Points of Interest at the Center for Land Use Interpretation:
A Tour in the Margins of Social Ecology

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Abstract

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"Dedicated to the increase and diffusion of information about how the nation's lands are apportioned, utilized, and perceived," the Center for Land Use Interpretation (or CLUI, as it has come to be known) is a non-profit research organization that "aims to improve the collective understanding of the human/land dialectic."[1] Centering its gaze on human-altered landscapes, the Center scours, tours, charts and archives the land in search of clues that might elucidate the convoluted and conflicted relationship we have with the environment. This thesis delineates the particularities of CLUI's ecological perspective and demonstrates the extent of its interaction with an equally singular art legacy. While CLUI's polymorphous practice can be situated amidst a broader repertoire of environmental art, the Center's artistic underpinnings—that is, the complex merging of relational aesthetics and conceptualism—also lead to a postmodern form of tourism and a modulated ecological consciousness. Looking at CLUI's practice through the prism of what is sometimes called social ecology, this thesis affiliates the Center's liminal identity to a specific conception of ecology, one that is inclusive of human culture in the broad scheme of natural evolution. In conclusion, CLUI's art-informed criticality is presented as a vector for pushing social ecology toward more pragmatic and self-reflexive ends. In so doing, this thesis implicitly brings to light the critical agency of contemporary art—as exemplified by CLUI—and its potential contribution to the discursive development of ecological thought.

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[1] See their mission statement: www.clui.org.

Acknowledgements

Many contributions have influenced the course of this research project. I should begin by thanking Dr. Johanne Sloan whose intellectual guidance as my thesis supervisor proved to be invaluable. Dr. Sloan generously engaged in extensive conversations, helping me to delve ever more deeply into the substrata of my research subject and to excavate a foundational framework within the broad horizon of theoretical perspectives. Her shared viewpoints have shaped my critical enquiry far beyond the context of this thesis as can be seen in the way I now engage with surrounding environments on an everyday basis. I am also indebted to Dr. Martha Langford and Dr. Cynthia Imogen Hammond for their constructive comments and suggestions upon reading my work, allowing me to chisel out my arguments with greater acuity and express my thoughts more eloquently. I could never be thankful enough for the countless hours Sharon Murray has dedicated to the revision of my work. Her keen friendship and sheer generosity permeate each and every word, punctuation, and figure of style in this text. My experience studying in the art history department at Concordia University has also been enhanced by the warm and unrelenting support of its faculty and staff members, as by the friendly encouragements provided by peers. I should outline a few: Dr. Catherine MacKenzie, director of the graduate art history program; Anna Waclawek, program assistant; and Zoë Chan, my dear friend. Many thanks also to my mother Denyse as to Monique and Alphonse Saumier for their prompt help whenever it was needed. Lastly, I cannot overstate the importance of my partner in the completion of this thesis. In addition to countless evening discussions, Camille-Antoine willfully (and happily) walked, toured and visited points of interest at my side, searching for clues that might feed my reflections. He, along with my family, stands as the supportive bedrock of this thesis.

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Introduction: *From the Ground Up*

> *The shared space of the earth is physically and metaphorically what unites us, and until we colonize space, what we have here on this planet is all we have to work with. So it makes sense to investigate the human experience from the ground up.*
>
> Matthew Coolidge

Could there be such a thing as a CLUI-esque landscape? Before my discovery of this acronym (CLUI) and my interest in deciphering its meanings, I was fascinated with peculiar features of landscapes I encountered during travels in my home country and in my daily surroundings: a large erratic boulder, stranded in a shallow crater-like depression caused by the repetitive passage of buffalos rubbing their backs against the rock; a 32-foot cement moose monument; a ski resort built on the sinking banks of a river's drainage; a factory perched on a river and straddling two national territories, one side still in operation and the other, abandoned; a kitschy restaurant located mid-way along a straight highway, interrupting the infinite boredom of nowhere; a tiny chapel erected on a mountain-top facing two astronomy observatories that crown a neighbouring peak, all searching the celestial realm for answers to fundamental questions. I have come to see these disconnected features –where natural processes meet human traces in an intricate palimpsest of dirt, rain, wind, words, desires and displacements—as coordinates configuring an eclectic cross-section of the Canadian landscape. By focusing my gaze on seemingly insignificant, banal, strange or downright unpleasant facets of the landscape, and by trying to make sense of them, I came to develop a sensibility akin to that of a small American research center, whose area of study centers on land-use patterns.

"Dedicated to the increase and diffusion of information about how the nation's lands are apportioned, utilized, and perceived," the Center for Land Use Interpretation (or CLUI, as it has come to be known) is a non-profit research organization that "aims to improve the collective understanding of the human/land dialectic."[1] Centering its gaze on human-altered landscapes, CLUI scours, tours, charts and archives the land in search of intricate, curious or phenomenally banal land-use specimens, which they, in turn, photograph, describe, interpret, circulate, disseminate and exhibit as countless "points of interest." Whether navigating the peripheries of a restricted military site, contemplating the ruined remains of a shopping mall, studying the rectilinear designs of parking lots or exploring the backside of artificial scenery, the Center searches for—and detects—clues that might elucidate the convoluted and conflicted relationship we have with the land.

Mirroring the magnitude and the complexity of its subject of enquiry, the Center intentionally maintains an indefinable practice, keeping at the margins of ecology, art, geography, anthropology and tourism. CLUI's director, Matthew Coolidge, conscientiously locates the Center's mandate in the gaps of other disciplinary fields:

> Archeologists excavate the past from the ground, historians assimilate moments into patterns, and cultural theorists apply the structures of history to the present. Elsewhere on the ground, geologists study the subsurface, geomorphologists scrutinize the surface, and geographers examine the systems of human and nonhuman activities. ... But there are other parts of the spectrum of perception left unexplored by scholars, scientists, and other specialists—dimensions that are only hinted at in the great museums of the land.[2]

These disciplinary threads are nonetheless woven into CLUI's practice and can hardly be addressed independently. In this thesis I intend to delineate the particularities of CLUI's

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[1] See their mission statement: www.clui.org.
[2] Matthew Coolidge, "Introduction," *Overlook: Exploring the Internal Fringes of America with the Center for Land Use Interpretation* (New York: Metropolis Books, 2006), 16.

ecological perspective and to demonstrate the extent of its interaction with an equally

singular art legacy. As the coming chapters will explain, CLUI is deeply informed by art

theories and movements although this is sometimes masked by its apparent inclination

toward interdisciplinarity.

While the crossroads between art and ecology have been well explored since the

inception of the Earthwork movement in the late sixties, most accounts of this

intersection as a subject of theoretical inquiry remain broad and general, lacking

criticality about the widely differing ecological viewpoints implied in these art practices.

By looking at CLUI's practice through the prism of what is sometimes called "social

ecology,"[3] I intend to demonstrate how the Center's liminal identity responds to a

specific conception of ecology, one that is inclusive of human culture in the broad

scheme of natural evolution. While CLUI's critical inquiry is geographically restricted to

the American territory and even more specifically influenced by its Californian

background, it can also be said to negotiate a North-American romantic heritage

responsible for agonistic notions of nature in the popular imagination. CLUI avoids

transcendental and universalizing interpretations of nature; instead, it grounds its

understanding of our relationship with the environment in what they decipher from the

often contradictory traces we leave on the land.

Not purely a governmental institution, an academic consortium, an art project, an

exhibition center, an educational program, a tourism agency nor a research society but

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[3] Murray Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1990) and Félix Guattari, *Les trois écologies* (Paris: Galilée, 1989).

existing somewhere between all these, it is difficult to delineate the nature of CLUI's activities. My first chapter therefore examines the Center's organizational, discursive and methodological structures, from a description of its physical ramification across the American territory to an analysis of its publications, tours, exhibitions, conferences, and of course, the Land Use Database—probably the most popular entryway into CLUI. Following with a geographic and cultural contextualization of the Center, I unpack the cultural significance of its site of emergence: Southern California or, more precisely, the City of Los Angeles. The disjointed expansiveness of the megalopolis, the lures and traps of the California Dream, the romantic longings of the Frontier myth and the contradictory connotations of nature—encompassing consumption, fear and veneration—all shape the discursive background of the Center and inform the gaze it brings to bear on land-use. Not surprisingly then, numerous CLUI projects take the southwest region as their core discursive site. The last section of Chapter One is thus devoted to the Owens Valley Project as case study illustrating CLUI's polymorphous engagement with place. Other CLUI projects have instigated stronger reactions such as the notorious guidebook *The Nevada Test Site: A Guide to America's Nuclear Proving Ground* (1996), purportedly celebrated by both antinuclear activists and Department of Energy officials despite its politically polarized subject matter. I contend, however, that CLUI's month-long engagement with the Owens Valley generated an ecological reflection more diverse in its interpretations and modulated in its treatment of the human/land dialectic than these other projects. The Owens Valley indeed comprises in its topographical strata a complex "nature," which is at once preserved, consumed, exploited, interpreted, tamed, mystified and contested—all of which makes it an exemplary case study for the Center. The

project's three-fold structure—based on an exhibition, a tour and a guidebook—also exemplifies the Center's propensity to complicate single narratives through the overlay of interpretive strata. As such, the Owens Valley project illustrates most effectively the subtle yet incisive ways in which CLUI critically deciphers land-use patterns.

CLUI might appear at first sight more closely related to geographical societies than to art currents and theories. Hence my second chapter surveys the discursive developments of environmental art so as to implicitly position the Center within the broad picture of ecological art. While this literature review does not directly concern CLUI, many of the debated ideas are central to its mandate—the examples I raise in this section all have strong resemblances to the Center in some ways. I begin my interpretation of environmental art with the Earthworks movement and proceed to illustrate a shift in the way nature is understood and defined, from mere dirt to a discursive concept. I spend considerable time with the case of artist and critic Robert Smithson (1938-1973) and the ideological underpinnings of his work, as his influence percolates below the surface of CLUI's discourse. Contextualizing this shift with regard to the emergence of deconstructivist thought allows me to discuss the revisionist accounts of nature provided in postmodern cultural theory. In response to the intense rationalization and skepticism instigated by deconstructivism, I locate a counter-position in the emergence of an ecological discourse based on mutualism. While early formulations of "mutualist" art[4]

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[4] Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991).

have remained anchored in mythical and transcendental views, I describe how they eventually verge toward the socially engaged practice of "everyday ecology."[5]

These varying ecological viewpoints can be broadly associated with different art perspectives. For example, the treatment of nature as an unstable concept derives from a linguistic turn as does conceptual art, and the transfer of ecological thought to the social realm of everyday life is largely enacted by relational aesthetics. They can similarly be connected to a specific philosophical stance, generally known as social ecology. I end my second chapter with an introduction to social ecology through two different perspectives—Murray Bookchin's and Félix Guattari's—to reveal the many correlations between this philosophical viewpoint and the aforementioned theorizations of environmental art. Most importantly, I present social ecology as a valuable theoretical frame for situating CLUI's practice within a broader scheme of ecological sensibilities.

Whereas CLUI's curiosity is largely aimed at answering non-art related questions regarding land-use, its methods of enquiry are imbued with a kind of intentionality resembling an artistic address. Moreover, as my second and third chapters will demonstrate, the very act of departing from art-circumscribed issues to infiltrate non-art realms is actually part of specific art movements known for delving into interdisciplinary forms of expression. Accordingly, Chapter Three unpacks the Center's artistic underpinnings and follows their path to a postmodern form of tourism. Beginning with an

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[5] Nicolas Bourriaud and Félix Guattari bring about this notion of enacting ecological precepts on a daily basis, while Sue Spaid and Stephanie Smith provide examples of this in contemporary art. Bourriaud, *L'esthétique relationnelle* (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2001); Guattari, *Op. cit.*; Spaid, *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies* (Cincinnati: The Contemporary Arts Center; greenmuseum; ecoartspace, 2002).

analysis of CLUI's relational mode of communication, I focus predominantly on the theoretical positions of Grant Kester and Nicolas Bourriaud. My discussion progresses from dialogical art (Kester) to relational aesthetics (Bourriaud) only to complicate these rhetorical stances with the example of CLUI's liminality. I then retrace the legacy of proto-conceptual practices, focusing on the expansion of art through an aesthetic of administration, an archival impulse and institutional mimicry, and point out CLUI's productive appropriation of these tactics. The ghostly presence of Smithson recurs in this section, as an unavoidable protagonist in the shaping of CLUI's discursive background. Following my description of CLUI's artistic ambiguity—amalgamating relational approaches with formal asceticism and institutional conventionality—I contextualize this conflation of genres in light of the Center's post-tourist ethos. The concept of post-tourism, as defined by sociologist John Urry, allows me to situate CLUI within contested issues of site-specificity, authenticity, mediation and mimicry. Post-tourism most notably distinguishes the Center from conventional tourist outings by introducing reflexivity and playfulness into the tourist experience.

This reflection on CLUI's post-touristic position brings me to the concluding point of my thesis, namely that CLUI's complex negotiation with art is favourable for the critical enactment of socio-ecological precepts. Hence my conclusion reiterates some of the key components of CLUI's art-informed reflexivity to engage a critical analysis of social ecology. I emphasize CLUI's adherence and contribution to social ecology, notably its dismantling of essentialist concepts of nature and its revision of ideas of "wildness." I then briefly return to Bookchin and Guattari's socio-ecological convictions, drawing

connections with utopian art discourses. Finally, I frame CLUI's post-touristic playfulness and conceptual criticality as vectors for pushing social ecology toward more pragmatic and self-reflexive ends. In so doing, my thesis implicitly brings to light the critical agency of contemporary art—as exemplified by CLUI—and its potential contribution to the discursive development of ecological thought. For while the Center for Land Use Interpretation decodes the human/land dialectic from the ground up, it does not avoid the possibility of doing so from the elevated viewpoint of reflexivity.

I should briefly address the notion of landscape, for this term recurs throughout the course of my reflections. In a text unpacking the various implications of place, space and landscape, artists Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar retrace the emergence of landscape as an artistic genre; they follow the historical shift in status of the land, from mere background to an autonomous concept deemed worthy of attention and representation on its own terms. As Dean and Millar point out, the word landscape derives from the Dutch *landschap* which refers to a cultivated land that can be represented by an artist or topographer.[6] Landscapes are thus territories inhabited or marked by human activity, be it physical, perceptual or conceptual.

My use of the terms "humanized landscape" and "human-altered landscape" in this thesis may consequently have an air of tautology—which it is, of course. My reiteration of the human factor is quite intentional for it mirrors a comparable emphasis in CLUI's discursive method. It also points to CLUI's consideration of the human influence that underlies all landscapes, including views of purportedly

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[6] Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar, *Art Works: Place* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), 13.

pristine nature whose status relies on environmental policies, territorial boundaries and land-use restrictions.

Landscape as an artistic genre has largely promoted an aesthetic view of nature, periodically valuing beautiful pastures, picturesque valleys or sublime peaks as "good" forms of nature. More recently, the popularization of ecology has triggered a desire to understand nature beyond mere appearances. Introduced by a few Land Artists and articulated more thoroughly in subsequent art practices, a new aesthetic appreciation of nature was formulated relationally rather than according to ideals of beauty and harmony. My understanding of the term landscape derives from this (human) ecological perspective. More than a mere view, a landscape is a condensed network of social/biological /economic/geological/political relations, endlessly fluctuating yet solidly grounded in a physical site.

Visual theorist W.J.T. Mitchell expands the semantics of the idea of landscape by presenting it as a physical extension of human communication, a malleable medium that may be shaped to reflect our projected desires and values: "Landscape is a medium in the fullest sense of the word. It is a material 'means' (to borrow Aristotle's terminology) like language or paint, embedded in a tradition of cultural signification and communication, a body of symbolic forms capable of being invoked and reshaped to express meanings and values."[7] While CLUI scours, tours and archives the land as material to be processed and analyzed, it builds its own

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[7] W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," *Landscape and Power*, edited by W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 14.

interpretive layer on top of pre-existing strata, affecting the land's conceptual topography. Alongside photography, text, cyberspace and performed outings, landscapes could (and should) be considered among the mediums constituting the Center's post-medium practice[8]—a medium sculpted by interpretation.

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[8] Rosalind Krauss designates, by use of the descriptive "post-medium," a shift in contemporary art from traditional medium-specificity to polymorphous practices reliant on contemporary popular materials. Rosalind Krauss, "Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition," *October116* (Spring 2006).

Chapter One
Mapping CLUI: Acre by Acre

Subject both of science and art, the landscape functions as a mirror and a lens: in it we see the space we occupy and ourselves as we occupy it.[9]

<div align="right">Jeffrey Kastner</div>

It is difficult to locate the specific viewpoint from which CLUI scrutinizes humanized landscapes. What is doubtless, however, is that its de-centered position provides access to a complex vista—one where a close look at specific landscape components reveals the peculiarity of what could be considered a strange territorial mosaic framed by vast, geographic/discursive horizons. CLUI's position may be hard to pinpoint, but a close examination of its structure and context helps to define the elusive contours of its discourse. This chapter thus describes the Center's manifold character and unpacks the intricate nature of its activities, before taking a broader look at its geographic/cultural context. The chapter focuses on a specific case study—the Owens Valley Project—as a quintessential example of CLUI's critical engagement with the land and the primary discursive site for the elaboration of this thesis.

Entering CLUI

The Center for Land Use Interpretation can be many things, depending on the point of entry. Someone may be sitting at a computer in their home—perhaps in Montreal— accessing the Center through its virtual portal in which case, CLUI is an incredibly vast database charting an infinite variety of land uses, from spectacularly strange or menacingly obscure sites to apparently banal areas endowed with an eccentric sense of place. CLUI can otherwise be noticed on the road, as a typical bus-load of tourists

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[9] Jeffrey Kastner, "Introduction," *Land and Environmental Art* (London: Phaidon, 2004), 11.

enjoying comfortable and carefully organized field trips, with the exception that their "points of interest" and "photo spots" refer to off-track or displaced attractions. In its published form, CLUI appears on the shelves of art, architecture and landscape libraries, under the guise of pseudo-governmental guidebooks documenting many unconventional itineraries throughout the American landscape. From its office entrance, situated on Venice Boulevard in Culver City (Los Angeles), CLUI is, at first sight, nothing more than a modest (and poorly visible) sign marking a sun-backed, windowless commercial building. A small exhibition space, where a sober and dimly lit curatorial setting provides insightful clues about different land use patterns, occupies the front room of the edifice. The apparently straightforward disposition of information, mimicking the interpretive panels and interactive monitors often seen at historical monuments and national parks, conceals a strongly conceptual framework. Adjacent to this clever text/image layout is a small library, where the Center's publications, along with other books deemed relevant to its mission, are made available to the public for purchase or consultation. Beyond this public space is the slightly cramped work/archival office of the Center, the restrained physical site staging the ongoing development of such a wide and multi-faceted cultural endeavour.

CLUI's impersonal name renders anonymous the network of collaborators working under its title. In constant reconfiguration, the Center's crew evolves freely in conjunction with the projects they coordinate. There are, nevertheless, a few core members who provide constant support while others come and go with different projects. With his background in Film Studies, Contemporary Art and Environmental Studies, Matthew Coolidge

founded the Center for Land Use Interpretation in 1994 (or as he puts it, "paper work was filed"), and has since been appointed as director.[10] Other staff members and frequent collaborators are associate director Sarah Simons, photographers Erik Knutzen and Mark Rowell, media artist and curator Melinda Stone, and architectural historian Kazys Varnelis. Since its inception, the Center for Land Use Interpretation has attracted numerous contributions from artists, curators, photographers and cultural theorists, while the interdisciplinary character of its projects has brought these contributors to collaborate closely with governmental representatives, industrialists, traffic engineers, security officers, conservationists, farmers, astronomers, bus drivers, and other interested parties. The artistic status of CLUI's practice may be to some extent debatable—CLUI may just as easily be assessed as a sociological, ecological or geographical project inasmuch as artistic—but the reflective path it traces and the way it looks at landscapes borrows heavily from art-induced theories, perspectives, and modes of address (a point which I will further develop in the third chapter). This strong inclination toward interdisciplinarity is also indicative of art's increasing permeation by non-art issues and sensibilities, as if conventional art and aesthetics were no longer self-sufficient in their assessment of the land we live on. CLUI's eclectic pool of contributors mirrors the complexity and diversity of the land-use patterns they examine, while also reflecting the different interpretations that intersect and sometimes collide throughout the process.

CLUI mainly functions in a mode of observation—researching, studying, analyzing and archiving the land in its many manifestations—and its various infrastructures serve as

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[10] Coolidge is also a faculty member in the Curatorial Practice Program at the California College of the Arts, in the context of which he addresses issues in line with the Center's marginal realm of inquiry, such as a course on the concept of "nowhere."

land bases that support its charting activities. Outside of its main office in Los Angeles, CLUI also operates a Land Use Museum in Wendover, Utah, and a Desert Research Station (DRS) near Barstow, California—covering the Great Basin and Western Desert areas—while the Northeast Regional Office in Troy, New York, features exhibitions centered on the "Northeastern United States Interpretive District." These institutional rhizomes each have art/research residency programs and conferences pertaining to their respective regional contexts. A compendium of all of CLUI's latest activities is provided in a quarterly newsletter, entitled *The Lay of the Land*, adding another layer of ambiguity to CLUI's function as a non-profit organization and its tendency toward institutional pastiche. CLUI's exhaustive study of the land also relies on observations made by volunteers throughout the American territory, independently researching land use patterns and reporting their results back to the Center.

Paralleling (and exceeding) this intricate geographical network is the ungraspable range of interpretive possibilities provided by the Land Use Database (LUDB). The original database is contained in file cabinets at the Center's main office in Culver City, although an online version makes it accessible to a much wider array of armchair viewers/tourists/researchers. As Coolidge explains: "The database is a tool that enables its users to explore remotely, to search obliquely, and to make creative collisions and juxtapositions that render new meanings and explanations of America—and of the many ways of looking at it."[11] Focusing on "exemplary and unusual" locations, the Land Use Database provides a deadpan portrait of land use in the United States that is

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[11] Matthew Coolidge, "Introduction" *Overlook: Exploring America's Internal Fringes with the Center for Land Use Interpretation*, edited by Matthew Coolidge and Sarah Simons (New York: Metropolis Books, 2006), 25.

simultaneously vernacular and marginal, commonly recognized and exceptionally

unknown. Individual navigation along these lines of inquiry generates a plethora of

unpredictable crossroads and interpretive combinations as LUDB users may arbitrarily

shift from one site to another through the click of an avatar and play with the sites'

connoted values. In a typically Google-like manner, researching sites in the LUDB relies

on the semiotic intersection between keywords, clickable maps and iconographic

categories. Thus by searching within the "monuments" and "attraction" categories, an

image of the naturally formed but cement-reinforced and decaying "Old Man of the

Mountain" in New Hampshire might follow the yet-to-be-completed monumental

sculpture of Crazy Horse at Mount Thunder in South-Dakota. If a search is conducted

under the keyword "crater," the resulting hits will appear as a list of sites—each

represented by a photograph—in which the nuclear-induced impact at Trinity, New

Mexico might be compared with Roden Crater's land art installation by James Turrell

and Meteor Crater in Arizona (see fig. 1). This arbitrary comparison would confuse the

sites' respective agencies, as natural phenomena, art megalomania and nuclear

devastation are considered on an equal footing.[12] Through the conscious use of semiotic

slippages of this kind, CLUI manages to confuse the boundaries between what is

considered artefactual and natural, functional and aesthetic, military and lyrical. More

than expanding the mandate of art to non-art realms, CLUI appropriates non-art elements

of the landscape by looking at them through the prism of art: the massive military targets

at the Nellis Range that are described using land art terminology are an example of this.[13]

Such analogical thinking recalls Robert Smithson's intersecting interpretation of derelict

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[12] All these sites are to be found on the Land Use Database. http://ludb.clui.org
[13] Melinda Stone, "Landscape of Conjecture: View from the Center for Land Use Interpretation," *Public Art Review* (vol. 10, no. 2, Spring/Summer 1999), 31.

structures, industrial sites and natural monuments, a legacy that permeates CLUI's

practice in many ways. This I will address in the following chapters.

Usually deriving from the Land Use Database's rich repertoire of combinations, CLUI's

exhibitions and publications generally regroup specific sites under a connective region or

theme, mimicking guidebooks and interpretive pamphlets. CLUI's publications typically

present sites as succeeding one another on a geographical itinerary, illustrating them

through intentionally dead-pan photographs in the style of photo-documentary or

topographic reports—to avoid authorial autonomy and as a voluntary emphasis on their

alleged neutrality—coupled with pragmatic textual information. The subtle dialogue—

and occasional discrepancy—between text and image as well as the strong emphasis on

bureaucratic formalism reveal the legacy of conceptual art in CLUI's discursive tactic

(more of this in chapter three). Other exhibitions prefer to present singular views of the

land as provided by artists, which contributes to CLUI's already polysemous

interpretation.

In conjunction with (or perhaps as a counter-point to) this semiotic interplay caused by

the simple move of an avatar or the flick of a page, CLUI organizes bus tours to

experience some of the sites more directly. According to Coolidge, the physical

encounter with a place remains the primary experience that cannot be replaced by virtual

mediation. If only to understand the travel time required to reach some of these locations

or factors of interest, such as climate, elevation, radioactivity, social upheavals, and/or

surveillance, an actual encounter provides visitors with a more accurate impression of a

site's inscription in a specific temporal and spatial context. CLUI's "alternative" tours are

nonetheless reputed for providing a highly mediated experience as they have been

compared—using an art-related gerund—to a "multimedia phenomenological

experience" and a "spatiotemporal, nonfictional, theatre production brought to the

landscape."[14] Various mediation layers are indeed reported to filter the view, from the

tinted glass and window frame of the rented luxury bus to the continuous flow of

information provided by the tour guide as well as the art/documentary/fiction movie

excerpts carefully selected to punctuate the landscape. Artist and curator Sarah Kanouse

further argues:

> While the tours are premised on the belief, underscored by Coolidge, that there is no
>
> substitute for corporeal experience, the imposition of an interpretive text also insists that
>
> such experience alone is not enough, that information and cognition are necessary for
>
> interpretation or understanding to occur. Furthermore, the presence of the technology
>
> questions whether an unmediated experience of the land is possible, since the land and our
>
> attitude toward it are already so mediated by human action.[15]

Even as the tours, to a certain extent, generate a direct experience of sites, their pre-

established itineraries focus on *selected* aspects of the given places in the form of planned

"points of interest" along the way. This selective attention is typical of the tourist gaze,

which manifests as an acute perception of specific elements deemed worthy of interest

amidst long periods of passivity, as illustrated by the driving distances separating each of

the "photo spots." CLUI infuses critical agency in what is conventionally known as the

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[14] Matthew Coolidge, *Op. cit.*, 27.
[15] Sarah Kanouse « Touring the Archive, Archiving the Tour: Image, Text, and Experience with the Center for Land Use Interpretation », *Art Journal* (Summer 2005, vol. 64 no. 2), 83.

tourist experience of the land, without necessarily inhibiting the channeled voyeurism implicit in such a viewing position.

However scripted the tours may be, there always remains a space for slippage, as the touring crew makes way for local interpreters when it comes time to explain some of the points of interest. Just like interviews where the interviewer and the interviewee each have their own script in mind and come to negotiate a discursive middle point beyond their initial expectations, local interpreters operate a caesura in CLUI's mediation and complicate an understanding of the land by adding new layers of perception. CLUI's bus tours are partially calculated forays into the landscape, where intense mediation collides with genuine spontaneity in a constant state of in-between, most suitable for addressing a land that is neither purely cultural nor pre-discursively natural.

Initially based in Oakland, CLUI relocated to Los Angeles in 1996, as Southern California's contrasted setting seemed to generate a better understanding—and reception—of the Center's ambiguous profile by funding institutions.[16] According to Coolidge, the San Francisco cultural community had trouble deciphering CLUI's ambivalent discourse; instead they looked for frankly political endeavours that were more clearly defined as either cultural or environmental.[17] As art critic Ralph Rugoff points out, it is precisely this terrain where "the man-made, the cultural, and the natural [seem]

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[16] CLUI is supported by many national endowments and foundations, such as The Los Angeles County Arts Commission, The National Endowment for the Arts, The Nevada Humanities Committee, The Getty Grant Program, Hemingway Western Studies Center, Pioneer Documentary Fund among others.
[17] A conversation with Matthew Coolidge at the Center for Land Use Interpretation, April 29, 2007.

to merge"[18] that captivates CLUI's attention. As wind and rain work in conjunction with tectonic upheavals to fashion the land, so humanized landscape components are treated by CLUI as indexical signs of the intersubjective relations and socio-economic structures underlying the appearance of things. In what Coolidge terms "anthropogeomorphology," the methodology of geomorphology—deciphering underground activity and geological history through the reading of surface signs—is extended to humanized landscapes, for the knowledge they provide on human-land relationships. This peculiar mandate situates CLUI within an ambiguous epistemological space, somewhere in the margins of geography, history, geology, sociology, ecology, and art history, from where the Center takes pleasure in testing their discursive limits. According to the new artistic paradigm described by Miwon Kwon in her essay *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, CLUI fits perfectly into the register of new liminal practices. It straddles many positions and disciplines, perpetually shifting from a curatorial role to that of a tourist, archivist or researcher without ever exclusively endorsing these functions.

