THE CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE IN ART

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ABSTRACT: *This paper addresses ideas of how landscape is conceived, perceived, depicted, and understood in the contemporary visual arts. It focuses on how artists choose to depict a contemporary geographic reality that has been variously described as "postmodern," "fragmented," "confused," "heterotropic" or "Thirdspace." As case studies, I take four artists whose work embodies these concepts: Benjamin Edwards, Robyn O'Neil, Mark Lombardi, and Julie Mehretu. Each challenges the idea of what a landscape is and forces a broadening of how the genre is understood. I conclude that these artists are essentially working as cutting edge geographers in their engagement with landscape. They demonstrate that landscape can no longer aspire visually to traditional notions of truth and reality, but must embrace unprecedented levels of complexity.*

I am interested in exploring how ideas about landscape and by extension, mapping, emerge throughout the work of a group of contemporary artists. These artists are: (in the order that I will discuss them) Benjamin Edwards, Mark Lombardi, Robyn O'Neil, and Julie Mehretu. In my search to answer the question that is best phrased as "What has happened to the landscape in art today?" I have chosen these artists to illustrate the contemporary landscape. They engage the ideas of the landscape in a way that is reflective of the present day. While each of the aforementioned artists understands and interprets landscape differently, they share in both means and goals, the abilities and challenges that come with representing the complex and multi-scopic space and place that is the contemporary landscape.

To best understand the context of the work of these artists, a review and examination of the origins and history of landscape is required. Landscape art differs from other genres of art such as portraiture, still life, nudes, and religious scenes in that it is a relative latecomer as a subject of artistic practice. Edward Casey explains that the landscape arose later than the other genres that it is associated with, such as still life, because unlike the still life, the landscape is not an easily imitable subject.[1] To depict the landscape is essentially asking the artist to represent an infinite subject in a finite space. Because landscape was never an easily duplicated subject, it required the artist to play a more active role in the decision-making process of what a landscape should include. While landscape was often included within other genres (such as a religious scene taking place in the context of landscape), it did not stand alone in western canonical art until the

1500's in Europe and the 1600's in America. Although artists did paint landscapes prior to that point, and many incorporated landscape into their work, it did not become a genre of respectability and high culture of its own until the rise of industry and the age of enlightenment.

Landscape's original aesthetic was one of faith.[2] It served as a means that accompanied exploration of new worlds, to show God's grace in nature, and the sublime nature of environments beyond the civilized world. However, since its rise as an independent genre, the agenda that landscape served has varied. It has been used for romanticizing nature, advancing social progress, establishing ownership, and allowing for a better understanding of foreign and distant territories. Towards the end of the 19th century, landscape served as a subject for the experimentation of painterly techniques such as impressionism and expressionism. The origins of the landscape that the 'western canon' of art constructed were pushed to the sidelines of the then contemporary art scene of the early 1900's. The shift that caused the change of focus away from landscape had begun with surrealism and various other "-ism" movements that came to prominence by the 1910's. Artists of that time ceased looking outward into the world for truth and inspiration. Rather, they began looking inward expecting the greatest understanding to come from the self. "-Isms," and the philosophy to look inward for inspiration, culminated with the shift of the western art scene from Paris, to the advent of the high modernism of Jackson Pollock and the formation of the New York-centric art scene. By 1950, it could be argued that landscape, as a genre, had disappeared from the forefront of high culture,

replaced by abstraction. To be a traditional landscape painter while studying art at the university, one would likely be shunned for being historical and not contemporary. Denis Cosgrove, in writing on landscape, argues that today, the landscape is primarily the domain of scientific study, land planning and personal pleasure.[3] It no longer holds the moral or social significance that was attached to it in its heyday. This landscape that Cosgrove speaks of, the same one that the universities shun, is of a narrow historical context. However, the landscape of the aforementioned artists has evolved beyond Cosgrove's conception of landscape. Instead of considering landscape as a stagnant genre which was replaced by abstraction, it must be considered as a genre that has been transformed into something that is both grander and greater.

