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by

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Canine Fields

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Report

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Dedication

For Kraig.

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Abstract

Canine Fields

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

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This report details, through a series of interconnected anecdotes, my specific understanding of photography. It charts the paths that led me to this point, explains how, in the midst of an interdisciplinary studio art MFA program, I came to understand myself as a landscape photographer, and argues that such a label might actually be somewhat meaningless unless it eschews its traditionally “objective” connotations and embraces the urban landscape as a network of felt experiences.

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1. Key Term

In *The Age of Wire and String*, Ben Marcus defines canine fields as: “1. Parks in which the apprentice is trained down to animal status. 2. Area or site, which subdues, through loaded, prechemical grass shapes, all dog forms. 3. Place in which men, girls, or ladies weep for lost or hidden things.”¹ I picked up the book for a couple bucks, but within those lines I discovered a name for the place I’d been trying to photograph for years.

It should be noted that *The Age of Wire and String* is a work of fiction. Marcus crafts a new lexicon by cobbling together scraps of the recognizable, the everyday, and the possibly scientific. With that in mind, it feels even more reasonable that I’ve appropriated *Canine Fields* as a title.

Also the photographs have lots of dogs in them.



Figure 1:
Canine Fields 2
Photograph, 2016-17

¹ Marcus, Ben. *The Age of Wire and String*. Dalkey Archive Press, 1995.

2. Killing the Father/Myths of the West

Pope John Paul II went to Phoenix in 1987. My parents probably didn't have much energy for fanfare, what with Daisy, a blind pointer, and me, a very young baby, around. According to Mom, "we watched him on TV at Sun Devil Stadium—people thought that was funny. I remember trying to explain him to you in baby terms. They showed the motorcade to the airport and his plane taking off, so we went and stood on the tree stump as his plane flew really low right over the house. We waved to him. He was a nice pope I guess, as far as popes go, and the whole thing was kind of sweet. I remember you liking it. Why do you ask?"



Figure 2:
Canine Fields 1
Photograph, 2016-17

We lived on Wilshire, at the edge of downtown in a brick house, dotted with citrus, a big tree stump in the lawn. The stump was once a tree, and when I was a newborn that tree was struck by lightning and burst into flames. We watched it burn as a family. The fire department came; the tree was doused but dead, and was soon cut down with a chainsaw. So even though I've seen the tree—immolated!—I can only summon a reasonably faithful image of the stump. I was too young for the tree. The tree is a ghost, nothing but a construct

of my imagination, some amalgam probably closer to the oaks I see out the window as I write this than the mesquite or whatever it actually was. My images of the fire are from Hollywood—flames a color only found in cinema. Odorless, heatless, a furious cinder-edged tree either far more or far less dramatic than the actual event had to have been.

Recently, home for the holidays, I drove by the old house and saw no sign of any of that; just a low-profile façade of red brick, big dry yard, decorative oranges, newer swing set succumbing to the same sun as everything else but at record speed. I texted someone a picture of the house along with the observation that I'd seemingly spent my childhood living in a Henry Wessel photo. The comment made sense only to me, as only I had spent the majority of my twenties obsessively reevaluating my relationship to Wessel and the other photographers who made up the 1975 George Eastman House exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*. (That's the show where seven American and two German photographers displayed some modest, straightforward black and white photographs—and one American displayed some modest, straightforward color photographs—of suburbs, industry, and main streets from across the United States and in the process permanently rerouted the discourse around landscape photography.) After that moment looking at the Wilshire house, I began to wonder if the seeds to my later preoccupations had been planted, long before I'd ever made a photograph, somewhere in the same dirt as that stump.

New Topographics does not only feel close to me because I grew up in the sprawling West that most of its artists strove to document. The show's curator, William Jenkins, later became a professor of photography at Arizona State University. He was there as I matriculated. To his credit Bill wonders why there's still so much fuss about that show,

though his objections did not stop its influential ghosts from lingering inside our darkroom. The same deadpan photographs of parking lots and suburban homes surfaced in student show after student show, and I understand why. We were so close to the source. Many of us grew up in those suburbs, and we felt some sense of expertise with regard to their banalities. But these photographs were mostly redundant and—not necessarily the fault of their makers—as banal, as superficially superficial, as their subjects.

The roots of this issue are Civil-War-deep: A lingering desire can be charted through the history of (specifically) American photography, an attempt to express, with some veneer of objectivity, the conditions of the present through precise renderings of place. In her introductory text to the 2010 *New Topographics* revival catalog, Britt Salvesen charts this continuum:

In an elegant generational cycle, [Walker] Evans was now poised to play for young photographers in the 1970s the role his own nineteenth-century predecessor, Mathew Brady, had played for him in the 1930s, encouraging them, in a time of social crisis, to situate their medium and their subjects in an explicitly American context. (p. 14)²

Extending that timeline to the present, almost the same span of years has passed since the original *New Topographics* exhibition as separated the New Topographers from Evans. And today we just so happen to find ourselves in another moment of social crisis. But the Brady-Evans-*Topographics* thread carries, alongside its Americanness, an adherence to a documentary style that is disconnected from the contemporary social landscape.