By using an open-source research technique and adopting a peripheral epistemological stance, CLUI circumvents the comfort of a unifying and comprehensive narrative and instead lets the plurality of visions, along with their contradictions and divergences, filter through its standardized tone. In doing so, CLUI destabilizes conventional assumptions in terms of land use values and leaves only uncertainty as a reliable landmark. In its commitment to complicate how things are perceived, CLUI seeks the unacknowledged, dismissed, hidden and neglected aspects of the American landscape just as it takes

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[18]Ralph Rugoff, "Circling the Center," *Overlook: Exploring America's Internal Fringes with the Center for Land Use Interpretation*, edited by Matthew Coolidge and Sarah Simons (New York: Metropolis Books, 2006), 35.

pleasure in exploring, closer to home, the limits and edges of the frontier culture and its

adjoining California Dream. As Coolidge further comments about observing things from

the often dismissed—albeit insightful—peripheries, "There's a good view from the

fence."[19]

Unusual Landmarks in the Frontier Land

Given its physical location at the heart of Los Angeles, CLUI has a pretty insightful

perspective on the numerous contradictions marking the California Dream and its relation

to the land—an insider's viewpoint that is brought to the margins of this contrasting

discursive/geographic site through the Center's polymorphous practice. Southern

California, and more specifically Los Angeles, has long been inscribed in the popular

imagination as a land of sunshine, lush gardens and rugged nature, alongside its

reputation as the capital of cinematographic fantasy. This inflated image is increasingly

compromised by a dismal version of the L.A. myth—an image of the megalopolis

profoundly marked by reckless urban sprawl, political and social dissension, and

environmental disruptions. This pessimistic perspective is evidently based on factual

elements; compulsive real estate development and lucrative ambitions effectively

generate social tensions and racial segregation while also incurring serious environmental

threats. But the dark underside of the California Dream indulges in defeatism well

beyond the actual imperfections of the city: it is an inverse reaction to L.A.'s boosterish

legacy. As urban theorist Mike Davis explains, "Divine wrath or not, there is widespread

popular apprehension that the former Land of Sunshine is "reinventing" itself, to use

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[19] Matthew Coolidge cited in: Christie Lange, "Walking the Land," *Afterall* (no. 13, Spring/Summer 2006), 16.

fashionable gerund, as a Book of the Apocalypse theme park."[20] In his configuration of

what he calls an "ecology of fear," Davis describes L.A.'s cultural mind-frame as

hovering between a reverence for an edenic nature and a reaction of fear and control

against the threat of natural disaster.[21] Davis's *City of Quartz* conveys explicitly the

inherent dualism of the California myth in a chapter entitled "Sunshine or Noir?," in

which he describes the distinct efforts of local intellectual groups such as the L.A. School

to de-fantasize the region's dichotomous identity without slipping into extremes.[22]

In a similar vein, CLUI tends to reduce a paradoxical interpretation of the Los Angeles

Basin to a more down-to-earth topography without necessarily neglecting its complexities

or denying its legitimate contrasts. Southern California arouses strongly negative

impressions of its social and environmental settings inasmuch as its positive projected

image has been branded on the collective imaginary. Exacerbated by the Californian

context, such paradoxes extend throughout the American territory as secret military bases

and weapon test sites are adjoining official tourism destinations and preservation zones

such as national parks and historical monuments. This contrast shapes the background of

CLUI's theoretical consciousness. Most notably, it is demonstrated through the Center's

peculiar interest in contradictory perceptions and uses of the territory as well as its

propensity to draw a more nuanced portrait of land-use issues than the usual heap of

dichotomous interpretations. CLUI transposes its Californian site-specific criticality to

other regional and national features, in an attempt to reveal the complex network of

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[20] Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 6-7.
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London; New York: Verso, 1990), 15-97.

interrelations configuring the contemporary American landscape. By exposing the power structures and socio-economic mechanisms underlying the visible landscape and by seemingly remaining neutral, CLUI allows its audiences to become aware of the territory's inherent complexity and to negotiate in their own terms the middle ground that might potentially characterize it.

While CLUI emerges from the Californian context and extends its critical inquiry to all corners of the American territory, historically artists and writers have predominantly been drawn to Western landscapes for their charismatic frontier connotations.[23] California's reputation as a land of rugged beauty and flexible entrepreneurial possibilities still bears resemblances to the frontier spirit of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Western regions were framed against the background of a pristine nature and were not yet considered to be corrupted by the stifling complications of civilization. Taking a retrospective look at the more recent past and another facet of CLUI's cultural genealogy, Suzaan Boettger situates the Earthworks movement of the late sixties in the context of a widespread fascination with Western landscapes. These landscapes were believed to be the ultimate frontier of open possibilities, California epitomizing this cultural trend. Citing the philosopher Jacob Needleman, Boettger observes, "California plays a unique role in the gestation and the nurture of what is unusual, and often downright weird, in American life."[24] She further describes the cultural context in California as enacting itself

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[23] The American pictorial tradition has long been marked by frontier romanticism, as can be observed in the paintings of Albert Bierstad, Thomas Moran and Thomas Hill. A similar phenomenon can be denoted in John Muir's texts, and later on in Edward Abbey's writings, among other textual works. With his insightful reflection on *The Frontier in American History* (1920), Frederick Jackson Turner is recognized as one of the main authors to have theorized the frontier's significance in the forging of a distinct American identity.
[24] Jacob Needleman cited in: Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 107.

through the natural landscape for which it expresses an intense reverence. According to

cultural theorist Karen Voss, this reliance on nature for self-determination turns the

region of Los Angeles into a hotbed for Western culture re-enactment. In her study of

L.A.'s cinematographic representations, she identifies two determinant motifs: the "resort

frontier" of beaches, with "cow-boy surfers" moving swiftly and intuitively in the natural

landscape, and the yet-to-be built or half-decayed high-rise as a symbol of incomplete

settlement and a center piece in "taking-back-the-fort" scenarios.[25] Whereas Los

Angeles's frontier imaginary is laden with racial tensions in Voss's interpretation, CLUI

primarily negotiates this romantic legacy by exposing the arbitrariness of its conventions

within land use patterns and conceptions of nature.

While Voss situates the edges of civilized regulation at the beachfront, for Land artists it

is moved slightly inland toward the inhospitable mesas and semi-desert lands of the

South-West interior. Artists of this period repeatedly went to the desert to leave their

mark, whether as important depressions like Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969),

twirling ramps and jetties such as Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), or vast expanses

pinned with metal rods in the likes of Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* (1977). The

attraction exerted on artists by California's desert environment persists even today as art

initiatives discursively contiguous to CLUI—Andrea Zittel's ongoing project *AZ West,*

for example—tend to demonstrate. In a discussion about her High Desert Test Sites

(HDTS), a component of the broader *AZ West* project, Zittel explains that she is drawn to

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[25] Karen Voss, "L.A.'s Cultural Geography of Privilege: Whiteness, Beaches, High-Rises," *Emergences* (vol. 9, no. 2, 1999), 321-344.

the Mojave Desert because of the possibility of "getting lost" in it.[26] During a round table focusing on contemporary art's relation to remote places, Zittel describes the desert as the ultimate frontier landscape, where lack of structure creates gaps in which innovation and change can happen.[27] Revealingly, her High Desert Test Sites are situated near a fictional-turned-real locality called Pioneer Town[28] and their name echoes the no less intriguing (or troubling) Nevada Nuclear Testing Grounds nearby. In fact, Zittel shares a lot of common ground with CLUI: they are both drawn to the desert region for eco-cultural reasons; they underline the incongruous notoriety of the place and its military use; they are particularly curious about the local "fauna" (population) and its cultural diversity; and they have a comparable fascination for fringes and marginality, etc. Despite such commonalities between Zittel's HDTS and CLUI, the latter attends to the frontier culture *within* societal structures, instead of looking for it in apparently vacant spaces. While artists such as Pierre Huyghe travel as far as Antarctica in search of a non-coded place or a discursive *tabula rasa*, CLUI actually undermines the frontier aura of remote places, emphasizing instead the extended reach of human cognition on the land. In contrast to Huyghe's lyrical and mysterious travelogue in the film production, *A Journey that Wasn't* (2005), CLUI has created an interactive CD-ROM documenting Antarctica's "Highway One" as the extension of the road network—and implicitly, human configuration of the land—to its southern extreme.[29] By doing so, CLUI inscribes

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[26]Lisa Auerbach and Andrea Zittel, "A Text About the High Desert Test Sites – Inside Out: Art's New Terrain," *Artforum* (vol 43, pt 10, Summer 2005), 282.

[27]Tim Griffin (moderator), "Remote Possibilities: A Round Table – Inside Out: Art's New Terrain", *Artforum* (vol 43, pt 10, Summer 2005), 291.

[28] Pioneer Town is charted in CLUI's Land Use Database. Initially built as a Western movie-set, it was subsequently reclaimed by marginal individuals who built real homes behind the facades.

[29] http://www.cluistore.org While CLUI's area of inquiry geographically and discursively centers on America, places like Antarctica—where an American research station is in operation—serve to illustrate the extrapolation of national boundaries.

Antarctica as *terra cognita*. Using a generous repertoire of postmodernized frontier terminology, CLUI locates the "margins," the "boundaries," the "peripheries" and the "edges" of our world where they are not usually found. The anthology *Overlook: Exploring the Internal Fringes of America with the Center for Land Use Interpretation* is a quintessential attestation of this contemporary reconfiguration of America's frontiers in the collective consciousness. It displaces the unknown—from inaccessible Western territories to widely dismissed, forgotten, or, on the contrary, heavily commoditized features, such as subterranean caves turned into mass-tourism attractions, equipped with cafeterias and the occasional wedding chapel.[30] Other than obscure military sites and mysterious scientific installations, the boundaries of today's American mainstream society reside, according to CLUI, in the kitsch taboos of consumerist venues and the decaying remains of bygone infrastructures.

In other cases, CLUI remains faithful to the classical "center-periphery" model of boundary apprehension. The project *Hinterland: A Voyage Into Exurban Southern California* explores the backcountry of Los Angeles and attests to the highly diversified human presence in this peripheral territory, from aerospace industries in Antelope Valley to the crafted flanks of Salvation Mountain.[31] But the concentration of projects focusing on internal characteristics of Los Angeles suggests that marginality can be found *within* the center, or rather that margins can be anywhere, since, in the case of L.A., the center no longer is or never was. While urban theorist Edward Soja suggests that suburban

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[30]Matthew Coolidge and Sarah Simons (editors), "Subterranean Renovations: The Unique Architectural Spaces of Show Caves," *Overlook: Exploring America's Internal Fringes with the Center for Land Use Interpretation* (New York: Metropolis Books, 2006), 96-123.
[31] The Center for Land Use Interpretation, "CLUI Bus Tours Probes L.A.'s Hinterland," *The Lay of the Land* (Summer 1997).

sprawl in the modern era was carried by "primarily white middle-class 'pioneers' pushing

ever outward the suburban 'frontier,' following the grand American tradition of civilizing

frontier settlement,"[32] CLUI's outlining of internal fringes seems precisely adapted to

postmodern multi-centered metropolitan galaxies. If, as Manuel Castells argues,

"Megacities are discontinuous constellations of spatial fragments, functional pieces, and

social segments,"[33] CLUI has understood that such disjunctive patterns create gaps,

fissures and crevices where today's boundaries are to be negotiated. Christy Lange

situates CLUI's perspective in a similar way: "For many L.A. residents, the expanse of

the Mojave Desert is the antidote to urban sprawl. For the CLUI, it is also what lays

beyond the view of the highway, past the barbed-wire fences, down the seemingly

invisible dirt tracks, or at the bottom of the largest pit mine in California."[34] In its search

for blank spots within the land, CLUI blurs the distinction between urban, suburban and

exurban territories by exposing their intricate connections, both tangible and imagined.

The already multi-centered/multi-fragmented megalopolis of Los Angeles is thus

expanded to encompass a much wider array of places in its realm including the

spectacularly rugged and strongly contested Owens Valley: the "Country of Lost

Borders."[35]

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[32]Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 240.
[33] Manuel Castells, cited in: Edward Soja, *Ibid.*, 235.
[34]Christy Lange, *Op. cit.*, 14.
[35]Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988, originally published in 1903), 1.

Tapping Into the Disputed Owens Valley

"It is the proper destiny of every considerable stream in the west to become an irrigating ditch."[36] The naturalist Mary Austin had coined these words in her book about the Owens Valley in 1903, barely a few years before intense speculation and debate started in the Valley, concerning the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power's diversion plans of the Owens River to quench the city's growing thirst. Farmers and cattle herders had already divided the river into an elaborate configuration of irrigation trenches and were protecting their valuable water rights "with a Winchester and a deadly aim"[37] when the expanding City of Los Angeles entered the picture. As for many other places in the dry western regions, the Owens River Valley has been turned into a site of confrontation, a hotbed where diverging economic interests, tense urban/rural power relations and contested conceptions of "nature" collide.

Straddling three distinct bioregions,[38] the Owens Valley is situated north-east of Los Angeles, and extends up to Mono Lake, a large salt lake located due east of Yosemite and San Francisco, near the border of Nevada. A land of superlatives, this narrow topographic depression separates two monolithic fortresses of faulted rock, causing radically different ecosystems—from alpine forests to desert shrubs—to rub shoulders with little (if any) transition over extremely short distances. Deemed "the deepest valley in America," Owens Valley is flanked by the sheer walls of the Eastern Sierras on one side and by the

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[36] *Ibid.*, 85.

[37] *Ibid.*, 85-86.

[38] A "frontier land" on all aspects, the Owens Valley is characterized by a liminal ecology, marked by the prolific encounter of the Sierra Nevada bioregion with that of the Mojave Desert and the Great Basin Desert. For a detailed account of the Owens Valley's ecological-geographical-geological nature, consult the guidebook *Deepest Valley: Guide to Owens Valley, Its Roadsides and Mountain Trails*, second edition by Jeff Putman and Genny Smith (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1995).

equally elevated—although more arid than scarped—Inyo and White Mountain ranges to the east, beyond which are the alkali flats of Death Valley. Beginning its course in the alpine lands just south of Mono Lake, the meandering Owens River originally marked the valley floor by following the path of least resistance down to Owens Lake, while its tributary streams were fed melt water from the high Sierra snowfields. With the completion of the Los Angeles aqueduct in 1913, the lower portion of the river was diverted from its natural course, causing the already shrinking and saline Owens Lake to desiccate entirely. Today wind gusts periodically raise dense volutes of dust from the ghostly expanse of Owens Lake, generating particle pollution rates that have been deemed the highest in the country. The Owens riverbed now receives a mere trickle, the bulk of its hydraulic power now harnessed and subsequently brought to Los Angeles through an ambitious network of pipelines and conduits.

The extraction of Owens Valley "blue gold" imposed a reconfiguration of the valley's economic activities and lifestyle. While mining has played a prominent role for early settlement by luring gold seekers to the valley's mountain sides and allowing a support economy of agriculture and cattle ranching to develop, this precarious balance was cut short by the diversion of its most important staple resource. Under the leading influence of resilient protagonists such as Father Crowley—nicknamed the "Desert Padre"—the valley reoriented its focus toward whatever charm it had left, namely its vast desert expanses and its superb mountain vistas. With the paving of "El Camino Sierra," now called Highway 395, the valley became a prime vacationland for L.A. residents as the City was simultaneously sprawling and its population density increasing. The

exceptionally undeveloped state of the valley, along with the cowboy-style showdowns

associated with past political negotiations assured its notoriety as one of California's

interior frontiers. As CLUI points out, the valley's remote character—despite relative

proximity to Los Angeles—served to inscribe it as a fabled "backspace" in the collective

imaginary and tourism industry.[39]

While Los Angeles was provided with more water than it needed in the early twentieth

century, the city's exponential growth prompted the extension of the aqueduct in 1940,

reaching as far as the Mono Basin and intercepting the tributaries and irrigation ditches of

the upper Owens River. Subsequently, a second aqueduct was constructed in 1970 to

increase drainage capacity. After what had happened to Owens Lake and because the

valley's new economy depended heavily on environmental beauty for recreational

purposes, this second stage of water extraction was met with strong objections. This time

the debate shifted toward concerns about environmental integrity, specifically, worry for

Mono Lake's decreasing water level and the depletion of native flora due to excessive

groundwater pumping. The level of the dispute also evolved: courthouses hosted the

negotiations instead of town halls, and environmental policy took the place of dynamite

and guns as the rhetorical tools for local groups. Outright confrontation progressively

made space for collaboration eventually leading to hard-won agreements. Thus, the

raising of Mono Lake's water level was ordered in 1994 while a dust reduction plan was

established in 1998 for Owens Lake in order to impede air pollution through shallow

flooding and the cultivation of salt grass on the lakebed. A section of the lower Owens

[39] "Diversions and Dislocations: An Account of the CLUI Bus Tour of the Owens Valley," *The Lay of the Land* (vol. 27, Summer 2004).

River was even partially re-watered in 1990 in an attempt to restore its watershed environment.[40]

The environmental fate of the valley remains unresolved as of today because there is no agreement on what solution might serve the valley's "greatest good." Divergent conceptions of nature's "moral imperatives"[41] are also to blame as the different accounts of this story demonstrate. The most popular version positions valley residents as deceived victims of power abuse by the City of Los Angeles—a viewpoint epitomized by the Sierra Club's Manichaean interpretation written by David Carle and entitled *Water and the California Dream: Choices for the New Millennium*. The high-ranked corruption and fear campaigns reported to have been instigated by the LAWDP render *Chinatown*'s fictional account somewhat reminiscent of a dystopian reality.[42] In light of the City's boisterous past, these swinish details may not be so far from the truth. Carle's arguments revolve around the widespread environmental depletion of many regions—Owens Valley among others—that are being ecologically sacrificed to satisfy Los Angeles' vampiric water cravings. This accusation is echoed by a chapter in Davis' *Ecology of Fear* entitled "How Eden Lost Its Garden," where the booming real estate developments around the

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[40] For a comprehensive chronology of political developments in the Owens Valley pertaining to Los Angeles' aqueduct, see the historical section in: Jeff Putman & Genny Smith (editors), *Deepest Valley*, *Op.cit.*, 231-268.

[41] William Cronon coined this term, referring to a general propensity in ecological thought to infuse nature with culturally determined moral values, leading to biased judgements in terms of what nature "ought to be." William Cronon, "Introduction: In Search of Nature" *Uncommon Grounds: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York : W. W. Norton, 1996), 36.

[42] While the Owens Valley has been the site of so many Western films, as the "Movie Flats" in the Alabama Hills clearly attest, the valley and its aqueduct became a prime Hollywood subject matter in Roman Polanski's political thriller *Chinatown*. As I travelled through the Owens Valley in May 2007, the dystopian example of *Chinatown* seemed to be on everyone's lips—from local residents to National Forest Services employees—when came the time to discuss the valley's conflicted past, mingling Hollywood fiction with factual accuracy.

popular city are described as wide scale ecocides.[43] Not everyone, however, finds Owens

Valley in a sacrificial state. Based on (epic) oral historical reports from family stories and

interviews, Robert Pearce's *The Untold Story* conveys the perspective of his grandfather

who actively took part in the valley's land sales to the City of Los Angeles. Despite

rhetorical gaps and occasional explanatory confusion, Pearce's account of the Owens

Valley controversy complicates the villain/victim dichotomy by exposing other levels of

power relations (and corruption by the same token), notably between the local town of

Bishop—where the Inyo County Bank and business money historically was—and the

farmers. Regardless of the desiccation of an entire watershed (including a lake), Pearce

considers that the Owens Valley is better off as a humanly-induced wilderness rather than

the alternative outcome: in his mind, the Owens Valley would have become an

overdeveloped agricultural region that would still be plagued with water conflicts. The

indecipherable "truth" of the valley most probably resides somewhere between these

diverging perspectives, in an elusive grey zone beyond the reach of arbitrary positions.

The antagonistic "nature" of Owens Valley makes it a most valuable case study for those,

like CLUI, seeking to unpack contradictory land uses and their interpretations.

An exemplary site not to be missed, the Owens Valley was first taken-up by CLUI in

1995 as part of their Extrapolative Projects Program.[44] The Center installed a Sound-

Emitting Device (SED) in the middle of Owens Lake evoking the ghostly past of the dry

expanse by reproducing the sound of lapping water at night. Nearly ten years later, the

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[43] Mike Davis, "How Eden Lost Its Garden," *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 57-92.
[44] The Extrapolative Projects Program consists of interventions on the field, as "extensions of traditional interpretive techniques, and are designed to expand the methodology into new fronts." www.clui.org

Valley was again at the center of CLUI's critical attention, during a month-long site-specific study conducted in April, 2004. The Center treats the Owens Valley as an area recuperated by the California Dream—an extension of Los Angeles in terms of resource extraction, ecological footprint, cultural projections and the consumption of nature. Focusing predominantly on the aqueduct, and following its course all the way to its farthest reaches near Mono Lake, CLUI emphasized the valley's connection to its urban neighbour. As Coolidge explains in the foreword of the project's publication, "In this place, we see the effects of the cause of Los Angeles, and by extrapolation, the codependent relationship between the urban and rural, the consumers and the consumed. The local and remote are two sides of the same coin."[45]

A typical example of CLUI's unusual approach to the territory, the Owens Valley project is constituted of three distinct, albeit intersecting, components. The exhibition *Diversions and Dislocations: California's Owens Valley*, on view from April 9 to May 9, 2004, presented different perspectives of the site through the work of four collaborating artists. The Valley, subtly framed in photographic compositions, was given another layer of mediation with the presentation of the artworks. As with any curatorial installation by CLUI, the dimly lit exhibition gave an impression of sobriety and bureaucratic formalism regardless of the distinct character of the four presented views (fig. 2). The diverse uses of the photographic medium by these reunited artists implicitly emphasized the range of manipulative strategies possible with photography, contradicting its (still) popular identity as an "objective" eye. The creativity emanating from the exhibited works also

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[45] Matthew Coolidge, "Foreword", *Points of Interest in the Owens River Valley* (Culver City: Center for Land Use Interpretation, 2004), i.

clashed with CLUI's more formalistic approach to photography, as its own visual

production usually overwrites stylistic concerns with a bureaucratic tone. All of the

displayed projects nevertheless retained a dose of conceptualism (to varying degrees) in

tune with CLUI's general mode of address.

In contrast to Ansel Adam's earlier photographic rendering of the valley (*Born Free and*

Equal, 1945) in which all signs of the aqueduct had been carefully avoided despite the

political climate of the time, Eva Castringius follows the aqueduct on its meandering

journey across the valley. Her series of colour photographs, entitled *The Great Thirst*

(2001), aestheticizes the aqueduct through photogenic perspectives and richly saturated

desert light (fig. 3-4). Aaron Forrest also visually unpacks this ungraspable infrastructure

in his *Los Angeles Aqueduct Landscape Atlas* (2002). Revealing, page after page,

photographic mosaics of the aqueduct organized in geographic succession and

accompanied by cartographic data, Forrest's rendering of this engineering colossus

hovers between psycho-geographic delirium and conceptual intertextuality (fig. 5-6).

Further documentation of this intricately dense "nonsite" is presented in the form of

critical analyses of the aqueduct's various landscapes: pictorial views used to manipulate

public opinion, cultural references by CLUI (their SED project) among others, and

appropriated (and perpetuated) myths, like the film noir script of *Chinatown*. In

displaying intertextual work with internal references to some of its previous projects,

CLUI showcases its own discursive contextualization through someone else's

perspective. This tactic induces a parallactic variation on its own self-presentation and

frames the Owens Valley through a diachronic interpretive process. Projected on a wall

and accompanied by a musical soundtrack and narrative, David Maisel's aerial shots turn

the patterns and colours of Owens Lake dry bed into intricate compositions that are

reminiscent of abstract expressionism (fig. 7-8). Claiming a form of objectivity in his

work by comparing his pictures of Owens Lake's traumatic condition to a kind of

"autopsy,"[46] Maisel's *The Lake Project* (2001) nevertheless displays an ethical

ambivalence and an aesthetic grandeur strongly akin to that found in the sublime

photographs of Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky.

Pointing to another sensitive aspect of the valley (and another source of dislocation),

Andy Freeman photographically retraced the buildings of Manzanar Relocation Camp—a

Japanese-American internment camp dating from the Second World War—that were

dispersed throughout the valley and given new functions after the war. Presented on

monitors, and later published as a book entitled *[Manzanar] Architecture Double* (2006),

Freeman's colour photographs of individual buildings and their surrounds are juxtaposed

with captions that describe their converted function and pinpoint their longitudinal and

latitudinal coordinates. In the published version, the carefully composed images are

accompanied by critical texts layering the multiple repercussions of this dark historical

episode, notably by internee descendant Karin Higa and art critic Elisabeth Wiatr. In his

foreword, Matthew Coolidge also maps out a general topography of the elusive

palimpsest that remains, concisely describing the contraction/expansion flux of

displacements: "After the war, many of the camp's buildings were removed and relocated

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[46] John K. Grande, "Tapping Topographies: An Interview with David Maisel," *Ciel variable* (June 2007, n.76), 14.

throughout the Owens Valley – an inversion of the way in which 10,000 Japanese-

Americans had been removed from their homes and concentrated at this camp." [47]

By keeping the visual composition of his photographs fairly straightforward and by

framing the buildings to highlight their banality, Freeman lets the intensity of this

displaced history speak for itself (fig. 9-10). Ironically referencing the LAWPD

superintendent William Mulholland's famous declaration during the opening of the Los

Angeles Aqueduct —"Here it is. Take it."—Matthew Coolidge further comments:

"Despite the careful photographic and contextual considerations that went into this quiet

epic of a book, the work resounds with the clarity of the obvious: Look at it. Here it is."[48]

The land artist Robert Smithson once claimed that "each landscape, no matter how calm

and lovely, conceals a substrata [sic] of disaster."[49] While nature has the capacity to

soothe violent traces left by intense geologic activity, Freeman's photographs expose the

process by which oppressive histories are gradually absorbed into the mundane. By

seeking out tangible traces of a forgotten/sublimated past in the landscape, Freeman

mirrors the Center's practice quite beautifully.

The exhibition was complemented by a tour in the valley where, from the elevated

viewpoint of a luxury bus, the industrial, recreational, military, sublime, utopian and

ruined components of the landscape were attentively examined by CLUI members and

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[47] Matthew Coolidge, "Foreword," *(Manzanar) Architecture Double*, www.andrewfreeman.net
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] Robert Smithson, "Art through the Camera's Eye," *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press), 375.

the public that joined them.[50] Due to the length of the aqueduct, the tour took a full day to travel up to Bishop, viewing points of interest along the way, and then returned the following day. As the article in CLUI's newsletter reports, the theme of the first day was "diversions," focusing primarily on displacements of the valley elsewhere and vacuities in the landscape.[51] The list of extractive processes noted by CLUI is quite extensive, including borax, silver, lead, sodium carbonate, tungsten, fish, electricity, and, of course, water. Whether carried in bottles by truck or in pipelines, water is the most important diversion and serves as the focus for numerous points of interest. The tour looked at Jawbone Canyon where the aqueduct takes a large dip and then rises up again on the other side of the depression, and where the aqueduct has been dynamited a number of times by protesters; Haiwee Reservoir which allows sediments to deposit and water to be purified by sun and oxygen exposure; and the Los Angeles Aqueduct Intake where the lower Owens River is swallowed by pipes and conduits that take the water all the way to San Fernando. The following day, travelling highway 395 in the reverse direction, the tour declared Owens Valley a hosting site for dislocated components, or, as explained in their newsletter, as "a place of the displaced."[52] Among the dislocated things are trout, hatched in various locations throughout the valley and distributed across the oligotrophic Sierra lakes; Tulle elks, transplanted from Central Valley (their degraded initial habitat) in 1930, marginal residents of Keeler—a former mining town near Owens Lake; "exotic"

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[50] As this tour was given in 2004, I have not had the opportunity to experience it first-hand. I traveled across the Valley in May 2007 and visited most of the points of interest designated by CLUI—guidebook in hand and tour in mind. I was, however, left to imagine what the views would seem like from the elevated viewpoint of a coach bus, and what differences would there be in my interpretation of the Valley had I been part of a large tour group running on a tight schedule. My description of the tour derives entirely from secondary sources, notably from an article published in CLUI's newsletter *The Lay of the Land* and from a conversation I had with Matthew Coolidge when visiting CLUI's main office in Los Angeles.
[51] "Diversions and Dislocations: An Account of the CLUI Bus Tour of the Owens Valley," *The Lay of the Land* (vol. 27, Summer 2004).
[52] *Ibid.*

(or non-indigenous) students of the remote Deep Springs College; and the relocated buildings of Manzanar that recall the former displacement of entire communities. [53]

While the pictures of the tour seem to document the visited points of interest, their composition always reveal the landscape as framed by the bus tour experience or various infrastructures: impressive views on Owens Lake's dust mitigation works are tinted with light reflections as they were photographed *through* the bus window (fig. 11); silhouette-like outlines of the bus interior foregrounds images of the valley's desert expanses thereby evoking the guide's discursive mediation in an ambiance of air conditioned comfort (fig. 12). Other visual accounts of the tour seem, at first sight, trivial but they cleverly conceal other referential compositions. Thus a "simple" picture of the parked bus is in fact a highly staged play with perspective as the receding bus converges with arrows on the sidewalk pointing to Mount Whitney—a tiny jumble of rocks in the upper background of the bus' rear end—therefore following a stylistic logic typical of Renaissance compositions (fig. 13). When appropriated by CLUI, it becomes ambiguous whether this visual strategy seeks to highlight the mountain as its subject matter or the various means of mediation—from arrows to bus—framing its presentation.

