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Place Self: Identity at the Crossroads of Place and Time in Catherine Opie's Los Angeles Landscape Series, 1988-2004

A Dissertation Presented

by

Kim Woltmann

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

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The Graduate School

Kim Woltmann

We, the dissertation committee for the above candidate for the

Doctor of Philosophy degree, hereby recommend

acceptance of this dissertation.

Dr. Michele H. Bogart – Dissertation Advisor
Professor, Art Department

Dr. Andrew V. Uroskie - Chairperson of Defense
Associate Professor and MA/PhD Graduate Program Director, Art Department

Dr. Zabet Patterson
Assistant Professor, Art Department

Dr. Megan Craig
Associate Professor and Masters Program Director,
Philosophy Department, Stony Brook University

This dissertation is accepted by the Graduate School

Charles Taber
Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Dissertation

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Catherine Opie achieved success and notoriety during the 1990s for several controversial photographic series of herself and members of her LGBT community that explored themes of sexuality, gender, and identity. She also, however, built a contemporaneous body of work throughout the 1990s comprised of landscape series. These images embraced a cool stoicism and deadpan aesthetic that contrasted the intimacy and dissidence of Opie's portraits, as well as the early branding of her as a contemporary provocateur. They therefore received little scholarly attention. More recent renewed interest in Opie's landscapes is largely inspired, retrospectively, because images of place have now overtaken images of people within her oeuvre; however, much of the commentary attempts to relate the landscapes to the portraits without supplying sufficient analyses of the landscape series themselves. "Spatial identity" has become a catch-phrase for characterizing the themes within Opie's work, and most critics do not probe further than to state that place and identity are simply "related" for Opie. This dissertation analyzes Opie's early landscape series in order to amend an oversight within the existing scholarship, as well as supply the necessary grounding to discuss the relationship between place and identity in her work. Focusing primarily on Opie's landscapes of the 1990s, this dissertation argues that her seemingly indifferent imagery of depopulated and banal places—freeways, mini-malls, and suburban housing developments—responds to the specific sociopolitical climate of Los Angeles, as well as to the cultural milieu of the millennium that anticipated an increasing physical alienation in the context of new virtual technologies. Ultimately, I argue, Opie's works demonstrate how identity is a product of regionalism, and that both literal geographical place and

abstract space are germane to self-ideation. Her landscapes are therefore not simply about place, but about the self and its multiplicity within forever shifting contexts.

Dedicated to my parents

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Introduction: Identity and Region

RE-FRAMING CATHERINE OPIE

In 2003, I saw the debut of Catherine Opie's then most recently completed series, *Surfers* (2003) at Regen Projects gallery in Los Angeles. Priced around $3,000 apiece, only a third of Opie's *Surfers* photographs had been sold. Four years later, the Guggenheim Museum in New York held a retrospective of Opie's work, an incredible honor and commercial coup for a mid-career artist. The exhibition spanned two floors and on the weekends I visited, was packed. Shortly after it closed, I observed that the price for the same photographs I had viewed in L.A. five years earlier had accrued to somewhere around the $20,000-range.

This kind of prestige is still a rarity among artists, considering it represents a small fraction of the number of practicing artists who contribute to the contemporary art scene, but strangely, among those who do achieve success on a similar scale, the rapidity with which it comes is less and less unique.[1] Like memoirs, formally expected to be written by wise elders reflecting about their life's accomplishments and now published as first novels about coming-of-age, the idea of a 'retrospective' continues to shift from an all-encompassing survey after an artist's retirement (or death), to a more focused scan of maybe a decade. In Opie's case, although the earliest work referenced in the Guggenheim show—her MFA thesis piece *Master Plan* from 1988—establishes a twenty-year span, the look back is closer to ten years, considering her most

[1] The "Young British Artists" or YBAs of the 1990s is one example of artists achieving quick success. Opie also notes the commercial pressure on young artists to achieve recognition early in their careers in an 2006 interview with Andrea Bowers. See: *Between Artists: Andrea Bowers, Catherine Opie* (Canada: A.R.T. Press, 2008), 40-42.

well-known works were produced between 1993 and 1995, and that most exhibitions are planned three to five years in advance.

This is not to say, however, that the changing criterion for the idea of a 'retrospective' necessarily reflects a decline in the quality of art; rather it reflects the heightened influence and pressure of commercialism more than anything else. It is also an indicator of the fact that we are more sped up in general. This is not only a business concern, as those who invest in contemporary art assume a risk dependent on the unknown future success, relevancy, and production of an artist, but is also indicative of a broader reality in contemporary life, that significance is increasingly bound up with the immediate. There is the unsettling notion that if an artist like Opie were to have a retrospective in 2038, at the age of 78 versus 48, the relevancy of her work might not translate. This is again, not a function of merit so much as it is a by-product of the fact that the present is ever-more prevalent and insistent than the past, and the long-term future is more difficult to predict.

I mention this acceleration of time in the context of the sale and promotion of Opie's work because it exemplifies the way in which time has become the evaluative commodity of millennial culture. We conceive of experience, and place relative value on it, more and more in terms of time—how long it takes to accomplish something; how much time we 'spend' involving ourselves in one thing or another; how 'efficient' things are. Information flows via an invisible network of fiber optic data cables and connectivity is nearly instantaneous. The increased supremacy of time has in turn affected the role of space in what is commonly termed the "space-time compression," or the notion that time is inversely related to space. As time's significance becomes more and more secure, the role of space becomes less and less stable.

The decreased role of space is an intellectual bias that manifests in a particular cultural milieu. It is not a functional condition of reality. Existence, of course, requires taking up space just as much as it does transitioning over time; yet, while one would recognize that sitting in a traffic jam is indeed to occupy space, no one sits in traffic and thinks of where he is physically in space so much as he bemoans how much time he is losing and how much longer it will take him to get wherever he needs to go. It is perhaps the fissure between the reality of space's omnipresence and the pervading cultural bias to dismiss space that creates the sense of disequilibrium and instability. Conditions of reality cannot be obliterated entirely. They can, however, become intellectually devalued to the point that their physical omnipresence becomes like a disturbing paradox. No matter how much space is devalued, there is no way of obliterating it, and thus, instead of eliminating spatial context, culture is instead alienated from space. Space in turn becomes more and more abstract such that there are fewer ways of recognizing, understanding, and accessing its organization and influence.

This dissertation is largely about space and geography and its influence on the sense of self. Under this philosophical inquiry, it focuses on the work of one artist, Catherine Opie, and primarily her photographic landscape series produced within a period of ten years, from 1988 through 1998. One thing that this dissertation observes, which has been for the most part overlooked in the literature on Catherine Opie, is the fact that this decade of the 1990s encompasses a stylistic mode for Opie that is characterized by separating people from place, strict formal taxonomy, and serial imagery. The subject matter is likewise characterized by a preoccupation with personal communities and local civic environments, topics that technically define Opie's entire body of work, but are more regionalist in focus during the nineties. During this period, Opie's major photographic series alternate between several polarities, not only in

terms of subject matter, oscillating between portraits and landscapes, but also in terms of tone. Portraits of individuals in Opie's LGBT circles (including self-portraits of the artist herself in drag as well as in S/M fetish costume) are openly seditious and challenging of social conventions, while her landscapes are quietly composed and have the appearance of impartiality in their depiction of rather banal Los Angeles environs—freeways, strip malls, and innocuous residential streets. These distinctions are not all-encompassing because, as will be further analyzed throughout this dissertation, both types of series sponsor contrast between content and expression more than anything else: the portraits are not without their resolute coolness, and the landscapes, while calm, are certainly not neutral or undisturbed.

Unlike her more recent series, Opie's works of the 1990s deliberately separate people and place. Her portraits display their sitters without spatial context, in front of flat and unspatial colored or patterned backgrounds. Landscapes are of sparse and abandoned places, usually spaces that are synonymous with human traffic like highways and shopping malls, thereby making the absence of people even more conspicuous. These are not an isolated topics in Opie's entire body of work—abandoned landscapes appear again in later works such as her *American Cities* project (ongoing, from 1999), and her series *Children* (2004) employs the same decontextualizing colored backgrounds as *Portraits* (1993-1997), but it is the most prevalent mode during this period. In addition, works produced in the years following those that are the subject of this dissertation reunite people and place to a degree that makes their earlier separation all the more deliberate. Such series as *Domestics* (1995-1998) and *In and Around Home* (2004-2005) capture their subjects of lesbian couples in the former series, and Opie and her family in the latter, in their personal homes, intentionally inviting the viewer to examine subjects within domestic spatial context. Series such as *Surfers* (2003) and *High-School Football* (2008) splice

populated landscapes—the Pacific Ocean in *Surfers* and the football field in *High-School Football*—with portraits of members of the temporary communities that inhabit them. The series *Icehouses* (2001) is comprised of images that portray otherwise deserted rural areas when they temporarily are populated by the ramshackle ice-shelters of winter fisherman.

The literature on Opie's work of the 1990s insists upon preserving this separation between portraiture and landscape, but does so almost as a matter of routine or default. In part, this is because the portraits are so different in emotional temperature from the landscapes, especially in terms of the portraits' recognizable LGBT politics versus the quieter, more subdued landscapes. The portraits are often framed in the context of queer and feminist theory, sexuality and violence, and postmodern identity, while the landscapes are often interpreted formally and framed in the context of aesthetics. In part, the imbalance is the outcome of an expected critical blindspot given the significant degree of synchronicity between Opie's portraits and the rise of scholarship that challenged modernist (re: white and male) hegemonies in many disciplines, including art history. The blindspot was not in supplying feminist or LGBT commentary to Opie's works, as those contributions certainly offer valuable analytical strategies and produce important readings of her photographs; the blindspot was in focusing on her portraits exclusively and thus, indirectly maintaining an insistent separation between the portrait series and the landscape series. As a result, the criticism on Opie has produced a standard rhetoric for her work that is somewhat lopsided, with the majority of the scholarship pertaining to her portraits that engage LGBT politics and identity the most clearly, and less of it devoted to her landscapes.

The more troubling aspect regarding much of the literature on Opie is that it tends to reduce her works to a kind of illustration—that is, her portraits are often invoked as secondary exemplars to broader theories regarding gender, sexuality, and identity. Her inclusion in

‘themed’ art historical tomes is often to support preordained theses.[2] Aside from this kind of response, most of the remaining literature on Opie is in the form of interviews and lectures in which Opie supplies her own—rarely challenged—rhetoric. The catalogue that accompanied the 2008 Guggenheim exhibition embodies the typical approach to Opie’s work and its problematic oversights. The Guggenheim’s *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, edited by curators Jennifer Blessing and Nat Trotman, does not take any liberties with the standard expectations for a retrospective exhibition catalogue. It organizes the information chronologically, segmenting the series and brief commentary into separate sections, so it is somewhat unfair to criticize what is merely conventional, but the objective here is to examine it as a model, particularly because it holds the distinction of being the only culminating text for a comprehensive survey on Opie. The problem in organizing Opie’s serial works chronologically is that it creates a misleading linearity, as if Opie produced her series one after another. In fact, many of their productions overlap. Furthermore, it ignores similarities in the stylistic approach that predominates both Opie’s portraits and landscapes, namely in her preference for formalizing her subjects, whether people or places, into tight, taxonomic serials. This attention to formality is an objective, more documentarian approach that persists throughout Opie’s entire career, but is the most controlled during the decade that is the subject of this dissertation. Opie’s movement away from this strict formalism around 1999, as well as its intensification after partial emergence in her earliest work, *Master Plan* (1988), further invite conception of her nineties work as its own period.

The shared aesthetic between Opie’s landscapes and portraits produced during this period is not a matter of stylistic preference, especially considering that Opie’s process varied from the

[2] Some texts that include Opie’s works in this manner include: Douglas Crimp’s interview of Catherine Opie in *Aesthetics of Risk* (2008); Jonathan D. Katz and David C. Ward, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (2010); and Cherry Smyth, *Damn Fine Art by New Lesbian Artists* (1996).

very new (for the 1990s) use of digital photography to the very old process of platinum printing—manipulating very different processes to yield similar results, in other words. This is not to argue that the different series lack individual integrity, as they were conceived and produced as independent projects; rather, that they represent a prevailing, calculated approach to the medium that supersedes differences in subject matter and moreover, conceptually joins such disparate subjects. In interviews, Opie has described her work in this respect as an ongoing meditation on community, observing that, “L.A. is just an incredible mix of people living together. How do we view a certain city, how do we view different groups of people? What are our relationships to them? How do we begin to go beyond our ideas of stereotype and how to we begin to define ourselves?”[3] No one, however, has investigated what she means beyond the understanding of community in the context of her identity as a lesbian artist. As a result of equating ‘community’ with social politics, in addition to the rise of postmodern identity scholarship of the 1990s and its congruence with Opie’s LGBT images, most criticism has concentrated on Opie’s portraits, rather than her landscapes.