What does it really mean for something to be a landscape? A landscape in the most basic sense is to depict or represent a sense of place. Place, according to Edward Relph, is the foundational unit of geographic knowledge. In the words of Eric Dardel, "before any scientific geography, there exists a profound relationship between man and the world that he lives in."[4] To do geography is to encounter through direct experiences and consciousness the places around us and the world we live in.[5] But the concept of a contemporary landscape expands upon the notion of just depicting place, to ask the question, "What does it mean for something to be a place?" In order to explore this idea, landscape artists are no longer interested in depicting singular places, and/or spaces, but the interrelationships and interactions between many places and spaces. The contemporary landscape has become a landscape of 'poly-scenic' construction. The aforementioned artists are not just depicting landscape, but rather, are creating landscapes that challenge the very notion of what a landscape, place and space are.

What causes these artists to question the very foundational units essential to geography? In our contemporary globalized world, it is not uncommon to find contrasting geographies transported to one place. Characteristics that once made places unique and distinct often no longer apply or help the geographer in identifying and understanding a place. Oft times misleading, the tendency of places to be homogenized, and to lose their distinctiveness characterize much of what is termed as 'postmodern geography'. A postmodern account of geography would not consider any one representation of a place as any more valid than any other representation. A given landmark often no longer represents a given location, but the vestiges of many. Edward Relph associates the idea of postmodernism with 'confused geographies,'

suggesting that a mixed up landscape often leads to a sense of 'placelessness'.[6] Michel Foucault spatially describes the world we live in as 'heterotopias', the opposite of utopia, indicating a space that is the product of multiple visions, expressions, and rationalities.[7] Contemporary forces such as globalization have made geographical understanding evolve into something that is characterized by fragments and bits of geographies, histories, and cultures, which have been mixed up in ways that are often hard to sort out. While such a complicated place and space could be classified as something other and perhaps beyond landscape, landscape is far from being an irrelevant term. While landscape has been altered, it still manifests itself in contemporary art, and should be recognized as such.

When considering the postmodern contemporary landscape, it is important to distinguish between a modern versus postmodern view of landscape. In constructing landscape, artists who use singular methods of mapping and depiction would be following a modernism paradigm. Such would be the paradigm of the futurists and the cubists who sought to deconstruct geometries and depict aspects of geometric otherness. The cubists and futurists were formalist movements in that they were concerned with the deconstruction of physical forms. In going against established methods of artmaking, they based their depictions on intuition and the projection of their individualist and deep-seated conscious feelings. While the cubists did map out objects, often claiming that they saw in four dimensions, their depictions were still based on a singular way of seeing and one mode of cognitive thought. A postmodern line of thought would argue that singular methods of depiction are no longer adequate to represent a globalized world where the way that place is comprehended is changing at an ever faster rate. While the cubists claimed that they mapped in four dimensions (three of space, and one of time), an artist who depicts the postmodern landscape maps in a near infinite number of dimensions. A postmodern artist creates an alternate sense of space that is far more complex, both formally and theoretically than anything that the cubists envisioned. Such a space is presented in both the work of Benjamin Edwards and Julie Mehretu, whose overlaying depictions yield a mystifying complexity, averting comprehension. The work of Mark Lombardi and Robyn O'Neil take a more abstract view of a complex landscape: Lombardi, working with maps, O'Neil treating landscape as a mystified, allegorical space. All of their work explores, integrates, and overlays a multicultural, postmodern, and diverse symbolic construction that is far vaster than any of the art produced in the modernist period.
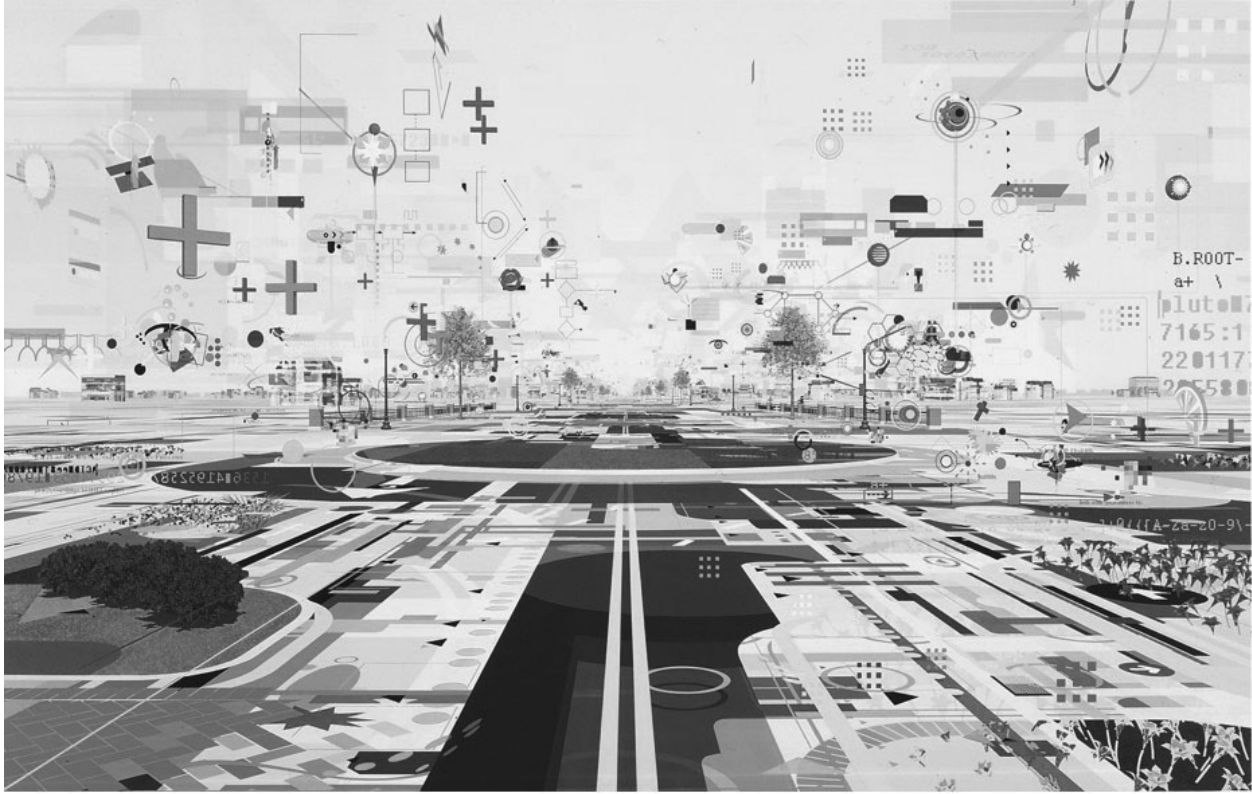
Figure 1. "Immersion" Benjamin Edwards, 2004 Oil on Canvas, Courtesy of Ben Edwards.