Mirroring Coolidge's background, cinematographic references are an intrinsic part of CLUI's interpretation ethos, and the Owens Valley Tour abounded with such fictional mediation. The ride across the valley was punctuated with video projections providing insights on the Los Angeles aqueduct story, notably excerpts from the movie *Chinatown* and the PBS series *Cadillac Desert*. While visiting the Alabama Hills (bouldery foothills

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[53] These sites are all reported in the account of the tour: *Ibid.*

notorious for having hosted numerous Westerns and "British-army-in-India" films) the

tour group experienced the site in conjunction with layered fictional-documentary views:

"In a number of remarkable moments, the video shows scenes from Western films, cross-

faded with scenes of the same view of the valley today, merging with the views out the

windows of the bus."[54] In a similar vein, the movie *Tremors*, filmed in the Alabama Hills,

was deemed an allegory of the valley's traumatic past by CLUI members who associated

its tube-like underground monster with the aqueduct. In other instances, as reported in the

newsletter, the tour indulged in cathartic moments:

> Then, heading back to Los Angeles, we watch Race with the Devil, where Peter Fonda
> and Warren Oates pilot a RV through the plains of Texas, lurching and veering wildly
> throughout, in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to escape an encroaching Satanist
> conspiracy. The rectilinear interior of the screeching and careening RV seems
> metabolically connected to the tour bus, sensoramically emphasizing our empathetic
> connection with the protagonists on screen.[55]

While it can be assumed that the actual tour was more intensely focused on the valley as

such, the tightly programmed schedule and the continuously narrated interpretations

made sure that mediation would never slip too far out of the tourists' minds. The account

of the Owens Valley tour in CLUI's quarterly newsletter points to a similar emphasis as it

conveys the temporal and geographic progression of the tour mixed with a precision

reminiscent of scientific travelogues and the informative tone of publicity stunts:

> The gleaming white luxury tour bus, provided by California Excursions and piloted by
> driver Larry Hansen, leaves from the Center's main office in Culver City, after tour
> participants have a moment to browse the Owens Valley exhibit. [...] At this point, a half
> hour into the tour, the bus transitions onto the 14 freeway, leaving the city, and the first

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[54] *Ibid.*, 4.
[55] *Ibid.*

element of the video program for the tour begins. [...] North of Mojave, after over two hours on the bus, passengers disembark at Jawbone Canyon, where the massive pipes of the two parallel Owens Valley aqueducts, the 1913 and the 1970 system, dramatically dip down and up the sides of the canyon. This is a moment to physically interact with the pipe, to touch it, to listen to the water inside, walk on it. [...] Back on Highway 14, heading north, the highway is soon absorbed by Highway 395, the main road through the Owens Valley, merging from the east. The hills too begin to converge here, indicating that the land is coming together to form the valley. [...] North of Pearsonville, the bus, running next to the Aqueduct, passes under high voltage transmission lines, another linear element exporting resources from the valley to Los Angeles—the 'P' of LADWP. [And so on.][56]

Despite the highly choreographed nature of the tour—with its punctual information delivered in conjunction with the defiled landscape and the consciously repetitive and almost performative enactment of "embarking on/disembarking from the bus"—there seems to have been some improvised moments. At one point, as the newsletter article reports, the tour crew expected to meet a local interpreter at the Owens Valley Radio Astronomy Observatory only to discover empty rooms except for screens that showed live surveillance feed of a vacant scientific site and humongous satellite dishes pointed toward the infinite. Coolidge explains that when someone finally showed up and asked the crew, "Why are you here?" the situation exerted a profoundly existential atmosphere.[57]

A guidebook entitled *Points of Interest in the Owens River Valley* was issued in conjunction with the tour, adding points of interest that were deemed inaccessible while visiting the valley. The guidebook has a northward itinerary in the valley taking the

[56]"Diversions and Dislocations: An Account of the CLUI Bus Tour of the Owens Valley," *The Lay of the Land* (vol. 27, Summer 2004).
[57] A conversation with Matthew Coolidge in CLUI's main office, April 29, 2007.

reader up to Mono Lake and its adjoining curiosities with a final destination of a viewpoint looking south on the valley. While the printed catalogue contains colour photographs, a pdf version (available on CLUI's website) presents the same pictures in black and white accentuating the overall sobriety of the document. The generic visual layout of the points of interest is counterbalanced by a textual explanation of their specific character. Furthermore, the photographic emphasis moves away from the bus experience, back to the aqueduct and to framing infrastructures in the landscape such as road signalization, interpretive panels, restrictive indications, and so on. Such is the case with the *Eastern Sierra Interagency Information Center* where a picture of Mount Whitney is taken *through* the window of the center on which an arrow indicates the visual path required to get a glimpse of the mountain. The guiding purpose of the arrow is repeated by a postcard on the right making sure that visitors see nature "as it ought to be" (fig. 14).[58] The description of Mount Whitney in the newsletter article similarly focuses on the surrounding infrastructures rather than the mountain itself:

> We turn up Whitney Portal Road, which leads to the parking lot, snackbar, and trailhead
> for the ten mile climb up the tallest peak in the lower 48, something that around 20,000
> people do every year. While reservations are required, and the mountain is often officially
> booked up all season, there is no fence surrounding the peak.[59]

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[58] Since CLUI's visit in 2004, the rebuilt Information Center provides a much more evocative visual frame to the popular mountain. Mount Whitney can now be glimpsed through an old section of the aqueduct pipeline, installed in front of a giant bay window. The infrastructure that prompted the valley's economic re-orientation is thus superimposed over its main tourist attraction.

[59]"Diversions and Dislocations: An Account of the CLUI Bus Tour of the Owens Valley," *Op. cit.* I decided to experience this eponymous American hike, and see for myself what all those infrastructures stood for. As I neared the summit, military jets from the nearby Edwards Air Force Base kept passing right above my head, making the sound of a decompressing cargo truck or a breaking train pale in comparison. Having been built in the late 1920s as a countermeasure to the recession, the trail's impressive masonry is reinforced with concrete, all the way up its 16 km distance. The trail is so densely frequented during summer months that the Forest Service now asks all hikers to pack their poop out, using bags specifically provided for such usage. Visitors are asked to "leave no trace."

As architectural historian Kazys Varnelis further comments, "Driving through the Owens Valley, we find evidence of these multiple layers of infrastructure and belief at work. Rather than seeing them purely as distractions from the 'natural,' we should recognize that not only are they inescapable, but that our very conception of the 'naturalness' of the Owens Valley is dependent on them."[60] Whether through the distinctive eye of artists and curators, the tinted window of a traveling bus, the notices written on panels and fences, or the selective images of a guidebook, the Owens Valley project is driven by a poststructuralist desire to expose the many layers of interpretation that influence our understanding of the land, of nature, and our use of it. By borrowing from the touristic apparatus while simultaneously studying it in the landscape, CLUI reveals a tendency for self-reflexive examination of its own means of mediation.

Many aspects of CLUI's practice seem to find echoes in the valley's social and topographic strata, not to mention its faulted past. "At once beautiful and toxic, natural and reshaped by man,"[61] the Owens Valley comprises enough contradictory potential to peak CLUI's investigative interests while the tight management of its natural character and the conscientious maintenance of its Frontier aura are extremely representative of the Center's Californian context. As mentioned previously, Matthew Coolidge defines two variously interesting kinds of sites:

> The Center regards a site as 'unusual' if it stands out as unique, extraordinary, singular, rare, or exceptional. An example might be a piece of land art or a plutonium processing facility. A site is considered 'exemplary' if it serves well to represent a more common type of land use, if it is especially articulate, descriptive, coherent, or concise. Or if it represents

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[60] Kazys Varnelis, "Introduction" *Points of Interest in the Owens River Valley* (Culver City: The Center for Land Use Interpretation, 2004), 2.
[61] *Ibid.*, 1.

an apogee of its type: perhaps it's the first, the largest, the smallest, or has some other superlative quality. In this case, it is selected to exemplify that form of land use.[62] Without losing sight of CLUI's overall practice, the remainder of my reflections will predominantly focus on the Owens Valley project, it being an "exemplary" manifestation of the Center's peculiarity amidst other art practices deemed "environmental" in a broadly ecological sense.

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[62]Matthew Coolidge, "Introduction", *Op. cit.*, 19.

Chapter Two
Situating CLUI: The Discursive Evolution Surrounding Environmental Art

> *To avert whatever crisis might be forming in the present and awaiting us in the future, the world needs to maintain its interpretive diversity, along with its biological and cultural diversity. The tool kit needs to be fully stocked.*[63]
>
> Matthew Coolidge

> *Surely this is the primary motivation behind the "escape" from one visual ecosystem to another—to stay free, to survive, to thrive and evolve in new ways?*[64]
>
> Johanne Sloan

Ecovention, Weathervane, Beyond Green, Elements of Nature, Faux Naturel. The proliferation of exhibitions and publications bearing "green" titles is indicative of the widening discursive space for ecological issues in contemporary art. The discourse framing the intersection of art and ecology has continuously evolved since the early Earthworks, and comprises many different—at times divergent—conceptions of nature, society, and postmodernism. Given the multiple interpretations of environmental art, one can easily contend that the term "ecology" encompasses a broad range of meanings beyond its scientific definition: "the study of the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings."[65] In order to fully appreciate the ecological underpinnings of CLUI's practice, it is necessary to bear in mind the discursive evolution of environmental art, and also to understand the specific concepts of society and nature promoted by social ecology in comparison to other philosophical viewpoints on these concepts. This chapter thus maps out multiple ecological standpoints in art—from nature as dirt to discourse, mutualism and everyday ecology—all of which are relevant to an

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[63] Matthew Coolidge, "Introduction," Overlook: Exploring America's Internal Fringes with the Center for Land Use Interpretation (New York: Metropolis Books, 2006), 13.

[64] Johanne Sloan, "The Great Escape," *Safety Gear for Small Animals* (Montreal: ABC Art Books, 2005), 40.

[65] "Ecology," *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, ed. Katherine Barber (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2001).

understanding of contemporary art. It should be kept in mind that, despite their linear

presentation, these various perspectives do not temporally succeed or supplant one

another. They develop through an accretion process, coexisting and interacting one with

another. I additionally will introduce social ecology as a pertinent philosophical

framework for addressing and comprehending such art-specific convolutions.

Nature as Dirt

The most common scholarly approach to art and ecology has been to discuss various art

practices and their ecological undertones in general terms, most frequently linking them

back to the Land Art movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s as to the German artist

Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) who were forerunners of an ecological consciousness in art.

But as Suzaan Boettger indicates in her comprehensive review, *Earthworks: Art and the*

Landscape of the Sixties, retracing an eco-art movement to the earlier context of

Earthworks requires an attention to nuances, as these works' alleged intentions often get

misinterpreted. Thus, rather than casually affiliating the first generation of Land Artists to

the environmental awakening promoted by the counter-culture during the 1960s, Boettger

places these Land Artists' works within a broader matrix of socio-political upheavals and

artistic concerns. In a process of de-romanticization, Boettger questions the

environmentalist stance frequently attributed to these works:

> The dyad of nature and art is embedded in the term *earthworks*, yet the artists' formalist
> statements, and their boldness in rearranging earth, clearly displayed more of an
> engagement with this matter as art rather than as nature. This ambivalence—going to
> nature, but relating to it as dirt—was not merely their own; their works exaggerated and

dramatized society's dilemmas in the midst of a transition about its relation to the planet earth.[66]

However, Boettger also concedes that Earthworks have their share of romanticism. Despite the fact that Land Artists obviously rejected any spiritually-minded aestheticization of nature, they were nevertheless responding, in their own specific way, to a call of the wild as an escape from art market regulations. As Boettger remarks, their search for a corporeal experience of nature in its rough, unidealized state and through coarse, austere, monumental, and physically demanding art processes brought them to endorse another form of idealized "being-in-nature," in tune with the Frontier West and "buckaroo bravado" mentality.[67]

Subject to this ambivalence as much as his peers, Robert Smithson nonetheless attempted to critically unpack nature's otherness in terms different from the ecologists' purist stance, the pastoralists' aesthetic perspective, and the industrialists' instrumental conception. Boettger presumes that Smithson was most probably acquainted with Eugene P. Odum's *Fundamentals of Ecology* (1953), which, along with Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanach* (1949), is one of the earliest accounts of holistic ecology. According to Boettger, Odum's relational views may have triggered Smithson's dialectical interpretation of nature, just as it may have affirmed his dismissal of the human/nature dualism, which, according to mainstream thinking, opposes industrialists and ecologists.[68] Smithson's incisive writings communicated a process-based understanding of nature as an ungraspable phenomenon in a constant state of becoming, as opposed to the fixed idea of nature frequently nurtured by pastoralist views and the nostalgia for a long-lost nature

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[66]Suzaan Boettger, *Op.cit.*, p. 225.
[67] *Ibid.*, 216.
[68] *Ibid.*, 218.

common to many ecologists of the time. Though Smithson was generally inclusive of human traces in natural processes, he steered clear of subjecting nature to human values. His dialectical interpretation of nature derived in part from Uvedale Price and William Gilpin's concept of the picturesque. Developed at the turn of the 19th century, the picturesque, according to Price and Gilpin, builds on earlier theories of the sublime and the beautiful by synthesizing the two. Describing a nature that is neither frighteningly sublime nor harmoniously placid but hovering tensely in-between the two, the picturesque points to an aesthetically driven sensibility that predates the ecological movement while, in some ways, being akin to it. Borrowing from this view, Smithson tended to treat the landscape as a dialogue between traces of violent disruption and their mellowing by entropic processes.[69]

While Odum's theory assumes that nature progresses from competition toward collaboration and mutualism, this evolutionary take on ecology is not present in Smithson's perspective. The latter's inclusion of humanity in his inquiry about nature may signal a consciousness akin to what is today known as social ecology, yet his refusal of evolutionary interpretations of nature keeps him at the margins of this philosophical stance. Smithson rather centered on entropy—deterioration and decreasing energy through gradual loss of order—in his atopian interpretation of nature. He also manifested a keen attraction to the mineral realm, from geologically formed continental faults, clean crystals and volcanic ash, to industrially produced cement, asphalt, and glass. Not willing to exclude destruction and gritty materialism from nature's manifold character, he instead

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[69] Robert Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape," *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1996), 159-160.

called for their consideration in the broad picture: "A consciousness of mud and the

realms of sedimentation is necessary in order to understand the landscape as it exists."[70]

Foreshadowing CLUI 's critical practice, Smithson sought to unearth nature's complex

strata from the ground up in what he termed "open landscapes," namely, uncontained

sites where simultaneous perspectives and clashing angles filter through. Paving the way

for CLUI, Smithson conveyed an intricate and lively image of nature where cultural

debris mingled with natural thresholds in a commonly disrupting effect over placid

appearances. In discussing Frederick Law Olmsted's work at Central Park, Smithson

manifested the same fascination for topographies of change, diversion, and contradiction

as found in CLUI's study of the Owens Valley: "Central Park is a ground work of

necessity and change, a range of contrasting viewpoints that are forever fluctuating, yet

solidly based in the earth."[71] Smithson's visual and textual works pointed to a specific

form of ecological thinking that has influenced numerous artists and collectives, CLUI

among others. The connection occasionally drawn between his convictions and *any* form

of ecology is, however, evidently misleading. For if Smithson spoke of nature as process,

he did not adhere to any kind of overtly ecocentric, spiritual, or evolutionary

perspectives. Moreover, his questioning and vitriolic criticism of ecological standpoints

generated ostracizing comments from mainstream ecologists.

The collision between Smithson's understanding of nature and the environmentalist

perspective created unparalleled tension during the incident surrounding *Island of Broken*

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[70] *Ibid.*, 170.
[71] *Ibid.*, 165.

Glass (1970). With the support of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Smithson intended to dump

100 tons of fragmented green-tinted glass onto a small rocky islet in the Straight of

Georgia, west of Vancouver. This project was to be Smithson's most permanent work to

date, outliving its public for centuries, "existing somewhere between a mental image and

an always changing, ever deteriorating material entity."[72] The heap of glass shards was to

gradually erode back to sand, following its geomorphic destiny toward entropic

disintegration. But Smithson's artful demonstration of erosional processes did not quite

fit into the more short-spanned, biocentric concerns of conservationist groups. While

Smithson's *Island of Broken Glass* embodied nature's mineral morphism, it was deemed

potentially harmful to various species likely to interact with the islet. Ecologists argued

that the glass would disrupt the islet's presumed role as a nesting ground for migratory

birds—a point worth considering, although dubiously proven by then (or so it seems).

Smithson's geologic timeframe for his project was thus overridden by the urgencies of an

ecosystemic temporality. Needless to say, the use of industrial glass probably spurred the

opposition to Smithson's proposal, even though the medium would have been derived

from natural material and would gradually have flowed back into its natural, granular

state. Smithson's deep disappointment following the cancellation of his project might

explain his subsequent backlash against ecological discourse: "The island is not meant to

save anything or anybody but to reveal things *as they are*. The phony 'salvation' put forth

in so much ecological propaganda has less to do with 'saving the land' than losing one's

mind."[73]

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[72] Grant Arnold, *Robert Smithson in Vancouver: A Fragment of a Greater Fragmentation*, ed. Grant Arnold (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2004) 17.
[73] Robert Smithson, cited in Grant Arnold, *Ibid.* 25.

From Dirt to Discourse

While Boettger unpacks the purportedly environmental character of Earthworks in relation to their broader cultural context, Land Art's contribution to the emergence of postmodernism and its discursive legacy in cultural theory is outlined by Jeffrey Kastner and Brian Wallis in an anthological survey *Land and Environmental Art*. The authors locate the postmodern contribution of Earthworks in the spatial practices triggered by their geographical marginalization, their transgression of disciplinary boundaries and the conflation of language and aesthetics in their dematerialized/decentered form.[74] Cultural critic Craig Owens addresses this latter point in his contribution to *Land and Environmental Art* centering predominantly on Smithson's Site/Nonsite dialectic to illustrate a discursive phenomenon he labelled *Earthwords*. Citing Smithson's own words describing his practice, Owens makes the following observation: "the Nonsite, a 'course of hazards, a double-path made up of signs, photographs and maps' is a text. Not only does this complex web of heterogeneous information—part visual, part verbal— challenge the purity and self-sufficiency of the work of art, it also upsets the hierarchy between object and representation, 'Is the Site a reflection of the Nonsite (mirror), or is it the other way around?'"[75] Furthermore, according to Owens, Smithson's Site/Nonsite operated "a radical dislocation of the notion of point of view, which is no longer a function of physical position, but of *mode* (photographic, cinematic, textual) of confrontation with the work of art."[76] Smithson's tendency to tackle vast, dispersed territories as subject matter (Sites) in conjunction with highly framed and focused

[74] Brian Wallis, "Survey," *Land and Environmental Art*, ed. Jeffrey Kastner (London: Phaidon, 2004).
[75] Craig Owens citing Robert Smithson, "Earthwords," in *Land and Environmental Art*, ed. Jeffrey Kastner (London: Phaidon, 2004), 282.
[76] *Ibid.*

versions of these sites (Nonsites) speaks of his concern for the interdependence of center and periphery, mediation and corporeal experience, intelligibility and elusiveness. Smithson's layered assessment of objects and their representations presents a Kantian version of reality by emphasizing the weight of apprehension and conceptualization in what is generally taken for "truth" or "reality." Thus we are brought to wonder what is more real than art, more art than the real, between Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), its filming and its textual account. Where does the actual artwork end and the mediation begin? The same could be said of CLUI's overall practice, seeing "America seeing itself,"[77] and more precisely said of the Owen's Valley project, analyzing the extent to which "the Valley is set to become a version of itself," through its self-imposed touristic framework as much as through CLUI's contextualization.[78]

This tendency to conflate objects of enquiry and their apprehension/representation goes hand in hand with the critical turn instigated by what Kate Soper terms "postmodernist cultural theory."[79] In response to the ecological imperative to preserve pre-discursive-nature from waste and pollution, Soper argues that postmodernist cultural theorists tend to emphasize nature's conceptual instability and discursive construction, to the point of questioning its existence outside of "the chain of the signifier."[80] She synthesizes these opposed viewpoints:

> Where the focus of the [ecologist] is on human abuse of an external nature with which we
> have failed to appreciate our affinities and ties of dependency, the other is targeted on the

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[77] "Editorial Commentary," *The Lay of the Land* (vol. 27, Summer 2004).

[78] "Diversions and Dislocations: An Account of the CLUI Bus Tour of the Owens Valley," *The Lay of the Land* (vol. 27, Summer 2004).

[79] Kate Soper, "Nature/nature," in: *Land and Environmental Art*, ed. Jeffrey Kastner (London: Phaidon, 2004).

[80] *Ibid.*, 285.

cultural policing functions of the appeal to 'nature' and its oppressive use to legitimate

social and sexual hierarchies and norms of human conduct. Where the one calls on us to

respect nature and the limits it imposes on cultural activity, the other invites us to view the

nature-culture opposition as itself a politically instituted and mutable construct.[81]

Cultural theorists' calls for self-reflexivity in ecological thought have set a standard for

art historical scholarship on ecology and contemporary art. Essays on the subject—and

artworks by the same token—are now often double edged; their sense of urgency about

environmental depletion is underwritten with a critical awareness of the cultural bias

underlying most (if not all) palliative endeavours. Hence critical attention has shifted

from nature *per se* to what could be designated as the epistemologies of nature. Canadian

artist Bill Burns's "enterprise" *Safety Gear for Small Animals Inc.* (1994-2003) is an

example of this poststructuralist criticality in the assessment of ecological problems.

Furthermore, he shares with CLUI a predilection for institutional mimicry as an effective

vector for "framing the frame" of nature. In Burns's case, the epistemological

apprehension of nature—which often acts as a surrogate for the actual thing—is

described with literary sources that hover somewhere between the scientific and sheer

fantasy, from natural history manuals to adventure novels, travelogues and children's

stories. The discursive tone of Burns's catalogue belongs to a comparably critical niche:

authors Beth Seaton and Johanne Sloan, for example, each emphasize ways in which

culture informs how we understand/apprehend nature. Seaton methodically dismantles

the opposition of culture and nature with intriguing case studies, such as male birds

during courtship imitating cell phone ringtunes or the reported intergenerational cultural

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[81] *Ibid.*

behaviour of whales.[82] Sloan taps into nature's visual documentation and lingers over a

few "specimens" of ways in which fantasy and artistic arbitrariness percolate through

what are conventionally recognized as objective observations.[83] In close proximity to

CLUI's lucid reading of the land as an intricate map of human desires and ambitions, and

in line with Smithson's earlier dissection of ecological precepts, these excerpts of cultural

theory suggest that while environmental issues are becoming increasingly inescapable—

or perhaps because of this—they can no longer be acted upon in these postmodern times

without a serious dose of reflexivity. Soper however complicates this need for self-

criticality by pointing to its potential deconstructive abuses: "Just as some forms of

ecological rhetoric about nature can be charged with being too ready to abstract from the

political effects of its cultural representation, so the deconstructivist rhetoric can be

accused of being too ready to deny the nature which is not the creation but the prior

condition of culture."[84]

Mutualism

In his description of Land Art's early contribution to postmodernism, Wallis suggests that

the emergence of environmentalism is part of a broader disenchantment with the failures

of "progress." According to Wallis, this disenchantment has popularized what he calls

"ecocentric catechism" as well as anti-materialism, holistic interpretations of the

ecosphere, and the attribution of intrinsic value to all living creatures.[85] Furthermore, the

disenchantment that followed the decline of modernism aroused conflicting responses

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[82] Beth Seaton,"The Paradoxes of Protection, or How to Listen to Wild Animals at the End of the World," *Safety Gear for Small Animals* (Montreal: ABC Art Books, 2005), 54-63.
[83] Johanne Sloan, "The Great Escape," *Op. cit.,* 33-48.
[84] Kate Soper, *Op. cit.* 286
[85]Brian Wallis, *Op.cit.,* 24.

from artists and critics that remain subject to intense negotiation. Wallis provides a comprehensive account of such clashing views, illustrating by the same token the complexity of postmodern thought.

The failures of modernism are strongly decried in postmodern fields of enquiry, notably in postcolonial and feminist theory; both fields reclaim a revitalized, active and nuanced intellectual praxis as a counter-measure to the cultural and disciplinary exclusions that seem to have remained unquestioned during modern times. Postmodernism has generated multiple strategies against the perpetuation of hegemonic discourses, such as polyvocal practices (in the like of CLUI) that convey a complex and unresolved picture of reality by preventing any single narrative from dominating over competing ones. Wallis nevertheless denotes a predominant trend within postmodernism's plurality, which he describes as a deconstructivist propensity to examine and analyze "the construction and perpetuation of the subject, or individual socialized person, through discourse, social fields made up of representations which do not refer back to an 'original' nature or reality but only to the language of one another."[86] Such revisionist deconstruction of previously accepted ideologies exacerbates post-modern scepticism to the point where "the very existence of the real or something 'outside' discourse [is] questioned."[87] This critical approach actively contributes to the dismantling of hegemonic ideologies and their essentialist assertions. But in so doing, it is considered to leave little foundational ground on which to recast a sense of identity. According to cultural critic Fredric Jameson, the lack of essential foundations creates a sense of psychic fragmentation that, in turn,

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[86]*Ibid.*, 38.
[87] *Ibid.*

generates "passivity and helplessness, by systematically obliterating possibilities of

action under the impenetrable fog of historical inevitability."[88] However, Wallis notes

that this helplessness is being countered by numerous ecological endeavours in

contemporary art, which engage the public through participatory aesthetics thereby

perpetuating a sense of agency beyond mere cynicism.

Many authors corroborate Wallis's signal of a counter-perspective to deconstructivism.

Grant Kester argues that while this strategy is originally intended to impede the critical

stagnation of dominant discourses, it has been turned into a formulaic trope—a

systematic process of theoretical dissection that leaves little opportunity for hope in its

aftermath.[89] In her eulogistic call for *The Reenchantment of Art*, Suzi Gablik vehemently

criticizes French philosophers Jean Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard, whom she

deems the standard bearers of deconstructivism, for their pervading nihilism. Overturning

deconstructivism by highlighting its own constructedness, Gablik asserts that a

worldview is not something found "out there," but is:

> [S]omething individuals construct and create. The issue of what beliefs we hold is therefore
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> crucial. For instance, a belief that resistance to the dominant social structure is futile,
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> because the structure is too ruthless or too powerful, will have the effect, if accepted by
>
> enough people, of stabilizing the relations of dominance.[90]

In response to what she interprets as deconstructive defeatism and inertia, Gablik asserts

the importance of remaining hopeful and proactive: "the willingness to throw out our

tough-minded empiricism and to believe that individual actions can make a difference is

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[88] Fredric Jameson, cited in: Brian Wallis, *Op. cit..* 38.
[89] Mick Wilson, "Autonomy, Agonism, and Activist Art: An Interview with Grant Kester," *Art Journal* (Fall 2007), 107-118.
[90] Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 22-23.

not necessarily a *glissade* into self-delusion, but rather our most valuable resource."[91]

This new paradigm that she heralds and aims to encourage is centered on "a significant

shift from *objects* to *relationships* [...] [w]hereas the aesthetic perspective oriented us to

the making of objects, the ecological perspective connects art to its integrative role in the

large whole and the web of relationships in which art exists."[92]

If it were not for her mythologized view of ecology, Gablik's call for optimistic practices

based on mutualist principles instead of competitive and self-assertive drives would seem

to foreshadow Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* and other theories of dialogical

practices. As opposed to Bourriaud, Gablik finds that "one must begin by separating

oneself to some extent from the world of ordinary, everyday activities, in order to find

that inner archetypal energy contained in myth that has been made by our society to seem

archaic."[93] Undeniably driven by spiritual desires, many of Gablik's case studies delve

into ritualistic and mythological beliefs, intended to reconnect us with a transcendental

and universalised "Nature." With their references to the "earth goddess," the "land's

womb," to "mother earth," or yet simply to the "nurturing land," some of her examples

carry overtones of eco-feminism in its most mythical expression. While a few of the

projects she mentions clearly set the terrain for the socially-engaged relational movement

that in the 1990s is about to take root, others remain deeply entrenched within edenic

conceptions of nature. Paraphrasing social ecologist Murray Bookchin in the conclusion

of her book, Gablik argues that "it is precisely to the 'periphery' and the 'margins' that

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[91] *Ibid.,* 24-25.
[92] *Ibid.,* 7-8.
[93] *Ibid.,* 47.

we must look, if we are to find the 'cores' that will be central to society in the future, for it is here that they will be found to be emerging."[94]

Following Gablik's train of thought, Canadian art critic John K. Grande has written extensively about the relationship between art and nature, in a manner that calls for a "re-souling of art and society based in real communication."[95] In Grande's view, "authentic" artists today are confined to a marginalized status, outside the international art circuit and the market system, in the shadow of the ambition-driven, deconstructive tactics that seem to take precedence. Grande is highly suspicious of what he categorizes as "technologized and ideational practices," as he finds that mediation and intellectualism (for their own sakes) hinder all possibilities of connecting with nature or with other people. His discontentment with conceptual and minimal art, based on their alleged lack of spontaneity and personal engagement, brings him to value mystical practices centered on holistic and cooperative principles, as well as outdoor sculptures using all-natural materials—in his mind these stand as quintessential manifestations of an ecological consciousness in art. Grande's call for more authenticity and sincerity in art is somewhat a reiteration of Gablik's emphasis on mutualism and community, and his praise of localized engagement recalls Lucy Lippard's *Lure of the Local* with its bioregionalist twist, mingling issues of site-specificity with ecosystemic concerns. Grande seems hesitant to settle on one ecological position, and therefore occasionally contradicts himself, as he oscillates between an eco-social criticism of our society and its romanticized relationship to nature, and a recurrent appeal to mysticism and

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[94] *Ibid.*, 183.
[95] John K. Grande, *Balance: Art and Nature* (Montreal: Rose Books, 2001), 96.

universalism. What remains, however, is his claim that the institutional frame and the international art market are to blame for art's pervasive alienation from nature. Citing Robert Hughes from *Times Magazine*, Grande synthesizes his point: "What strip mining is to nature, the art market has become to culture."[96] Perhaps recalling Robert Smithson's "make-do" philosophy in regards to strip mining's potential for picturesque reclamation[97] could have brought Grande to anticipate emerging ecological strategies in art—working *within* the restrictive context of institutions and market regulations in "microtopic" steps (to borrow from Bourriaud's terminology) while tucking away the utopian dream of a complete social makeover in Modernism's back pocket.