Interestingly enough, the inclination to separate Opie’s portraits and landscapes has the paradoxical effect of calling attention to the strangeness of their juxtaposition, as exhibited at the Guggenheim retrospective. When life-sized portraits of a black man with lime-green pubic hair wearing nothing but roller-skates and another portrait of the artist, sporting S/M costume and topless with the word “PERVERT” carved into her chest, are displayed alongside small panoramas of empty highways and images of deserted Koreatown strip-malls, it is hard to ignore the nagging question of what one has to do with the other. Rather than continuing to use the

[3] Catherine Opie, qtd. in “Voice of the Photographer: Catherine Opie,” [n.d.], video clip, accessed January 12, 2013, YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9lsY78C0_Q.

obvious differences in subject matter between Opie's nineties portraits and landscapes as reason to separate them conceptually, perhaps the time has come to consider the fact that these differences are so obvious but occur within concurrent series and are expressed formally via the same stylistic strategies. The question that should be asked is not so much what one has to do with the other, or what landscape has to do with portraiture, but rather to ask a question premised on the assumption that the portraits and landscapes are linked and that their exchange is purposeful: why so forcibly depopulate place and de-locate people?

This dissertation directly addresses this question of the relationship between place and identity in the final chapter. The majority of its content, however, approaches questions of identity and community indirectly more as a product of regionalism and focuses five of Opie's major landscape series of Los Angeles: *Freeways* (1993-1995), *Mini-Malls* (1997-1998), *Houses* (1995-1996), *Master Plan* (1988-1989) and *In and Around Home* (2004-2005). In part, this approach is corrective and addresses the imbalance in criticism pertaining to Opie's landscapes versus her portraits as mentioned above, but it also promotes the relevancy of landscape, of geography, and of place, to the changing conditions of postmodern identity and postcapitalist communities. In other words, to concentrate near-exclusively on Opie's landscape photography is to argue, essentially, that place is more germane to self-definition and cultural exchange than as previously recognized, perhaps more germane than the more obvious assumption that identity and personhood are solely engaged through representations of people. The final chapter, however, reconstitutes people to the discussion and examines some of Opie's portrait series, including her *Self-Portraits* (1993-2004), *Being and Having* (1991) and *Portraits* (1993-1997), in the context of how they relate to the significance of space and place.

Shifts in the Landscape: Space and Place

Opie's four landscape series that are discussed in this dissertation correspond to different factions of civic space, from transport or transitional space (*Freeways*), to commercial space (*Mini-Malls*), to residential space (*Master Plan, Houses*, *In and Around Home*). Together, these factions represent the social geography of urban life, as well as a documentary portrait of the spatial experience of Los Angeles, thereby collapsing distinctions between the global and specific. Los Angeles as Opie's subject is significant at the same time that it is not: the pictures offer a record of her wanderings through L.A., capitalizing on its unique metropolitan topography and its reputation as the foremost postmodern city, but its presentation in series is also rather benign and objective enough to represent a generalized influence of space and place intended for a global audience. It is necessary to consider Los Angeles and all of the elements specific to its identity as a city—its recent history, its social fabric, and its politics—as an influence on Opie's approach to landscape; it is not necessary to be familiar with the city in order to engage with her photographs.

The mediation between the general and the specific in Opie's images corresponds with a geophilosophical dialectic loosely termed "space versus place," in which 'space' is shorthand for space in the Cartesian mode—a neutral, geometric surround—and 'place' is shorthand for space that is specific, structural, and has a fluctuating, interactive exchange with the people inhabiting it. The phrase has its roots in the late 20th-century development of humanist geography, and appears explicitly in the work of Yi-Fu Tuan, whose 1977 book bears the title, *Space and Place*. Tuan, one of the most philosophical foundational geographers, used phenomenology in order to introduce the concept of place as a dynamic entity, one that was deeply personal and influential on the development of one's sense of identity, both individual and cultural. Tuan was and is still

unique among his contemporaries in his emphasis on subjective experience. Very simply, Tuan's contribution since the 1970s has been to revisit the question of the meaning of space, or, more aptly, how space is meaningful. He has engaged with this question in a variety of ways: *Space and Place* discusses space and place as defined within the individuated personal experience, of which both are dependent concepts, while *Topophilia* (1974) discusses how the definitions of space and place relate to how we come to define ourselves, and *Escapism* (1998) engages with the psychological impact of place and the psychic attachments formed to place as the origin and outcome of social and cultural movements. The lyrical autobiographical style of Tuan's writing is not only a departure from more empirical geographical studies (measurable population developments, environmental changes, and economic exchange), but an even more intimate lens that distinguishes him from the socio-geographical approaches as well (feminist, multicultural, environmental geographies). Tuan's central concern has its counterpart in Opie's landscapes, such that he has consistently written about space and place as joined, and as a phenomenon that has both individual spiritual influence as well as one that that influences culture and has implications pertaining to the universal human condition. Tuan's scholarship, however, is so intertwined (by design) with Tuan the person, that there is no exact or direct school of thought that follows him. His influence inspires a general lineage, and it is widespread and profound.

The other foundational figure that influences this study of Opie's works is Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre offers a complement to Tuan: whereas Tuan is a philosophically-minded geographer, Lefebvre was a spatially-minded philosopher. Lefebvre's famed study on the social implications of space and place, *The Production of Space* (1991) was influential in its argument that place could only be understood in the context of human activity and that its physical form was an interactive reflection of social and political structures and hierarchies. Up until *The*

Production of Space, geographers were certainly aware of the connections between social organization and spatial organization, but the tendency was to conceive of space as a reflection of the social, or its object. Lefebvre's contribution was to provide a comprehensive explanation of how space is a conceptual product of certain social and cultural hierarchies. Lefebvre offers a spatial analysis within the Marxist tradition; therefore his argument is premised on a critique of capitalism. The economic politics expounded in *The Production of Space* have little influence in my interpretations of Opie's work, despite the fact that she herself is a Left-leaning liberal and has made partisan comments and created political imagery. Having said that, Lefebvre's exploration of capitalism as a pervasive yet concealed phenomenon in the tradition of philosophical Marxist critique is important to my treatment of Opie's photographs. *Production of Space* argues for the understanding of space and place as culturally encoded, such that the way in which space is visualized, conceived, and discussed is directed entirely by capitalist assumptions. Examples of this in the book include Lefebvre's critique of how civic space is organized and the very nature of the grid as expressions of private ownership and governmental power.

Opie's work, as I will argue throughout this dissertation, challenges presumptive visual modes and invites viewers to reconsider landscape as an active, rather than passive, discursive site. Broadly, Lefebvre's conception of 'third' space ("representational space" in Nicholson-Smith's translation) has profound connections to Opie's identity politics. Lefebvre defines 'third' space as space reconceived in the fine arts in such a way that it subverts the naturalization of capitalist space, forcing its audience to reconsider certain assumptions about how space is organized and how people understand and interact with it. Artists are such ambassadors of representational space, but so too are those who exist outside of capitalist culture, such as the homeless and undocumented. Individuals identifying as LGBT, including Opie, often live in

some way distanced from ‘community’ at least in its spatial manifestation. Although the acceptance of homosexuality has increased rapidly, it is still true today and certainly the case in the 1980s and 1990s, that identifying as LGBT meant excising oneself from settlement—particularly from the domestic and suburban spheres, but also psychologically from traditional definitions of family. To be gay is in some sense to also live unmoored, and Opie’s images are both a literal manifestation of that nomadism, as well as a representation of perpetual and compulsory psychological transience.

Specifically, Lefebvre’s conception of space as a coordinate of culture grounds much of the final chapter of this dissertation, which analyzes the relationship between Opie’s portrait and landscape series. The association between her images that display sexual fetishism and violence and her images of place invites a Foucauldian approach, but I have chosen to employ Lefebvre’s theories over those of Michel Foucault because Foucault’s analyses tend to be spatially premised, but not spatially directed. Lefebvre’s argument is grounded resolutely in the analysis of space and place, of which the individual body and more comprehensive body politic are certainly relevant, but not the focus. Much of Foucault’s writings concentrate on history and individuality, which is not only closer to the Cartesian conceptualization of space—it cannot help but to imply the distinct body inhabiting and surrounded by space—but also would refocus this dissertation more on Opie’s portraits, as opposed to her landscapes. As the goal is to concentrate on the landscapes and prioritize matters of space and place, it is more appropriate to supply a theoretical framework that also prioritizes space and place over person and body.

MODERN/POSTMODERN AND THE TERROR OF 'NON-PLACE'

Tuan and Lefebvre do not together form an established linear intellectual tradition, but they are linked here as the basis of theoretical inquiry because of their connections to phenomenology and to humanism. In this respect, both scholars engage with the concept of existential meaning as a condition of presence, a concept that has become increasingly significant anticipating and following the second millennium and the advent of computer technology. In their own ways, both Tuan and Lefebvre discuss space and place as a constant compromise or vacillation between the two coordinates of presence, the psychic and the physical: one can be physically present but psychically elsewhere. One underlying shared concern in their works can be summarized as the effect of physical space's decreasing role in lived awareness. More and more, the world not only entices but requires individuals to be psychically removed from wherever they are. We are literally multiple beings, holding simultaneous real-time presences as avatars on social networking sites (usually several at a time), voices on cell phones, dots on electronic maps.

Unsurprisingly, this unique effect of the space-time compression and accompanying globalization has been an important issue within humanist geography scholars, among them Paul Virilio, whose particular engagement with speed relates well to Opie's *Freeway* series, the topic of the first chapter of this dissertation. One of the more subtle aspects of Virilio's writings that make them a suitable verbal complement to the visions supplied by Opie's *Freeways* is their sense of spirituality, even within a rather cynical and apocalyptic outlook. At the risk of putting *Freeways* in the position of illustration, the series nevertheless poses a striking similarity in sentiment to Virilio's writings: the empty landscapes bear the weight of loneliness and introspective freedom equally. Virilio is most known for his thoughts on war; however, he has

also written extensively about the increasing dispersion of perspective and the speed-oriented "dromology" of the contemporary city in works such as *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology* (1977; 1986 in translation); *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (1980; 1991), *The Lost Dimension* (1984; 1991) and *The Vision Machine* (1988; 1994). It is his evaluation of speed technologies and virtual realities as contributing to a profoundly anesthetic society that informs my analysis of *Freeways*, in which I argue that Opie's photographs are designed to disturb unconscious assumptions related to how we realize time and how we are conditioned to see to our surroundings.

Virilio's view nevertheless comes across as quite dim, a trait shared by many scholars producing around the same time (and it is also not a coincidence that Virilio enjoyed a bit of a renaissance during the nineties, seeing many of his works republished in English for the first time, although his appointment as President of Ecole Speciale d'Architecture in 1990 also probably helped to boost his recognition). Perhaps in a subconscious response to the growing anxiety regarding the acceleration of time and increasingly unreal or abstract nature of space, place, in its more literal meaning as a defined region or location, rose to greater prominence in the late eighties and early nineties. There were also more concrete influences, such as shifts within academia—namely a movement towards more hybridized areas of study that sought to include geography in the context of more traditional fields (economic geography, geopolitics, urban geography, environmental history), and the rise of cultural theory (multiculturalism, feminism, queer theory) that questioned the supposed impartiality and authority of established modernist narratives. The result was that space and place became also aligned with modern/postmodern debates. Space, because it was conceptually associated with Cartesian ways of thinking—the essentialized individual as central director of his surroundings—was linked to

old-guard modernism, and place, which was concrete, hybrid, changing, and also yielded itself more conveniently to direct autobiographical experience, became linked to new postmodernism. In response to the suspicion (or outright hostility) towards old-guard modernism, specialized and individualized approaches to and integration of geography became in vogue during the eighties and nineties. This type of scholarship tolerated a more subjective lens and tended to be grounded in studies on the character of specific urban areas that the author has experienced personally.