Benjamin Edwards gathers source materials for his work by exploring what he calls the "architecture of suburbia."[8] His work explores the landscape and the geographies that are created by the American Interstate highway. He sees the Interstate highway as a roadside life that exists in almost a separate channel of reality. In documenting what he calls the "Iconography of Roadway,"[9] Edwards creates landscapes that could be best described as "Mondrian in Hyperspace."[10] In depicting the landscape as a form of computational interior, he shows how standardized and mechanized we have become. His works take snippets from our real world, and through the integration of the fragments, show us how the landscape has become both unified and uniform. His paintings of environments illustrate an environment integrated into a greater environment as a cross section of a postmodern, digital psyche.

Edwards describes the philosophical basis for his understanding of the ideas behind the highway, as well as his own body of work, through a series of essays on his website.[11] For example, he sees the road trip originating from the American tradition of Romantic escapism. If an individual is taking a road trip alone on a highway, that person is seeking out a non-existent frontier, trying to fulfill the unattainable need to attain a sense of isolation. The vehicle serves as a barrier between the person and the landscape creating a form of isolation that allows for an isolation and individualism relative to greater society. Traveling at high speeds, the driver becomes one with the vehicle. Their needs become integrated, and it is the integrated needs of the 'vehicle bound ethos of mobility' that the landscape of the highway is designed to serve. This vehicle-person combined ethos is well illustrated in Edwards' 2004 piece "*Immersion,*" where he creates the landscape of the highway as the immersion into the ultimate American consumer environment. Within the work, he explores how the needs of our individual mobility are transformed into a collective environment. "*Immersion*" suggests both the speed and digitization that is inherent in the American Landscape. In depicting the landscape, Edwards suggests that we examine how the landscape is designed to suit us, how we fight the landscape that we are entrapped in, and how the landscape reconfigures itself to suit our so-called needs. In that it is a transformative landscape, it is also a placeless landscape. Edwards is depicting an everyplace that is also a no place. In an attempt to represent everything that makes the roadside unique, Edwards represents nothing, because there is no uniqueness. In representing unique places as generic, and showing how generic the landscape has become, Edwards' intent is to bring forth a commonality that forces us,

as interpreter and consumer, to reexamine the places and spaces that we inhabit. He brings forth the question of how different any place or space is from any other.