Everyday Ecology

While the call for ethically-based, mutualist strategies in eco-art is in the process of actualization, the emphasis has shifted from universalism to ubiquity, and from transcendentalism to the mundane. Supplanting (or encompassing) the serenity of pastoral landscapes; the vertiginous sublimity of mountain scapes; the emptiness of desert expanses; the crumbling horizons of the soil; the meandering of language; the nomenclature of scientific studies and the conventions of institutional blueprints, the currently privileged terrain for assessing, configuring and disseminating an expanded ecological consciousness is anchored in the everyday—that local site "where ideology and its resistance are lived out in all their messy contingency."[98] Extending notions of the everyday as a theoretical tool—as developed by cultural theorists Michel de Certeau[99]

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[96] Robert Hughes, cited in: Grande, *Ibid.*, 35.
[97] Robert Smithson, "Entropy Made Visible" in Flam, *Op. cit.*, 307-308.
[98] John Roberts, cited in: Wallis, *Op. cit.*, 41.
[99] Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).

and Henri Lefebvre[100] and transformed into spatial practices by critical movements like

the Situationist International—contemporary eco-art uses informal strategies of

infiltration, permeation and appropriation of various rhetorical and geographical

pathways. De Certeau's explanation of everyday practice addresses culture from the

standpoint of the reality of daily life instead of considering it as separate and autonomous.

He is more interested in practitioners' daily relationships, manipulations and

appropriations that configure their culture, rather than culture's official representation

through rationalized institutional forms.[101]

Recent exhibition catalogues are saturated with trans-disciplinary and poly-authored

projects, rooted site-specifically in the everyday unfolding of a given place, community,

concept or ecosystem. In her textual presentation of *Ecoventions*—ecological

interventions—for an exhibition organized by the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) of

Cincinnati in 2002, critic Sue Spaid surveys a wide range of practices whose participatory

aesthetics unfold on a day-to-day basis: from Mel Chin's bio-art to the Harrisons' inter-

textual configurations of environmental policy.[102] CLUI is also covered in the catalogue,

epitomizing the motif of the "research center" as a relational node around which circulate

countless amateur research contributions, informational exchanges and educational

opportunities. Despite the intentional elusiveness of its political views, CLUI is here

categorized as an activist group on the basis of its awareness-raising activities. Art critic

Ralph Rugoff supports this view and argues that the Center, however indirectly, can

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[100] Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (Paris: L'arche, 1958).
[101] De Certeau, *Op. cit.*
[102] Sur Spaid, *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies* (Cincinnati: The Contemporary Arts Center; greenmuseum; ecoartspace, 2002).

"function as an agent of intelligent change, possibly even revolutionary change. ...

Embracing a post-protest ethic that moves beyond simple binary oppositions, the Center

sets out to reframe the nature of debate itself."[103] Rooted in the everyday, CLUI's

potential "revolution" emerges from the ground up by means of an acute attentiveness to

the land that is constantly being treaded upon. Throughout the Center's acitivites, the

public is repeatedly brought to stumble on land use anomalies and/or banalities that it had

grown accustomed to and come to neglect.

The importance of the everyday as a coveted site of intervention in art signals a common

desire to improve the current state of affairs through modest and singular changes rather

than a complete reconfiguration of our social parameters. The everyday is the

quintessential site for reworking the system from within just as it allows a more inclusive

interpretation of ecology encompassing the *socius*—from preserving wildness to

celebrating a more mundane nature, extending the consciousness of our habitat from

Walden Pond to urban psychogeographic *dérives*. A travelling exhibition co-organized in

2005 by the Smart Museum of Art in Chicago and ICI (Independent Curators

International) in New York, *Beyond Green* presents the work of (mostly emerging) artists

and collectives. According to curator Stephanie Smith, the aim was to move past prior

generations of more narrowly ecological approaches by inscribing environmental

imperatives within a much broader social conscience.[104] Smith asserts that by drawing on

sustainable design for its potential influence on everyday life and by shifting the focus

from remote areas to crowded social places, "such projects chip away at perceptions that

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[103] Ralph Rugoff, "Circling the Center," *Op.cit.*, 41.
[104] Smith, Stephanie, *Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art* (University of Chicago, Smart Museum of Art; New York, Independent Curators International, 2005), 13.

'the environment' is something 'out there' and that cities are not as deeply connected to other ecosystems as they are to global trade networks. They reflect the current reality that as far-flung people and places become more entwined, ever-spreading populations and communications networks reduce the number of places that might qualify as 'out there.'"[105] Heavily based on collaboration, the recent art initiatives in *Beyond Green* undeniably derive, to some extent, from relational aesthetics, just as they fulfil Suzi Gablik's premonition of a burgeoning ethico-mutualist turning point in art. Smith's personal remarks echo Gablik's earlier discontentment: "I find it heartening that space seems to be opening up both within the wider culture and inside the art world for practices that feel hopeful. Ironic detachment has its benefits ... but earnest engagement has a place and is finding expression within complex, experimental forms of contemporary production."[106] The works covered in *Beyond Green* validate Gablik's earlier perspective while simultaneously fine-tuning her premise with a conceptual acuity, critical edge and pragmatism better attuned to today's discursive reality.

Undeniably recent socio-ecological art endeavours are the legatees of Land Art's de-centered form and conceptual density although Joseph Beuys's political concerns and integration of art into everyday life can also be considered an influence. Beuys's performative activism, in line with some eco-feminists like Mierle Lauderman Ukeles, intended to turn everyday banality into a manifestation of art giving new meaning to the ritualistic character of the quotidian. Critic Jack Burnham asserts: "If ecology is the syntax of Nature, then ritual is its daily, procedural counterpart in Culture. While ecology

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[105] *Ibid.*, 15.
[106] *Ibid.*, 17.

is simply the way of Nature, ritual has to be learned and adhered to."[107] Beuys provides a

model of socially-engaged art where ritual no longer abides in the "atemporal realm of

the vaguely mythical," to use Wallis' expression, but becomes firmly inscribed in the

daily enactment of personal routines. The repetitive gesture of planting trees in *7000*

Oaks (1982-1987), the sharing of quotidian life with a coyote in *I Like America and*

America Likes Me (1974) or the daily practice of teaching, which Beuys considered to be

an essential part of his art, abide by such principles of the everyday. Coming back to dirt,

these quotidian tactics work to reconnect us to our surrounding ecologies, in both natural

and cultural terms, as their transformative power on social networks tends to be grounded

in broader, natural processes as much as in the topography of everyday cultural forms.

Social Ecology

The surge of collaborative ethics and the extension of an ecological consciousness to the

socius in recent art interventions can be situated within a specific frame of thought: social

ecology, as it is commonly known. Although most scholarship does not explicitly take

this philosophical position when discussing ecological art, its broad lines clearly

permeate current ecological strategies and the discussions that trickle from them. As

evidenced by its nominal designation, social ecology differs from biocentric positions

like deep ecology as it responds to the ecological crisis by delving *into* society's

dysfunctionality rather than stepping away from it in favour of a dichotomized view of

nature versus culture. Following a similar argument to that of ecofeminism, social

ecology interprets the ecological crisis as a symptom of a much broader regime of

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[107] Jack Burnham, "Contemporary Ritual: A Search for Meaning in Post-Historical Terms," cited in: Brian Wallis, "Survey," *Op. cit.*, 34.

domination pervading all spheres of human life. Whereas ecofeminism reduces all

patterns of domination to gender opposition, social ecology seeks to undermine the

generalized pathology of domination, of which environmental depletion is but one

"symptom" among others in the social, economic, political, scientific and technological

realms. According to its main tenets, social ecology maintains that humanity, just like

nature, would reach greater potential if it would place value on mutualism rather than

competition.

Just like many other philosophical currents, social ecology is guided by a general set of

principles and practiced in variation. My discussion therefore centers on two main

authors, Murray Bookchin and Félix Guattari, who represent distinct branches of the

movement. Although not reducible to this particular view, social ecology is often

associated with Murray Bookchin's "dialectical naturalism." This author is often

considered the standard expert on social ecology in scholarly texts, and many authors

agree that he founded the movement.[108] While Bookchin's political views are explicitly

framed as social ecology, authors such as Guattari incorporate socio-ecological

philosophy into broader and generalized discussions. A presentation of Guattari's

tripartite ecosophy is thus useful for the purpose of my thesis, as it opens up the field to a

greater repertoire of perspectives. Moreover, and as I will further discuss in the following

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[108] John Clark emphasizes the narrow correlation that is generally established between Bookchin's socialist views and social ecology. Such is the case with Freya Mathews, who considers Bookchin to be the "originator" of social ecology as a coherent philosophical stance. See: John Clark, "Political Ecology: Introduction," *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, ed. Michael E. Zimmerman (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993) 354-357 & Freya Mathews, "Deep Ecology," *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Dale Jamieson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001) 227-228.

chapter, the distinctions between Bookchin and Guattari's theoretical positions are a crucial component of CLUI's critical enactment of social ecology.

Grounded in Hegelian dialectical reasoning and evolutionary thought, Bookchin's concept of nature is developmental in character, describing the natural world as constantly in a state of becoming, irremediably and endlessly moving toward greater complexity and diversity. As opposed to deep ecologists who consider humans to be indistinctly part of nature and who wish to see them abide by the same principles as any other living creature, Bookchin distinguishes humanity from the rest of nature on the basis of its expanded consciousness, while keeping it firmly inscribed in the evolutionary scheme. According to him, nature's complexity has reached unsurpassed levels through humanity's capacity for self-reflexivity. It is through this vector that nature is allowed to consciously take part in its own evolution. From this perspective, humanity's liminal stance (neither a part of nor apart from nature) exerts an outward influence on nature's boundaries setting the stage for a pioneer-like venturing into unknown possibilities. Bookchin's interpretation of culture as a form of "second nature," a self-conscious nature, serves to justify human intervention into natural processes and give him cause to endorse human stewardship over nature. Humanity's participatory agency in its own evolution therefore is the quintessential manifestation of natural freedom—a notion at odds with Darwinian theory which tends to perceive life forms as being entirely subjected to exogenous forces.

According to Bookchin, the major source of ecological disruption stems from the emergence of social hierarchy and its unfolding into class structures, private property, and a competitive market economy. Following this logic, Bookchin states that the solution resides in reason, action and social concern rather than in self-effacement and obedience of the "laws" of nature. He also asks that we deepen our involvement with nature through labour and productivity in conjunction with ecological processes, instead of contemplating nature at an ideological distance or with spiritual-like reverence.[109] Challenging the notion of an unmediated nature that finds no expression in society and human will, Bookchin asserts that "The power of social ecology lies in the association it establishes between society and ecology, the social conceived as a fulfillment of the latent dimension of freedom in nature, and the ecological conceived as the organizing principle of social development—in short, the guidelines for an ecological society."[110] The solution may not consist of returning to a state of wilderness so much as valorizing individual and singular potentials, as well as decentralizing communications and power structures so as to allow a better cultural and natural self-realization.

The social-ecological approach is echoed by many authors who consider that the time has come to turn the mirror upon ourselves and see the underlying pathological condition of the ecological rather than just its symptoms. This is precisely the point of French psychoanalyst-philosopher, Félix Guattari, when he states: "Relié à l'écologie environnementale est la gentrification, la déterritorialisation du Tiers-monde, la dégénérescence de la télévision, la militarisation. Non seulement les espèces

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[109] Murray Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1990), 114.
[110] *Ibid.,* 118.

disparaissent, mais les mots, les phrases, les gestes de la solidarité humaine."[111]

Guattari's tripartite ecosophy adds a psychic dimension to social ecology, emphasizing

the importance of understanding subjectivity in "eco-logical" terms and as being

fundamentally connected to the social and environmental spheres. In accordance with

Bookchin, Guattari does not demonize reason, but rather seeks to remove it from purely

instrumental and analytical applications. As a counter-weight to scientism and empirical

reductionism, Guattari proposes an ethico-aesthetic paradigm intended to contaminate all

discursive realms, to inoculate creative uncertainty and delirious inventiveness in all

fields of knowledge.[112] While this last argument implies a romanticized interpretation of

art as a domain of intervention unimpeded by institutional and authorial influence,

Guattari nonetheless presents a new form of holistic consciousness, extending the

signification of ecology from its scientific-environmental application to a way of

conceptualizing life. In other words, according to Guattari, ecology should encompass all

disciplinary sensibilities.

Guattari believes that the achievement of an ecological society will most likely take place

through a form of *hétéro-genèse*, or "hetero-genesis," namely the burgeoning of

difference and diversity, from the psychic to the social and to the environmental.

Consequently, psychic subjectivity is of utmost importance to Guattari, whose conception

of ecology suggests an oscillation between individual subjectivities and their broader

environmental contexts and back again. Like Bookchin, Guattari adheres to the Hegelian

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[111] Félix Guattari, *Les trois écologies* (Paris: Galilée, 1989), 35.
[112] *Ibid.*, 25.

notion of "unity in diversity," although he paradoxically acknowledges the importance and inevitability of dissension in the attainment of sheer singularity.

There are many points of convergence between Guattari's ecosophy and Bookchin's dialectical naturalism, not in the least being their comparable emphasis on developmental possibilities rather than a passive status quo. Each in their own way, Guattari and Bookchin set the stage for a reconstruction of social mechanisms, through grassroots endeavours. Both advocates of anarchistic principles to varying degrees, they hope to bring social intervention up to the level of a politically coherent, collective praxis instead of a nationalist enterprise. Hence Guattari argues: "Il convient de laisser se déployer les cultures particulières tout en inventant d'autres contrats de citoyenneté. Il convient de faire tenir ensemble la singularité, l'exception, la rareté avec un ordre étatique le moins lourd possible."[113] Both authors extrapolate on the threat of homogenization—from nature to the social and psychic realms, which brings them to counter conformism and manipulation through new solidarities and informal social configurations. Their main opposition is to the global market economy—what Guattari calls "Capitalisme Mondial Intégré" or CMI—as it progresses like a steamroller, leveling distinct identities and particular environmental circumstances on the way. The extended reach of the global market economy is located, according to Guattari, in its shift of power from the production of goods and the administration of services to the production of signs, syntaxes and subjectivities. In the face of this ubiquitous hegemony, both authors call for a drastic de-centralization of the configuration of subjectivities and agencies.

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[113] *Ibid.*, 46.

Guattari's ecosophy, however, does not attempt to formulate an *essence* of nature as is

the case with Bookchin, just as he does not envision the enactment of a social-ecological

turn through similar means. While both philosophers adhere to a conception of nature that

is developmental and diversifying, Bookchin seeks to decipher the *why* behind the *how*,

or the reason for this ongoing process of diversification. His enquiry leads him to basic

assumptions: that there has to be a minimal amount of order in the universe; that order is

not merely imposed on reality by rational thought; and that the developmental process of

nature implies some kind of directionality. These fundamental premises mark the caesura

between Bookchin's social ecology and the critical position proposed by cultural theory

and foreshadowed in Smithson's writings, in which specific case order is put to the test of

entropy, while growth, development and directionality are in constant dialectical relation

with degeneration, destruction and meaninglessness.

Bookchin elaborates upon his view by marking a distinction between reality and

actuality—actuality being a latent potential toward which all living beings tend to

move/gravitate during their developmental process, just like a foetus ripening toward

birth or nature evolving into ever more intricate configurations. In other words, Bookchin

interprets actuality as being implicitly *inscribed* in reality in the form of latency. Based

on this notion of actuality, Bookchin's dialectical naturalism relies on ethical speculation

to determine a form of nature that "ought to be" instead of simply "is." This reasoning

leads him to the assertion that there is a *drive* in nature connected to objective ethics and

independent of human will. While ethical principles are inextricably part of

environmental debates, Bookchin's speculative theory is clearly deterministic and

strongly moralistic. His proposed solutions are no less radical as he finds that an

ecological consciousness can only be achieved by abandoning our market structure: "In

the end, our choice—that primal exercise of freedom—will be between an ecocommunity

or a market community, a society infused by life or a society infused by gain."[114]

In contrast, Guattari frames the current ecological situation within an intricate matrix of

fragmentation, de-centeredness and multiplying antagonisms, suggesting that diversity

and complexity might already be undermining—or at least complicating—the levelling

effects of global capitalism. According to Guattari, geo-political tensions, social identities

and economic exchanges are becoming increasingly poly-centered, leaving behind the

obsolete North-South and East-West axes of power relations. Given this emerging "new

world order," Guattari calls for oblique strategies like infiltration, appropriation and

subversion instead of downright "megatopian" ambitions of a complete social makeover.

While Bookchin's theory relies heavily on past models of anarchistic social structures,

Guattari does not find pre-modern nostalgia to be particularly productive; neither does he

believe that we can retrieve a bygone lifestyle: "Jamais le travail humain ou l'habitat ne

redeviendront ce qu'ils ont été."[115] Guattari rather focuses on a more actual site of

intervention: the everyday as subversive tactic. For him, technological means,

communication vectors, economic structures and consumption patterns can and should be

subverted through a reconfiguration of the social relations they generate. He situates a

day-by-day strategy of singular appropriation at the core of a socio-ecological ethics. It is

no longer deemed paramount (or realistic) to throw away our social super-structures so

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[114] Murray Bookchin, *Op.cit.*, 126.
[115] Félix Guattari, *Op.cit.*, 33.

much as to develop a resilient attitude in their wake—an attitude born out of critical

agency and individual autonomy. Guattari's concluding words communicate a confidence

in the power of small gestures, just as they reveal an unyielding hope in the potential of

the everyday: "Ainsi toute une catalyse de la reprise de confiance de l'humanité en elle-

même est-elle à forger, pas à pas, et quelquefois à partir des moyens les plus minuscules.

Tel cet essai qui voudrait, si peu que ce soit, endiguer la grisaille et la passivité

ambiante."[116]

Cultural theorists and scholars of the humanities frequently reiterate the broad strokes of

social ecology. The deconstructivist propensity to reduce reality to its semiotic state

entails a consideration of human consciousness similar to Bookchin's celebration of

"second nature." Seaton's ontological understanding of humanity's distinctive nature

echoes Bookchin's liminal interpretation: "This is our uniqueness, then, the capacity for

abstraction from both nature and ourselves, in which we are no longer creatures of

immediate needs but signs of ourselves. Culture is part of our nature."[117] From this

perspective, it is worth considering environmental issues through the prism of our cultural

relationship to nature—an enterprise conducted by William Cronon in an anthology

aimed at "reinventing nature." Cronon intends to complicate a particularly biased notion

of the natural world grounded in the idea of wilderness.[118] Retracing the American roots

of this concept back to a gentrified fascination for the sublime and the individualist

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[116] *Ibid.*, 72-73.
[117] Beth Seaton, *Op. cit.*, 59.
[118] Needless to say that Cronon's critical endeavour triggered rancorous reactions on the part of certain ecologists, who accuse him of unproductively mining the credibility of the environmental movement precisely at a point where it needs to stand its ground in the face of corporate lobbyism. For an account of this debate, see Bill McKibben, "Walking Through an Idea," *Appalachia* (Winter/Spring 2008), 32-36.

ideology of the frontier, Cronon emphasizes the inherent dichotomy of the wilderness by

revealing its intimate connection to human values of purity and idealism. Foreshadowing

Cronon's cultural analysis of nature, Smithson commented on the cooptation of such

values: "[O]nly commodities can afford such illusionistic values; for instance, soap is

$99^{44/100}$% pure, beer has more spirit in it, and dog food is ideal; all and all this means such

values are worthless."[119] Indeed, Cronon situates the importance of the wilderness in

popular consciousness within the context of a consumerist society where nature is toured,

visited, photographed and consumed as an "other" commodity instead of being

considered an immanent part of everyday reality. Implicitly associating the wilderness'

roots with those of Orientalism, Cronon describes how nature is exoticized and presented

as an antithesis to humanity. Whatever legitimate attributes the wilderness may have,

Cronon finds no reason why nature should not include humanity:

> In the broadest sense, wilderness teaches us to ask whether the Other must always bend to
> our will, and, if not, under what circumstances it should be allowed to flourish without our
> intervention. This is surely a question worth asking about everything we do, and not just
> about the natural world ... We need to honor the Other within and the Other next door as
> much as we do the exotic Other that lives far away—a lesson that applies as much to
> people as it does to (other) natural things.[120]

Cronon further criticizes the idea of wilderness by revealing its Manichean construction

as "the locus for an epic struggle between malign civilization and benign nature."[121]

Rather he seeks to retrieve a sense of confidence and esteem for humanity which was

evacuated from the wilderness on the pretext of inconsiderate anthropocentrism. Kate

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[119] Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments," *Op.cit.*, 13.
[120] William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 88-89.
[121] *Ibid.*, 84.

Soper furthers this claim by exposing the inherent contradiction of the biocentric ideal, as our human condition is inescapably natural, just like the egocentricity that marks our sense of values and priorities.[122] While Soper reminds us that a decision to preserve nature or to exploit it is a human decision in any case, Cronon informs us that "If we wish to understand the values and motivations that shape our own actions toward the natural world, if we hope for an environmentalism capable of explaining why people use and abuse the earth as they do, then the nature we study must become less natural and more cultural."[123] Soper's proposed solution also revolves around a view of nature that is inclusive and accessible:

> What is really needed, one might argue, is not so much new forms of awe and reverence of nature, but rather to extend to it some of the more painful forms of concern we have for ourselves. The sense of rupture and distance which has been encouraged by secular rationality may be better overcome, not by worshipping this nature that is 'other' to humanity, but through a process of resensitization to our combined separation from it and dependence upon it.[124]

Cultural theory thus rejoins social ecology by relocating nature closer to home. Whereas Bookchin finds an expression of "home" in bioregionalist rootedness regardless of the environmental determinism it entails, Guattari and Cronon seem to anchor locational identity within everyday practices. Without denying nature's extrinsic and independent character—"the 'nature' to whose laws we are always subject—even as we harness it for human purposes and, according to Soper, whose processes we can neither escape nor destroy,"[125] social ecology defines humanity as a natural process and thus looks for manifestations of nature closer to it. It also contends that while nature is the pre-condition

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[122] Kate Soper, *Op. cit.*, 286.
[123] William Cronon, *Op. cit.*, 36.
[124] Kate Soper, *Op. cit.*
[125] *Ibid.*

to human culture, the latter is an actualization of the former and takes part in the configuration of its "laws" (or "processes") while simultaneously being subjected to them. From the perspective of social ecology, there is no such thing as a pure natural "essence" devoid of humanity's corrupting influence. There is only an overwhelmingly complex continuation of life of which we are a part and on which we have no other vantage points than our own.

While ecology as a discipline encompasses far more than humanity's relationship with the environment, the locus of *ecological thinking* resides, according to social ecology, within our cultural guidelines and social structures inasmuch as somewhere objectively "out there," out of our reach. In a similar vein, the percolation of culture through our conceptions of nature is blatantly exposed by CLUI and its effort to reframe the culture/nature dichotomy as inextricably enmeshed conceptual entities. Accordingly, when CLUI ventures out, it leaves with the purpose of charting the pervasive influence of our value systems, discernable by elusive traces as well as massively gouged marks on the land. However, as CLUI typically likes to address the land's polymorphous uses with an equally poly-centered perspective, the Center artistically hovers between a relational mode of communication, a form of institutional mimicry and conceptualism. As I will further explain in the coming chapters, this artistic ambiguity impels a critical articulation and application of social ecology, far from utopian ambitions and redemptive desires.

Chapter Three:
Deciphering CLUI: Some Artful Thoughts About Non-Art

Maybe CLUI has found a new territory in which to operate, another kind of frontier, because they have created a fuzzy space running parallel to mainstream art (yes, we are pretty much mainstream) that is still open for intervention.[126]

Andrea Zittel

Describing its role as that of a "curator," mandated to preserve and enhance the land's "interpretive diversity,"[127] CLUI recalls postmodern appropriation and mimicry in its use of art strategies to address non-art issues. But whatever artful modes of address CLUI may integrate into its practice, the Center's deployment of other cultural, scientific and bureaucratic languages and sensibilities makes them hard to decipher. Even the Center itself does not explicitly associate its cultural enterprise with contemporary art. CLUI is nevertheless undeniably indebted to and complicit with art's perpetual self-reassessment, even more so through its extra-artistic concerns. As art historian Alexander Alberro writes: "[W]hereas cultural production is inherently affirmative, upholding established conventions and conforming to (and reproducing) the status quo, artistic practice, by definition, challenges, reflects upon, and attempts to transform the structure of the artistic field."[128]

Just as the Center deconstructs the (often misconstrued) concept of nature while looking for its wildest expressions within everyday life, it combines and expands various art discourses by letting their contradictory elements challenge each other. Thus CLUI's affiliation to relational, dialogical or new genre practices (as they have come to be

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[126] Andrea Zittel in: Griffin, Tim (moderator), "Remote Possibilities: A Round Table – Inside Out: Art's New Terrain," *Artforum* (vol 43, pt 10, Summer 2005), 291.
[127] Matthew Coolidge, "Introduction," *Op. cit.*, 13.
[128] Alexander Alberro, "Introduction," *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), xxiv.

theorized by different critics) through its extra-artistic realm of inquiry and its consistent

engagement with the public, is modulated by a keen awareness of institutional

rationalization as derived from institutional critique. This latter strand can in turn be

viewed as perpetuating elements of conceptual art such as poststructuralist analysis and

incessant self-reflexivity. Equipped with such an artful dialectic, CLUI sets out to

undermine and complicate the popular conception of nature, and the ways in which we

act upon such unequivocal understandings of the natural world. Following an analysis of

each of the poles of CLUI's artistic heritage, I will demonstrate how this theoretical "tool

kit" leads to a reflexive and performative strand of postmodern tourism—taking the view

as a stage and the act of viewing as a game.

CLUI's (Air Conditioned) Relational Field

CLUI obviously shares common ground with some of the most prevalent art

developments in the 1990s. If only in its curatorial-managerial structure and collective

enterprise, the Center is part of a new artistic paradigm, one that, according to Miwon

Kwon, changes the role of the artist from a *producer* of things to a *provider* of critical-

artistic services. [129] Kwon continues:

> [T]he situation now demands a different set of verbs: to negotiate, to coordinate, to
> compromise, to research, to promote, to organize, to interview. This shift was forecast in
> conceptual art's adoption of what Benjamin Buchloh has described as the 'aesthetics of
> administration.' The salient point here is how quickly this aesthetics of administration,
> developed in the 1960s and 1970s, has converted to the administration of aesthetics in the

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[129]Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Massachussets: The MIT Press, 2002), 50.

1980s and 1990s. Generally speaking, the artist used to be a maker of aesthetic objects; now he/she is a facilitator, educator, coordinator, and bureaucrat.[130]

While the dematerialization of the work of art and the expanded role of the artist in everyday life are hardly new (they can be traced back to conceptual art and even earlier to Duchamp and other avant-garde movements), these tangents developed exponentially with the relational agenda of the 1990s. Variously termed relational aesthetics, dialogical art, community-based art or new genre public art (depending on the perspective of the author who theorizes these practices), theoretical attention increasingly focused on art practices that were predominantly interested in intersubjective relations, collaboration and direct engagement with specific social constituencies. Diverging interpretations suggest the difficulty of delineating a coherent and all-encompassing understanding of these interdisciplinary, open-ended, and intangible collective endeavours. Art critic Claire Bishop comments: "Such work seems to derive from a creative misreading of poststructuralist theory: rather than the *interpretation* of a work of art being open to continual reassessment, the work of art *itself* is argued to be in perpetual flux."[131]

In an attempt to frame this eclectic pool of art tactics with specific criteria, various critics have devised their own definitions. Grant Kester now functions under the aegis of "dialogical art" practices "which [break] down the conventional distinction between artist, artwork and audience—a relationship that allows the viewer to 'speak back' to the artist in certain ways, and in which this reply becomes in effect a part of the work

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[130] *Ibid.*, 51
[131] Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October 110* (Fall 2004), 52.

itself."[132] According to Kester, three key shifts in conceptual and minimal art have paved

the way for dialogical practices: the dematerialization of the art object; the work's

dependency on physical and/or perceptual interaction with the public for its completion;

and the emphasis on a "durational temporality."[133] Combined, these shifts have led to

interactive, collaborative practices, "informed by conceptual art but located in cultural

contexts associated to activism and policy."[134] Art historian Tony Godfrey similarly

asserts that conceptual art today, even if distinct from dialogical practices on many fronts,

has also been redirected toward social relations and collective initiatives:

> Artists might well argue that what is key, in fact, is the plethora of small alternative spaces,
> small magazines and, above all else, the notion of artists working together. The key aspect
> of a Conceptual art today, would, thus, lie not in objects or spaces, but in communality, and
> an emphasis on communication and on how people behave.[135]

One of Kester's chosen examples of dialogical art is Helen and Newton Harrison's

ecologically informed practice, one that might be compared to CLUI's in many ways.

The Harrisons' practice is described by Kester in a way that recalls Smithson's Nonsites:

> [T]he Harrisons synthesize a vast range of scientific and historical material along with
> their own extensive documentation of a given region through a process of both literal and
> figurative mapping. This mapping process reframes the region as an integrated totality
> defined by ecological processes and deliberate human intervention.[136]

Just like CLUI, the Harrisons seem "less concerned with the internal operations of an

individual discipline than with the topographic ability to assess interconnections among

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[132] Grant Kester, cited in Claire Doherty, "The New Situationists," *From Studio to Situation* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004), 12.
[133] Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2004), 13-14.
[134] *Ibid.*, 14.
[135] Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), 419.
[136] *Ibid.*, 64.

various disciplines at a given site."[137] While firmly grounded in the ecological strata of a given place, the Harrisons's projects map out an intricate network of relationships from biotic interconnections to social exchanges. Their work also incorporates the contributions of countless individuals from various disciplinary backgrounds in what could be termed "conversational" configurations of the land. Formally speaking, the Harrisons draw out the lyricism of manipulated cartographic data but in a way that suggests that their method/mode of address is research-based (fig. 15)—somewhat like Aaron Forrest's labyrinthine maps in his Los Angeles Aqueduct Landscape Atlas (fig. 16). Whereas CLUI sometimes uses similar visual strategies—seen in some of its clickable site maps for instance—in most cases the Center adheres to a rather austere combination of text and image, straightforwardly complementing one another without the visual interference of charts and graphs. Perhaps less visibly detectible than in the Harrisons's work, CLUI's aptitude for generating collaborative exchanges is nonetheless just as real and important for the completion of its projects as it is for the Harrisons.