The reassertion of place and attentiveness to regionalism affected many schools of thought, but it was noticeable specifically in scholarship by white men. That is not to say it was absent from scholarship by those who were *not* white men—feminists, such as bell hooks, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Minh-Ha Trinh offered focused sociogeographical analyses based on first-person narratives, for example—but it was somehow conspicuous in the writings of white male academics.[4] That may have been in part because the criticism was already primed; however, in today's hindsight, the privileging of place during the 1990s does seem to reflect a defensive response to the association of space and place along the two poles of modernism and postmodernism and a preemptive claim to legitimacy within the new postmodern values. Thus, within some of the grand definitive tomes of postmodernism, such as Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism* (1990), Jean Baudrillard's *America* (1988) and *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), and David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), is an insistence upon individuated spatial experience. Jameson's book contains his famed critique of Downtown L.A.'s Bonaventure Hotel; Baudrillard famously chronicles himself a Frenchman on the freeways and at

[4] See: bell hooks, *Yearning,* (Boston: South End Press, 1990); Minnie Bruce Pratt, "Identity: skin blood heart," in *Yours in Struggle: three feminist perspectives on anti-Semitism and racism,* Elly Burkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Barbara Smith, eds., (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1984): 10-63; and Minh-Ha Trinh, "Cotton and iron," in *Out There: marginalization and contemporary culture*, Russell Ferguson et. al., eds., (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990): 327-335.

Disneyland; and Harvey, already a geographer unlike Jameson and Baudrillard, not only insists upon conceptualizing social geography into all-encompassing theoretical logic, but argued that socio-spatial phenomena is exclusively reducible to class inequity under capitalism. He thus proposes postcapitalist class struggle as a 'universal' that overrides all other cultural struggles, including race, gender, and sexuality—essentially seeking to promote his definition as universal over shared theoretical multiplicity.[5]

THE POSTMODERN METROPOLIS: THEORIZING LOS ANGELES AND THE 'L.A. SCHOOL'

It is not by accident that Jameson and Baudrillard devoted significant attention to Los Angeles. The new postmodern geography also became mixed with sociological and critical theory, and Los Angeles, with its complicated politics, diverse population, and sprawling concrete topography, enjoyed (or suffered) tremendous interest. Even today, L.A. remains the urban postmodern archetype, a characterization that began in the early nineties with the emergence of the so-called "L.A. School." The L.A. School was comprised of several high-profile geographers and historians, including Mike Davis, Michael Dear, and Edward Soja. Geographer Edward Soja is perhaps the most influential within academia, having written an essential text, *Postmodern Geographies*. Soja's objective with *Postmodern Geographies* was at once both simple and complicated. Its most straightforward goal was to reinsert space as a fundamental coordinate for social theory, to crusade for "a more flexible and balanced critical theory that re-entwines the making of history with the social production of space, with the

[5] This critical point is made by Doreen Massey in her essay, "Flexible Sexism." See: *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 212-248.

construction and configuration of human geographies."[6] Heavily influenced by Lefebvre, Soja examined the social-spatial connection and was particularly invested in Lefebvre's concept of a trialectic relationship between culture and space. His 1996 book, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined-Places*, continues this goal and discusses 'thirdspace' in the mode of Lefebvre's 'representational space' or reimagined space.

Soja's presence in this dissertation, at least in terms of direct references, is minimal, mostly because he was attempting to propose new methodologies for the field of geography and thus, his intended audience for both *Postmodern Geographies* and *Thirdspace* was comprised of geographers. His ideas are not directly applicable to my interpretations of Opie's works, and in fact, many of the ideas that I have applied to Opie's works come from feminists, including feminist geographers who were largely critical of Soja. Both Gillian Rose and Doreen Massey wrote feminist responses to Soja, accusing him of marginalizing feminism as a niche concern with his 'greater' agenda of exposing postcapitalism's effect on social geography.[7] Soja's inclusion of various cultural critics, including Mike Davis, bell hooks, Edward Said, and Gillian Rose herself, may have seemed progressive in 1989 and probably did derive from genuine respect and enthusiasm for their work; however, one cannot read Soja's citations and avoid the uneasy sense that the above-referenced writers were also included because they conveniently provide Soja with 'progressive' authority. It is difficult to read his discussion of bell hooks' essay "Choosing the Margin" in his 1996 book *Thirdspace*, which concludes with a personal

[6] Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 11.

[7] See: Gillian Rose, "Review of Edward Soja *Postmodern Geographies: the reassertion of space in critical social theory,*" in *Theory and Society* 21: 145-154 and Doreen Massey, "Flexible sexism," in *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 212-248.

anecdote about him and hooks breakfasting together and exchanging fond memories of a conference honoring 'Fred' Jameson, and not find the mention as a kind of academic tokenism—in addition to the fact that the need to absorb hooks into the elite academic echelon ignores the main argument in her work, which is a resistance to the essentializing and colonization of her identity.[8]

Indirectly, however, Soja's influence for my purposes is that he represents a particular moment in scholarship, a moment in which place became important enough to warrant as ambitious a text as *Postmodern Geographies*. Many of the problems of *Postmodern Geographies* can be attributed to its grandiosity, but it is also that same grandness of vision that established place as a necessary consideration within postmodern theory, pushing social geography beyond a niche interest and suggesting it was fundamental to the human condition. This awareness is deeply resonant with various shifts in our relationship to space that occurred in the last decades of the twentieth-century, including the space-time compression, globalization, and the rise of new virtual technologies. Soja also played a pivotal role in creating a relationship between Los Angeles and new developments in postmodern geography and social theory, being one of the main figures to insist upon the importance of Los Angeles:

> Los Angeles, in another paradoxical twist, has, more than any other place, become the paradigmatic window through which to see the last half of the twentieth century . . . perhaps more than any other place, Los Angeles is everywhere. It is global in the fullest sense of the word . . . Los Angeles has become an entrepot to the world, a true pivot of the four quarters, a congeries of east and west, north and south. And from every quarter's teeming shores have poured a pool of cultures so diverse that contemporary Los Angeles represents the world in connected urban

[8] The conversation is referenced in Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 104-105.

> microcosm, reproducing *in situ* the customary colours and confrontations of a hundred different homelands. Extraordinary heterogeneity can be exemplified endlessly in this fulsome urban landscape.[9]

This is a big claim, and one that illustrates the complications of Soja's other intent with *Postmodern Geographies*, which was ascribing himself the role of a pioneer in redefining how established Marxist theory could integrate with postmodern schools of thought. The trouble with that objective is perhaps best expressed in Soja's own preface: "The political challenge for the postmodern left, as I see it, demands first a recognition and cogent interpretation of the dramatic and often confusing fourth modernization of capitalism that is presently taking place. It is becoming increasingly clear that this profound restructuring cannot be practically and political understood only with the conventional tools and insights of modern Marxism or radical social science. This does not mean that these tools and insights need to be abandoned, as many formerly on the modern left have rushed to do."[10] While he his stated intent suggests integration, the statement itself alerts one to the author's discomfort with postmodernism's diversity and flexibility, an uneasiness that eventually betrays the fact that despite his claim to new 'postmodern' geographic thought, Soja was still entrenched in a rather myopic perspective and centrist argument: "It is the dominant view assumed to be universal, and that view is white, male, heterosexual, western."[11] Nevertheless, Soja's works are foundational and provide an important example as to how geography was developing as a discipline during the 1990s, and how the new ideation of postmodern geography became increasingly linked with L.A.

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[9] Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 221-223.

[10] Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 5.

[11] Doreen Massey, "Flexible sexism," in *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 225.

Also productive during the same time was Mike Davis, probably the most widely read of those in the L.A. School, having published 1990's seminal (and splashy) *City of Quartz* and 1998's *Ecology of Fear*. These books detail two types of Los Angeles' infrastructure: *City of Quartz* examines the city's man-made systems and its development as a postmodern police-state (according to Davis), and *Ecology of Fear* examines the city's ecological infrastructure. Davis' influence was strong and inspired many similar journalistic studies on Los Angeles, including James Howard Kunstler's scathing *The Geography of Nowhere* (1993, written to counter boosterist literature by authors such as Kevin Starr), Norman M. Klein's *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (1997), and Peter Schrag's *Paradise Lost* (1998). The titles alone betray the fact that Los Angeles during the 1990s was heavily characterized as a kind of postmodern dystopia. The city's history during that decade, which included the 1992 Rodney King Riots, the 1993 Malibu fires, the 1994 Northridge earthquake, and the OJ Simpson trial (1994-1995), did little to alter that perception. At the same time, it is somewhat fitting that Davis would inspire writing of a more journalistic bent because one of the criticisms of his work is that he himself writes according to bias and researches selectively, using information that supports his argument and dismissing what doesn't. Critic James Duncan observed that while Davis purports to champion the disenfranchised, he literally speaks for them, rather than offering interview quotations or direct references, establishing himself as a kind of modernist authority.[12] This failure to interact with the actual inhabitants of the city they claimed to study, this separateness from being 'boots on the ground,' was a common criticism of Dear and Soja as well, whose perspectives appeared abstracted from the everyday and whose writings

[12] James Duncan, "Me(trope)olis: Or Hayden White among the urbanists," in *Re-presenting the City: Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the 21st-century Metropolis*, Anthony D. King, ed. (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1996), 253-268.

betrayed a resistance to being pinned down, assuming instead a godly, or "universal and objective" eye from which to view L.A.'s panorama.

The prevalence of Davis' (and later, Dear's) narrative illustrates a kind of anxiety that became connected to place sometime around the 1990s. Wary of sprawl, suspicious, of population influx, and disparaging of corporate expansion, the criticism was directed at kitschy and commercial urbanism—the urbanism of Wal-Mart, of Disneylandesque shopping 'environments,' and suburban housing developments, much like Valencia, the subject of Opie's 1988 MFA thesis project, *Master Plan*. It is also significant that the L.A. School was never really a collective so much as a shared preoccupation among similarly-minded scholars living in Southern California, a fact which suggests the lived experience of Los Angeles and its strange topographies really is rarefied enough to produce a distinctive yet cohesive branch of scholarship. It remains an interesting and hugely influential moment within the tradition of studies on Los Angeles and Southern California.

L.A. Art

In some ways, art historical scholarship has paralleled other fields when it comes to the treatment of Los Angeles' cultural history. Earlier texts on L.A. history tend to be more survey-oriented, as a means of exposing histories that had been overlooked in traditional canons, which is not to say that they were not critical—indeed, such books are classics because they were not

only unique in their choice of subject, but innovative in their scholarship.[13] Within the last twenty or so years, studies on Los Angeles have engaged more multidisciplinary critical theory, an approach that is indebted to the legacy of the L.A. School, and offered multifaceted and comprehensive accounts on the city.[14] Art history and scholarship on L.A. art specifically has more or less followed in this development, with earlier works focusing on established West Coast movements, including the postwar period and art developing out of the Ferus Gallery and La Cienega arts district, L.A. Pop, the California light and space movement, and assemblage. More recent art historical scholarship has been more theoretically-oriented, following the developments in socio-historical fields, and one example of the beginnings of this direction is *American Quarterly* publishing an entire issue devoted to Los Angeles ("Los Angeles and the Future of Urban Culture") in 2004. Additional recent works that have covered Los Angeles' art scenes are Sarah Schrank's *Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles* (2009) and a number of the publications accompanying the 2011 city-wide exhibition *Pacific Standard Time*.[15] There has also been a surge of interest in L.A. art of the postwar period, and significant texts on the subject include Cecile Whiting's *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the*

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[13] Classic texts in this mode are Robert M. Fogelson's *The Fragmented Metropolis* (1967), Carey McWilliams' *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (1980), George B. Sanchez's *Becoming Mexican American* (1993), and Kevin Starr's *Inventing the Dream: California through the Progressive Era* (1985).

[14] A selection of these texts includes: Eric Avila, *Popular Culture and White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (2004); William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past* (2004); Greg Hise, *Magnetic Los Angeles: Planning the Twentieth Century Metropolis,* (1997), William Alexander McClung, *Landscapes of Desire: Anglo Mythologies of Los Angeles*, (2002).