Some landscape artists represent the landscape through mapping. Mark Lombardi, in his work, depicts the dysfunctional landscape of global commerce. He does so with the use of complex web-maps. To preface the discussion of Lombardi's work, I will examine artists' uses of maps. For an artist to map is to gather information, the influx of which is from different sources, assemble it, and then make conscious decisions about the image that is to be constructed. Maps by their very nature are abstractions. The more particulars and purposes of a given map, the more evident the nature of the abstraction becomes.[12] While seeming to have an aura of objectivity and authenticity, maps can be as personal and as subjective as any other conception of reality. They create and construct worlds as much as they have the power to depict them. They have the power to uncover previously unconceived and unimagined realities. Thus maps become an alternate form of an abstract landscape. While not all landscapes necessarily map space, all maps are essentially mapping landscape. In the sense that Mark Lombardi maps out geographies of scandal and corruption, he depicts landscape. For artists like Lombardi, to understand his subject matter, to map becomes necessity.

Mark Lombardi's web drawings chart the global political and financial scandal in government over the course of many years. Most of his information is gathered from newspapers and other public sources. But it is rare to see all this information brought together in one intricate web, demonstrating how everything is related. From a distance, Lombardi's drawings seem as if they are celestial charts. It is only when viewing them in detail that one can make out the text and get an idea of what the work is about. To truly understand all the interaction that takes place in one of his works would require intense observation and study. Lombardi's drawings were originally a means to understand, and only later became an end in visualizing information. The narratives that the drawings produce while selective and clear are also massive and complex. While the vexing diagrams try to capture all that is inherent in the global capitalist environ, the reality of the web is dense to the extent that the interactions become surreal. His drawings are unreal in the sense that they present too complex a reality to sort out. We can only understand parts; as a whole, the work creates a sensory overload. Sensory overload becomes most apparent in Lombardi's circular works such as *"Oliver North, The Lake Resources of*

Panama and the Iran Contra Operation," where the drawing metaphorically represents the details of the Earth. In the same way that it is impossible to derive the happenings on the surface of the Earth from space, one can perceive but not understand Lombardi's drawings from a distance.

"Oliver North, The Lake Resources of Panama and the Iran Contra Operation," explores the relationship between Oliver North in trying to set up the Iran Contra operation by selling weapons to Iranian "moderates," and the several off shore corporations set up to launder money, creating, according to Lombardi a circular cycle in order that North's illegal dealing could be kept secret and untraced. Whether one considers such a drawing as a painstakingly realistic map or one man's vision of the failure of global commerce, it certainly represents a
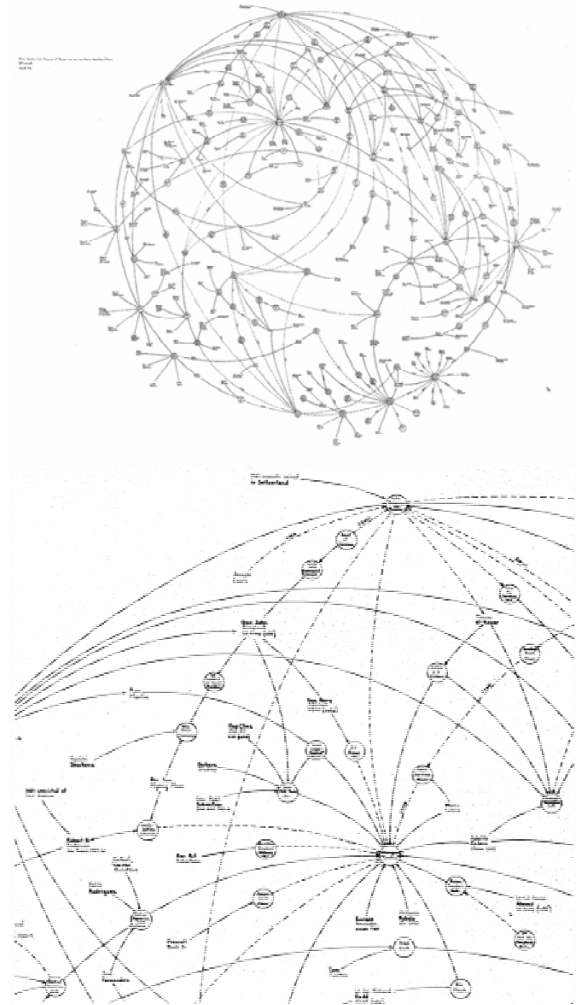