While Kester's concept of dialogical art contributes actively to the discursive configuration of such practices, the most broadly recognized theory is, perhaps, that of relational aesthetics, as advanced by French critic Nicolas Bourriaud. First published in 1998, Bourriaud's essay *Esthétique Relationnelle* was one of the first comprehensive accounts of the intangible practices that were prevalent in the 1990s. Emphasizing art's permeation of external fields of relation, Bourriaud's theoretical framework shares common ground with most ecological views, considering that it is based on a relational ontology:

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[137] *Ibid.*, 67.

> Ainsi l'essence de l'humanité est-elle purement trans-individuelle, faite des liens qui
> unissent les individus entre eux dans des formes sociales qui sont toujours historiques....
> [À] l'opposé d'un objet clos sur lui-même par l'entremise d'un style et d'une signature,
> l'art actuel montre qu'il n'est de forme que dans la rencontre, dans la relation dynamique
> qu'entretient une proposition artistique avec d'autres formations, artistiques ou non.[138]

In other words, relational aesthetics seeks to transcend disciplinary boundaries and the

(de)limited notions of the *author* and *object*, and instead focuses on the relationships that

shape our conception of reality. Relational aesthetics often uses interventionist strategies,

provoking events or peculiar encounters, sometimes individually initiated but typically

collectively enacted.

By defining relational aesthetics as a "social interstice" resisting the alienating effects of

mass-mediation and global capitalism, Bourriaud directly aligns this particular art

movement with Guattarian ecosophy and implicitly connects it with Bookchin's socio-

ecological concerns. Relational aesthetics' participatory ethics and propensity for self-

determination is in response to a desire in art for proactive, productively driven

endeavours of change in the social and environmental realms in line with Gablik's call

for an ecological "reenchantment of art." However, Bourriaud seems wary of utopian

ambitions that bear no connection to current limitations: "Les utopies sociales et l'espoir

révolutionnaire ont laissé la place à de micro-utopies quotidiennes et à des stratégies

mimétiques : toute position critique 'directe' de la société est vaine, si elle se base sur

l'illusion d'une marginalité aujourd'hui impossible, voire régressive."[139] Explicitly

greffant Guattarian thoughts onto contemporary art, Bourriaud conceives of existence as

a vast network of interdependencies. He situates art within this relational web as merely

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[138] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2001), 21
[139] *Ibid.*, 31

one platform of sensibility among innumerable others, all of which are connected in gestaltic relation to a broader (or meta) system.[140] Bourriaud further explains the emergence of artistic collective endeavours in the 1990s as reflecting society's progressive transformation into a network-based field of communication.

The aesthetic appreciation of the Los Angeles Aqueduct in Kazys Varnelis' introductory text for CLUI's Owens Valley guidebook clearly evokes this networked organization of the *socius*: "If there is a sublime today, our awe now derives not from a visible icon but from the vastness and incomprehensibility of an unmappable network that appears everywhere simultaneously. If the Los Angeles Aqueduct was built in the days of the emerging large-scale domination of nature, it also anticipates this networked sublime."[141] This reference to a networked sublime is in fact central to the discussion of dialogical and relational practices. Kester borrows his notion of the sublime from Jean-François Lyotard who describes it as an overwhelming experience that overcomes our capacity to understand, control and conceptualize—it thus cuts short our ability to communicate. This provoked communicative incapacity is considered a good thing in Lyotard's mind for it humbles us by shutting down our pretenses to rational throught.[142] Kester presents a counter-discourse by asserting that dialogical art seeks to re-establish exchanges and dialogues based on commonsense in an otherwise alienating network of mass-communications and capitalist fluctuations. Dialogical art (and relational art by extension) can thus be seen as attempting to salvage bits and pieces of genuine human

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[140] *Ibid.*, 96.
[141] Kazys Varnelis, *Op. cit.*, 2.
[142] Grant Kester, *Op. cit.*, 85-87.

contact in an overwhelming and new communicative order while simultaneously

adopting its structure: the network.[143]

CLUI emerges as a truly relational organization deploying itself somewhat like a

rhizome—with all the convoluted and nomadic wanderings implied by this Deleuzian-

Guattarian concept[144]—across the American geographic/cultural territory. Rugoff further

unpacks CLUI's structure revealing how its seemingly predetermined development

depends in fact on grassroots networks of independent researchers. Dispersed throughout

the country and regrouping countless disciplinary fields, this amorphous basin of

contributors has a strong influence on the unpredictable unfoldings of the Center in all its

complexities.[145] Taking the Owens Valley project for instance, CLUI's month-long

engagement instigated collaborations with numerous individuals from diverse

backgrounds, each imbued with a different view of the valley. Among them stands

architectural theorist Kazys Varnelis, California Excursions bus driver Larry Hansen, US

Borax Company representative Paul Lamos, Keeler resident Mike Patterson, Chicago

University Astronomer and Owens Valley Radio Astronomy Observatory (provisional)

interpreter Erik Leitch, LADWP operations manager Pat Brown, the Indian Wells

Microbrewery owner, artists Eva Castringius, Andy Freeman, Aaron Forrest and David

Maisel, and a Mount Whitney Fish Hatchery employee. All these encounters had their

influence on the Center's understanding of the valley and the topical selection of its

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[143] *Ibid.*, 88-90.
[144] In their introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write: "A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles." They further state that: "Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways." See Deleuze and Guattari, "Introduction: Rhizome," *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 7, 12.
[145] Ralph Rugoff, "Circling the Center,"*Op. cit.*, 41.

points of interest. CLUI's ecological understanding of the landscape is also analogous to Guattari and Bourriaud's relational vision combined with Smithson's dialectical view. The Center regards land use patterns as indexes of a vast network of underlying relationships open to multiple interpretations and fluctuating significations rather than stable marks left by an equally static conception of the land.

Relational aesthetics and dialogical art are fundamentally based on the premise that social change is to occur through genuine human relations. Accordingly, they sometimes conceal institutional rationalization (unavoidable to a certain degree) beneath the veneer of face-to-face interaction—a point addressed by Kwon in her critique of community-based art.[146] CLUI's administrative formalism works inversely: it understands the extent to which it relies on and generates grassroots contributions while stimulating critical thinking about these same contributions. In fact, CLUI's bureaucratized synthesis of individualized insights acts as a relational vector between an informal basin of contributors and a general public. Conversely, throughout the process it uses the influence of a formal yoke to disseminate and accentuate a sense of the land's diversity.

As explained in the *Overlook* anthology, CLUI's relational encounter with the terrain occurs at many different levels. Usually first contact comes in the form of individualized accounts from local informers. The Center then sends out staff members to scout and assess the terrain, visit, research and gather information, and subsequently archive the site in CLUI's vast database. A final and lengthy contact is then organized taking the form of

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[146] Miwon Kwon, "The (un)sitings of Community," *Op. cit.*, 138-149.

a bus tour in search of points of interest.[147] These trips are open to the public and provide

the basis for relational "odysseys" between the touring crew and the landscape and

between the participants themselves. Although CLUI may occasionally organize tours for

specific groups in the context of a graduate course or a museum request, their outings are

most frequently open to a broad and varied public. Coolidge finds that the diversity of

participants is correlative to the promoting of the tour, whether it is broadcasted on mass

media—in this case, a tour may attract quite a diverse range of people, from curious

locals with diverse backgrounds to students and tourists—or simply announced on

CLUI's website or pinned on a museum's news board—which generally limits the tour

frequentation to CLUI initiates or to groups of people sharing special interests.[148]

Generally speaking, then, CLUI's touring ethos regroups otherwise unrelated individuals

in what could be called a provisional "community" or perhaps more accurately, a

"collectivity," bound by the desire to live out an experience of physical/perceptual

displacement.[149] Far from claiming any sense of "empathetic cohesion" or "mutual

affirmation" amidst the bus crew, CLUI's relational field bears specific affinities with

Miwon Kwon's configuration of "collective artistic praxis" and its alternative to

relational or dialogical art. Kwon's scrutiny of community-based rhetoric is clear:

"[w]hat remain invisible in the process [of framing a community] are the mediating

forces of the institutional and bureaucratic frameworks that direct such productions of

identity, and the extent to which the identity of such institutional forces are themselves in

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[147] Coolidge, "Introduction," *Op. cit.*

[148] A conversation with Matthew Coolidge at the Center for Land Use Interpretation, April 29, 2007.

[149] Without explicitly emphasizing or claiming to generate a sense of community with the tours, Coolidge nevertheless contends that many participants also take part in subsequent events organized by CLUI. This recurrence could be viewed as indicating, if not a true community cohesion, at least an ambiance of conviviality, despite CLUI's formalism.

continuous process of (re)articulation."[150] Her understanding of collective artistic praxis

is *projective* rather than *descriptive*, tending toward some idea of community without

pretending to reach it or (worse) taking it for granted:

> It involves a provisional group, produced as a function of specific circumstances instigated
> by an artist and/or a cultural institution, aware of the effects of these circumstances on the
> very conditions of the interaction, performing its own coming together and coming apart as
> a necessarily incomplete modeling or working-out of a collective social process.[151]

Although the public who embark on CLUI's tours share a view of the defiled landscape,

they are merely a momentarily connected entity, precariously bound together by the

comfort of a spacious and air-conditioned vehicle.

CLUI's bus tours allow the public to actively take part in the Center's understanding and

conceptualization of the land, turning the passive experience of mass-tourism into a focal

practice, a critical gesture. As Bourriaud wrote: "[L'observateur] oscille alors entre le

statut de consommateur passif et celui de témoin, d'associé, de client, d'invité, de

coproducteur, de protagoniste."[152] But even though CLUI's representatives are literally

and figuratively "on the same bus" as their adjoining public—looking at the same

landscape, at the same time, from the same perspective, with the same

questions/criticisms in mind[153]—these tours fit rather awkwardly into Bourriaud's

definition of "relational" events. For while CLUI tours the land alongside its public, it

also *manages* the tour, acting as what Hal Foster would call an "ethnographic guide" of

land use. Such position of guidance is criticized for the distance it maintains by means of

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[150] Miwon Kwon, *Op. cit.*, 151.
[151] *Ibid.*, 154.
[152] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Op. cit.*, 60.
[153] Coolidge puts great emphasis on the fact that CLUI members are embarked on the same quest as their public, looking at the landscape from a shared viewpoint even while guiding the tour. A conversation with Matthew Coolidge, April 29, 2007.

its "institutionally sanctioned authority"[154] and its presumed capacity to enlighten

"implicitly flawed viewers."[155] Foster indeed warns against the dangers of falling into

"ideological patronage" through what he calls the "ethnographic turn" in contemporary

art where "the artist [becomes] a paragon of formal reflexivity, a self-aware reader of

culture understood as text."[156] Foster questions this textual model, for while it supposedly

encourages polyphonic dialogue, it also objectifies the culture of study through

abstraction. Furthermore, and as Foster explains: "[F]or all the insight of such projects,

the deconstructive-ethnographic approach can become a gambit, an insider game that

renders the institution not more open and public but more hermetic and narcissistic."[157]

Grant Kester presents a similar critique of paternalist attitudes in art, attitudes that he

locates specifically in neo-conceptual practices. Targeting his critique on Critical Art

Ensemble, Kester raises salient concerns that could just as easily be directed at CLUI:

"The critical insights that CAE generates, rather than result from a process of open-ended

exchange with a given audience, viewer, or co-participant, are produced within their core

group of artists, technicians, and academics and then distributed outward in the form of

essays, performances, pamphlets, and so on."[158]

CLUI's self-description follows a textual mode of address as that criticized by Foster, just

as it implicitly takes on the role of a critical expert. Coolidge asserts: "All of this [land]

can be read, like a text, a text that tells stories about our culture and society. Learning

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[154] Miwon Kwon, *Op. cit.*, 138.
[155] Grant Kester, *Op. cit.*, 61.
[156] Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde Art at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 180.
[157] *Ibid.*, 196
[158] Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, *Op. cit.*, 160.

how to read this text, learning the vocabulary of the language of land use and teaching it to others, is one way of describing what the Center does."[159] As opposed to the Harrisons' conversational means of gathering information and including human exchanges into a work of art, CLUI's pedagogical agenda might be viewed as perpetuating a form of institutional authority. As early as the Situationist International, the one-way communication associated with art monologues was well decried for its presumptuous claim of authority and its compliance with what Situationists called "the society of spectacle."[160] The performance aspect of CLUI's tours accentuates this as Coolidge usually recites an informational soliloquy at the front of the bus while passengers indulge in quiet contemplation.[161] But all this can be assumed to be *consciously* enacted or played out by the Center, with the intent of exposing the power relations typical of art, tourism, ethnography, environmentalism, as well as many other fields. Claire Bishop argues the same, shifting the charge of complacency on to relational practices. She favours, instead, initiatives that problematize "any idea of these relations being fluid and unconstrained by exposing how all our interactions are, like public space, riven with social and legal exclusions."[162] Foster expands upon his point by exposing the contrapuntal dangers of over-identification: it can lead to a more pernicious form of objectification and paternalism concealed under a purportedly "egalitarian" attitude. He thus concludes: "Faced with this impasse, critical distance might not be such a bad idea after all."[163] And while the land is being looked at by CLUI and its adjoining public as some kind of

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[159] Matthew Coolidge, "Introduction," *Op. cit.*, 16.

[160] Laurent Chollet, *Les Situationnistes: L'utopie incarnée* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004).

[161] A conversation with Matthew Coolidge, April 29, 2007. See also the many tour reports available on the CLUI website and in the newsletter *The Lay of the Land.*

[162] Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October 110* (Fall 2004), 74.

[163] Hal Foster, *Op. cit.*, 203.

exotica, it only serves as a proxy for or a material trace of American culture—CLUI's

own cultural background. In other words, CLUI may be viewed as having an

ethnographic distance from its own identity, touring the land as a way of entry into self-

reflexivity.

Bureaucrats in the land

It should be clear at this point that CLUI's discursive structure is intertextual more than

dialogical—hovering between a hands-on experience of sites, a virtual accessibility

through its database, a constructed sequence of encounters in the guidebooks, referential

displays in the exhibitions, and interpretive palimpsests through the heavy use of maps,

graphs, text, timetables, and so on. As such, it bears more affinities with a conceptual

framework than a relational one. Early understandings of conceptual art as "the concept

behind the work" (Sol Lewitt), "an enquiry into the foundations of the concept 'art'"

(Joseph Kosuth) and "the dematerialization of the art object" (Lucy Lippard) may have

withered through time.[164] But the kind of multi-sited intertextuality found in

contemporary art shows an allegiance to and actualization of dated principles of ideal

(rather than physical) presence, linguistic emphasis, seriality, and audience participation.

Tony Godfrey explains the importance of proto-conceptual art's enduring legacy, notably

in the way this art current may have acted as the threshold for the transition to

postmodern thought. In a recursive movement of self-scrutiny, conceptual art in the late

1960s and early 1970s abandoned modernist precepts and began to critically assess the

construction of art's own discursive matrix. Formally speaking, as Peter Osborne

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[164] Sol Lewitt, Joseph Kosuth and Lucy Lippard, cited by: Tony Godfrey, in *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), 142.

observes: "The multiplicity of ('non-Aesthetic') representational forms—written

descriptions, photographs, maps—was intended to produce a fluctuation of meaning,

irreducible to any single form, and hence to draw attention to the ideality of meaning

itself." [165] Art's boundaries were also expanded to include new fields of knowledge yet

undermined, by the incorporation into art's definition of what was considered to stand as

its complete opposite: popular culture. Thus Osborne explains:

> [I]n the aftermath of Minimalism, the position of the opposite or contrary to the artwork
> shifted from the industrially manufactured object to the products of the new technologies
> of mass communication: radio, film, television, newspapers and colour magazines. In this
> context, it was no longer physical objects that were to be appropriated but visual formats
> or whole cultural forms. [166]

This conceptual strategy of buttressing language against visual and appropriated

representations in order to provoke semantic gaps and disjunctures is most clearly

exemplified by Dan Graham's *Homes for America* (1966-70). Taking the form of a

pseudo photo-reportage of a real-estate development, Graham's piece subversively

juxtaposes a textual description of tract-housing during World-War II with straight

photographs of suburban prefabricated homes (fig. 17). A deliberate connection is

established between the generic architecture in the piece and minimalism. Forecasting

CLUI's tendency to address various non-art features (such as military targets and landing

strips) by framing them as art, Graham's piece seeks to "show that Minimalism was

related to a real social situation that could be documented." [167] Following Osborne's

comment on *Homes for America*, CLUI could be said to similarly "stage its inaugural

intention to remain outside the grasp of art, within art, and thus to be a peculiar kind of

[165] Peter Osborne (ed), "Survey," *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 2002), 30.
[166] *Ibid.*, 35.
[167] Dan Graham, cited in: Peter Osborne, *Op. cit.*, 134.

non-art art, via the documentation of the history of its reception." Instead of an art magazine, CLUI's "history of reception" is represented by its art-affiliated sponsors, art-oriented conference contributors, art-dedicated sites of literary distribution, and art-educated groups of visitors.

While CLUI draws upon Graham's ambiguity—neither critical nor celebratory of suburbia—the Center's guidebooks similarly evoke the broadly inclusive, self-effacing tone typical of governmental or publicly funded educational documents. Art critic Sarah Kanouse observes rather humorously: "CLUI founder Matthew Coolidge, who researches and writes many of the books singlehandedly, apparently never absorbed the injunction to avoid the passive voice."[168] In line with Conceptual art, CLUI's carefully tailored tone conceals a Situationist-inspired strategy of *détournement* by which, according to Jeff Wall, "a specific social genre, existing functionally, is altered in a prescribed direction aimed at bringing out and making perceptible the underlying historical oppression."[169] In the case of CLUI, such *détournement* becomes operative through the application of a self-effacing tone used to address politically charged or highly eccentric objects of enquiry, subversively catalyzing both the singularity of the case-studies and the absurdity of the mode of address.

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[168] Sarah Kanouse, *Op. cit.*, 82.
[169] Jeff Wall, *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1991), 31.

Of all the early conceptualists, and despite the prevailing ambivalence in considering

Land Art as "conceptual,"[170] none is more significant to an understanding of CLUI than

Robert Smithson. By means of an artful geology and dialectical sensibility, Smithson's

work foreshadows CLUI's trialectical (site/nonsite/website) "antropogeomorphology" on

many fronts—an influence that is most evident when looking at *A Tour of the Monuments*

of Passaic, New Jersey (1967). Published in *Artforum* in 1967 and based on a stroll

Smithson took along the Passaic River in his birth town, this article frames and comments

on derelict industrial sites and commercial features making a parody of public art by

considering these banal sites as eloquent "monuments." From sewage drain pipes—

ironically called "The Fountain Monument," perhaps in a nod to Duchamp's Fountain—

to sand-boxes and pontoons, Smithson's monuments turn the banality of everyday

industrial architecture into a grandiloquent homage to entropy—"memory-traces of an

abandoned set of futures."[171] Discussing this work in her own terms, artist Tacita Dean

devises an interpretation of Smithson's travelogue that is very close to CLUI's peculiar

mode of assessing the land: "Smithson photographed the earth as though it were an alien

environment, his birth town as if it were an other planet, an environment that he was

placing under a series of experiments, testing its physical and conceptual parameters, one

against the other: testing it as place."[172] Each equipped with a mixed dose of touristic

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[170] Tony Godfrey describes a somewhat generalized hesitation to consider Land Art as being conceptual, because of its (monumental) object-based ethos, and because of its romantic connotations. See Tony Godfrey, *Op. cit.*, 237-238.

[171] Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey (1967)," *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings,* ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1996), 72.

[172] Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar, "Place—The First of All Things," *Art Works: Place* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005), 23.

fascination and anthropological "factography,"[173] CLUI and (beforehand) Smithson both set out to explore parcels of land (or Sites) in a way that would reveal and articulate their criss-crossed meanings through conceptually-determined representations (or Nonsites). Hence New Jersey, a "derelict California" in Smithson's view, conceptually rejoins the "real" California through CLUI's witty gaze. Each representing art-looking land features within their banal landscapes, Owens Valley's Coyote Flat Airstrip (fig. 18) is pictured by CLUI almost as an incidental piece of Land Art while Smithson's "Sand-Box Monument" (fig. 19) is incredibly close to a Nonsite container or even more strictly, a Minimalist sculpture.

Above all, CLUI retains (or develops) from earlier conceptual models a semiotic approach thereby functioning within a poststructuralist frame of thought: it "incorporat[es] the supplementary and overdetermining strategies of curatorial placement and conventions of installation (traditionally disavowed in painting and sculpture) into the *conception* of the work"[174] while also framing them on the land. Indeed, the Center's main task consists of searching for indexical signs from the ground up in order to elucidate some of the obscure facets of what it calls "the human/land dialectic." Of all the clues deciphered in the landscape, those that are deemed most worthy of CLUI's attention are peripheral elements pointing towards or framing something else. A discrepancy thus often appears between CLUI's textual accounts of specific points of interest and their photographic representation thereof—they picture a surrogate *symbol* or an infrastructure pointing to the site rather than the object of enquiry itself.

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[173] This term was coined by Jeff Wall, in referring to both Dan Graham and Robert Smithson. See: Jeff Wall, *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel, Op. cit.*
[174] Benjamin Buchloh, *Op. cit.*, 525.

Peter Wagner provides a comprehensive analysis of what he calls the "parergon:" an

expression going back to Immanuel Kant that describes the "supplement" or "frame" of

an object as opposed to its main content. The Kantian distinction of the parergon from the

ergon was subsequently complicated by Derrida who applied a poststructuralist frame of

analysis to the subject matter. In turn, Wagner's essay is yet another framing layer over

Derrida's critical analysis of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. In a comparable

poststructuralist twist, CLUI "takes the parergon as its ergon" (in Wagner's words) by

focusing its investigative attention on all the framing devices—be they physical,

discursive, symbolic, implicit, or what have you—applied to the land and influencing our

comprehension and use of it. CLUI thus implicitly reiterates Derrida's seemingly

innocent question: "where does the frame begin and where does it end?"[175] In so doing,

CLUI recognizes the importance of parergetic elements in the semantic configuration of

what is being framed, or as Wagner writes: "The frame, in any case, is the site where

meaning is being produced that eventually overpowers the allegedly central [object of

attention]."[176]

It is evident that the Owens Valley guidebook and tour undermine their content's

presumed stability (or essence): numerous points of interest focus on the importance of

tourist attractions, scientific infrastructures and conservation measures in the active

curating of the valley instead of a mere presentation of it. Of the two main pictures used

to illustrate the Owens Valley Radio Astronomy Observatory, the one reproduced in the

guidebook (fig. 20) evokes the exclusiveness of scientific knowledge. It shows a satellite

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[175] Jacques Derrida in Peter Wagner, "Frame-work: The Margin(al) as Supplement and Countertext," *Reading Iconotexts* (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), 83.
[176] Peter Wagner, *Ibid.*

dish raised toward the sky, while a signpost in the forefront warns that "authorized

personnel *only*" can access such elevated knowledge. Raising a whole other set of

questions, the image representing the Radio Astronomy Observatory in the *Lay of the

Land* (fig. 21) uncovers, layer by layer, the mediation strata framing this site, each plane

of recession acting like an interpretive onion peel. The bus crew is pictured as

disembarking in some interstitial interpretation zone amidst this spatial layering of

information. Tour members are squeezed between a panel directing the gaze toward the

"earth" and a satellite dish bouncing the gaze back outward by pointing at the sky.

Such parallactic plays on gazes—enquiries into scientific-existential enigmas framed by

the very pragmatic context in which such questions are generally posed—can also be seen

in Smithson's approach particularly in a piece entitled *The Domain of the Great Bear*

(1966). Co-authored with Mel Bochner, this magazine article describes the Hayden

Planetarium and the Museum of Natural History's interpretive settings and curatorial

strategies—from colour and material choices to renovation changes, space configurations,

and lighting—in pseudo-existential terms that mimic the discursive tone of both

institutions. The authors begin: "For some, infinity is the planetarium, a frozen whirlpool

at the end of the world, a vast structure of concentric circles, round whose borders one

may find an interminable collection of ideas as objects, a repository of model universes.

Here also is *the domain of the great bear*."[177] The aforementioned introductory sentence

of the article, hovering between poststructuralist analytical finesse and existential

mysticism, is very close to the kind of tone CLUI might take when deconstructing various

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[177] Robert Smithson and Mel Bochner, "The Domain of the Great Bear" (1966), published in: Jack Flam, *Op. cit.*, 26.

mises-en-scène in the landscape and celebrating their potential for fascination and wonder. The conflation of fundamental and pragmatic knowledge is also illustrated in one of the planetarium's panels, isolated by the authors in the text, indicating a common direction that leads (as if they were equivalent) to the "solar system" and the "rest rooms" (fig. 22).

CLUI's poststructuralist mode of address is also apparent in its relationship to photography, which it considers (and implicitly uses) as an additional layer of interpretation or another frame projected onto the land. While Smithson, in his *Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*, compared the experience of photographing the land to "photographing a photograph,"[178] CLUI's use of photography digs deeper into layered mediation as it exposes the "pictorialization" of given points of interest by documenting the structures that serve to stage them. This reflexive interpretation, however, finds a contradiction in Coolidge's endorsement of photography within CLUI's projects. While most of the Center's pictures are shot by collaborating professionals— artists and photographers—their authorial signatures are subsumed by the Center's corporate identity. "The function of this anonymity" Coolidge explains, "is to let the image, as much as it can, stand for itself, as a document. It is not meant to be a record of an individual photographer's point of view, but an institutionalized record of the appearance of a place." Their avoidance of pre-existing photographs, he continues, serves to offer "an independent view and a primary level of site verification."[179] In other words, Coolidge reasserts photography's legitimacy as an objective record, an indexical trace of

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[178] Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," *Ibid.*, 70.
[179] Matthew Coolidge, "Introduction," *Op. cit.*, 22.

reality. Such viewpoint has long been discredited in art and communications theory for its

disregard of the photographer's agency. Coolidge's statement should nevertheless be

taken with a grain of salt as it subtly points to a more complex kind of intentionality.

In an essay on photography's discursive spaces, Rosalind Krauss establishes a distinction

between *landscapes* and *views*—a theory that provides much insight into CLUI's

relationship to the medium. Krauss explains how early topographers were interested in

depicting *views* of the land—accurate renderings of specific features isolated from their

background—instead of making *landscapes* imbued with aesthetic subjectivity:

> *[V]iew* addresses a notion of authorship in which the natural phenomenon, the point of
> interest, rises up to confront the viewer, seemingly without the mediation of an individual
> recorder or artist, leaving authorship of the views to their publishers, rather than to the
> operators (as they were called) who took the pictures. ... In this sense the
> phenomenological character of the view, its exaggerated depth focus, opens onto a second
> feature, which is the isolating of the object of that view. Indeed, it is a 'point of interest,'
> a natural wonder, a singular feature that comes to occupy this centering of attention.[180]

Views are valued for their factual accuracy and topographical precision while landscapes

are framed by what Krauss calls the principle of "exhibitionality," which is to say that

they are composed in view of their subsequent display on a wall within a specific and

carefully determined setting. While Krauss reclaims the legitimacy of early topographic

"views" from their current art historical (mis)interpretation as "landscapes," CLUI

consciously replicates the technical sensibility of topographical and geological field

reports. This is perhaps to insinuate a genealogical connection with this historical genre

but more probably, to conceptually appropriate and reconfigure its visual codes as the

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[180] Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View," *Art Journal* (Winter 1982),
314-315.

New Topographics have done in the 1970s. As art critic Brian Dillon comments about

CLUI's anthological book:

> *Overlook* takes its title from the vantage point from which, traditionally, a picturesque
> landscape ought best to be viewed. The images it collects—drawn from the researches of
> amateur and professionals, academics and artists (though the photographs are never self-
> consciously 'artistic')—tend rather to get to the heart of the territory in question, to delve
> among its monuments and plumb its depths.[181]

Reacting against the pictorial style that preceded them, the New Topographics have

similarly framed human-altered landscapes with stylistic anonymity—hence turning

this strategy into an artistic style. The alleged lack of aesthetic subjectivity in CLUI's

work can thus be linked back to a photographic tradition—from the serial work of Ed

Ruscha and the Bechers to New Topographers such as Robert Adams and Lewis

Baltz, and archival appropriations by N.E. Thing Co.—closely related to conceptual

art's formal asceticism, seriality and critical irony. Moreover, as it is the case with

the New Topographers, the people who take pictures for CLUI are professional

photographers, and the casualty of their images betrays a printing mastery that cannot

be fully subsumed.

The Owens Valley guidebook abounds with such images where specific features or focal

points are singled out— from aqueduct intakes to charcoal kilns and sprinklers—thereby

"structuring the image" and "centering the space," as Krauss would say. But despite their

denotative clarity, these images reveal little about the depicted sites other than the

banality or beauty of their visual appearance. Thus the Center's guidebooks reiterate the

classical conceptual conundrum between text and image: the (limited) amount of

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[181] Brian Dillon, "Subterranean Kitsch," *Art Review* (December 2006, no. 6), 117.

information provided by the photographs is complemented and anchored by explanatory texts which, in turn, rely on the images as indexical traces of their referent. In some cases, as can be seen in the ancient bristlecone pine forest and the Methuselah Tree, a discrepancy disrupts the semantic relay between text and image as one is subverted by the other.