[15] See: Paul Schimmel's *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981* and *Mex/LA: Mexican Modernisms in LA, 1930-85,* Mariana Botey et. al., eds., (2011) are two examples. The second major retrospective, *Catalog L.A.: Birth of an Art Capital 1955-1985*, was organized by Catherine Greiner at Centre Pompidou. The third, *Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000* includes post-1980s art, but in a survey of a hundred years, the coverage is understandably not comprehensive. Its accompanying catalogue, however, *Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000*, edited by Stephanie Barron, Ilene Fort, and Sheri Bernstein, is comprised of essays that supply more detailed examinations of the artists and periods.

1960s (2008); Alexandra Schwartz's *Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles* (2010), and Hunter Drohojowska-Philip's *Rebels in Paradise: The Los Angeles Art Scene and the 1960s* (2011).

While the literature on Los Angeles art is substantial and growing, there has not been a great deal of scholarly attention on art produced in L.A. during the 1990s, an interesting omission because Los Angeles as an art center was quite productive during the late-eighties through the nineties. The city was home to three important MFA programs: UCLA's Department of Art, Otis College of Art and Design, and California Institute for the Arts (CalArts), from which Opie received her Master's degree, and studied with faculty members like Douglas Crimp, Millie Wilson, and Allan Sekula. The art market was not only expanding into new neighborhoods such as Chinatown and Venice, but also actively supported many young graduates from local institutions. MOCA, the Pasadena Museum of Art, the Santa Monica Museum of Art, and Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE—a non-profit gallery), sponsored shows and events that helped establish the careers of many young LA-based artists, including Opie, Dave Muller, Laura Owens, and Sam Durant. The Long Beach Museum of Art (LBMA) had a well-established video production editing facility for artists, as well as an artist-in-residency program, and nurtured ties with local media outlets to promote video art.[16] Dave Hickey's *Art Issues* magazine was also published out of Los Angeles from 1989 to 2001. Thus, behind the dark rhetoric and an even darker historical decade for Los Angeles, the L.A. art world was growing, using some of the monetary proceeds and the cultural attention to support a new West Coast generation of artists.

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[16] This is, it must be mentioned, only a sampling of establishments within the wealthy, predominately white cultural establishment, to say nothing of the many institutions that developed for the purpose of supporting non-white arts and culture. A sampling of such institutions includes: the Chinese American Museum (CAM, which did not open until 2003, but had begun fundraising in 1984), Japanese American National Museum (JANM), the Museum of Latin American Art (MoLAA), Plaza del Raya, Self-Help Graphics, and Skirball Cultural Center.

It is interesting to examine Opie's photographs produced during this time with the awareness of the type of education she had just received and the type of market she was entering. The relevance of Los Angeles and Opie's regionalism is mentioned in much of the literature on her, and Opie herself has referred to the differences between her upbringing in rural Ohio versus her adult life in California, as well as the differences between her experiences as a college student in San Francisco and as a graduate student in the L.A. suburb of Valencia. She speaks highly of CalArts, but has hinted that San Francisco offered greater freedom, political solidarity, and a larger sense of community than Los Angeles—in Los Angeles, Opie indicates that she felt comfortable within the "radical little bubble" of CalArts, but estranged from the markedly conservative suburbs that surrounded it:

> And for me it was so interesting because I went from this San Francisco leather community to CalArts. Even though there was a queer presence at CalArts, it wasn't the same as the radical community that I had just left. And then I started photographing suburbia. Everybody kept saying, 'Well, why aren't you making queer work?' and I kept saying, 'this is queer work.' You have to make work about the norm to understand the notion of the norm and to begin to create a critical analysis of it. And it was the perfect place for me to try to reposition myself as a documentary photographer and a street photographer. It allowed me to shift the work towards a wider read than what I was doing before. Just photographing people doing S/M in their houses wasn't enough for me. It wasn't interesting enough. It was just showing something without creating dialogue.[17]

Much of Opie's work comes from this desire to understand difference in the context of community, and how to engage with one's own uniqueness within the character of a place, a quality that Yi-Fu Tuan cogently argues is both desired and avoided.[18]

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[17] Catherine Opie, qtd. in *Between Artists: Andrea Bowers Catherine Opie*, 30, 31-32.

[18] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Escapism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 82-83.

The character of Los Angeles, including the way in which the city has been (and still is) discussed within academia is significant to Opie's work, and is considered throughout each chapter of this dissertation. The intent of including this critical foundation is threefold: one objective is to situate Opie's work within the tradition of art produced in and around Los Angeles, the second is to discuss how regionalism affects artistic development, and the third is to address the question, why Los Angeles and how Los Angeles, in reality as well as in myth, enables a particular awareness to spatial identity. Although the majority of my analyses in this dissertation is object-based before it is theme or theory-based, a central premise is that L.A. is important, both in its physical form as a city of dispersion, and in its theoretical form as a city representing postmodernity—in essence, that Opie's distinctive approach to landscape probably could not come out of any other place *but* Los Angeles. The landscape series discussed in this dissertation record experiences of the city that are both literal, as in physically traversing its locations and forming a psychological interpretation while doing so, and theoretical in that they also stem from her awareness as a member of academia (Opie graduated from CalArts in 1988 and subsequently worked as a lab technician at UC Irvine from1989 to 1994) of developing postmodern scholarship. This is not to argue that Opie is a student specifically of humanist geography or social theory, but simply that these modes of inquiry were prevalent at the time that she entered the art scene, and that Los Angeles played a special role as a sort of physical manifestation of the issues relevant to those fields. It was, "the quintessential postmodern and globalized megalopolis, and considering the institutionalized mechanisms of its visuality, contributes to an understanding of visuality in an era of globalization."[19]

[19] Darnell M. Hunt, "Los Angeles as Visual World: Media, Seeing and the City," in *Visual Worlds*, John R. Hall, Black Stimson, and Lisa Tamiris Becker, eds. (London: Routledge, 2005), 139.

CENTER AND PERIPHERY

This dissertation embraces a multidisciplinary approach to Opie's work and uses a diverse and eclectic selection of theories, some of which I have outlined above, in the hopes of clarifying the relationship between place and identity and illustrating why such a question holds unique interest today, in contemporary art and culture. The main bodies of scholarship that it draws upon are humanist geographies; postmodern cultural theory, primarily feminism; studies of twentieth-century Los Angeles history (including its modern, contemporary, and public art, its architecture, its transportation history, class struggle, and the L.A. School); the critical theories pertaining to photography; and finally, more generalized areas in history such as suburban and environmental history. My intent is to synchronize these resources in a responsible manner, such that I may provide a richer understanding of Catherine Opie's landscapes and more importantly, the way her vision implicates the decreased awareness of space in today's world as a sign of unfortunate political apathy, an illiteracy that has the potential to damage communal identity and encourage social estrangement.

The first chapter, "Politics on the Road: Catherine Opie's *Freeways*," examines Opie's *Freeways* series in the context of automobility, transportation history, and the philosophical relationship between speed, image, and vision as theorized by Paul Virilio. Consisting of over thirty photographs that are the same size and identically toned, *Freeways* is one of the largest and consistent of all Opie's series, and has thereby engendered sufficient response. Most commentators view the series squarely and exclusively within a loose interpretation of Los Angeles' role as an exemplar of the postmodern city, or a city of hub-and-spoke topographic dispersion, but few have taken into account that the role of the freeway in Los Angeles' history in terms of cultural reception has changed drastically from decade to decade and has never been

consistent or straightforward. The same urban feature is also ascribed polarizing cultural values, as it has been theorized as a mode of transgression as well as an instrument of control. In addition, the experience of driving itself is never discussed in relation to the images, or what it means to *stop* driving either, as Opie's presence on the side of the road as the photographer is obvious as well. In accordance to these observations, "Politics on the Road" attempts to supply a solid historical and philosophical framework for the intentionally labor-intensive and romantic aesthetic of Opie's *Freeways.*

The point of supplying this background is to argue that the images' somber banality is intentional and necessary in order to activate what Martin Heidegger refers to as 'ontological indifference,' or to beget introspection, and then active participation, by concentrating on the mundane. It argues that the sense of stillness and death, often recognized in the series as "apocalyptic," is a means of calling attention to assumptions regarding time and space as well, namely that it disturbs the viewer's articulation of space and time. The photographs are of familiar locations that the viewer realizes no one is actually familiar with, and the deserted roadways suggest viewing the present as if it has already passed. These disjunctions lend themselves to a way of re-envisioning and reconceiving vision itself, or the way in which one visually inhabits—passes through—the world. If, as Yi-Fu Tuan argues, landscape supplies us with the necessary distance to envision our surroundings (in every sense of the word) that we are unable to see as inhabitants of it in daily life, then Opie's *Freeways* is the distancing of the self from environment in a political practice.[20]

Chapter two, "Postmodern Piazza: *Mini-malls*" analyzes Opie's images of L.A.-area strip

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[20] Tuan, *Escapism*,110.

malls in the context of postmodern and architectural theory, engaging the debates between the democratic positivism expressed by Reyner Banham and the respondent criticism levied by Kenneth Frampton. It also discusses Opie's photographs in the context with ongoing debates regarding civic community and the usage of public and private space. The main contention here is that while strip-malls are often regarded as dehumanizing and homogenizing forces conspiring against urban community, a perspective that appears in harmony with the emptiness or literal lack of community of Opie's *Mini-malls* photographs, they also represent democratic commerce that is made possible by flexible architecture. The resulting ambiguity is also informed by the disagreements within postmodern theory in general and its social affects, demonstrating the limits of social Marxism. The same ambiguity complicates the traditional interpretation of *Mini-malls* as summarily critical of Los Angeles' strip-mall oriented culture.

"Postmodern Piazza" also endeavors to place *Mini-malls* in historical context with their precedent in the work of the *New Topographics* photographers of the 1970s, an homage that Opie has referenced herself in lectures and interviews.[21] Characterized as objective and documentarian, *New Topographics* photography captured the unique and specifically American development of the suburban commercial landscape. Its practitioners, including Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Frank Gohlke, and Stephen Shore, shot parking lots, corporate campuses, and housing developments, similarly depopulated and sharing the same deadpan attitude as Opie's *Mini-malls*. Similarities have been noted in the literature on Opie, but the natural question of why she chose to revisit the same subject matter and style as had been done twenty years prior to

[21] Catherine Opie, in an interview with Edward Robinson. See: "Catherine Opie on *New Topographics*," YouTube video, 4:57, posted by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, December 11, 2009, http://lacma.wordpress.com/2009/12/11/tour-new-topographics-with-catherine-opie/.

her own images has gone uninvestigated. “Postmodern Piazza” argues that while far from being celebratory, Opie’s images respond to the fears inherent in the *New Topographics* works at the dawn of the age of the strip-mall—that social life would disappear, that American culture would become standardized, that human connectivity would be perfunctory and commercial rather than meaningful—with images of the reality after the fact. The images admit a loss of public engagement, but they also calmly suggest that society has not ended; all is not lost, because there are the indications of eclecticism and the promise of activity throughout each image. *Mini-malls* are assuredly not a resounding applause of the new postmodern city, but the images do objectively present the reality of the postmodern world as diverse and pluralistic in spirit. In their images of a real city, a city in which shared space involves taco stands, signs in Korean, and 99-cent stores, Opie’s *Mini-malls* suggest that perhaps the postmodern environs are most apocryphal only if one is unsettled by such eclecticism.