Figure 2 (detail and full image). "Oliver North, The Lake Resources of Panama and the Iran Contra Operation" (fourth Version) 1999. Mark Lombardi. Graphite on paper. Courtesy Perogi Gallery and Donald Lomarbdi.

compelling, if not confusing network of events. In Lombardi's view, the subject of landscape has become something greater and broader than a topographical or built space. For Lombardi, landscape has become the space of global interactions. In depicting landscape, he shows us the persons, peoples, and objects that are involved and active in the landscape, how they use the space of the globe to interact, and how everything is interconnected. While Lombardi's drawings are perhaps one truth upon many, they are a compelling depiction of the global landscape (of commerce). In the attempt to depict everything within the landscape, Lombardi brings a postmodern ethos to the landscape, in that while immense networks can be formed, there is no universal understanding of 'everything' that is our world.[13]

Robyn O'Neil takes on the landscape in a more direct fashion, in that her works still partially follow the aesthetic of what is a traditional landscape. While many traditional landscape artists, such as the Hudson River School of Painters, sought to depict a utopian version of the land, O'Neil's landscapes are better described as 'dystopias'. Her drawings are of immense size and often of harsh winter environs, populated, either sparsely or sometimes heavily with figures. The grand scale of her work relative to the minuteness of the people, evokes the work of Hieronymus Botch and Northern Renaissance

painting. Often the people depicted in her work are men in track suits. While at times seemingly benign, sometimes the men are engaged in ritualized violence, evoking the type of atmosphere present in Shirley Jackson's horror story, *"The Lottery."* As the weather is emphasized by the stark black and white contrast in her work, one often gets the feeling that the apocalypse is coming, as the peoples are fighting over whatever they have left. Her work embraces an obscure mysticism; the characters engaging in strange rituals that could be equated to "ants performing tasks too minute for human understanding."[14] In her work is a dark vision and humor that transforms not just the immediate landscape, but the historical landscape as well. If traditional landscape is 'Heaven on Earth,' than O'Neil's work represents 'Hell on Earth.' Following that line of thought, O'Neil brings to us the 'Anti-Landscape.'

While still beautiful, O'Neil's landscapes do not bring us a majestic beauty as much as they bring us a beauty of awkwardness. Standing in front of her work, one falls into the deep space of her painstakingly detailed work, realizing that within the conception of her work as landscape, something is terribly wrong. While stylistically realistic, there is nothing real about the narrative that her work evokes. A surreal narrative, within a surreal, landscape, mini-narratives evoke the reality of a greater situation.

Figure 3. "Everything that stands will be at odds with its neighbor, and everything that falls will perish without grace" Robyn O'Neil. 2003, Triptych, Charcoal on Paper. Courtesy of Clementine Gallery.

This is certainly the case in *"Everything that Stands will be at Odds with its Neighbor, and Everything that falls will Perish without Grace."* Within the environs of *"Everything that Stands will be at Odds with its Neighbor, and Everything that falls will Perish without Grace"* one finds people interacting, conflicting, ignoring each other, very much in the same way that those interactions occur in our non-surreal, everyday environment. While such a work does evoke a very particular mood, it lacks any specific overarching meaning. Perhaps the piece is just a means to eliminate all the clutter that surrounds human interactions so we can see ourselves without obstruction. As an existential theme pervades the work, indicated by the fallen figures throughout, and then echoed by the fallen tree in the center, we are forced to consider human tragedy. For O'Neil, to depict landscape is to comment on the inevitability and hopelessness of the present human condition. She brings forth a postmodern ethos with regard to landscape, in her attempt to chart the greater path and pitfalls of humanity. It is a geography that attempts to reveal as opposed to concealing the true nature of the landscape that we inhabit.