Supposedly the oldest living creature in the world, the Methuselah Tree is pictured in the Owens Valley guidebook viewed from below, its branches torn up as if embracing the sky, imbued with the aura of a stately entity (fig. 23). Its isolation somehow recalls the sublimity of Romantic landscapes. Just as the witnessing subject eventually came to be represented by a lonely tree in some Romantic representations, CLUI's portrayal of the Methuselah Tree seeks to imbue it with mythical status as the ultimate witness of our history—a status that is, in fact, commodified as a major tourist attraction. However, the accompanying text counteracts this mythical rendering since it indicates that the Methuselah Tree is unidentified among an entire forest of millenarian Pine trees. In other words, its status is "an invisible attraction," in order to prevent vandalism. The isolated tree in the image is thus far from unique in age (an entire forest of such trees exists) and is not necessarily the authentic Methuselah Tree. Furthermore, the text indicates that a creosote bush in the Mojave Desert was recently estimated to be three times older than the Methuselah Tree. Given its non-photogenic looks and its remote location, the small desert shrub has very little chance of topping the aura of the Methuselah Tree even though it is the senior entity. While the photograph's composition evokes a romantic fascination with nature, the anecdotal text sheds light on the constructed nature of any

kind of mythical status and its instrumental role in a capitalist system. As this example demonstrates, CLUI profoundly adheres to one of Smithson's adages, namely that: "The deposits of writing affect the topographical features of photographs."[182] Prolonging the semiotic task of earlier conceptual artists, CLUI draws on Roland Barthes's proclamation about the photograph—it is a "message without a code"[183]— to expose the underlying polysemy of all signs, including mere illustrations or field reports.

The Center's propensity to toy with photography's denotative capacity and to cumulate such informational traces can be considered as a variation of what Hal Foster calls the "archival impulse." Foster observes that: "[I]nformation does often appear as a virtual readymade, as so much data to be reprocessed and sent on, and many artists do 'inventory,' 'sample,' and 'share' as ways of working," generating an art type that he considers "more 'institutive' than 'destructive,' more 'legalistic' than 'transgressive'."[184] In a footnote, Foster hypothesizes on the motivations behind this impulse:

> Archival art might also be bound up, ambiguously, even deconstructively, with an 'archive reason' at large, that is, with a 'society of control' in which our past actions are archived (medical records, border crossings, political involvement...) so that our present activities can be surveilled and our future behaviours predicted. This networked world does appear both disconnected and connected—a paradoxical appearance that archival art sometimes seems to mimic.[185]

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[182] Robert Smithson, "Hidden Trails in Art," *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1996), 366.
[183] Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," *A Barthes Reader*, edited by Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 194-210.
[184] Hal Foster, .An Archival Impulse," *October* (Fall 2004, no. 110), 3-22.
[185] Hal Foster, *Ibid.*, 22.

In other words, the archival impulse may be yet another kind of impulse—a conceptual one—meant to address and cope with our networked society and having a different perspective on the matter than dialogical and relational art.[186]

Through its archival system, the Center keeps track of the world's content. Its archive/collection/database focuses on the land and performs yet another variation of what art critic Michael Ned Nolte calls "the administrative sublime"[187] in its "Sisyphean commitment" to the near-impossible task of charting the whole of land-use patterns in America. CLUI's data-based work seeks association with a topographic sensibility while it simultaneously remains attached to an artful sense of aesthetics. CLUI's propensity to inscribe its bank of images within a quasi-topographical system of classification—neatly organized around pre-determined categories and sub-categories—may be viewed as an art tactic affiliated with conceptual artists (Ruscha, N.E. Thing Co.) and photographers (the Bechers). However, given the main dissemination of these images through a database, and their inscription in non-art systems of information, CLUI's visual material may also simply exist as informative documents. For while art-informed viewers may recognize the style and use of those images as art, those accessing CLUI's work from another point of entry—from the Bureau of Land Management's website where CLUI is listed as an official information source, for example—may interpret the same images as transparent documents. Depending on the viewer, then, CLUI's body of images (and its body of work, by extension) exists as a documentary source driven by an educational purpose, or

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[186] However, things are never so simple. Some artists or groups like CLUI straddle differing viewpoints (and discursive styles) and seem to express an unresolved ambivalence on the question.
[187] Michael Ned Holte, "The Administrative Sublime or the Center for Land Use Interpretation at the Circumference," *Afterall* (no. 13, Spring/Summer 2006), 25.

as a conceptual enterprise heavily informed by art theories and aesthetics, or yet again, as both.

Matthew Coolidge's description of the Center's procedural character and the way it administers research accentuates this sense of "data processing." It also subsumes whatever aesthetic discourse CLUI may have into the discourse of the scientifically-informed researcher: "In addition to procuring images, researchers take notes and write descriptions of the places they visit, following the Center's Site Characterization Report guidelines. Independent field researchers—that is, individuals who voluntarily submit material to the Center—do so using forms [see fig. 24]."[188] In his essay *Conceptual Art, circa 1962-1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,* Benjamin Buchloh locates conceptual art's main achievement in its subjection of "the last residues of artistic aspiration toward transcendence... to the rigorous and relentless order of the vernacular of administration."[189] Whatever results from CLUI's research protocol is taken a step further: it is shifted from art-for-art's-sake to a celebration of "administration-for-administration's-sake" or, citing Holte, taking administration "to the boundaries of experience."[190]

As it turns out, quite often (and is the case with CLUI) the archival impulse goes hand in hand with the ethnographic turn, as the archive brings about a propensity to catalogue, categorize, classify or map out—and thus further abstract—the subject of enquiry. But

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[188] *Ibid.,* 22.
[189] Buchloh, Benjamin H.D., "Conceptual Art, circa 1962-1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the critique of Institutions," *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology,* eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 532.
[190] Michael Ned Holte, *Op. cit.,* 26.

the archive is used by CLUI as a means to undermine certainties and conventional

meanings—through semiotic slippages, semantic interchanges and descriptive

discrepancies—while testing the ethnographic voice against other languages of authority.

This is all done within a complex and highly modulated state of institutional mimicry.

While CLUI develops a keen eye for detecting singular, informal and sometimes

downright subversive land use patterns amidst conventional usages of the territory, these

singular fragments clash significantly with the Center's corporate formalism. With its

Cartesian design, CLUI's logo (fig. 25) projects an ethos of scientific objectivity and

rigour reminiscent of geographical and anthropological societies, and emulates the

authority typically associated with such scientific institutions. In a similar way to

National Geographic Magazine, CLUI imposes an apparently rational and structured gaze

onto an incredibly diverse array of social and cultural traces, examining them with staid

curiosity. The Center's name, prone to acronymization, furthermore asserts a corporate

identity. Despite all this, innumerable collaborations and exchanges emerge from behind

the authorial façade of the Center while in ironic contrast, its formal tone only

accentuates the richness and complexity of its land-use case studies. In line with Kwon's

argument in her critique of community-based art, CLUI's institutional discourse also

emphasizes an inevitable process of negotiation and permeation between artists, curators,

institutions and viewers, and brings a consideration of these roles into relationship with

one another.[191] Bureaucracy is here used as a double-edged medium, host to its own

criticism through playful and ironic mimicry while also subversively transformed into a

vector for criticality and political agency.

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[191] Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, *Op. cit.*, 142.

This attention to bureaucracy is but one manifestation of the expansion (and transformation) of institutional critique since the proto-conceptual practices of the 1960s and 1970s. The critique of the art institution was initially restricted to the phenomenological experience of art and its associated physical sites—the museum and gallery spaces. It did not take long however before the scrutiny shifted from the institution's walls that framed the art to the discursive mechanisms consolidating a position of authority. This shift thereby exposed the legal and/or linguistic act of defining art as dependent on "a discourse of power rather than taste."[192] Along with other contemporary practitioners of institutional critique, CLUI rejuvenates the critical relevance of this theoretical framework though a semantic expansion of the institution and a correlative extrapolation of the criticism directed toward it.[193] While CLUI's relational field accounts for the inescapability of institutional ties, it simultaneously spreads beyond the institution of art and makes the Center's endeavours not merely art but something else or something more. CLUI is in fact marked by a profound ambiguity as it hovers somewhere between institutional mimicry and bureaucratic reality, between pastiche and authenticity. Christy Lange agrees that the Center has an ambiguous character: "What can be read in the context of contemporary art as a quasi-institutional strategy or a pseudo-scientific aesthetic is, in fact, not dealing in quasi-knowledge or pseudo-research. It is a collaborative, effective resource, trading in information within— and beyond—the art world."[194] CLUI's self-conscious use of specific institutional

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[192] Benjamin Buchloh, *Op. cit.*, 519.

[193] This perspective on institutional critique is close to Andrea Fraser's "institution of critique," taking the complicity of art with the institution as her site of intervention and framing institutional critique not as a genre whose success or failure can be debated, but as a critical tool to be used in a variety of contexts. See Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* (September 2005), 278-283, 332.

[194] Christy Lange, *Op.cit.*, 17.

languages might be a form of mimicry yet the results of its activities are far from fictional

or merely parodic—the Center is inscribed on governmental websites as an informational

resource. Hence CLUI might be said to be conciliatory for it effectively manages to reach

beyond art's limitations and tap into (and infuse) other epistemological realms—as

relational art so clearly intends to do. Furthermore, it expresses concern over the ubiquity

(and tenacity) of institutional ties through what Kanouse terms "the dead-pan

redeployment of convention."[195] In particular, CLUI's reconfiguration of the bureaucratic

discourse/aesthetic generates what critic Doug Harvey considers to be "[a model] of

bureaucratic intelligence with an intrinsic capacity for humor, creativity, compassion, and

responsibility."[196]

The Post-tourist Game

Far from being counter-cultural, the Center recognizes and accepts the inevitability of

institutional (and capitalist) co-optation while maintaining ambitions of developing a

critical discourse within those conditions. Since the 1990s, a number of artists have come

to negotiate this situation through what Fraser calls "the artistic emulation of the 'regnant

episteme' of a terciarized late capitalist society,"[197] or more precisely, through the

aesthetic reenactment of the service industry's relational structure. This is most clearly

evidenced in CLUI's activities that combine formal appropriation of public information

services and tourist travel packages. Indeed, CLUI's compulsively accumulated and

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[195] Sarah Kanouse, *Op. cit.*, 86.
[196] Doug Harvey, cited in: *Overlook: Exploring the Internal Fringes of America with the Center for Land Use Interpretation, Op. cit.*
[197] Andrea Fraser, "What's Intangible, Transitory, Mediating, Participatory, and Rendered in the Public Sphere," *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), 76.

formatted information calls out for an intellectual engagement with its means of

promoting land use issues, considering its pseudo-touristic strategy is comparable to—if

no less cynical than—Smithson's advertisement:

> What can you find in Passaic that you can
> not find in Paris, London or Rome? Find
> out for yourself. Discover (if you dare)
> the breathtaking Passaic River and the
> eternal monuments on its enchanted banks.
> Ride in Rent-a-Car comfort to the land
> that time forgot. Only minutes from N.Y.C.
> Robert Smithson will guide you through
> this fabled series of sites... and don't
> forget your camera. Special maps come
> with each tour. For more information visit
> DWAN GALLERY, 29 West 57th Street.[198]

Simultaneously informational and promotional, the Center takes on Smithson's dual

persona of site-seer and tour-guide and adds to it the consumptive charisma of the gift

shop. As CLUI derives a plethora of saleable goods such as books, CD-ROMs and T-

shirts from its research activities, its database and newsletter each devote a page to the

description and promotion of its latest "products":

The Nevada Test Site: A Guide to America's Nuclear Proving Ground
The only book available that describes in detail the nation's foremost weapons and R&D field test
facility. Praised by both antinuclear activists and Department of Energy officials!
$15.00

Subterranean Renovations: The Unique Architectural Spaces of Show Caves
Examines underground built structures and depicts some of the best tourist cave environments in
the United States, with contact and visitation information. From the CLUI exhibit.
$5.00

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[198] Robert Smithson, "See the Monuments of Passaic New Jersey," *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1996), 356.

CLUI Mug   *Forever on sale!*
Standard issue mug, with CLUI emblem. We guarantee that you will get out of it everything you
put into it. $5.00

Considering that product-selling is merely a sideline to its service provision, CLUI

mainly establishes a clientele relationship with the public through its guided tours that

combine planning, coordination, management, entertainment, consumption and

contemplation. Using the comfortable and familiar bus tour formula to carry their public

to remote and intriguing places, CLUI contrasts the criticality of its observations with a

passivity normally attributed to this touristic state. It also points to the malleability of

landscapes under the weight of interpretation. This strategy keeps the touring group

aware of the parameters that frame their travel experience as well as the views that are

being looked at—a critical attitude labeled "post-tourism" by social theorist John Urry.

Contextualizing post-tourism within a social configuration of the tourist gaze, Urry

explains how historically, the dichotomous perspectives known as the collective and

romantic gazes have characterized tourism. Whereas the collective gaze, traditionally

associated with lower and middle classes, is characterized by an anti-auratic, non-elitist

interest in popular pleasures, the romantic gaze values experiences that are "unique" and

"authentic"—in other words, "superior." Socially affiliated with elitist values and driven

by class distinction, the romantic gaze derives from Romanticism's aristocratic love of

natural recreation and from its subversion of the bourgeois order through the display of

what Urry calls "aesthetic asceticism" or, to use Bourdieu's expression, "ostentatious

poverty." [199] Hence, to the detriment of pre-packaged collective tourist destinations, the

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[199] John Urry, "Cultural Changes and the Restructuring of Tourism", *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London; Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1990), 86.

romantic popularity of individually undertaken, unconventional and unplanned travels have long been the territory of high-ranking social groups.

While the clear dichotomy between lower and upper class tourism reflects a modernist state of affairs marked by strong divisions between high and low culture, specialized and amateur interests, and between disciplinary specializations themselves, postmodernism somewhat complicates this social structure by engaging a process of de-differentiation by means of boundary dismantling . With postmodern times, then, comes a new service class characterized by Urry as "grid and group" low—that is, a class imbued with a weak classificatory structure, straddling and transgressing social boundaries. Moreover, the increased media exposure of upper-class lifestyles has encouraged the emulation of their social habits by members of different classes. Thus postmodern tourism—or "post-tourism"—is a reflection of this social reconfiguration.

In broad terms, post-tourism engages a return to the collective gaze, namely to highly mediated experiences often based on mechanically reproduced, secondary sources of information that are blatantly pastiche. Principally, what distinguishes post-tourists from earlier practitioners of mass-tourism is their awareness of being part of the tourist "game" and their quest for creative encounters *within* these well recognized and assumed parameters. Post-tourism, in other words, recognizes the artificiality of the touristic experience instead of indulging in an illusion of authenticity. Urry explains: "The typical tourist experience is anyway to see *named* scenes through a *frame*, such as the hotel window, the car windscreen or the window of the coach... There is much less the sense

of the authentic, the once-in-a-lifetime gaze, and much more of the endless availability of gazes through a frame at the flick of a switch."[200] While CLUI members are sincere tourists and value this method for its efficiency in reaching a broad audience, one can also sense that they *perform* this function in full knowledge of its parameters. By acknowledging the "rules of the game," the Center places itself in a privileged position to subvert them. In tune with its postmodern context, CLUI's post-tourism conflates diverse disciplinary authorities with one another, blending and confusing their discursive fields. It similarly pushes against the boundary between high and low culture by dipping into pop culture and functional architecture as food for its aesthetically steeped appreciation of the landscape—notably evident in its special interest for contemporary ruins.

While conventional tourism is based on a clear distinction between what seems banal or familiar and what is strange, post-tourism expands the search for points of interest to include and celebrate a plethora of yet to be considered aesthetic sensibilities.[201] Hence, tourism becomes an everyday activity applicable to any possible field of inquiry as the viewer's scopophilic curiosity is redirected toward even the most everyday things. Since the extraordinary in this context is no longer intrinsic to place but an effect of perception, post-tourism brings sites or elements thereof to the attention of a society that has internalized and forgotten them. CLUI's critical odyssey in the Owens Valley clearly functions within that frame of thought as it unearths some of the valley's obscure or unglamorous features that generally remain unnoticed by passing visitors en route to

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[200] *Ibid.*, 100.
[201] *Ibid.*, 101-102.

Mammoth Lakes or the High Sierras—from the extensive aqueduct network to the anonymously dispersed barracks of Manzanar.

The singularization of common places endemic to post-tourism can be seen as part of a reaction against spatial homogenization. As Urry observes, localities are struggling to invent or simply preserve their distinct identities albeit through artificial means.[202] Kwon also speaks of some municipalities' quest for distinctiveness often through the sponsoring of site-specific art projects. Artists become highly coveted vectors of differentiation or critico-aesthetic tourists whose sharp eyes dig up yet-to-be-noticed local attractions. CLUI can be said to maintain such a relationship between art and tourism as it engages with the familiar, the unnoticeable, the inaccessible or the merely functional making it extraordinary and strange, turning it into a "point of interest." As Coolidge is reported to have said while guiding a tour in Irwindale: "We will be going to some of the most banal and dramatic landscapes in Los Angeles, and by the time we are done, we won't be able to tell the difference."[203] In this respect, CLUI takes part in a phenomenon Hal Foster pejoratively describes as the transfer of "tabooed values in postmodernist art" from the artwork to the site, values such as authenticity, originality and singularity.[204] While Foster critiques this phenomenon for its vulnerability to capitalist co-optation, CLUI's celebration of singular land-use patterns is less a promotional eulogy for the national landscape than a critical fascination with what could be termed "the good, the bad, and the ugly" of American culture.

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[202]John Urry, « The Tourist Gaze and the Environment », *Consuming Places*, London; New York : Routledge, 1995, p. 178.
[203] Matthew Coolidge, cited in: Michael Ned Holte, *Op. cit.*, 24.
[204] Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde Art at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 197.

Moreover, as post-tourism consciously reflects a more generalized postmodern mode centered on the emulation and appropriation of cultural symbols from other social classes, it also employs a critical reflexivity regarding the drive for "locational identity," to use Kwon's expression. With its emphasis on pastiche and secondary information, post-tourism belongs to and functions within an over-mediated world that is visually and semantically constituted by the perpetual overlay of recuperated signs. As Urry states: "This world of sign and spectacle is one in which there is no real originality, only what [Umberto] Eco terms 'travels in hyper-reality' (1986). Everything is a copy, or a text of a text, where what is fake seems more real than the real."[205]

This situation can be traced back to what is pejoratively known as the "société du spectacle" through the writings of Guy Debord, a leading member of the International Situationist. The first of many Situationist publications, *La Société du Spectacle* denounced a loss of authenticity in communication, leading to a profusion of social stereotypes and a detrimental process of alienation/commodification in the (de)formation of communities.[206] Relational aesthetics is believed to derive from this critical stance. Most notably, it attempts to counter the hegemony of mass media and the rationalization of social relationships with the creation of authentic contact zones and using interventionist strategies. Arguably, then, relational aesthetics is among the most popular art forms for city-sponsored site-specific projects.

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[205] John Urry, "Cultural Changes and the Restructuring of Tourism," *Op. cit.*, 85.
[206] Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

Lucy Lippard's argument runs along similar lines as she calls for a rehabilitation of the

local in her book *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*

(1997). Furthermore, in her later work *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art, and Place*

(1999) she forwards "active tourism" as a means for reclaiming authenticity and

criticality. While a longing for authenticity and critical agency is fully comprehensible,

those attributes have long been recuperated by tourism. Indeed, the trope of the

individually autonomous traveler has been largely exploited for the merchandization of

destinations. Post-tourism, as opposed to Lippard's ideal of active tourism, takes a self-

reflexive stance toward its own co-optation. Rather than nurturing the illusion that it can

overcome or escape this situation, post-tourism plays the game of tourism and recursively

observes the game as it is being performed and merchandized. CLUI embodies such a

post-tourist ethos by means of an acute sense of irony in its enactment of the tourist

game, treating ideals of authenticity and enlightened criticality—in the landscape or in its

own practice—with a grain of salt.

Another distinction between post-tourism and active tourism is the former's

performativity.[207] In responding to culture as pure spectacle, post-tourism stages the

complex mechanisms operating in tourism, all the while consciously participating to their

deployment. Taking CLUI's ambiguity as an example, the Center treats the land as a

stage hosting endlessly fluctuating meanings, while acknowledging and enacting its own

complicity with the interpretive processes at work in the landscapes it studies. Through

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[207] Performativity is mostly being referred to in the context of identity politics and gender studies, hence it comprises a range of meanings specific to these theoretical fields. My interpretation of the concept is more open-ended. By performativity I mean to designate a state of ambivalence and reflexivity, as the conscious staging of modes of address lead to their sincere endorsement.

this performative aspect, post-tourism defines itself as a perpetrator of the cultural

phenomenon it studies, mimics and criticizes, unlike Lippard's active tourism which

seeks to remain detached from its object of critique. And whereas Lippard retains an

essentialist attachment to place, Urry, citing Daniels and Cosgrove, emphasizes the

semantic instability of landscapes: "From such a post-modern perspective landscape

seems less like a palimpsest whose 'real' or 'authentic' meanings can somehow be

recovered with the correct techniques, theories or ideologies, than a flickering text...

whose meaning can be created, extended, altered, elaborated and finally obliterated by the

touch of a button."[208]

Tourism is one of the prime vectors for spatial commodification and hyper-reality, and

the Owens Valley is not spared in this equation. Taking from CLUI's observation:

"Through the establishment of scenic corridors, interpretive driving tours, overlooks,

more museums and visitor centers, and newly staffed and managed attractions, the selling

of the wonders of the Owens Valley is now careening into the tourist age. Like much of

America, the valley is set to become a version of itself."[209] The valley is indeed strewn

with information centers, historical museums, scientific research stations, belvederes and

interpretive panels—a whole framing apparatus that the Center methodically decorticates.

By borrowing from the touristic apparatus while simultaneously studying it in the

landscape, CLUI reveals its self-reflexive attitude toward its own means of mediation,

conformable with post-touristic detachment. And while CLUI's points of interests

seemingly contribute to the differentiation of places as they simultaneously pave the way

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[208] Daniels and Cosgrove, cited in: John Urry, *Op.cit.*, 98.
[209] "Diversions and Dislocations: An Account of the CLUI Bus Tour of the Owens Valley," *Op. cit.*, 4.

for economic co-optation, the Center's parergetic focus on framing devices reveals its awareness that such processes of differentiation are the result of and are being capitalized on by the very localities they promote. The Center brings this situation to public consciousness by intentionally enacting it and by turning its audiences into active participants, just like its publications emphasize the consumption of landscapes.

CLUI is less interested in the essentialist retrieval of authenticity through a (delusory) avoidance of commodification—like other site-specific projects have been known to do—than engaging in critical reflection on the inevitability of institutional and/or capitalist co-optation, taking the tourism industry as its site of intervention. It similarly does not attempt to overcome the Society of the Spectacle as opposed to relational aesthetics and other post-1968 neo-avant-gardes, so much as to critically assess its own position within it. Without making a show out of itself, the Center addresses the land as sheer spectacle or as a stage hosting the projection of so many cultural assumptions. CLUI follows on Smithson's earlier assertion that nature should be compared to a vast museum. Moreover, the Center further dematerializes Land Art by chiseling away at our interpretation of the land through curatorial work as opposed to literally fashioning dirt. Giving out signs of professional deformation, CLUI directly locates interpretive infrastructures in the landscape as a reflexive manifestation of its own "museological" practice.

Hovering somewhere between a geographical society, an archival institution and a tourism agency, CLUI transcends them all to develop its own instituting potential.

Beyond mere mimicry or criticism, CLUI whole-heartedly draws on these institutional languages, confident that bits and pieces of each can be positively subverted and transformed into a focal practice that fosters critical engagement yet remains pragmatically attached to a whole set of structuring conventions and rationalizations. The Center's modulated acceptance of institutionalism similarly percolates down through its assessment of the land. Thus CLUI develops an interpretive gaze that is at once ecological and cultural, subversive and assertive, and at the same time hopefully resilient—if not utopian—despite being obviously pragmatic.

Conclusion: *Mining the Margins of Social Ecology*

> *If the planet itself has thus become the content of a new space created by its satellites, and its electronic extensions, if the planet has become the content and not the environment, then we can confidently expect to see the next few decades devoted to turning the planet into an art form.*[210]
>
> Marshall McLuhan

"Location is Everything" reads an interpretive panel at the Conway Summit Lookout, the

concluding point of interest in the Owens Valley guidebook (fig. 26). The photographed

feature is accompanied by a caption describing it as follows: "The view is dramatic,

looking south over the Mono Basin, after which it is all downhill to Los Angeles."[211] By

photographing this scene in such a way that the panel's quasi-promotional slogan (similar

to real-estate catchy phrases) is readable, CLUI lets its own sense of irony leak onto the

touristic veneer of the Owens Valley. This linguistic nod may also serve more self-

reflexive ends. Somehow, reading the panel's title in the context of CLUI's

"anthropogeomorphology" evokes the Center's attentiveness to its own critical

positioning, suggesting the importance of retaining a comprehensive view of both its

realm of enquiry—the human relationship with the land—and the framework within

which it operates—social ecology. Framed in such a way, "Location is Everything" infers

the importance of recognizing one's own critical standpoint in the unpacking of nature's

multivalent character—from its humanly impacted state to its most sublime

manifestation.

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[210] Marshall McLuhan, cited in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity and Contemporary Art*, edited by ?? (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2007), 48.
[211] The Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Points of Interest in the Owens River Valley, Op. cit.*, 54.

Despite the current preponderance of deconstructive criticality in scholarship, essentialist notions of nature remain prevalent in mainstream environmental thought with their possibility of a retrievable "original state." As I briefly explained in Chapter Three, the still popular romantic gaze in tourism performs this "authentic connection" with nature by promoting solitary ventures in wild or rugged environments or in exotic cultural settings where one can feel lost or without bearings. Throughout my discussion on the discursive evolution of environmental art in Chapter Two, I suggested that even the American Land Artists' radical gesture of bringing art into the desert amounted to a kind of great escape, even though it claimed to seek unexplored discursive terrain unimpeded by market regulations. The effect of this practice was to extend the reach of cultural frames as far into the landscape as the artists could roam, rather than liberating their art from the conventions of a system that never ceased anticipating, supporting and disseminating their work. Smithson recognized and addressed this conflicting situation in his Site/Nonsite dialectic, marking the interdependency of vastness and containment, the remote and the crowded, the unnamed and the discursively layered, the desert and the gallery. Smithson's inflammatory critique of the bias inherent in the popular ecological discourses of his time challenged his propensity to wander alone in desolate places—a dialectical behaviour that betrayed his awareness of nature's malleable "truth" in the hands of discursiveness.

Following a similar—albeit less cynical—path, CLUI pays attention to nature's discursive polysemy just as it paradoxically responds to the same call of the wild that has enthralled Land Artists…but with a twist: CLUI accesses these far reaches in luxury

buses. Passengers see the landscape's ragged features through pristinely tinted windows while seated comfortably in captain seats thereby making "wildness" viewable within a highly mediated context rather than traversing the land on a solitary quest. As with Smithson's forays into New Jersey's derelict post-industrial landscapes, CLUI seeks out—and finds—wildness not exclusively in empty expanses and caked salt flats, but also in reclaimed mining towns, surveillance neighbourhoods, subterranean infrastructures, and so on. All this to say that wildness, from the perspective of CLUI, does not reside exclusively in unpopulated, unarticulated, unframed spaces, just as it does not require that we cast away mediating parameters to experience it as a liminal encounter. Or maybe by definition it *does* require so, and CLUI tries to present wildness as an oxymoron, since all "wild things" of this world are being apprehended—and labeled as such—thanks to their inclusion in the symbolic order of language. By generating "wild" experiences in settings where they are not normally expected to take place, CLUI plays with our cultural expectations of nature and tourism, highlighting their construction on the one hand and emphasizing their interdependence on the other.

What Urry calls the romantic tourist gaze can, indeed, easily be associated with the modern understanding of wilderness. Both can be traced back to the emergence of the individualist-minded, nature-centered tourism industry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one that explored the leisure potential of newly established national parks and other protected "wild" places. The Romantic heritage in North America is also made evident by the conflation of aesthetic principles with environmental philosophy, connected through contiguous notions of the sublime and the wilderness. The intersection

of visual arts with environmental concerns has often been epitomized by the sublime, painted or photographic representations of the newly protected natural territories at the turn of the twentieth century—territories that served, as Cronon explains, to preserve a gradually disappearing frontier identity at the time.[212] In line with the deconstructive trend I identified in the second chapter that frames nature as "discourse," revisionist accounts have since begun to dismantle these constructed narratives of nature, and comparatively, to undermine art's complicity in perpetuating essentialist assumptions.

Making use of such criticality, CLUI is interested in observing and commenting on the phenomenon of the sublime as it is being "scripted" in the landscape. This detached interest derives from its post-touristic position which prompts critical distance and exposes the social construction of both the visitor and the visited. Moreover, as I explained in detail in the third chapter, CLUI's institutional conformism undermines any claim of authenticity regarding its engagement with the public, and instead lets the exchanges speak of their own mediation and rationalization while they are being performed. The Center's strong emphasis on mediation and planning also blatantly interrupts whatever hopes the public may have for an individualized and spontaneous experience while on one of the tours. Instead of providing "true" encounters with "pristine" environments—a typical elite tourist attitude—CLUI confronts its public with the social construction of their generic relationship with the land which the romantic gaze conceals under a torrent of sublime illusions. CLUI consciously foregrounds the merchandizing and consumption of nature through the tourist gaze and frames the

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[212] William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness, or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Op. cit.*

landscape within a socially determined context. This framing is analogous to visual

theorist W.J.T. Mitchell's description:

> Landscape is a marketable commodity to be presented and re-presented in 'packaged
> tours,' an object to be purchased, consumed, and even brought home in the form of
> souvenirs, such as postcards and photo albums. In its double role as commodity and potent
> cultural symbol, landscape is the object of fetishistic practices involving the limitless
> repetition of identical photographs taken on identical spots by tourists with interchangeable
> emotions.[213]

The Center thus cuts short all temptations to romanticize its mandate, whether understood

as cultural or environmental or, more accurately, as something in between.