The third chapter of this dissertation, “Lost Domestic,” discusses Opie’s treatment of residential space over a period of roughly fifteen years, beginning with her MFA thesis project *Master Plan* (1988-9), continuing with her series *Houses* (1995-6), and concluding with *In and Around Home* (2004-5). It suggests that *Master Plan*, a series that has not received as much attention as her other works, establishes foundational themes that influence Opie’s later pieces. *Master Plan* is an ambitious photo-documentary of a housing development called Valencia on the outskirts of Los Angeles. The project is unique among Opie’s works because of the variety of photographic forms used in the series, including portraits, interiors, exteriors, panoramic landscapes, and photocollages, as well as its scope (over 200 images) and approach, as it is one of the only series that has a sense of narrative and progression, leading viewers visually from the approaching roads, to the suburban streets, and finally into the very living rooms of private

homes. “Lost Domestic” discusses how *Master Plan* represents Opie’s inner conflict as a lesbian woman, therefore excluded from the domestic ideal, who is both derisively glad to be excluded from the sanitized Valencia suburbs represented in her photographs, at the same time she covets suburbia’s security and stability. The chapter analyzes how Opie’s critique of suburbia shares in the narrative of postwar and contemporary American domesticity as studied in suburban history, and argues that far from being the common subject of pop-culture ridicule, the American suburb is much more contested terrain. Suburban history and residential sprawl has been a more recent examination in the fields of history and geography; this chapter is indebted in particular to the scholarship of Dolores Hayden and Becky Nicolaides.

“Lost Domestic” also intends to illustrate how *Master Plan* sets up the relationship between identity and place that will become the pervading theme of Opie’s works produced in the next twenty years. The argument that *Master Plan*’s presentation of Valencia is conflicted and not completely disdainful because it prevents Opie from marginalizing herself as the “Other” to Valencia’s “normal,” a dialectic that, as many feminists have argued, only serves those in power. Instead, Opie’s goal appears to be a kind of pluralism in which different facets of herself, Opie the S/M leather persona as well as Opie the soccer mom, can comfortably coexist. This understanding is key to investigating how her works of the 1990s, divided into empty landscapes and provocative portraits, relate to one-another. This is the focus of the final chapter, “People Without Place and Places Without People,” which offers a culminating analysis of the connection between identity and place and of why place occupies such a significant role in the contemporary cultural understanding of selfhood.

“People Without Place and Places Without People” departs from the previous three chapters in that it is the only installment that engages with Opie’s portraits as well as her

landscapes. The focus is biased to her portrait series *Being and Having* (1991), *Portraits* (1993-1997), and *Self-Portraits: Cutting, Pervert,* and *Nursing* (1993-2004). Although the chapter includes formal analysis of these works, its purpose is to always privilege space and place at the center of the discussion—and optimistically suggests new ways of interpreting photographs that already have a breadth of critical response from the art historical community. To this end, the chapter places analytical emphasis on the backgrounds of the portraits and the relationship of the body in space, rather than on the sitters themselves. This is a somewhat unorthodox way of viewing the portraits, but one that aims to reveal how the conspicuous lack of spatial context in Opie's portraits corresponds to the conspicuous lack of people to inhabit her landscapes. The disjuncture between the two is an indication of Opie's desire to suggest the mutual construction and reliance between place and identity, a realization that she reveals by severing their presupposed link.

"People Without Place and Places Without People" employs a variety of highly theoretical arguments, relying most on the insights supplied by Henri Lefebvre's *Production of Space*. There are several key points from Lefebvre's book that will be applied in this chapter. One is his assertion that space is socially constructed, just as culture is spatially constructed, and that identity is a shifting negotiation of the self as conceived in the context of space. As a result, if space and place become abstract, so to does one's sense of self. Another is his explanation of how the abstraction of space into an exclusively visual and intellectualized concept alienates one from her own body and sensuality. The abstraction of space occurs through several ways, but one objective in the postcapitalist era is to sublimate sexuality into particular spatial orders. The distance between suburbs and urban cores not only separate private from public spheres, but also regulate sexual reproduction and segregate the resulting family unit. This is, of course, an

exclusively heterosexual arrangement. Opie's photographs, whether landscapes or portraits, consistently suggest a sense of dis-ease, a condition that arises because her identity is somewhat designated as a sphere of difference on the grounds of her sexuality. In other words, in embodying two shades of 'othering' as a gay woman, Opie is uniquely predisposed to recognize these covert spatial systems and how they organize social relations and culture. This designation is supported in this chapter through inclusion of writers who have studied the effect of geography on cultural disenfranchisement, namely Doreen Massey and bell hooks. The search for home, as well as the search for community in Opie's work, is a haunting response to her constant state of displacement.

The displaced perspective is a personal one that pervades much of Opie's work, and yet her photographs are more broadly political than the sexual identity politics that emerge from her biography. The search for community is sometimes conceived of, narrowly, as a specifically 'gay' problem, the sort of idea bound up with LGBT political buzz phrases like 'marriage equality.' It is in Opie's landscapes that a more expansive plea for community emerges, as her landscapes, which are neither specifically sexual nor particular to Opie herself (although her presence as the artist is often felt when viewing them), help viewers to realize displacement and alienation as a shared condition of contemporary urbanism. The serial format and formality of Opie's series produced during the 1990s provoke this realization in viewers through formal means. The look of Opie's photographs and their arrangement into series correlates to construction and objectivity in contemporary photography as argued by Rosalind Krauss. One proposal in this chapter is that Opie's mechanical use of the camera reinterprets the usual way of viewing photography overall. As Krauss argued, the relationship between the photograph and its subject (or referent) is complex, despite the fact that it presents an identical copy of its subject.

Opie's engagement with this system of copying, captioning, and repetition through her photographic series exploits the difficult relationship between truth and construction in photography to parallel similar realizations as to the assumption of space as neutral and passive. The goal with her landscapes is to highlight a sense of estrangement within the familiar and banal, an objective that is accomplished through exploiting the unsettled relationship between documentation and interpretation in photography as discussed in Krauss' 1977 classic essay, *Notes on the Index*.

This dissertation is ultimately an investigation of regionalism and the importance of examining art within a regionalist context. The argument, that artists interact with their communities and are thus affected by their immediate surroundings, is nothing new, but while the call to regionalism presents justifiable reasons to investigate the concrete conditions of time and place—isolated events, influential people, noteworthy locations and gathering spaces—and their effects on individual artists, the experience of place is perhaps more potent on a personal, psychological level than such empirical data reveals. Opie's work addresses regionalism on these immaterial and conceptual grounds. The philosophical role of space and place in Catherine Opie's work is fundamental, and considerations of space and place are half of a productive dialogue between her landscapes and her portraits. Whereas the tendency has been to assume that Opie's work represents her biography with the objective of documenting the personal difficulties of negotiating her gay identity within contemporary American culture, this dissertation proposes instead that Opie's series of the 1990s supply a prescient visual that encompasses universal cultural anxieties taking place at the turn of the millennium and trace back to psychic estrangement from spatial context. Her work therefore enacts Yi-Fu Tuan's insight that space and place is subject to the experience of each individual and its effects cannot be completely

understood or shared between inhabitants, but also that space and place contribute to the formation of selfhood in general, and its mutual influence on personhood is simply part of the human condition. Opie's work reconstitutes viewers' awareness to space and place, in turn revealing that the more estranged we are from place, the less we understand both others and ourselves. The focus on 'community,' so often invoked by Opie in interviews, in either its presence or its absence in her photographs, is a plea for social connection, but one that requires a revolutionary realization of space and place.

Chapter 1

Politics on the Road: Catherine Opie's *Freeways*

INTRODUCTION: ON THE ROAD

Freeways is Catherine Opie's series of 45 platinum prints documenting Los Angeles-area highways, shot over a period of two years from 1993-1995. The individual photographs are small, roughly 2x6 inches, and employ a horizontal-panoramic layout. When displayed *en masse,* they span the gallery walls in identical 9x13-inch frames with wide white matting. They are strangely haunting images and highlight a symbolic tension of freeways as either hallmarks of technological advance and urban progress, or harbingers of apocalyptic desolation. This tension often appears in a single image through the interplay of an overpass' awe-inspiring sweep and scale with its equally-tenable barrenness. But it is also the story of the series as a whole, as Opie's approach to her subject embraces both the narrative to abstract. Narrative, readable images, such as *Untitled #40, 1994* (1994) and *Untitled #17, 1995* (1995)*,* which are contextualized panoramas of the 110 and 105 interchange and onramp construction respectively, recall the idea of archeological artifacts and remnants of a lost civilization. Abstract images such as *Untitled #7, 1994* (1994), emphasize a formal awareness of the interplay of light and shadow, linearity, and rhythmic repetition, calling the viewer's attention to the beauty of the structures.

The series was a departure in seemingly every way from Opie's previous work. She was primarily known as a portraitist working with issues of sexual identity and gender transgression—colorful characters on colorful display. Everything Opie had shot before *Freeways* was large-scale (photographs comprising *Being and Having* (1991) are 2x3 feet; those comprising *Portraits* are 3x6 feet) and utilized bright, exuberant Technicolor backgrounds:

golden-yellow for *Being and Having* and a rainbow of Crayola brights for *Portraits*. Opie also had primarily used digital photographic processes, which lent a crispness of detail in her final prints. *Freeways,* by contrast, was small-scale, black and white, and had the telltale velvety softness of old-style, labor-intensive platinum printing. Thus, Opie's *Portraits* appeared very current, while *Freeways* suggested antique.

Moreover, *Freeways* also seemed to take a step back from the socio-political activism that admirers had begun to associate with Opie. The artist who had once shot transgendered characters with names like *Divinity Fudge,* as well as herself topless in sado-masochistic costuming, the word "pervert" bleeding across her chest, had moved on to…empty roads? Joshua Decter, writing for *ArtForum* in 1996, described the *Freeway* series as "a metaphorical essay about the nexus of Los Angeles car culture . . . [Opie] would secretly like us to think or fantasize about the sorts of alternately 'transgressive' and 'conventional' social activities that may have occurred there . . .",[22] as if the images of forlorn highways were complimentary backdrops for the subjects of *Portraits*.

Yet, there was something politically compelling about *Freeways*, despite their relative quietness in comparison to Opie's previous work, and politics offered a strong analytical framework for interpreting the imagery. As far as the critics were concerned, Opie was no longer producing specifically "queer" work—although she herself had dubbed, and continues to proclaim all of her work as "queer"—but she was producing work that fell in line with liberal, Left-leaning politics that was assumed to be the umbrella for 1990s queer identity politics. The result was an interpretive strategy that aligned *Freeways* with the turbulent "race wars" of the

[22] Joshua Decter, "Catherine Opie," *Artforum,* September 1996, 110.

1990s. Los Angeles in particular enjoyed (or suffered, depending on one's point of view) an onslaught of scholarship regarding its social geography, and Opie's pictures depicting the city's landscape fell right within the academic milieu. Thus, there was a kind of literalism in the response to the series.

In a 1997 interview to coincide with Opie's Citibank Emerging Artist show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, curator Colette Dartnall discussed *Freeways* within the context of segregation and described the images as "about communities and the separation which exists between communities. The freeway is a straightaway which connects certain districts while also segregating them. It allows its passengers to go from point A to point B without having to interact with other environments, thereby almost imposing divisions between communities."[23] Dartnall's analysis is timely, given the trends in the general scholarship on Los Angeles, but it is still also reasonable. Los Angeles' freeways do contribute to civic fragmentation and moreover, are living symbols of the influence of racism and classism on urban planning: "highway engineers were particularly interested in locations for their freeways that either took away park land (where rights were cheaper and easier to acquire) or forced dislocation of residents in low income neighborhoods, since, it was assumed, both the cost of displacement and the level of opposition were more manageable."[24]

The inequities of urban development and fights over the organization of transportation networks are nothing new, particularly for those living in Los Angeles, but these issues were

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[23] Colette Dartnall, "Interview With Catherine Opie, July 11, 1997," in *Catherine Opie*, ed. Stephanie Emerson, Gardena, CA: Lithographix, Inc., 1997, unpaginated. Published in conjunction with the exhibition "Catherine Opie" shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

[24] David Brodsly, *LA Freeway: An Appreciative Essay* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 195.

increasingly the focus of public debate during the 1990s. Some of it can be attributed to the push to finish various transportation systems that had been planned thirty years before in the 1960s and fallen out of favor in the 1970s and 1980s, only to be resurrected again in the 1990s as a means of alleviating traffic. The Los Angeles underground Metro system was one example (which had gone into construction through Downtown, Hollywood, and the Long Beach corridor in the early nineties and was tellingly repeatedly blocked from continuing into Santa Monica and Beverly Hills); another was the completion of the 105 freeway. The 105 would provide an east-west corridor from the 605 freeway on the southeast side of the city to Los Angeles International Airport on the westside, in order to ease traffic on the 10 freeway, which runs parallel a few miles north, from Downtown to Pacific Coast Highway. The 105 also cut straight through South Central Los Angeles, and thus, straight through many neighborhoods that happened to be historically black.[25]

Thus, analyses of *Freeways,* such as Dartnall's, offer an important connection between Opie's work and the cultural and political environment of 1990s Los Angeles, correlating specific events to the concepts behind the images. Opie, however, tenuously withdraws from this kind of correlation. She is candid regarding her residency in Los Angeles and city's influence on her work, but she likes to frame discussion about her series in broader terms (she does the same for her "queer" work as well). Political commentary legitimates and grounds the series; too much of it confines her as a niche "LA artist." In response to Dartnall, Opie resisted the regionalist references and expanded the dialogue beyond specificity of place: "I agree, the freeways separate communities, but I would say that the biggest thing they do is separate the city from the suburb.