Julie Mehretu sees her work as an attempt to understand her own geography and identity. Having undergone a great deal of geographic displacement, she sees her work as an ethnographic quest to better understand herself and make sense of conflicts, histories, and geographies, that little sense can be brought to. Her work creates deep fictional spaces, representing conceptions to be tapped into; they bring out to us her reality. Mehretu's work is composed of multiple layers of architectural plans, abstract characters, and topographical shapes. Since the abstract parts of her work are uncontrolled, she finds that a major tension exists between the expressive and controlled parts of her work. This tension serves as a metaphor between individualism and social agency, occupying a conflicted and contested space. Like Lombardi's work, Mehretu's paintings present to us a universe from afar, that when viewed up close, reveals deeply complex relationships and interactions. In this respect, her work represents the postmodern ideal of 'functioning chaos.'[15]

The geographic basis for much of Julie Mehretu's work is the developing, Post-Colonial world in Africa and South America. The architecture of her work is often derived from cities that were redeveloped along with national independence. Often through development, such cities are not able to support their own infrastructure, becoming decrepit and dysfunctional. One of her works that tries to comprehend and understand the present situation in the city Brasilia is *"Looking Back to a Bright New Future."* The work is a large scale painting with many layers of architectural plans, colorful abstract lines and forms as well as cartographic shapes. All of these elements have created a tension, resulting in a joyful, outward explosion.

Embracing cartographic impulse, Mehretu's construction is one of irony; the "bright new future" that she envisions is almost entirely embedded in the past. Amongst the explosion, there is topographic suggestion through color and shape. Mehretu is showing us the Earth as she is standing above it; we are viewing it as she comprehends it. The work recalls the utopian visions of both Mondrian and Malevitch through the use of areas of hard and flat color. In that respect, her mode of depiction is similar to that of Benjamin Edwards. *"Looking Back to a Bright New Future"* is about how humanity builds on top of itself, and as is often the case, that as a result of our building we cannot understand our own past. As histories and geographies play themselves out through the way that we shape our world, we must remember not to forget what we already know. As layer builds upon layer, Mehretu suggests that our future will be similar to that of our past. As we attempt to ascend to both knowledge and progress, there is a limit to the level that can be reached. The viewer can barely perceive the space inherent in the work. The more one tries to understand, the more complicated the environment becomes; the less we realize of what we can understand. Layer upon layer alludes to a complex reality, one that most certainly represents a real view of a multi dimensional, fragmented, postmodern world.

The question that these postmodern contemporary landscapes pose, which all these artists embrace is whether conventional geography is still a valid means towards the greater end that is knowledge. Their depictions of landscapes and their ability to map both place and space, challenges the light through which we view those concepts. Under question is whether place or space as they are understood even exist. Places are oft hard to pin down with unique characteristics; anchored places become replaced by fluid ones leading to an ethos of global nomadic ability. Theorists credit this mobility, which has replaced our anchoring of place, with "space-time compression," meaning that as a result of more space being crossed in less time, our sense of place has become international, homogenized and placeless. Yi-Fu Tuan in his writing, associates place with the idea of home and hearth.[16] To him, place is a space that we make our own through a degree of personalization. While all the aforementioned artists represent their respective individual sense of place and understanding of their surroundings, they also

exhibit common characteristics that go along with frustration and a confusedness in the understanding of their geography.

By making works of art that resonate both as landscapes and maps, these artists embrace, but at the same time challenge the language of geographers. If geography is in its essence the understanding of spaces and places, then the work of these artists challenge the notion that a representation could ever be sufficient. There is no ultimate way to go about describing, depicting, and presenting our world. An individual worldview can no longer take in one view without consideration and understanding of a multiplicity of other views.