Chapter One presented the cultural setting out of which CLUI emerged, most notably the

dichotomous understanding of nature inherent in the California Dream and the

circumstances framing its Owens Valley project. Given this Californian context, where

nature is perceived as either Eden or inferno, CLUI's non-romantic approach de-

essentializes nature by exposing the cultural assumptions that underlie our relationship to

the natural world. Hence CLUI's contribution to social ecology is most apparent at the

level of perception as their projects explicitly show the causal relation that connects

natural spaces with dominant social structures. Undermining collective fantasies of

pristine nature, CLUI's insightful enquiry shows that no matter how natural an

environment may seem, it is never entirely fortuitous or innocent in its unfolding. More

often than not, places are deeply affected or regulated by power structures, be they

economic, military, social, cultural, colonial, etc. Thus, the wide expanses in the Owens

Valley are viewed by CLUI as "an artificially enforced wildness" while the Los Angeles

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[213] W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscapes," *Op. cit.*, 15.

aqueduct is portrayed as a "technology so vast and ungraspable that it is a form of nature again."[214] Similarly, CLUI contrasts the tight management of the Mono Lake ecosystem—the water level monitored for every dropped inch—with the unsupervised crowds flocking around Owens Lake—from the mysterious parties reported to have taken place in the abandoned Pittsburg Plate Glass plant to the marginal trailer community of Keeler. The displacement of the Manzanar Internment Camp is framed within a broader context of "migrations" as are Tulle elks, trout, climbers and sightseers. Whereas the Camp's dark history evokes a ruthless mix of exogenous and endogenous forces, the same could be said for the 1872 Lone Pine earthquake. While the Manzanar episode suggests a sublime nature of exile and hostility, a harsh environment with meager physical and cultural resources, flocks of tourists now indulge in quiet contemplation as they admire the very same natural features. The valley's significance is tamed by the hospitable tourist economy that now frames it yet all the while promotes a new kind of wildness.

Conflating the boundaries that maintain culture apart from nature, CLUI exposes the arbitrariness of such a compartmentalized worldview while revealing the construction of these categories. As mentioned previously, CLUI's textual/visual description of Mount Whitney—the tallest peak of the High Sierras and a centerpiece in the Owens Valley scenic corridor—focuses on everything but the mountain. It becomes clear, then, that our understanding of this feature as "natural" is inextricable from its cultural frame. In fact,

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[214] Kazys Varnelis, "Introduction," *Points of Interest in the Owens River Valley*, ed. Matthew Coolidge (Culver City, California: The Center for Land Use Interpretation, 2004), 1-2.
Indeed, to be greeted by a sign indicating the property of the City of Los Angeles after having driven four hundred kilometres north into the desert, reached the high foothills through back roads and hiked up a trail towards a mountain lake perched atop an escarpment is a dumbfounding experience.

the High Sierras epitomize the permeation of the cultural and the natural far beyond

CLUI's poststructuralist description of their touristic apparatus. A simple nomenclatural

comparison with the opposing range indicates how nature can be treated differently from

time to time, depending on the cultural value it is given. While the Sierras abound with

historical references to scientists, explorers and philosophers, constituting a compendium

of American identity in themselves, the facing Inyo-White Mountains are either identified

by mere literal or topographical descriptors (Boundary Peak), nicknamed after their

native inhabitants (Squaw Peak), or left unnamed. The Sierras attract numerous visitors—

from elite mountaineers to movie crews—while their eastern counterparts have no trails

on their broad backs other than the century-old paths and rusty structures left by mining

and other extractive processes. Whereas the Sierras are a natural sanctuary to be

cherished and protected, the Inyo-Whites are a massive heap of ferrous bedrock attracting

little attention other than for its scenic lookouts onto their towering neighbours. However

wild the Owens Valley is promoted to be, its preservation depends upon highly selective

cultural criteria dictated by the needs, desires and longings of L.A. urbanites.

Social ecology points to such culture/nature intricacies and it demonstrates the

importance of looking toward the "social" when addressing the "natural." Inasmuch as

social ecology frames the locus of ecological thinking in society, it is concerned with the

forms and regulations of the social fabric—from broad notions of democracy to its

implementation, ranging from anarchistic self-regulation to hyper-institutionalized

decisional processes. However, social ecology runs the risk of hitting an impasse by

venturing into this political labyrinth, mostly as it remains entrenched in modernistic social utopias.

In Chapter Two I presented the broad lines of social ecology, beginning with Bookchin's understanding of humanity as a self-conscious manifestation of nature. Bookchin locates the ultimate unfolding of nature's potential within humanity's freedom of action, provided that this freedom is applied responsibly. According to him, humanity's ecological inconsequence demonstrates that we have not yet distinguished ourselves entirely from "first nature"—still acting and developing un-reflexively (and thus uncontrollably) like the rest of nature. If humanity ever abided by ecological principles, nature could then reach its full self-reflexive potential. Nature would be able to *look back* at its own evolutionary path and to make the "right" decisions pertaining to its upcoming unfolding, rather than blindly suffer the exponential consequences of past developmental drifts. This logic implicitly leads Bookchin to value utopia over futurology, meaning he favours the capacity to envision and actualize a future that is *different* from current circumstances rather than merely extrapolating upon the present to create an imperfect future.

Suzi Gablik, who was central to my discussion on mutualism in environmental art, applies Bookchin's utopian thoughts to the field of art. Gablik calls for an art that looks beyond the current state of affairs, which she pejoratively describes as being plagued by inertia, to instigate improvements and changes where it was once deemed impossible or futile to do so. As I demonstrated in Chapter Three, her proactive attitude toward art has

since taken form as a multitude of socially-engaged movements, predominantly

influenced by Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics while also entrenched in

dialogical practice, new-genre public art and community-based art. Whereas Gablik is

strongly influenced by Bookchin's evolutionary understanding of social-ecology,

Bourriaud draws from Guattari's ecosophy to establish his theoretical underpinnings of

relational aesthetics. These diverging roots accordingly lead to a more modulated point of

view, for Guattari steers clear of any moralistic pretenses about what form an ecological

society should take. He nonetheless believes, just like Bookchin, that an ecological state

of being is to be attained through critical autonomy and self-reflexivity. As I explained in

Chapter Two, Guattari is more open-ended and pluralistic in his social perspectives than

Bookchin, although he is similarly driven by a post-1968 utopian desire to overcome

what he terms the "media machinery of subjectivities" through processes of collective

and individual "re-singularization."[215] Guattari is also suspicious of institutional

rationalization against which he romantically opposes the prolific unpredictability and

creative freedom of artistic practices. In Chapter Three I explicitly framed Bourriaud's

relational aesthetics within this exploratory context and suggested that he positions

himself against institutionalism by promulgating open-ended and informal attitudes as a

counter-point to overly determined and highly specialized endeavours. However,

Bourriaud does not adhere to Guattari's utopian goal of changing the social fabric

altogether. Instead, he proposes a "microtopian"[216] set of intentions, firmly grounded and

based on current limitations. Following Guattari's premise that technology, mass media

and consumption patterns should be subverted through oblique gestures of appropriation

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[215] Guattari, *Op. cit.*, 21.
[216] Bourriaud, *Op. cit.*

and infiltration, Bourriaud emphasizes strategies of mimicry as an effective way of enabling social change rather than full-blown critical attacks.

CLUI's socio-ecological character is closer to Guattari's viewpoint in that it works within the guidelines of appropriation and infiltration to destabilize the top-down structure of a homogeneous culture. Like Guattari, the Center does not seek in any way to dictate the right or wrong way of achieving an ecological state of being, as this decision democratically rests with the ethics and judgment of each and every individual (be it the cause of dissent). CLUI rather seeks to communicate a keen sense of criticality by sharpening the public's gaze and teaching the "art" of deciphering from the land's topography a testimony of our complex, conflicted and precarious relationship with the environment. Through its "post-protest ethics"[217] and political elusiveness, CLUI critiques Bookchin's moralistic social ecology for its sense of entitlement and elitism in determining the greatest ecological good for others. In a discussion about the ecological movement in Europe, social theorist and philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis warns against such totalitarian intentions:

> [E]st-ce qu'ici, sur ce point, sur cette ligne, nous ne rencontrons pas effectivement la limite de la pensée et de l'action politiques? ... Est-ce que cette limite n'est pas, sur ce point, celle-ci : que ni nous, ni personne ne peut décider d'un mode de vie pour les autres ? ... La question de l'auto-gouvernement, de l'autonomie de la société est *aussi* la question de l'*auto-limitation* de la société. Auto-limitation qui a deux versants : la limitation par la société de ce qu'elle considère comme les souhaits, tendances, actes, etc., inacceptables de telle ou telle partie de ses membres; mais aussi, auto-limitation de la société elle-même dans la réglementation, la régulation, la législation qu'elle exerce sur ses membres. [218]

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[217] Rugoff, *Op. cit.*, 41.
[218] Cornelius Castoriadis & Daniel Cohn-Bendit, *De l'écologie à l'autonomie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981), 46-48.

While CLUI's critical insights act as magnifying glasses for deciphering the ingenious, curious, excessive, conflicted or preposterous character of various land-use patterns, the Center leaves it to others to draw ethical conclusions about the points of interest that are visited/browsed through/clicked on.

Through its mimicry of institutional rationalization, however, CLUI goes against the grain of Guattari's ecosophy and Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, for it emphasizes not only the validity but also the *necessity* of such structuring forces in the pragmatic application of democracy. In so doing, the Center undermines Guattari's contestation of social superstructures and moves closer to Castoriadis's position on the matter. As art historian Helmut Draxler explains: "Already in the early 1970s, Cornelius Castoriadis pointed out that the notion of a society that was utterly transparent unto itself was not utopia but, in fact, no society at all, and that the critique of social institutions itself had always had the effect of creating institutions."[219] Extending this critical insight to a critique of the ecological movement, Castoriadis asserts: "[U]ne politique révolutionnaire aujourd'hui est en premier lieu et avant tout la reconnaissance de l'autonomie des gens, c'est-à-dire la reconnaissance de la société elle-même comme source ultime de création institutionnelle."[220] Through its deployment of "intelligent bureaucracy,"[221] the Center takes Guattari's position a step further and lays the ground for a socio-ecological variant of institutional reflexivity. While relational aesthetics and dialogical art generally require a criticism of systemic hegemonies in order to circumvent them, CLUI's institutional

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[219] Helmut Draxler, "Letting Loos(e): Institutional Critique and Design," *Art After Conceptual Art*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann (Cambridge, MA & Vienna, Austria: MIT Press/Generali Foundation, 2006), 158.
[220] Cornelius Castoriadis & Daniel Cohn-Bendit, *Op. cit.*, 50.
[221] Doug Harvey, *Op. cit.*

mimicry and criticality allows it to acknowledge and expose the systemic frames and cultural biases that influence our view of nature while simultaneously undermining them by promulgating critical agency and awareness *through* these very frames and biases. As a result, CLUI generates a form of "social interstice" conformable to relational aesthetics' intentions albeit in a pragmatically modulated—and perhaps more effective—way. The complex merging of relational aesthetics and conceptualism within CLUI's post-touristic strategy was thoroughly described in Chapter Three. This unsettled artistic position arouses complementary observations:

> At a moment in which the historical foundations of conceptual art are being recuperated and redeployed—at least in quotation—at the service of something more closely resembling pure spectacle, the Center is quietly mining the margins of the same period of artistic production in favor of something more, well, exemplary.[222]

Just as the Center reconfigures artistic parameters in rejuvenated critical combinations, it can comparatively be said to mine the margins of social ecology in favour of a philosophical standpoint that is well-steeped in self-reflexivity. Working on many fronts, both inside and outside art, CLUI enacts the very possibility that art may effectively permeate and inform other epistemologies. CLUI belongs to a new breed of art practices that dissolve art's autonomy and reposition the relevance of aesthetics in relation to a broader set of experiences. For this is, after all, what the Center is about: a better understanding of the world in which we live by opening up our aesthetic response to it. Accordingly, CLUI's liminal identity brings about a reconfiguration of the art historical field of enquiry, for conventional aesthetics no longer suffice to explain this new kind of endeavour. CLUI's "anthropogeomorphology" is of utmost relevance to art history, since

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[222] Michael Ned Holte, *Op. cit.*, 26.

it is through such practices that the discipline's "margins" and "fringes" are to be negotiated.

Coming back home from a meandering sojourn in CLUI's spaces, whether by closing the computer screen, slipping a bookmark in their *Overlook* anthology, stepping outside their office in the hazy light of downtown Los Angeles or driving back from the dry Western regions—with pamphlets on the dashboard and the Center's corporate mug in the cup holder—visitors may become additional disseminating vectors for CLUI's mandate, extended agents, rhizomic segments. Applying the Center's perceptive lesson—and touring ethos—to other familiar contexts, they are likely to accumulate a personal repertoire of CLUI-esque points of interest (such as my own Canadian list of curious landmarks), as the complex and previously hidden strata of surrounding environments are revealed. As Coolidge remarks: "The answers to much of what remains unclear to us are exposed for all to see, though often hidden, as it were, in plain sight. They can often be found in the overlooked quotidian elements that surround us, too banal-seeming to have value in any larger equation. Yet these are the building block of existence."[223] Remarkably, then, as they delve deep into grounded artefactual curiosities, CLUI initiates might come to conceptualize their own interaction with the land self-reflexively. Or, using Marshall McLuhan's prediction about the evolution of art practices (in the opening quote), they might begin to turn their own interaction with the planet into an art form.

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[223] Matthew Coolidge, "Introduction," *Op. cit.*, 17.

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Appendices

Figure 1. Screenshot of the land-use database. The page shows the entries that come out under the keyword search for "crater." Accessed June 14, 2008, at http://ludb.clui.org/search.jsp

Figure 2. An installation view of the exhibition *Diversions and Dislocations:*
California's Owens Valley
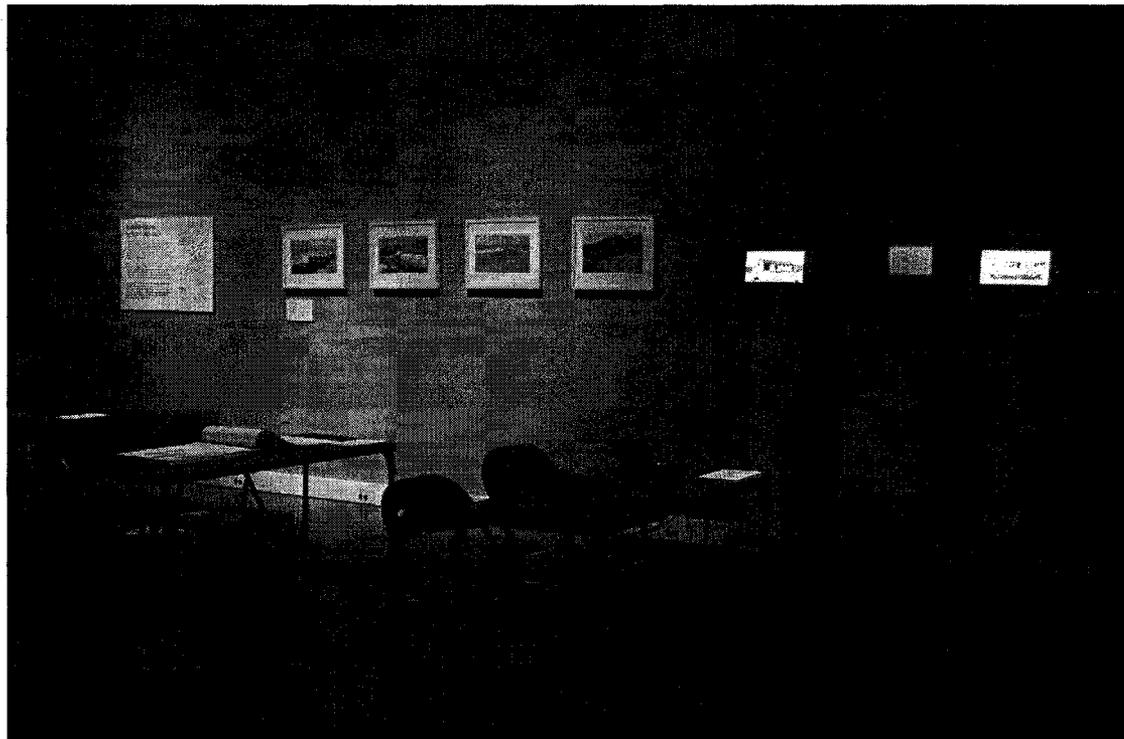
Figure 3. Eva Castringius, *Cementary Road*, lambda colour print on aludibond, 2003
Photo 3 of 10, from the series *The Great Thirst*
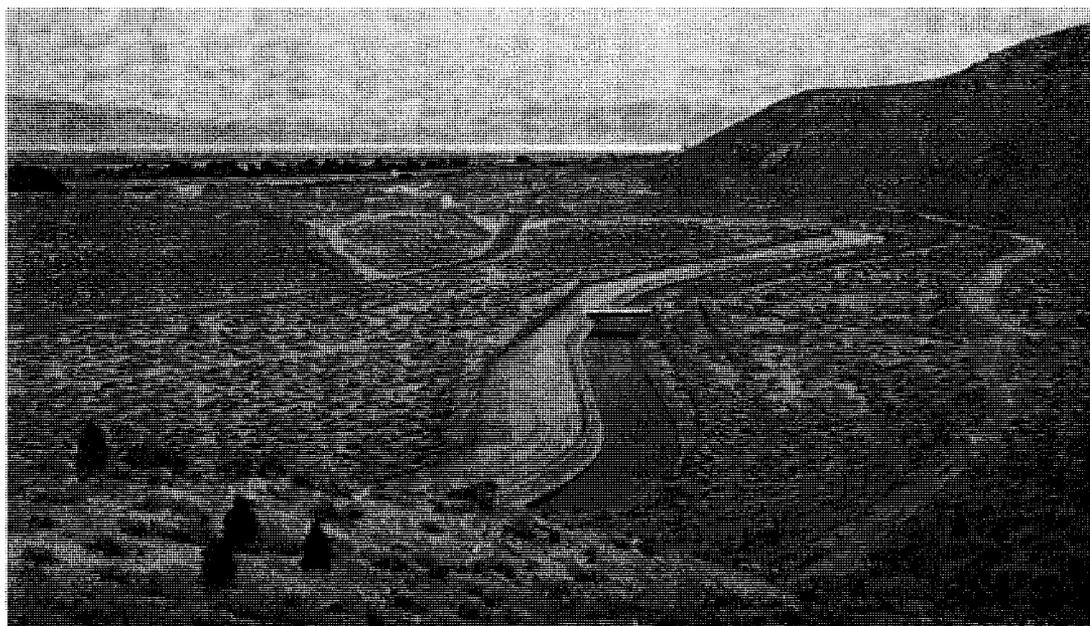
Figure 4. Eva Castringius, *Sherwin Grade*, lambda colour print on aludibond, 2003
Photo 2 of 10, from the series *The Great Thirst*

Figure 5. Aaron Forrest, "Main Streets, LAA," *Los Angeles Aqueduct Landscape Atlas*, 2002, 19.
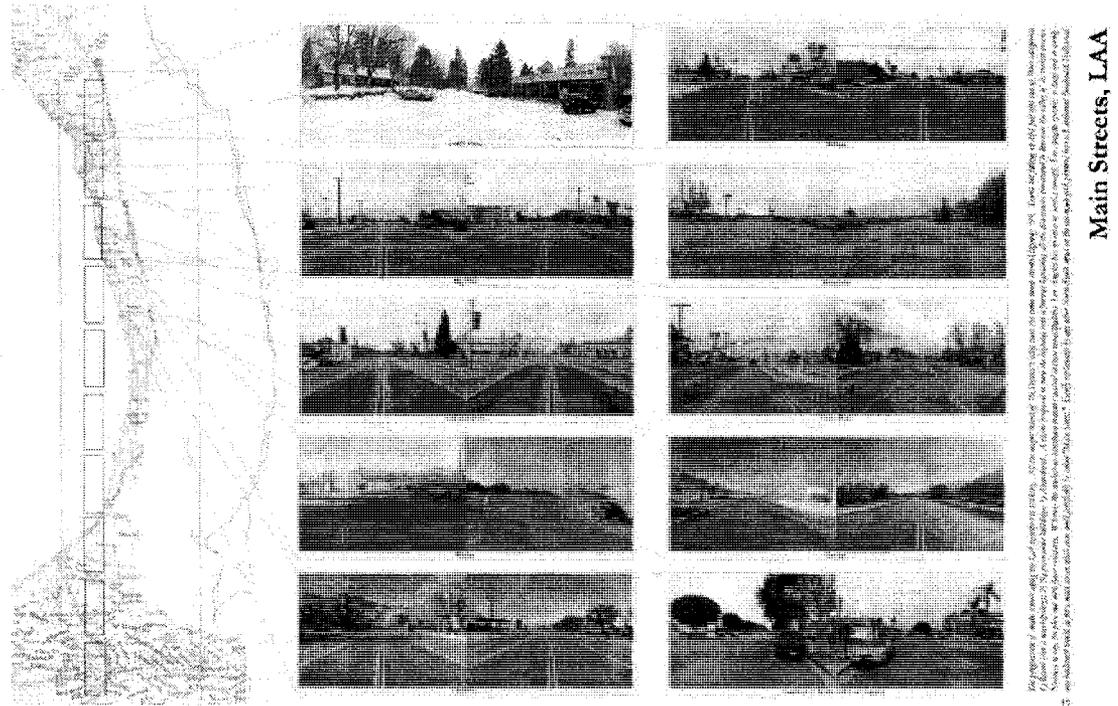
Figure 6. Aaron Forrest, "River and Aqueduct Crossings," *Los Angeles Aqueduct Landscape Atlas*, 2002, 20.

Figure 7. David Maisel, *The Lake Project*, 2001
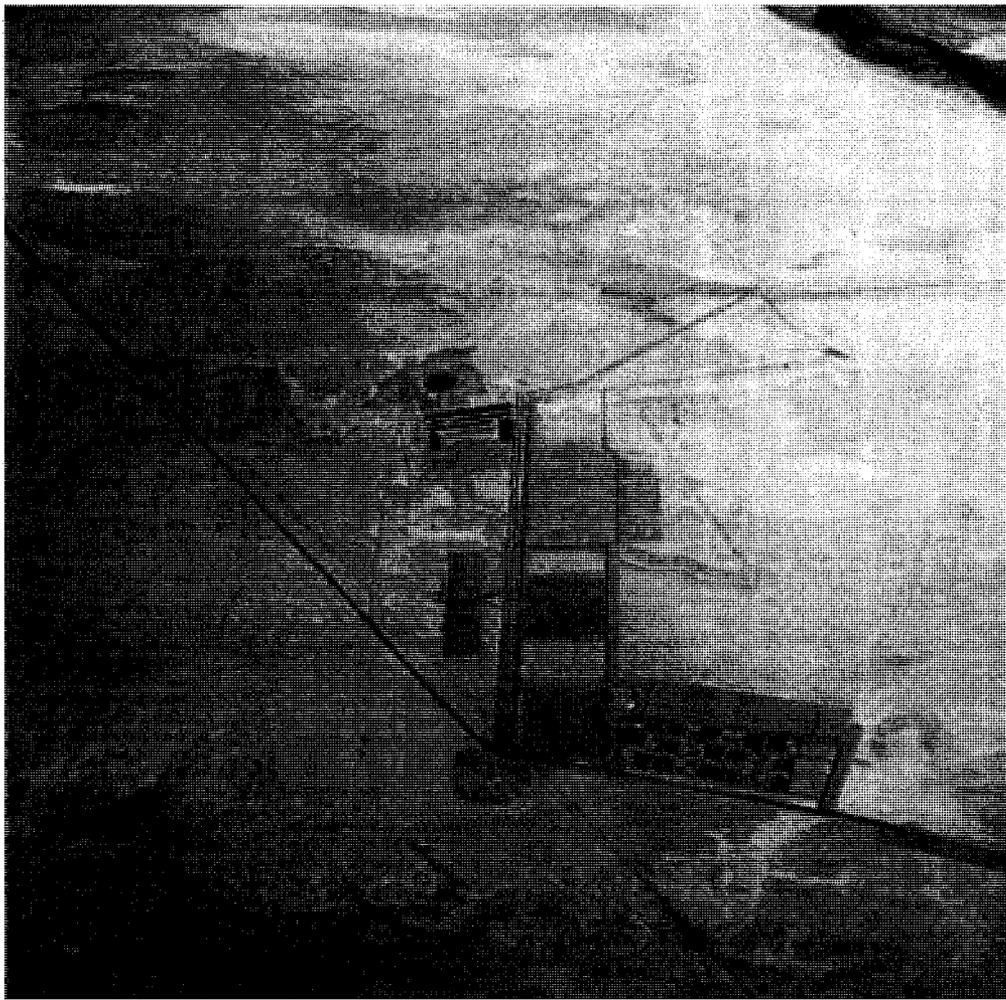
Figure 8. David Maisel, *The Lake Project*, 2001
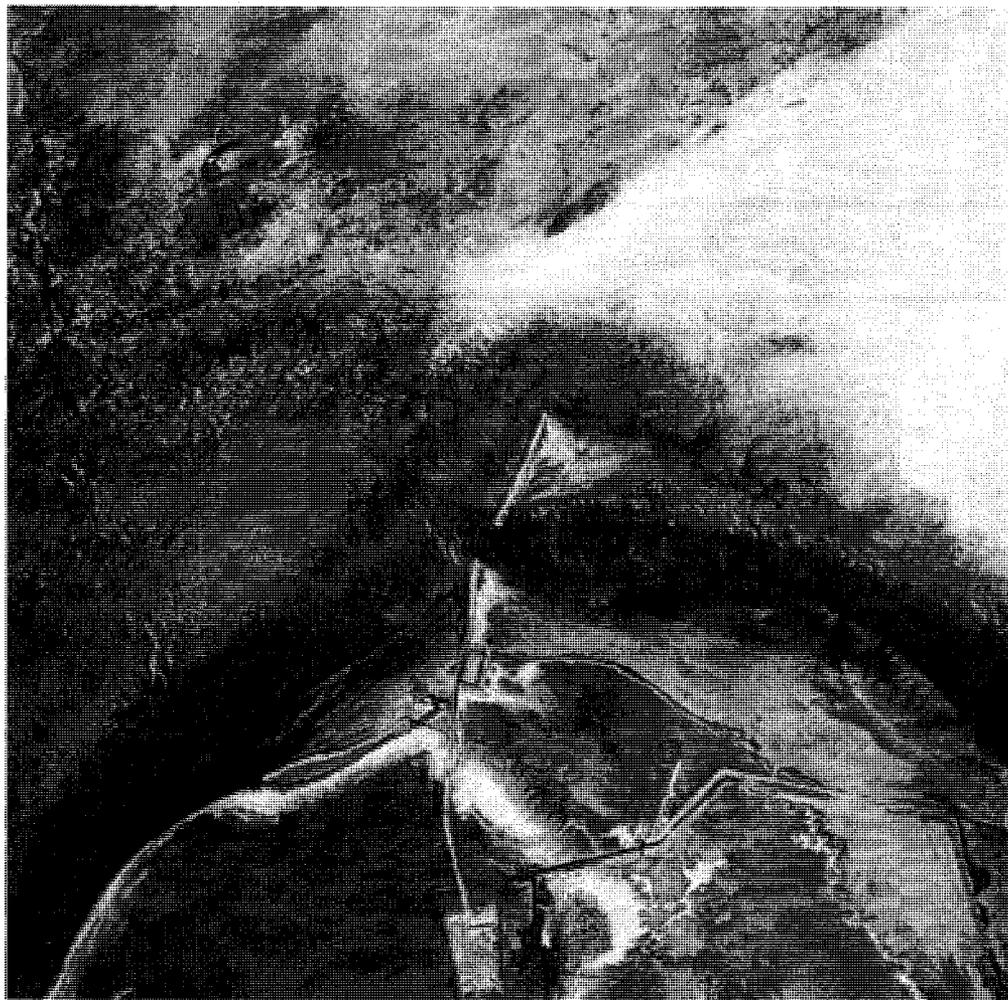
Figure 9. Andy Freeman, #5.4924.9.01 - Lone Pine Budget Inn (formerly The Willow Motel), Lone Pine, California N36°36.403', W118°03.884', from the series *Manzanar: Double Architecture*
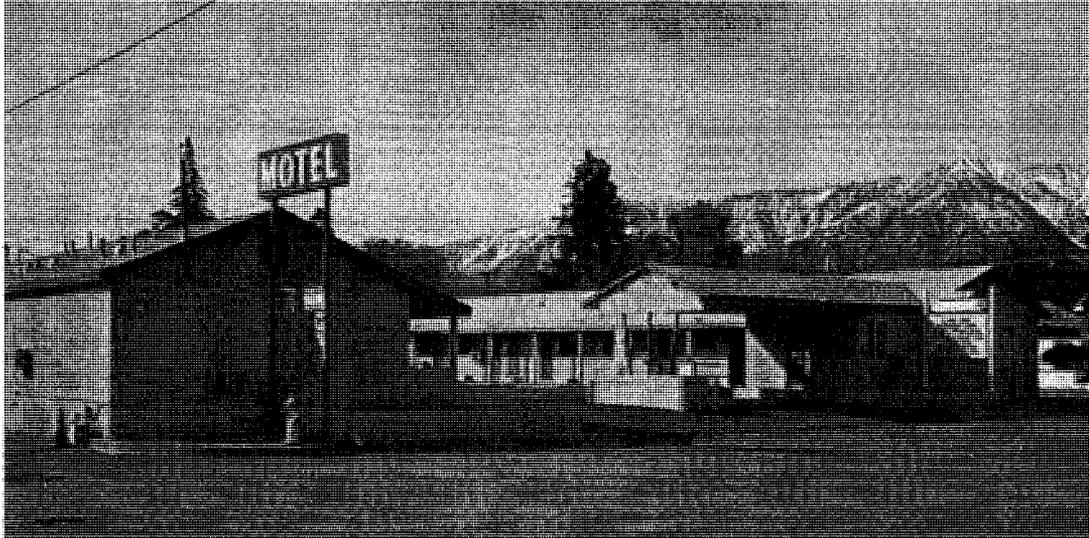
Figure 10. Andy Freeman, 5#3.28.01 - Abandoned building near Jawbone Creek and Highway 14 (version 1 of 2) N35°17.944', W117°59.983', from the series *Manzanar: Architecture Double*
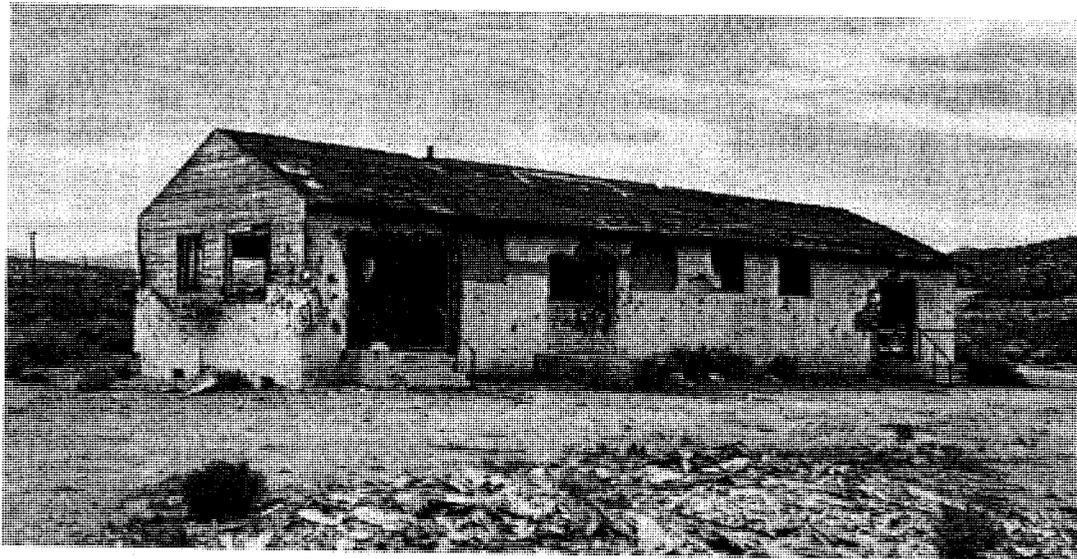
Figure 11. Owens Lake dust mitigation project: CLUI bus tour in the Owens Valley, 2004, CLUI archives.
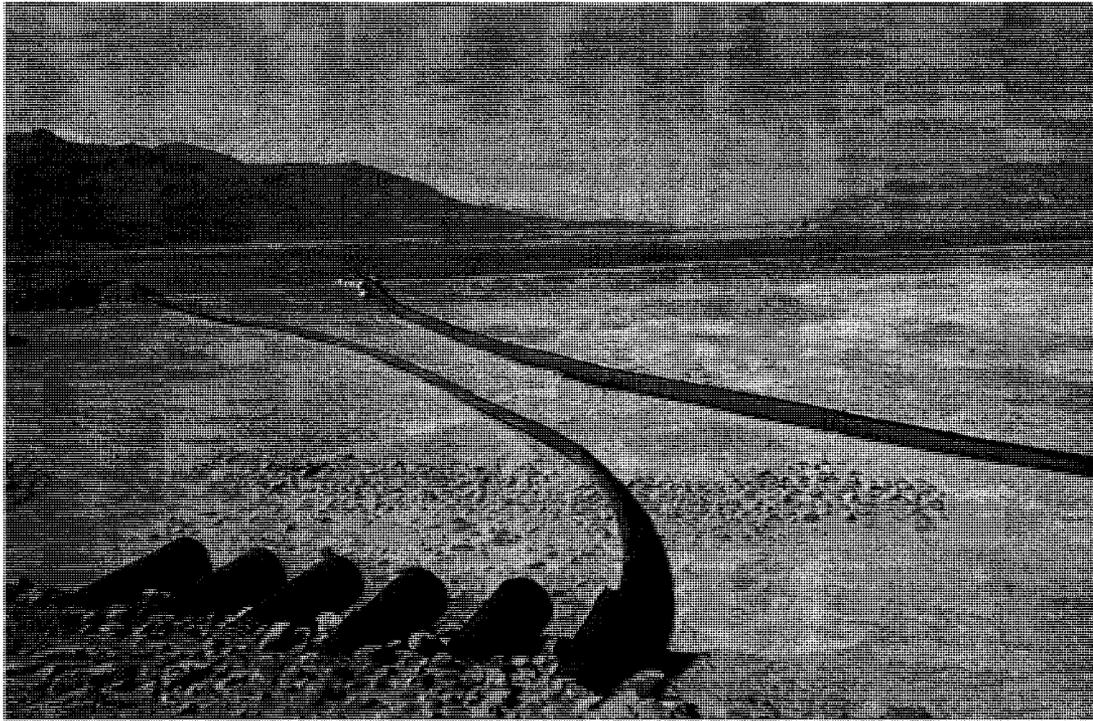
Figure 12. Crossing Owens Lake: CLUI bus tour in the Owens Valley, 2004, CLUI archives.
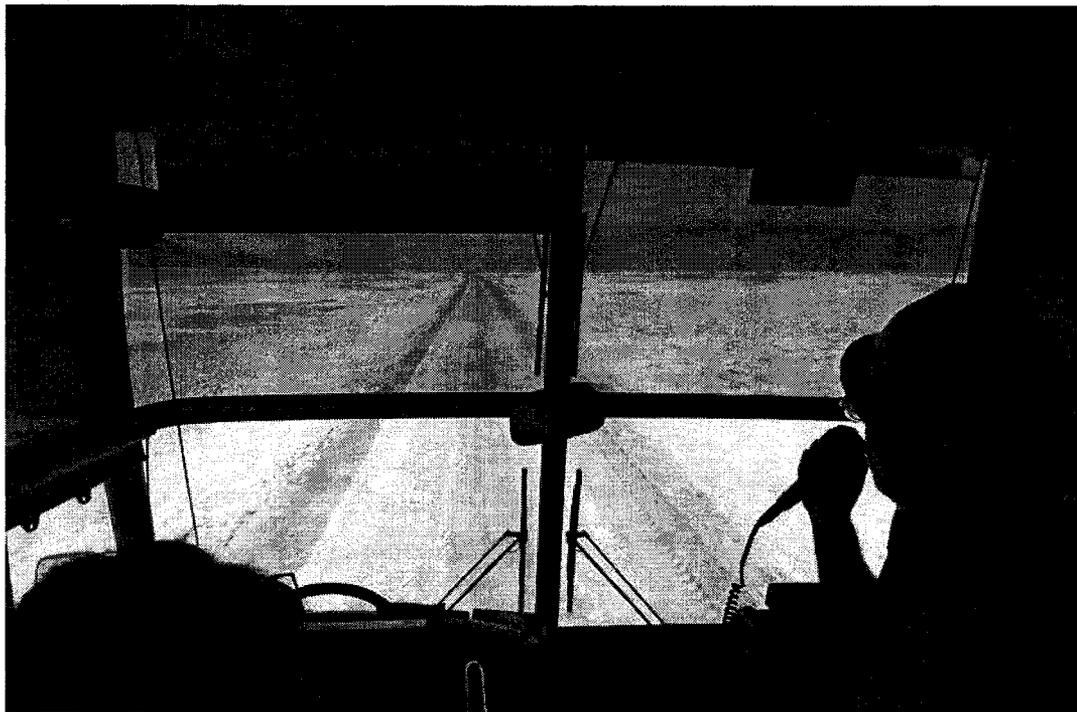
Figure 13. Mount Whitney: CLUI bus tour in the Owens Valley, 2004, CLUI archives.