[25] Brodsly, 195.

They change the way people look at the city and the way master-planned communities have been built, popping up on the city's outskirts."[26] When lecturing on the series herself, Opie does not discuss politics at all, but instead focuses on the phenomenological experience of driving from Irvine to West Los Angeles on early weekday mornings. She also cites the influence of photographers such as Maxime Du Camp and August Sander—both tactics broaden the series' scope beyond the particular place and time of its creation and its subject.

It is therefore difficult to define what role Los Angeles plays in *Freeways*. The roads and their surroundings might be recognizable to city residents, but knowledge of Los Angeles is not necessary for meaningful viewership of the series, nor is it the point. In addition, the series also deliberately defies a temporal designation. If anything, it suggests the *end* of time or stillness after the apocalypse—a situation which would more or less demand that the viewer imagine themselves standing in the future and viewing their present as a distant past. *Freeways* privileges these inconsistencies between specificity and vagueness, and reality and fantasy. As a result, the images are uncanny: landscapes, but not of any particular location; calming yet disturbing; depictions of arguably the most mundane and familiar of all features of the urban landscape, captured in a way that those same features are never seen or experienced. *Freeways* comprises a documentary record of real places at specific moments in time, while it simultaneously abstracts, decontextualizes, and disorients those places and those moments in time. Given this, the focus on Los Angeles and its social geography in previous criticism of series offers too narrow an explanation. This is not to say that such criticism is incorrect, as it does supply the necessary concrete historical context; it is to argue that such criticism it is insufficient because it has failed

[26] Opie, qtd. in Dartnall, n.p.

to account for the series' ambiguity. In its pursuit to extract the series' symbolic narrative and to provide a one-to-one ratio between the subject-matter and events surrounding its production, the criticism has ignored the expressive qualities of the series.

This chapter thus uses a theoretical approach to examine the *Freeways* series with the intent of supplying a more comprehensive explanation of the conceptual framework behind Opie's choice of subject—the highway—and her aesthetic choices in its portrayal. My approach is twofold. First, I analyze the ways in which *Freeways* encapsulates the diminishing connection contemporary culture has to place and the progressive erosion of physical presence. "Presence," in this context, refers to not only physical location, but also to temporal awareness. It therefore invites Paul Virilio's concept of "glocalization," or the process by which space becomes progressively unreal and alienated from daily life through the increased importance of speed. Virilio writes, "we live in a world no longer based on geographical expanse but on a temporal distance constantly being decreased by our transportation, transmission and tele-action capacities."[27] A highway is a physical manifestation of this process in that it allows for the traverse of land in which travelling becomes the experience of speed, rather than movement through space. A highway is also a transitionary emblem: it prefigures the complete shift of spatial experience to virtual reality via the development of the digital world. It represents both the future—as the emblem of rapid connectivity and the contemporary cult of speed—as well as the past, because as a physical structure, its materiality has become obsolete in the glow of the digital horizon. This chapter thus first supplies an interpretation of the expressive implications of Opie's *Freeway* series using Virilio's theses on speed and its influence on spatial awareness. I

[27] Paul Virilio, interview by Niels Brügger. In *Virilio Live: Selected Inverviews*. Edited by J. Armitage (London: Sage, 2001), 84.

will discuss this by providing an overview of Virilio's ideas, followed by an analysis of how those ideas are manifest in Opie's images.

The second section of this chapter then connects politics to theory. It proposes that Opie's *Freeways* is a visual meditation on the urban highway as an instrument of social control. Her images expose the highway system's complicity in the development of an ideology of liberal capitalism in which the individual driver is simultaneously both a free agent, directly in control of his or her immediate environment of the car's interior—from its sound to its temperature—at the same time he or she is anonymous, indistinguishable, corralled and controlled. One only needs to think of OJ Simpson trying to evade the police by speeding down the roads that could take him anywhere while offering no escape. A familiar argument is to articulate this condition as the individual versus the State, as has been done by many postmodern theorists, including Virilio. Although my argument is premised on such theories, I find the notion of "the State" too abstract and problematic because it suggests a conspiracy-like opposition between government and the individual. Opie's photographs implicate no one but the individual. It is therefore important to emphasize that the political overtones in Opie's work refer to "the State" as a situation of collective culture. As Hal Foster suggests:

> Is our mediatic world one of increased interaction, as benign as the cyberspace of a telephone call or a databank; or is it one of invasive discipline, each of us so many 'individuals' electronically tracked, genetically traced, not as a policy of any maleficent Big Brother, *but as a matter of quotidian course*? . . . Is it any wonder that this subject is often so dysfunctional? Is it any wonder that when it is able to function it often does so on automatic, given over to fetishistic responses, to partial recognitions syncopated with complete disavowals? (I know about AIDS, but I cannot get it; I know racists, but I am not one; I know what The New World Order is, but my paranoia embraces it anyway…)[28]

[28] Hal Foster, "Postmodern in Parallax," *October* (Vol. 63, Winter 1993): 19-20; my emphasis.

The connection between the individual's psychological alienation from physical place correlates to a compulsory withdrawal from politics. Writ large, this produces an erosion of active democracy. Thus when addressing politics in Opie's work—which are surely there—it stands to reason that the implications are more philosophically broad that the historical events of the 1990s. It is this disengagement from one's political environment and social reality that Opie invokes when she remarked, "…the most political thing about these [*Freeways*] photographs is that I've emptied them."[29]

As this chapter approaches politics from a theoretical perspective, it focuses on the political overtones of American car-culture. Specifically, it considers Opie's *Freeways* as a response to twentieth-century American individualist values as they were expressed through the cultural mythos of autotopia. The development of the highway system did not simply change American economic and social geography, it also altered an entire social definition and emotional psyche of what it meant to be a 20th-century individual living in America: the contemporary understanding of individual liberty as selective autonomy within universal governance.[30] In order to demonstrate this development, this chapter's discussion extends further back from the 1990s and examines how attitudes towards car-culture and urban development have changed since the 1960s, a decade marked by tremendous highway expansion.

California and Los Angeles present dramatic case-studies because freeway construction was especially prevalent. In 1966 alone, 341 miles were built throughout California—10% of all

[29] Opie, qtd. in Dartnall, n.p.

[30] Cotten Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 131.

freeways built nationally.[31] Los Angeles' love-affair with highways is more notorious than any other American city; so much so that architectural historian Reyner Banham famously dubbed the city's freeway superstructure an "ecology," alongside beaches, flatlands, and foothills, as though freeways were their own microcosmic cultural environment and part of the indigenous topography of the city. Whether condemned for converting coastal paradise into concrete jungle; admired for its scale and complexity; or puzzled over philosophically, the Los Angeles freeway system is fundamentally a living historical document, formed out of varying sociopolitical conditions, the very same that it in turn affects.[32] The highway was fundamental in forming an urban environment in which every part was accessible to all people at all times, while nevertheless preserving social alienation overall.

The photographs comprising *Freeways* encapsulate the emotional and psychological effects of the development of the highway—its influence on late 20th-century social geography. Within this context, the series also comments on the relationship of place, motion, and connectivity and their significance to the contemporary meaning of community. It is important to note one final nuance in this investigation, which is simply that the purpose of the series, or Opie's artistic intent with it, is not necessarily the same as its effects or influence. This chapter's argument is not premised on the claim that Opie specifically applied the theories discussed in this chapter to her artistic vision. The purpose for Opie was rather more personal: to record the phenomenological experience of driving on the urban highway. The significance of her presentation is its encapsulation of a new urban reality, a reality of spatial distance and

[31] Brodsly, 195.

[32] Brodsly, 52.

disconnection that continually asserts itself in rapidly changing the relationship between self and place.

Opie, Virilio, and The Human Dimension

Unlike Mike Davis and Edward Soja, or, to a lesser extent, Frederic Jameson, Paul Virilio is not a member of the 'LA School'—why turn to him over the many other space and place theorists, particularly those who have engaged specifically with the environs of Southern California? Among contemporary social geographers, Virilio is generally known for his particular interest in war and for an accompanying apocalyptic outlook on the future of space. His belief in the space-time compression corresponds to his belief that the demise of geography itself is already a foregone conclusion. In Virilio's writings, space will no longer matter in comparison to the supremacy of speed and time. The socio-political implication of this space-time compression is that class hierarchy is more and more influenced by *mobility*, rather than location. In other words, those who control the most economic resources (in Virilio's eyes, the military-state) are those who have the most flexibility of movement and can move the quickest. The compression terminates in a world of telepresence.

One reason is specifically because of Virilio's emphasis on speed and his investigation of the influence of speed on place. The notion of speed as a force that disengages the sensory understanding of space is particularly relevant to Opie's *Freeways* series. As discussed in greater depth later in this chapter, Opie's images express the changes in vision produced by the automobile and in turn, make the viewer aware of the divide between actual space and the car

transportation's construction of it. In addition, the premise underlying Virilio's arguments—that the importance and understanding of place is eroding in inverse relation to the increasing cultural value of speed—is a congruent articulation of the melancholic tone of Opie's photographs. Virilio argues that vehicular transportation is merely one step in the direction of complete telecommunication, the outdated relic of a naïve past optimism for independence through mobility: "The new space is speed-space; it is no longer a time-space . . . We live in a world no longer based on geographical expanse but on a temporal distance constantly being decreased by our transportation, transmission and tele-action capacities."[33] Opie's pictures represent the freeway as this transition from transport to transmission, mirroring Virilio's suggestion of the highway as a foregone moment.

More importantly, however, Virilio is ultimately the most concerned with the personal perception, bodily experience, and creative consciousness of space—all elements that align him more closely with humanist geographers like Yi-Fu Tuan, and the tradition of philosophical phenomenology. In particular, the loss of one's connection to space and place—or, in phenomenological terms, Martin Heidegger's "being-in-the-world"—is at the core of Virilio's perspective. Mourning such a loss produces his relatively dim view on technological progress. Virilio's humanism becomes particularly more pronounced when comparing his writings to those of Davis and Soja. Despite the fact that Davis and particularly Soja literally 'ground' their writings through personal experience of Los Angeles, their applications of theory to the city lack intimacy. Instead, they produce more distant surveys of the city, both of which have the voice of "the apparent authority of the overseeing, where many of us involved recognize neither our

[33] Virilio, *Virilio Live: Selected Interviews*, 56.

individual roles nor the play as the whole."[34] Although Virilio's writings do not involve any significant discussion of a specified city, they present "the city" as a concept, created and recreated through shifts in consciousness: space and place as psychic and emotional phenomena.

