the image. By eliminating the most obvious traffic and, in some cases, all cars and people from her images of freeways, Opie has created an eerie, almost post-apocalyptic vision of Los Angeles, the freeway. "In traveling the freeways, I started to think of them as the structures that would be left behind, that they are Los Angeles's monuments." Devoid of most architectural references, the work attaches a commune's truth to a traveler's fantasy of the open, empty road, and simultaneously maps the intersection between nature and subjective human construction where dead trees, dry grasses, and shrub-covered hillsides get dwarfed by the smooth surfaces, mechanical forms, and sweeping lines of asphalt. Cranes and steel beams litter the barren earth beneath overpasses, and floodlights brighten the structure of new bridges and ramps at night. Appearing from nowhere and going nowhere in particular, the freeways carved the earth into the air, and directed again into the land. As a documentary photographer, Opie captures a California phenomenon, not because highway construction of this scale is unique to



42  
 Catherine Opie, *Untitled* (1997).  
 From *Photography Now! 1976-1998*.  
 Published on behalf of the Board of Directors of the  
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 www.sfmoma.org

the state, but rather because it is emblematic of it. By developing and printing the photographs in such a way as to reference an earlier era of industrial development, Opie claims a monumental as well as memorial status for her subject. Whether envisioning the freeway as already antiquated, or implying that it will be so in the future, Opie's simultaneously impasse and misdirection never place this dominant network of roads in critical perspective: the fantasy of the open road is re-framed as a fantasy of the empty road itself, perhaps in the future: the road abandoned.

In a more pedestrian mode, Susan Schwarzenberg examines relations between individual biographies and cityscapes, particularly urban streets and plazas. Her *Cross Market Street Journal* (1996), published by the San Francisco Arts Commission, examines the life history of a single

blockward at the heart of the city. Sifting through a medley of historical maps and archival images that record the life of this busy thoroughfare, the artist juxtaposes stories from the past with those she gathers in the present, creating an experimental guidebook or map for Market Street. Combining archeology with documentary, Schwarzenberg intertwines narratives of everyday life with key historical events. Interviews became a central component of the work. The artist states that she "look[s] to the streets with a camera and tape recorder talking with anyone who appears in the mood to talk." She interviewed "important" and "not so important" people including city planners, police officers, architects, historians, and homeless people as well as architects, archeologists, Mass drivers, street workers, and sales clerks.<sup>10</sup> The book's variety

able variety of sources and the diversity of voices are enhanced by the names of Market de Gennes, Karl Marx, Holo-Cabrera, Charles Beaudouin, and other writers who have reflected on city life. Such references reposition the local focus of the book into a model for reading any blockward in any metropolis. Using the linear order of Market Street as its guide, the book begins at one end of the blockward (near the pier where many immigrants arrived in search of gold in the nineteenth century) and follows personal stories and key cultural sites toward the far end. *The Office*, *The Plaza*, *The Underground*, *The Department Store*, *The Hotel*, *The Archive*, and *The Frontier* serve as a conceptual and spatial taxonomy for ordering the artist's progress block by block, chapter by chapter. From a corporate businessman who claims he has been inside every high-rise building in the city, to a limousine conversation between women in the Emporium, to an architect who dreams the history of the city at night, to Harvey Milk's call for the rebuilding of neighborhoods, the stories that appear in the book are stories about living in a particular place and being defined by a unique locale. The power of the project is that it illuminates how any city street might be mined for an equally intricate network of human encounters. Whether the narratives included are about belonging or alienation, development or decay, Schwarzenberg's project reveals the interdependence

between biography and geography, subjectivity and environment.

#### New/Old/Stranger, Nature Interrupted

If there is indeed something that can be called "ecological" art, the artworks addressed here contend so that the concept of ecology must never be limited to the idea of "nature" naively conceived. Ecologies are always heterogeneous, interconnected systems involving a variety of human and nonhuman actors. Nadia Jarampeau has explored such social, economic, and material ecologies for several years as an independent artist and as an "engineering officer" at the Bureau of Inverse Technology (BIT), "an information agency servicing the Information Age."<sup>11</sup> The projects undertaken by the BIT are presented on the Internet as numbered "positions," and generally take the form of what might be called social surveillance. The 1996 *Search Box*, a motion detection system, was installed on the Golden Gate Bridge to capture on-camera any vertical motion in the vicinity of the bridge. In 1998 the camera recorded 17 "bridge events," then supplying the public with "frame-accurate data of a social phenomenon not previously accurately quantified."<sup>12</sup> By correlating the search box data with the rising and falling tides of the Dow Jones Industrial for each bridge occurrence, the artist also constructs a "dependency index," implying a direct link between the financial suc-