² Salvesen, Britt. “New Topographics.” *New Topographics*. Steidl, 2009.

Today the quotidian feels volatile and disarray—charted through an endless network of screens and slogans—seems the only guaranteed content. Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart’s assertion that “everyday life is a life lived on the level of surging affects, impacts suffered or barely avoided,” is apt. “It takes everything we have,” she says, “but it also spawns a series of little somethings dreamed up in the course of things.”³ These “somethings” should absolutely appear in a landscape photography for 2017, but may only do so if the practice is executed with a loose, inclusive approach. The authoritative objectivity that has become associated with the genre suggests a sense of order that is obsolete at best. Instead we should reach for a disjunctive harmony, where long views, product shots, appropriated documents, and digital manipulation are free to live alongside more traditional pictures. Through this process we may discover that inside the cacophony of the present, everything still is made of the same stuff.

This notion carries over into the content of *Canine Fields*: In one photograph a small white dog in an orange vest is observed in the early stages of becoming a cloud. Elsewhere a cloud of white foam seems on the verge of solidifying into a dog, complete with a bright orange leash. In both of these pictures an entirely organic—borderline magical—process happens within a cold institutional landscape, without horizon, all linoleum or concrete. The web of associations is dense but generous.

³ Stewart, Kathleen. *Ordinary Affects*. Duke University Press, 2007.



Figure 3:
Animal (Known)
Photograph, 2016-17

Next time I visit Phoenix I'll stop and see if the stump has been excavated. It wouldn't alter the story, but it would be a reminder that change persists when we're not watching. When the Pope visited Phoenix, to avoid offending the faithful, Arizona State University consented to enshroud every image of Sparky, their "Sun Devil" mascot whose dumb, generic mascot grin was allegedly modeled after Walt Disney, in yellow cloth.



Figure 4:
Shelter (Form)
Photograph, 2016-17

3. Mr. Thingy

Admittedly, as a person fixated on photographs—those little agents of distortion in time and place—it is easy fall into brief ruminations on memory and imagination. Here's another one:

Same childhood home, near the stump, a thicket of tall olive trees surrounded the irrigation valve. The trees dropped their leaves and fruit and nobody ever really bothered to clean them up. It was the shadiest place in the yard but in the summer it was also a humid mess of mosquitos. And Mr. Thingy lived there.

I don't know where he came from but I am confident implicating my uncle Kraig, as he was the type who claimed that when he had a child of his own he would only tend to it wearing a chimpanzee mask and welding gloves. It was Kraig who, when he came to visit my mother, was quick to ask me if I'd been behaving, or if I needed to take a trip to see Mr. Thingy. Incidentally it was also Kraig, who had a portrait studio, who first introduced me to photography. Somewhere in there is a parallel.

Mr. Thingy, he was a headless scarecrow. Made from my dad's newspaper-stuffed denim and an abandoned blue dress shirt—complete with the patina of monsoons and guano—he was propped in the branches of one of the olive trees at a slight stoop. From that position he groped at the hapless child below. He wasn't visible from the road; you had to be down in the thicket, crunching on dead leaves and dried pits, vulnerable to the mosquitos and whatever else, to notice the frayed ends of his jeans—with the yellowed Family Circus panels poking out—dangling above your head. He was horrifying to the point where, once I knew he was there, I could no longer enter the thicket. He was mystifying to the point

where, once I knew he was there, I could not stop myself from staring into the thicket from the living room window while my mother tried to talk me down.

Mr. Thingy will be nice if you are a good boy. Mr. Thingy is only mean to bad children. You are a good boy. Do not worry.

But the issue wasn't nice or mean, good or bad. Those dichotomies are too simple. My fascination was tethered to his presence. I allowed him to exist and he allowed me to remain delightfully unsure.

I would grow and forget, but then he would find me again in the yard. Getting older should have, and, in some senses did, clarify the harmlessness of the dummy, but I tend to succumb to my imagination: I allowed Mr. Thingy to remain a force of sublime childhood magic and fear until my family moved. It's improbable, but I guess he could still be up there. In some ways he has to be, a demon presiding over the earliest channels of my memory. Maybe somewhere there's a picture, but, to paraphrase a man who was killed by the laundry van, even if there was I could not reproduce the Mr. Thingy Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the "scarecrow"; it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of a science; it cannot establish an objectivity, in the positive sense of the term; at most it would interest your studium: period, clothes, bird shit; but in it, for you, no wound.⁴

Unless there is a wound, in which case this hypothetical photograph may have leapt out of description into a puddle of affect. It happens. For instance, in making *Canine Fields*, I

⁴ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, 2010.

have aimed for a body of work that is set in Texas, transmits an impression of a time in Texas, but is not Texan nor about Texas. Animals have entered the photographs, but the photographs are not specifically about animals. It's as if the animals have wandered onto an empty film set and become tour guides to its improbably discoveries.