Virilio's humanist approach thus draws out a subtle distinction within Opie's *Freeways* between place as a common universe, and place as subject to the way in which one understands and interacts with it. The increasingly obvious revelation through this inquiry is the fact that place is in part a reflection of the self. A landscape is not simply the locus of our existence or the backdrop of where we accomplish day-to-day activities; it is the result of *how* we are existing. Although highways, as the subject of Opie's photographic series, can be analyzed as rhetorical icons for urban progress, geographical separation, and a host of other tangible realities, their function is also to provoke an awareness of our modes of living as a basis for those realities. It sounds like a relatively introspective goal; however, this exploration of subjecthood can form a solid basis to extrapolate politics, namely by asserting politics as a function of how one conducts his or herself independently in the world. Politics is not merely a situation that surrounds us, but rather a situation that we are complicit in actively creating. This enables Virilio's writings to be resolutely fatalistic without betraying acceptance. The technological supremacy of speed is presented as fact; nevertheless, the *argument* is against passivity: "The blindness of speed of means of communicating destruction is not a liberation from geopolitical servitude, but the

[34] James Duncan criticized Davis' *City of Quartz* for being a "show trial," constructed as a platform for Davis' personal politics, rather than the presentation of a more nuanced direct account. See James Duncan, "Me(trope)olis: Or Hayden White among the urbanists," in *Re-Presenting the City: Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the 21st-century Metropolis,* ed. Anthony J. King, (New York: New York University Press, 1996): 260-261. Soja has also been repeatedly criticized for proclaiming his rather, as Doreen Massey suggests in her critique of Soja's *Postmodern Geographies*. The quote is Massey's, from *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 217.

extermination of space as a field of freedom of political action. We only need refer to the necessary controls and constraints of the railway, airway or highway infrastructures to see the fatal impulse: the more speed increases, the faster freedom decreases."[35] Opie's pictures utilize a similarly objectifying approach that has the effect of stimulating attentiveness. Thus, political consciousness for both Virilio and Opie is not a matter of provoking a response to a statement or assertion, but rather in provoking an independent realization of one's situation, both within a given environment and outside of it.

Photography operates with a certain kind of tension between the "facts" (or objects) it represents and its failure or resistance for its "facts" to be neutral or universal—the real, but strangely without veracity. Despite the fact that the camera is a literal record of the world, "something directly stenciled off the real . . . a material vestige of its subject," as Susan Sontag put it, it is nevertheless mimetic, not genuine.[36] Rosalind Krauss articulated this aspect of photography as an index or "the mute presence of an uncoded event," such that "[t]ruth is understood as a matter of evidence, rather than a function of logic."[37] The photograph is a record of reality, but its relationship to that reality is more complex and tangential. "[t]hough they are produced by a physical cause, the trace, the impression, the clue, are vestiges of that cause which itself is no longer present in the given sign."[38] As an example, Krauss associates the photograph

[35] Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), 158.

[36] Susan Sontag, qtd. in Peter Geimer, "Image as Trace: Speculations about an Undead Paradigm," trans. Kata Gellen, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no 1 (2007): 7. Original: Susan Sontag, "The Image-World." *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 154.

[37] Rosalind E. Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 2," *October,* Vol. 4 (Autumn 1977): 59, 66.

[38] Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 2," 59, 65.

with the “trace,” such as in a footprint or death mask. In both cases, there is a disjuncture between the record and its antecedent: the record perfectly mimics its antecedent, yet the original bearer of the mark, a pedestrian’s foot or a corpse’s face in Krauss’ essay, is gone. Some critics have argued that Krauss’ concept and the importance of the trace no longer applies to contemporary photography, specifically in the computer age because digital manipulation makes a referent irrelevant.[39] Opie’s *Freeways* avoid this hurdle because their romanticized antique look—specifically the velvety matte texture and delicate subtleties in the tonal gradient—directly evidences the method of their production: labor-intensive platinum printing.

Platinum printing is a definitively contact print process, which demands that not only a film negative be pressed to a chemical emulsion (the creation of a trace), but also that the negative be the same size as the resulting print, minimizing the amount of size-manipulation in the developing process and reasserting the image as a literal imprint on a 1:1 ratio. Opie’s use of the platinum print process also deftly represents the fissure within Krauss’ trace between the realism of the image and the absence of its referent via its own permanence. Platinum prints are among the most stable art objects and can last for thousands of years, and, in part due to the high-cost of platinum as well as the expertise required in production, also coveted among photographers as a medium for rare and personal images. Thus, the photographs comprising *Freeways* are relics in themselves, beyond the urban relics they depict, emphasizing the co-existence of two realities in an elision of time, the world of the referent and the world of the photograph itself. In addition, the images’ intimate size, refined detail, and tonal elegance elude to the investiture of time, labor, and money that went into their making, and thereby enacts a

[39] Hans Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece*, trans. Helen Atkins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

subtle reminder of the difference between the photographic referent and its image through relative value. *Freeways* is photographs-cum-memorial: what does it mean to devote such reverence to the production and commemoration of an exceedingly ordinary feature of the urban landscape? How is the photograph's aesthetic sophistication reconciled with its prosaic subject? In viewing a photograph of the Yosemite wilderness by Ansel Adams, one may perhaps speculate on the beauty of nature as depicted, but is less likely to contemplate the value of the picture itself because the quality of the picture is congruent with the splendor of its subject. When the two are less compatible, as in Opie's series, one is more likely to become aware of their separateness, and in turn, of the photograph itself as having value independent of its referent. Thus, these understated formal elements of artistic production in Opie's *Freeways* exploit the photography's essential divergence between realism versus actuality.

The effect of this divergence, however, is subject to debate. Since the 1970s and with the influx of media culture, many critics have identified varying effects of Krauss' indexicality. Her notion of referentiality is somewhat nostalgic in the digital age, and the idea of the index is in a bit of a crisis because computer technology has severed—or at least compromised—photography from its heritage as a document of reality. The concerns of this destabilization extend to many elements of photography, from authorship to memory, but of particular relevance to this analysis is the condition of viewership, beyond what we are looking at to how we see. Virilio has written extensively on the influence of vision technology and its effect on the nature of vision:

> …we are directly or indirectly witnessing a co-production of sensible reality, in which direct and mediated perceptions merge into an instantaneous representation of space and the surrounding environment. The great divide—between the reality of temporal and spatial distances and the distancing of various video-graphic and info-graphic representations—has ended. The direct observation of visible phenomena gives way to a tele-observation in which the observer has no

> immediate contact with the observed reality . . . in that absence of any immediate perception of concrete reality produces a terrible imbalance between the sensible and the intelligible..."[40]

Virilio's anxiety is uncompromising: he ignores any potential of technology and focuses instead only on its negative (and as he sees it, inevitable) effects. His critics therefore accuse him of being a myopic and intolerant quasi-philosophical pundit.[41] However, such criticism fails to recognize that Virilio's interest is not so much to critique technology, but to challenge the modernist idealism dominating the notion of progress and to cite technology as a tool within such a paradigm. In other words, what is often understood as an indictment of technology itself is an argument against our absolute faith in it.

In the case of photography, Virilio remains cynical by virtue of the fact that the camera lens is an initial step on the continuum of vision technology, although that does not mean that he is anti-photography. For example, in *The Vision Machine*, Virilio makes a distinction between photographic art and what he calls "surveillance" photography:

> This solemn farewell to the man behind the camera, the complete evaporation of visual subjectivity into the ambient technical effect, a sort of permanent pancinema which, unbeknown to us, turns our most ordinary acts into movie action, into new visual material, undaunted, undifferentiated vision-fodder, is not so much, as we have seen, the *end of an art* . . . It is the absolute culmination of the inexorable march of progress of representational technologies, of their military, scientific and instrumentalisation over the centuries. With the interception of sight by the sighting device, a mechanism emerges that no longer has to do with simulation (as in the traditional arts) but with substitution. . . *The main aim of the new art is to register the waning of reality*: an aesthetic of

[40] Paul Virilio, *Lost Dimension* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1991), 30-31.

[41] See, for example, Jorge Otero-Pailos, "Living or Leaving the Techno-Apocalypse: Paul Virilio's Critique of Technology and Its Contribution to Architecture," in *Journal of Architectural Education (1984-)*, Vol. 54, no. 2 (Nov. 2000): 104-110.

> disappearance had arisen from the unprecedented limits imposed on subjective vision by the instrumental splitting of modes of perception and representation.[42]

For Virilio, any technology that compensates for bodily sensation is suspect; however, it must be emphasized that it is again, not the technology in and of itself that is the threat, nor its conscious deployment as Walter Benjamin would have advocated, but this particular effect. Visual media's greatest menace, according to Virilio, is its standardization, mechanization, and sanitization of vision. In this way, Virilio assumes late 20th-century cynicism in reaction to Benjamin's early 20th-century cautionary optimism regarding the use of film and media technology.[43]

A prevailing assumption today is that contemporary photography can combat the standardization of vision by virtue of the fact that it fractions reality into discreet still images to encourage a heightened contemplation regarding the subjects of the images—in short, photography pauses moments and makes us aware of things we might miss in life. This would be a common way of understanding much of West Coast postwar photography, like Joe Deal's suburban sprawl, Lewis Baltz's empty white-lined parking lots, and Ed Ruscha's *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*: all present banal landscapes in such a way that the viewer is encouraged to see them anew—to consider the possible political and social overtones, even the very nature of their supposed "banality." Art historian Aron Vinegar suggests that this technique enacts Heidegger's concept of "ontological indifference," or the state of grounding one's observation of the mundane world in order to beget introspection.[44] The viewer transitions from a straightforward

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[42] Paul Virilio, 'Candid Camera' from *The Vision Machine*, trans. Julie Rose (London and Bloomington: British Film Institute/Indiana University Press, 1994. Published in *The Virilio Reader*, ed. Steve Redhead (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 122, 125.

[43] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968): 217-252.

[44] Aron Vinegar, "Ed Ruscha, Heidegger, and Deadpan Photography," in *Photography After Conceptual Art,"* eds. Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen (West Sussex: 2010), 28-49.

receptor of objects in the world to an active participant within the world. In this sense, photography's indexicality works through the disjuncture between the presentation and the reality.

It is a technique that works for unsung, "invisible" places, but only insofar as considering the subject that is projected back to us, or literally, *what* we see. It is less successful in challenging *how* we see, our mode of vision itself. The freeway or the nature of highway transport makes this distinction explicit because in the case of car travel, what is the reality of place? Although one is moving through space and through neighborhood after neighborhood, the experience of it is cinematic—the road as a motion picture, unfolding within the frame of a windshield. But what's more is that it is not just that car travel desensitizes or estranges the driver from spatial experience; car travel activates the deception that one has experienced place. It is common in L.A., for example, to hear the refrain, "Oh yes, I know that neighborhood—I drive through there all the time!" The visual experience of the road from behind the driver's wheel mimics the illusion of a film screen, an illusion that severs motion from the domain of the physical body and supplants actual movement with the moving image. Opie's *Freeways* not only capitalize on photography's indexicality in making its subject, the urban highway, a discursive site, but they also represent Virilio's concept of the increasing standardized and virtual nature of vision.

STANDARD WORLD VERSUS STANDARD VISION

There must first be a distinction between the standardization of the world, and standardization of *vision*. *Freeways* has occasionally been associated with the style of the Becher

School, although Opie herself is not considered a member, an erroneous comparison that demonstrates the difference between standardization of the world and that of vision. Upon first glance, the photographs comprising Opie's *Freeways* seem to cite the Becher aesthetic: they are images of abandoned industry, they are a series and their size is uniform, they are black and white, and they have a similar documentary style and melancholic tone. However, there is one substantial difference in that the Bechers' work comprises a stricter visual taxonomy. Their subjects, factories, water towers, grain silos and other industrial structures, are always shot from the same angle and assume the same size within their respective frames. They are also often displayed in a grid format, which clarifies the impression that each single structure is a variation within a larger industrial "genus." Opie's photographs are the same size, but the images of the freeways are taken from different angles and emphasize different qualities, some abstract and some narrative: some showcase the size of the freeways, some their linearity and interchange of light and shadow, and others their interwoven intricacy. If displayed all together, the series forms a single row around the gallery, such that the effect in viewership is to view each picture independently and to experience the series as an unfolding meditation. Finally, one of the hallmarks of the Bechers' photography, and more so of their protégés, is their relative deadpan coolness. Although the Bechers' images have a hint of despondency that belies complete objectivity, their dispassionate style has continued in contemporary photography and is evident in Thomas Ruff's portraits, Thomas Struth's interiors, Ed Ruscha's books, and works by artists represented in the *New Topographics* show. Whereas deadpan conveys a dry and emotionless expression, *Freeways*, even in its presentation of silent, motionless, and de-populated images, has a definite romanticism that is both contemplative and melancholic in tone. Everything about the series formally heightens these subjective elements, from the supple shades created by

platinum print processing, to the small size of each image that necessitates an intimacy of viewership.