Figure 14. "Eastern Sierra Interagency Visitor Center," *Points of Interest in the Owens River Valley*, 2004, CLUI archives.

Figure 15. Newton Harrison and Helen Mayer Harrison, *Vision for The Green Heart of Holland* (1995), installation view of the exhibition at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York.
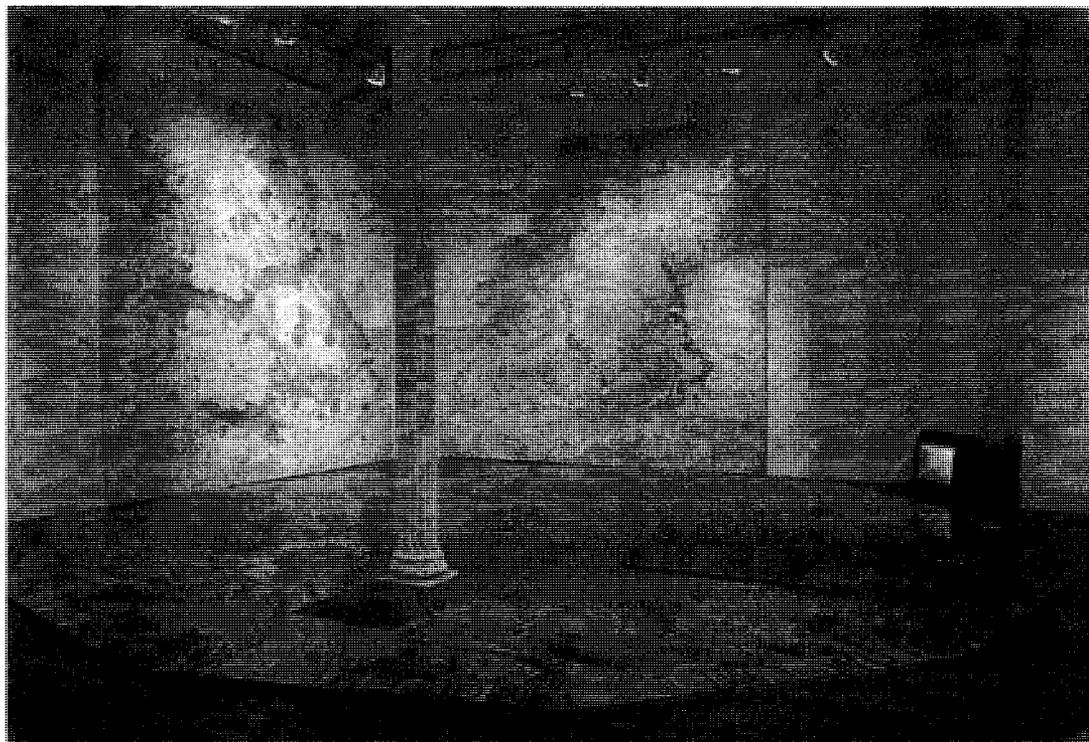
Figure 16. Aaron Forrest, "Disasters," *Los Angeles Aqueduct Landscape Atlas*, 2002, 58-59.
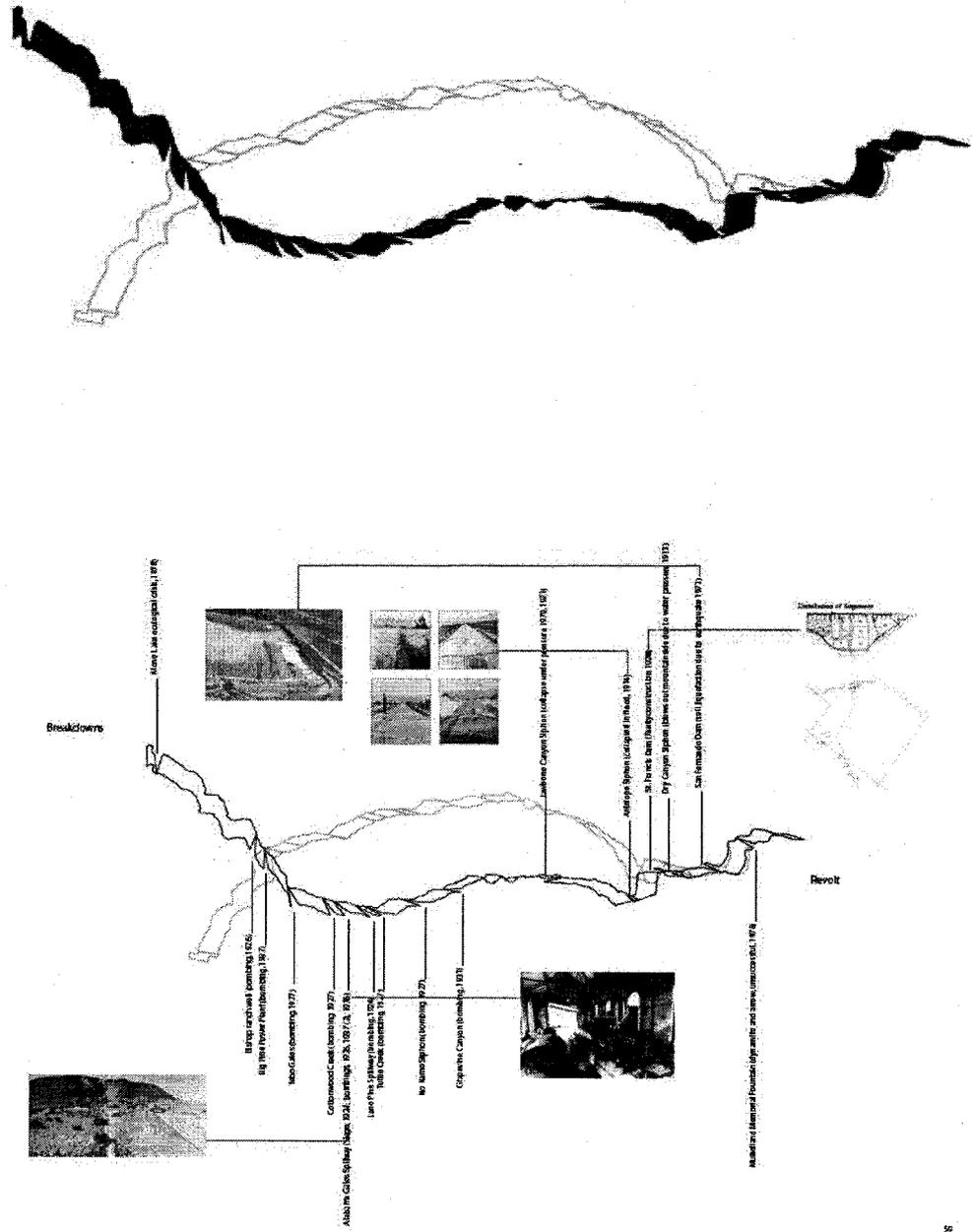
Figure 17. Dan Graham, *Homes for America*, 1966-67.
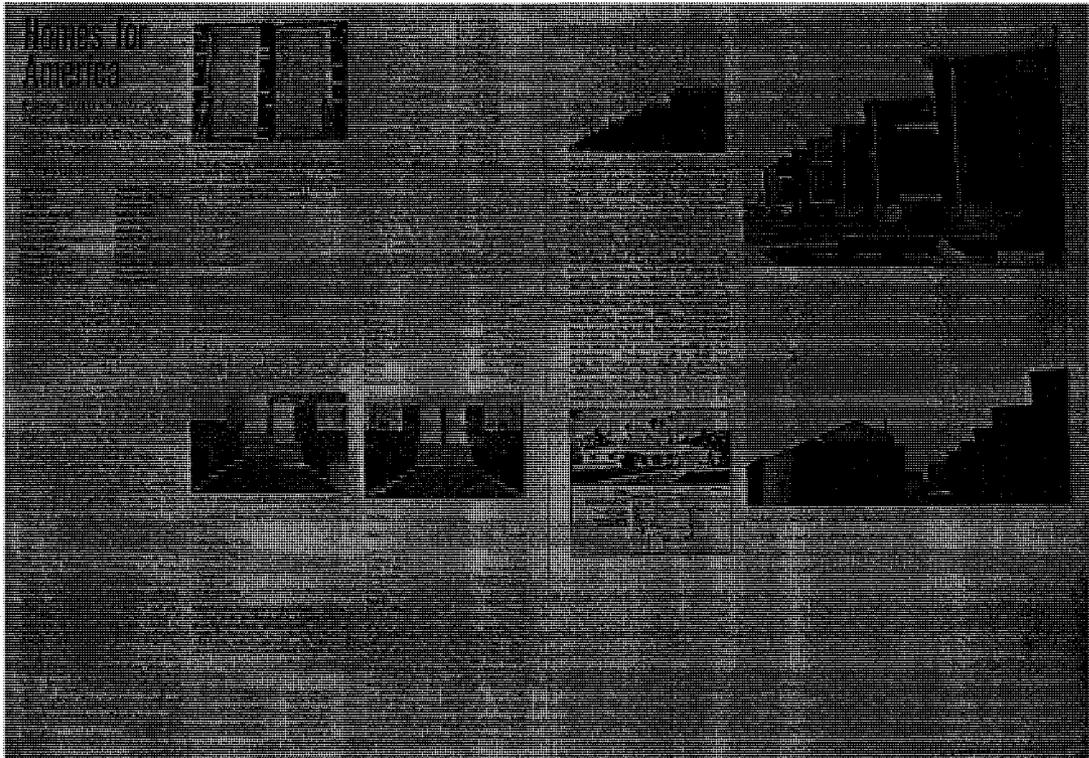
Figure 18. "Coyote Flat Airstrip," *Points of Interest in the
Owens River Valley*, 2004, CLUI archives.
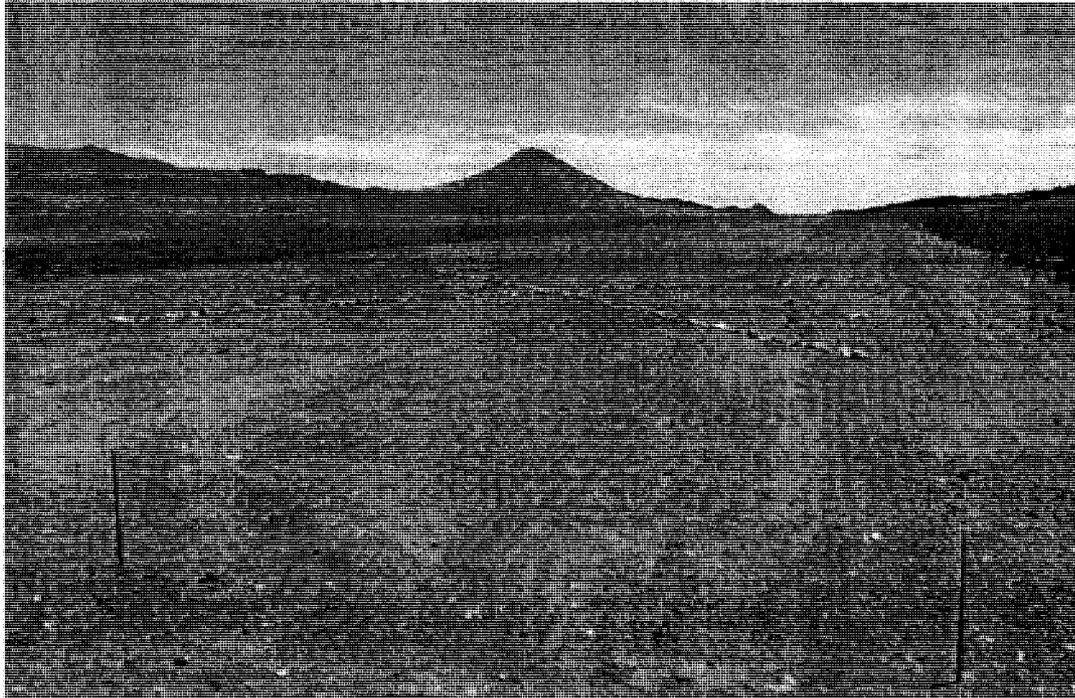
Figure 19. Robert Smithson, *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey—The Sand Box Monument, also called The Desert*, 1967.
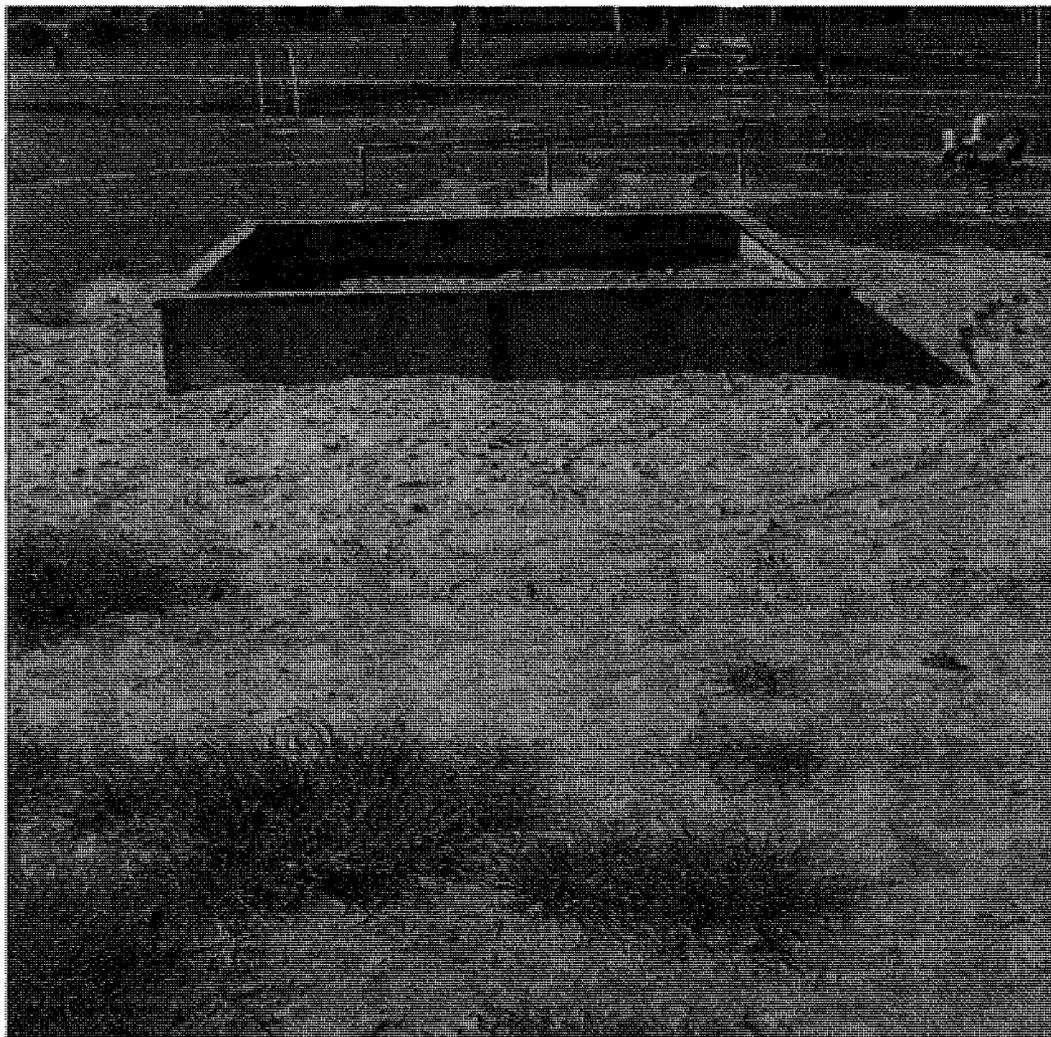
Figure 20. "Owens Valley Radio Astronomy Observatory," *Points of Interest in the Owens River Valley*, 2004, CLUI archives.

Figure 21. "Owens Valley Radio Astronomy Observatory," *The Lay of the Land*,
Summer 2004, CLUI archives.
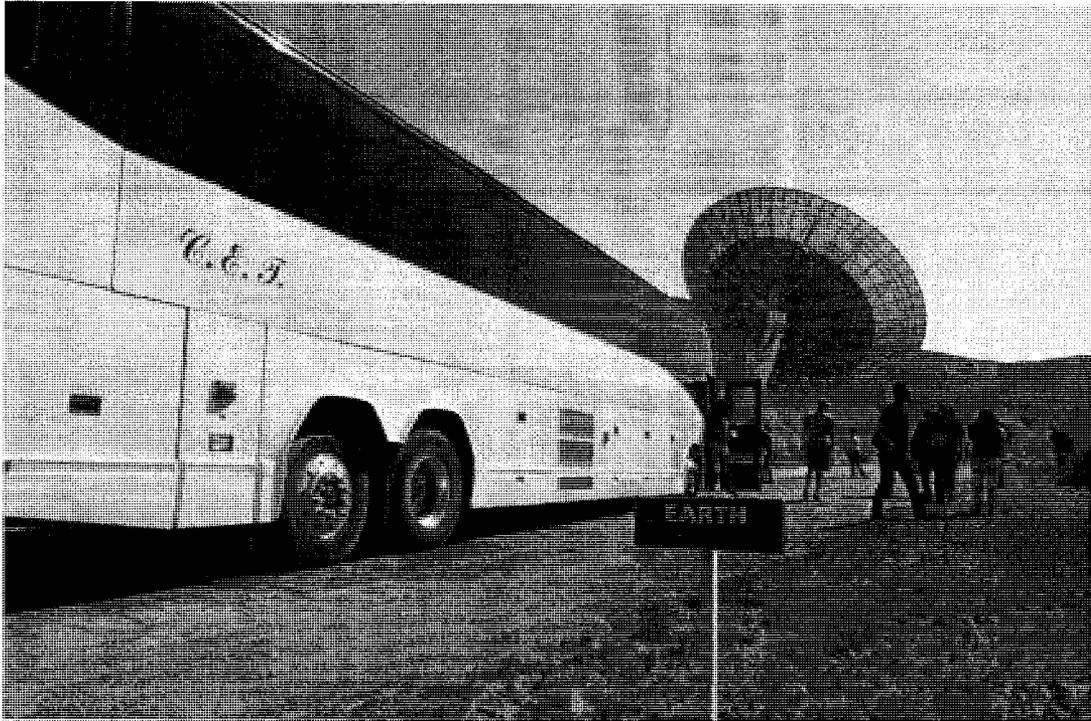
Figure 22. Robert Smithson and Mel Bochner, *The Domain of the Great Bear* (detail), 1969.

Figure 23. "Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest," *Points of Interest in the Owens River Valley*, 2004, CLUI archives.

Figure 24. Characterisation Report Form
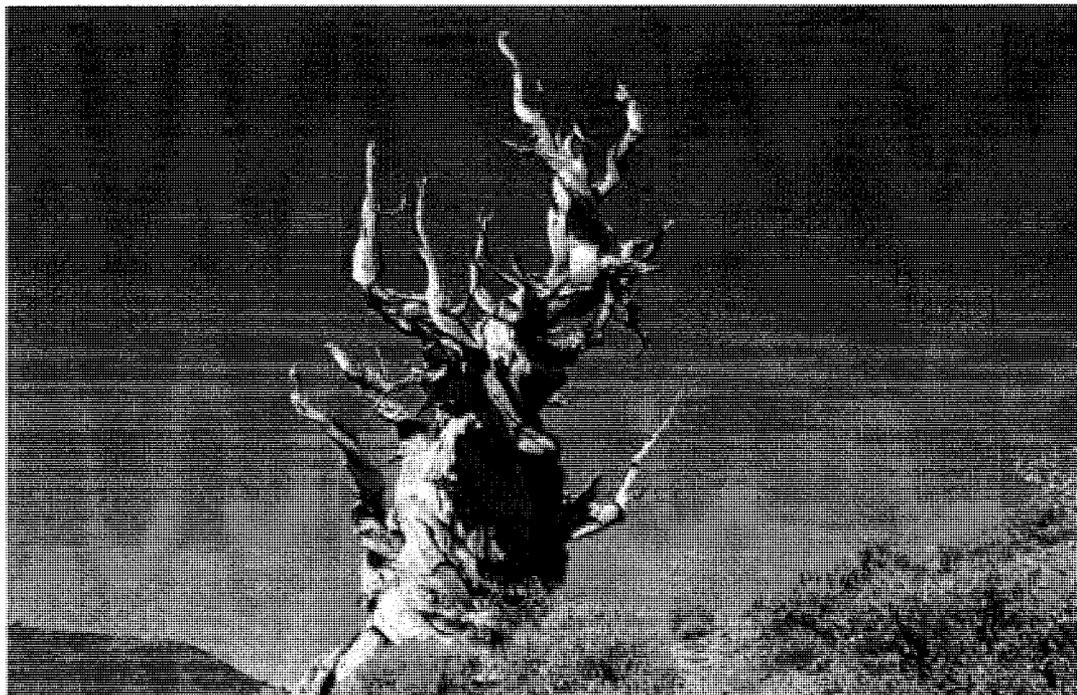
Figure 25. CLUI logo
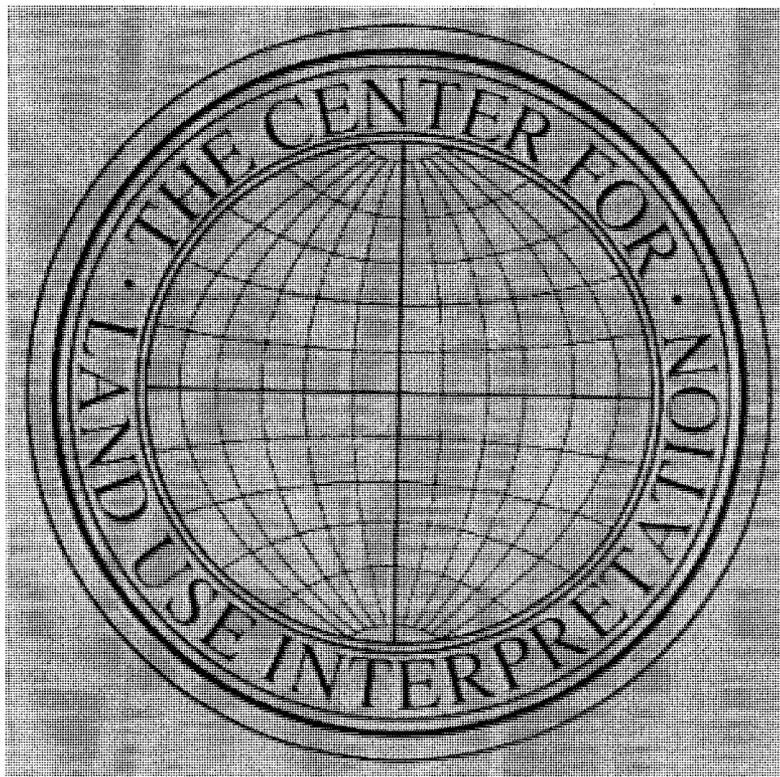
Figure 26. "Conway Summit Lookout," *Points of Interest in the Owens River Valley*, 2004, CLUI archives.