If *Canine Fields* was a narrative, the preceding paragraph would have loosely established the characters (animals) and setting (Texas). I'd now be set to put forth a plot. But *Canine Fields* is not a narrative, and there is no plot. There is, however, a cabal of Mr. Thingies—entities and objects that open up the space between what's imagined and what's lived. It's like when Hollis Frampton, in one of the best, silliest proclamations ever written on the subject of photography, said, "If it is dragons we seek, or if it is angels, then we might reconsider our desperate searches through space and hunt them, with our cameras, where they seem to live: in the reaches of temporality."⁵



Figure 5:
Hole in the Zuiderzee
Photograph, 2016-17

⁵ Frampton, Hollis. "Incisions in History/Segments of Eternity." *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton*. Edited by Bruce Jenkins, MIT Press, 2009.

4. The Picture of the Afghan Hound

I found the picture of the Afghan hound at an antique store.



Figure 6:
The Picture of the Afghan Hound
Photograph, 2016-17

He was staring up at me from a 3x2 inch info card, copyright 1948, his eyes warm and nearly religious, or perhaps heavy with longing. What's the difference? "Oh hello," I said in the store to the piece of cardboard, before bringing it home with me for a dollar. I soon decided the Afghan needed to enter the work. The inclusion felt like a departure, both because the picture is appropriated and because of the direct gaze of the hound. Most of the animals in my photographs exist at a tangible distance—the space between the camera and the creature always makes the seen thing strange. At first glance this doesn't apply to the incredibly present, iconic hound, but that sense of direct engagement is a ruse. *The Picture of the Afghan Hound* is much larger than its source, and the dot pattern of the original info card runs interference on a viewer's interface with the animal. The sense of engagement gives way to a sense of being duped, of being taken in by a duplicate of a duplicate of the image of a dog, long dead, and frankly alien in the world of the photographs. Considering this, it comes

to mind that *The Picture of the Afghan Hound* has a lot in common with a famous Afghan named Snuppy.

Snuppy died a year prior to my writing this. I didn't know until now, but then again I often find it hard to stay up to date on the news. In fact it was only yesterday that I found out Snuppy ever existed, and by then I was 364 days too late to attempt contact. Not that it would have been easy to say hello, what with Snuppy living in Seoul and me hopping around the southwestern United States. Still there would have been warmth in knowing he was out there, the first successfully cloned dog. Now that I know he was, how can I help but miss that warmth?

One tiny solace: apparently there are others. Snuppy's family, or something. If I try, I can imagine what it would be like to meet these marvels. Licking, sniffing, smelling of dog, their canine natures would overshadow the technological wonder of their existence. I would want to pet them. I would ask permission from a Korean scientist in a spotless, bright white lab coat, and I would pet them. Probably I'd also have to wear a spotless, bright white lab coat, but hopefully no gloves. I would say, in a tone similar to the one I would use with a person, "Oh hello. How are you? You are a nice dog." Meeting those clones would be lovely, in spite of the mystery, but I admit to heavy bias. Far as I can tell there is always mystery in meeting an animal, and it is always lovely.

For instance, take the Toad. I do not know the Toad, but it has lived in a crack on my front porch since I moved to Texas. On warm nights it crawls out and sits perfectly still on a step, waiting. When I come home from grad school I say, "Hello Toad," before I go inside. Sometimes I'll come back out in slippers and stare at it, or take its picture, or laugh. It usually doesn't budge, which is fascinating. There is no fear. I love the Toad, but I do not know the Toad. I cannot, but this has almost nothing to do with the fact that I am human and the Toad is toad. It has a little to do with distance, and with language, but mostly it has to do with the fact that the Toad is a shapeshifter; it is sometimes brown, sometimes gray, sometimes it is the size of my fist and sometimes it is the size of a key fob. Sometimes it is even two toads, and on one wondrous occasion it was three. How could I ever expect to familiarize myself with such trickery?

Here's the nearest I can get with language: I know the Toad is like *The Picture of the*

Afghan Hound, and I know they are both like *Toad*, which is my best approximation of the Toad in photograph form. All three challenge indexes, just as indexes begin to feel understandable. These challenges are the system on which *Canine Fields* is built. It is a shaky foundation, doomed to crumble over and over, but of course it is. Those surging affects, those lost and hidden things, they're damn persistent.



Figure 7:
Toad
Photograph, 2016-17

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