While Edwards, Lombardi, O'Neil, and Mehretu's work suggest that the human conception of place seems to need refinement, or perhaps a complete revision, their work makes clear the fact that place is insistent. While the representation of place and space is certainly not objective, to call it subjective could be potentially misleading as well. The discussed artists do not necessarily fit into the objective/subjective binary. They form a better fit into a category theorized by Edward Soja known as "Thirdspace." Soja considers 'Third-space' a contradictory type of space that eludes simple characterizations. At once it is "multi-sided and contradictory, oppressive and liberating, passionate and routine, knowable and unknowable," and "It can be mapped out but never captured in conventional geographies; it can be creatively imagined, but obtains meaning only when practiced and fully lived."[17] Under the rubric of postmodernism, 'Third-space' is distinct in that instead of focusing on a globalized postmodern space as fragmented and confused, it focuses on the idea of a place as being where all other places are.[18] According to 'Third-space', these artists' works are imaginary geographic projects that potentially attempt, whether through their simplicity, or complexity, to present everything to us at once. Through the philosophy of 'Third-space', these works can be seen as an all-encompassing tour-de-force of reality. While they do not accomplish the goal of presenting "everything," the totality of the attempt is genuine. They are real in that they accomplish so much more than the so-called objective and subjective representations of present. 'Third-space' presents a complex reality; under its rubric places are harder to make out, but they are far from ceasing to exist. While there is a force to homogenize and standardize, there are forces that go against that trend as individuals will always strive to leave their mark on the places that they inhabit. The result is a dynamic three dimensional reality that is too real to map. Key to a contemporary understanding of landscape is not to totally abandon

previous conceptions, for they are a vital part of our history, but rather to grant ourselves a broader and more diversified understanding of the conceptions that we are dealing with. We must understand how humanity's actions have brought about different and sometimes dissonant philosophies. None of these philosophies or modes of understanding and interpretation are more valid than any other. But that is no case to abandon pursuit, analysis, and exegesis of the world around us. We must be open to more possibilities and understandings in a geographic world with greater displacement and disorder.

Kenneth Clark, in writing on landscape describes depicting the landscape as an act of faith in that it sanctifies nature.[19] Amidst much confusion, the artists in this article take a leap of faith in attempting to depict, albeit quite successfully, the disjoined and fractured landscape that is the world around us. They have created and continue to create a conversation between artist and public on a multi-stranded geographical world view. It is a conversation that challenges the very way that we see and comprehend.

ENDNOTES

[1]Casey, E. 2002. *Representing Place: Landscape Painting and Maps.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p.5.

[2]Clark, K. 1976. *Landscape into Art*. New York: Harper & Row. p. 230.

[3]Cosgrove, D. 1985. *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*. Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books. p.2.

[4]Relph, E. 1976. *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion. p.5.

[5]Ibid, p.4.

[6]Relph, E. 2001. The Critical Description of Confused Geographies. In *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies*, eds. P.C. Adams, S. Hoelscher, and K.E. Till, pp. 150-156. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[7]Ibid, see also Soja, E. 1996. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Places*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell. p.145-163.

[8]See Tandem Press at http://www.tandempress. wisc.edu/ tandem/gallery/edwards/edwards.htm.

[9]Ibid.

[10]See Cleveland Museum of Art Exhibition Feature at http://www.clevelandart.org/exhibcef/metascape/htm/4641499.html.

[11]Much of my understanding of Benjamin Edwards' art was aided by his own writings which can be found at his website at http://www.benjaminedwards.net.

[12]Storr, R. 1994. *Mapping*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. p.13.

[13]For further information on Mark Lombardi see Hobbs, R. and Lombardi, M. 2003. *Mark Lombardi: Global Networks*. New York: Independent Curators International.

[14]French, C. 2005. Robyn O'Neil. *Flash Art* 38. p. 91.

[15]My knowledge of Mehretu and her work was aided by the catalog from her residency at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Mehretu, J., and Fogle, D. 2003. *Julie Mehretu: Drawing into painting.* Minneapolis: Walker Art Center.

[16]Tuan, Y.F. 2001. Cosmos versus Hearth. In Adams, P.C., Hoelscher, S., and Till, K.E. eds. *Textures of place: Exploring humanist geographies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p.319-325.

[17]Soja, E. 1999. Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope of the Geographical Imagination. In *Human Geography Today,* eds. D. Massey, J. Allen, and P. Sarre. Cambridge: Polity Press. p.276.

[18]The idea of there being a place where all other places exist is derived from a story by Jorge Louis Borges where he discusses the concept of this ultimate place/space under the guise of the "Aleph". More can be found on this in Soja, E. 1996. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Places*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell. p.54-56.

[19]Clark, K. 1976. *Landscape into Art*. New York: Harper &Row. p. 230

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