area of Silicon Valley and local outside areas. "Landing" is the context of that work is a wonder project. After all, falling before the land, at its falling stock prices. But the ecology engineered to that work, whatever its market implications, is not merely an ecology of death but is rather a cultural mapping of otherwise invisible social relations. Why is it, the work implicitly asks, that we miss some things—some "vertical motions"—and not others? While the work clearly asks us to consider the relation between capital accumulation, financial security, and the role of dependency in San Francisco, it is also, and perhaps more radically, signaling the wide range of significant human activity that remains "unquantified." In 1999 the HT launched their HT *Flow* aerial reconnaissance project over Silicon Valley. During the height of the economic boom then, security and privacy ruled the managed campuses of Santa Clara and Palo Alto. Not unlike a police state, Silicon Valley was a maze of off-limits territories, security checks, and other intrusions. By attaching a tiny video camera to a radio-controlled airplane, the HT was able to survey the territory from the air. Shooting grainy black-and-white images that bear a strong resemblance to images taken during early Cold War reconnaissance missions, the camera captures the curve of the horizon, the geometric grid of streets, and the airplane's own shadow, as well as the incandescent banding of the actively galloping

the industrial architecture, and the parking lots below. Access to land or property is contingent here upon membership, wealth, and specialized knowledge. Into a well-established ecology of surveillance, the Bureau of Inverse Technology introduces a new hybrid species, a new invasive device. HT *Flow* demonstrates the easy way of its producers while inviting viewers to examine the elements of "information access" that pervades high-tech industry.

In addition to her work with the Bureau of Inverse Technology, Jaramijevska has developed a series of investigations into the domain of bio-engineering. Her *On/Off* project involved three events focused over the question of genetic determinism. One thousand clones of a single biological sample were propagated in culture (a type named "Paradeis" trees) were displayed at the Yerkes Breen Center for the Arts in San Francisco for the Ecotopia exhibition in 1999. Each clone is to be planted throughout the city of San Francisco, involving the general public in a collaborative, collective husbandry. "Because the trees are biologically identical," she writes, "in subsequent years they will render the social and environmental differences to which they are exposed."<sup>13</sup> The trees will respond to the micro-climate of the city in unique ways, developing over the years in what Jaramijevska calls a "long-past and persisting spectrum of the Bay Area's diverse environment." *On/Off*'s experiment

with "artificial" life also includes an algorithmic model of the "Paradeis" trees called. The growth rate of these idealized simulations, controlled by a carbon dioxide sensor at the aerial part of computer terminals, offers a parallel spectacle to the complex growth phenomena occurring throughout the city. Jaramijevska's new ecology of artificial life effectively transforms the environmental health of the region while demonstrating to the public how the urban landscape is in fact a large-scale social, political, and biological laboratory.

#### Landing in California

Like most of the state's residents, many of the artists discussed here came from elsewhere. Each has responded to the material conditions of the land or environment discovered during her stay. Formally their work is wide-ranging, from tradi-

tional photography and sculpture to temporary installations and public art. Some have engaged the idea of land as an abstraction; others have changed the way the history of the state is viewed through the critical statement of labor conditions or the environmental impact of development; and still others have explored the ties between territory and biography. Common to them all is an exploration of human relationships to the land and their transformation over time. In my introduction, I suggested that the work examined here might reveal a new conceptual and historical terrain. What the artists have unearthed is the state of California itself—in fragments of earth, its immigration history, its population, its biographies, its ecological habitats. The new terrain is really an old terrain rediscovered and uncovered.

#### Notes

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4. David L. Broder, *From American: Opening Windows* (San Diego: Goodreads Press, 1991), p. 10.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
6. Joe Brodeur, "Way Out, L.A. Shows Left/Right," in *Way Out: Artists, Not Anger, Renew* (installation catalog) (Berkeley: Boreas Arts, 1999), p. 48.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
8. Chris Galant, "Valdiana Energy and Other Warnings," in *California's Unsettled Past*, ed. Tom Alden (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1997), p. 27.
9. Bruce Berk, "Community (The Rural)," Center for Cultural Inquiry quarterly paper, 1st issue.

James Turrell, *San Francisco Mountains*, 1971  
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GARIBOLDI, PIRELLA

## WOMEN ARTISTS IN CALIFORNIA AND THEIR ENGAGEMENT WITH PHOTOGRAPHY

California has been rich territory for women who have used photography either as their primary artistic medium, or for those who chose to incorporate photographs into a larger artistic scheme, such as the production of collage or installation work. Upon reflection, this emphasis on the mechanically reproduced image is hardly surprising: with the film industry located in Los Angeles, the critical understanding of and aesthetic responses to its culture of artifice are taught at the neighboring art schools and universities. California Institute of the Arts and the University of California campuses at both San Diego and Los Angeles, San Francisco, on the other hand, was the historical center for a much different tradition, the dedicated application of photography as a form of fine art since the 1930s. The photographers of the "City Group" were inspired by the aesthetics of cubism, a pictorial approach to the medium and a desire to make beautiful photographic prints. Through Ansel Adams's long-standing presence—not only as a creative personality, but also as a teacher and active participant—we called "straight photography" still remains a term to be reckoned with. Gladys and Minor White started the photography department at the California School of Fine Arts, now the San Francisco Art Institute, and Adams was an important early activist at the San Francisco Museum of Art, now the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.<sup>1</sup> Although she received little acknowledgment or credit from her male colleagues until late in life, Imogen Cunningham was also a