Deadpan photography tends to showcase standardization of the world—a kind of homogenization of its subject, particularly in the case of landscapes. The Bechers' work conveys a plethora of rich and varied ideas (the nostalgia of history, the betrayal of industry, the politics of postwar Germany—far too many to detail in this chapter), but these statements pertain to the world as observed. In a similar fashion, Ed Ruscha's pictures of gas stations call attention to the commercialized homogenization of the American West, while *New Topographics* photographers such as Robert Adams and Lewis Baltz created images that cited the stifling normalcy and standardization of the new American suburb. The deliberate indifference of deadpan photography provides for the realization that there has been a loss of sensuousness in the world, exuberance replaced by austerity and diversity slowly eclipsed by multiplicity. This is not to say that Opie's pictures do not share in these concepts because there is the same kind of conspicuous absence in her pictures; however, there is also a sense of appreciation as well, a kind of awe and delight in the highways' graceful curves and rhythmic interplay. Although *Freeways* is not specifically biographical, there is the sense that the photographs are nevertheless personal, like the visual commemoration of a private experience, versus a catalogue of observation. This subjective quality lends itself more to a standardization of vision—which is to say that although the subject itself is important, of equal importance to what the subject means culturally is the question of literally, how we see (or don't see) it. Whereas deadpan photography exaggerates the mechanized sameness of the world through the palatable indifference in its presentation, Opie's images of the empty freeways provoke a realization that vision itself has become systematized and synthetic by presenting the familiar in an unfamiliar way. It includes the notion of severing

roadways from their function by focusing on their aesthetic qualities, but moreover, to examine Opie's photographs is to be disoriented, to experience public space in a way that we never do, as a roadway without direction. By shifting our perspective—literally—Opie exposes the numbing monotony of how we visually understand a freeway, and as Virilio points out, such visual assumptions have dramatic political implications: visual ignorance lends itself to a loss of freedom.

Vision Politics

In order to take the *Freeways* photographs, Opie had to pull over onto the shoulder of L.A.-area highways. There she set up a panoramic-format view camera. This involved balancing the camera onto a tripod, positioning the bellows, composing and perfecting the shot on a ground glass image while standing underneath a dark cloth, exchanging the ground glass for the film holder, removing the darkslide, cocking and then releasing the shutter, exposing the film, and then finally replacing the darkslide. Needless to say, Opie's process was amazingly labor-intensive and therefore dramatically impractical considering the setting. Although the images do not require any knowledge of the specifics regarding the production of platinum prints, they at the very least clearly disclose where Opie had to stand in order to achieve the various compositions. But they are also so carefully composed, deliberate, and meticulously designed that it is also apparent to most viewers that *Freeways* is the result of a veritable roadside studio shoot. Although not as daring and exploitative as tagging the side of a mile-high bridge, the series' feat of production is also what makes the images compelling—not just because it is intriguing and entertaining to speculate as to the audacity of Opie's methods, but also because

the act of stepping out of one's car, of walking on a highway, and certainly of using a highway as scenic overlook, is not only unusual but a transgressive act in and of itself. The photographs proclaim the elaborate demands of their set-up in order to amplify the fact that their images are records of a political performance. There are two components of this political performance. The first is the indictment of vision and the awakening of a visual consciousness. In an ever-increasing media-saturated world, our conception of reality is progressively influenced by images; thus, how we see is implicit in informing what we understand. The second pertains to content and includes not only the political overtones as symbolized within the freeway as an icon, but also the realization of the freeway as an anesthetizing urban feature, one that not only permits social ignorance, but can also eerily construct an illusion of knowledge. I will first discuss the politics of vision.

The *Freeway* photographs are simultaneously narrative and abstract. One is aware of their subject, but also aware of their design. In terms of perspective, this appears as a subtle tension between the three-dimensional picture window and the two-dimensional picture plane, such that the images are spatially legible and yet disorienting. This is particularly apparent in an image like *Untitled #40, 1994* (1994), which is a close-up of overpasses, taken from underneath. Silhouetted against the sun, the parabolic shapes against a pale ground resemble the geometric abstract paintings of Ellsworth Kelly. It is also present, however, in a more typical landscape image like *Untitled #3, 1994* (1994), which depicts two overpasses converging at the very center of the composition, taken (presumably) from another raised highway running perpendicular to the converging roads; its pillar support is visible in the foreground. The image showcases a clear recession into space, and yet still has a touch of flatness. In part, this is achieved because the overall composition is stable, with the horizontal elements of the overpasses balanced by the

vertical lines of their supports. The two overpasses also converge in the center of the image, which also stabilizes the composition. Finally, the dominating black support in the foreground has the effect of anchoring the picture, for rather than swooping off into the distance with the lines of the overpasses, the foreground pier grounds the eye. The front column also contributes to the predominate feeling of stasis, minimizing the possibility that the recession created by the merging overpasses connote speed.

Then again, there is the uncanny sense that the roads do not so much recede into a central vanishing point, but rather converge and collapse at the center. This tension between three-dimensional perspective and the two dimensional surface is also helped by the support in the foreground. For one, the pillar doesn't so much foreground the picture as it nearly stops it entirely, like the vertical frame on a windowpane, separating itself from the scene and calling attention to the picture plane instead. In addition, the pillar has the effect of locating our position within the picture and making that position uncertain at the same time. Ostensibly, the photograph assumes the viewer is just in front of the pillar, somewhere along the road that curves off the picture-plane on the left side, but the angle of the image, which would be almost 180-degrees backwards from one's windshield if actually driving on the road, implies one is standing on the side of the road—not an impossibility, but a strange and unfamiliar idea. She employs a similar compositional technique in many other images within the series, including *Untitled #11, 1994* (1994)*, Untitled #40, 1995* (1995)*, Untitled #27, 1994,* and *Untitled #10, 1994* (both, 1994). Such images present a view that is more expansive and more extensive than the view of the road from the driver's seat. This is not because the camera affords a wider angle than the human eye (in fact, the human eye usually not only has a wider peripheral than most camera lenses, but it also provides more expansive vision because visual knowledge of space is a

conceptual compilation of the different perspectives captured by the eye in motion); rather, the image seems more expansive in comparison to how visually aware one is while on the freeway, or more expansive in comparison to the windshield. The windshield corrals vision and lulls it into hypnosis, offering a view that changes every second but nonetheless always looks the same, along with the promise of a destination, ever-receding into the distance that one can never reach, "the notion of displacement without destination in space and time."[45]

Consider the difference between *Untitled #3, 1994* (1994)*,* and Dennis Hopper's famed *Double Standard* (1961), a photograph taken through the windshield. Hopper's image depicts the twin "Standard" signs of a gas station at the intersection of Santa Monica Boulevard, Melrose Avenue, and Doheny Drive in West Hollywood, Los Angeles. Not only is the exact location of the intersection made evident by the sign for Melrose Avenue in the center of the opposite corner, but the exact location of the viewer is also explicit, as the photograph was clearly taken from the driver's seat out the front windshield. *Double Standard* is thereby place-specific in a way that Opie's images are not—*Freeways*, although not scenes of Everytown USA, are more place-neutral and their treatment of space is less structured than the *mise en scene* quality of *Double Standard*. Ironically, despite the liberated orientations of Opie's pictures, the images are formally structured and evidence careful planning, whereas Hopper's photograph is spontaneous. Opie's photographs use the visual language of American landscape painting and 19th-century pictorialist photography that signals something momentous and meaningful.[46] Hopper's image

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[45] Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 64.

[46] Opie's association with Du Camp appears in Nat Trotman's essay, "Freeways," in *Catherine Opie: American Photographer* (New York: Guggenhiem Museum Publications, 2008): 83. Published in conjunction with the exhibition, "Catherine Opie: American Photographer" shown at the Guggenheim Museum, New York. Opie's association with Hudson River School painting has been documented in numerous sources, among them in the artist's 2009 lecture at photo l.a.: Catherine Opie, (lecture, photo l.a., Santa Monica, CA, January 11, 2009).

has the casualness of a snapshot taken in the breath before the light changes. Whereas *Freeways* is presentational, *Double Standard* is documentary. The two works thereby also convey very different notions of time, Opie's images suggesting timelessness or being in the stillness outside of time, and Hopper's capturing a particular moment of the present.

Double Standard invokes the imaginative presence of the viewer as part of the scene, sitting behind the wheel. In shooting through the windshield, Hopper preserves the formal logic of the way one always sees the road, reflecting the familiar back to the viewer in order to expose its insufficiencies. The underlying argument of this construction is to highlight the separation of the viewer/driver from the communal sidewalk and, extent from that, from the sensory, lived experience of the city. The specificity of place and time as evident in *Double Standard* emphasizes the importance of presentness, the activation of an observational moment. *Double Standard*'s argues a wide spectrum of social commentary, mostly related to the creep of visual simulacra into the space of the city: there is the ironic juxtaposition of a fork in the road with the two "Standards," noting the illusion of choice when everything is the same; the notation of intense "visual clutter" in all the advertisements and signage; the notion of conspicuous consumption, both in the advertisements, and in the fact that the car itself must consume gas; the lack of community within urban density through the veritable emptiness in the roads ahead and the absence of people (save for the lone pedestrian, barely noticeable on the corner); and perhaps the faint suggestion of class inequity, with the right road leading towards the wealthier parts of town in the hills and the left leading east towards the flats (although one would probably have to know the topography of Los Angeles to understand such a reading). All of this is an indictment of the reduction of conscious sensory experience.

The windshield plays a prominent role in Hopper's photograph as a distancing feature, like a frame or proscenium. In *Double Standard* the windshield both separates the viewer/driver from the external world, as well as distorts the space. Despite the dramatic recessions of the two roads and the two sets of telephone wires, the space seems flat. This is in part because of the prominent signage and the disruptions in scale—a woman who is larger than a palm tree and lettering that dwarfs cars—but it is mostly the reflection in the mirror, the frame of the windshield, and the open sunroof that disorient the sense of space. Together, these three elements reproduce a series of screens, each one reasserting two-dimensionality over the roads' vanishing points. Although the car in the rearview mirror is obviously reflecting another car somewhere behind the picture plane, it instead appears like an image within an image. The sunroof both provides context for the viewer's orientation in the driver's seat, but it also frames a separate un-spatial dimension of the sky and its whiteness has the effect of bleeding out into the white photo-paper frame, like an intermediary between the space of the viewer and the space of the image. Lastly, there is the frame of the windshield itself, which is simultaneously both transparent and reflective, containing the entire vista while also faintly reflecting items below and off-frame—perhaps the driver's knee to the top left and the shiny window-roller at the right. The windshield is thereby revealed as both a veritable picture-window and a surface at the same time. All at once, there is a disturbance in vision contained within the conflict between the suggestion of a complete 360-degree view, as we can see above, ahead, below and behind, and the unrelenting flatness created by screen upon screen upon screen. The effect is to highlight the screen itself as the functional condition of a driver's vision, a statement as to the tremendous influx of visual information in contemporary society, which has nevertheless become fractured and incoherent.

The screen is a distancing feature, one that provides a view of nearly everything everywhere, but flattens everything out at the same time to a virtual, rather than actual, presence.

Freeways also employs a similar compression of space, constantly subverting the highway structure's recession into the distance with emphasis on their linearity (most prominent in an image such as *Untitled #40, 1995* (1995), in which the two merging overpasses recall the flat shapes of Ellsworth Kelly or painted ellipses of Frank Stella), but the effect is more of an aesthetic realization. The composition of Opie's photographs, despite their sophisticated handling and steady sense of equilibrium are also subtly jarring—panoramas that expand into space and contract onto the surface at the same time—but, unlike *Double Standard*, this tension is pictorial before it is conceptual. That is to say the tension between depth and surface occurs in Opie's images because they compound dissimilar formal language: the distinct pictorial constructions of modern abstraction and 19th-century pictorialism. This is very different from creating tension between surface and depth via the visual content, as Hopper does. Whereas *Double Standard* enacts a variety of visual puns that illuminate idiomatic differences between visual rhetoric and reality—the repetition of "Standard," the suggestion of complete connectivity and freedom of choice while being physically confined, and the notion of a complete and comprehensive visual field that is nonetheless so fragmented as to render the world incoherent—the pictorial tension of *Freeways* comes across as the uncanny, rather than wit.

This difference between the two works is predicated on a certain treatment of reality. *Double Standard* assumes a reality principle in which there is a genuine lifeworld to be saved from erosion caused by an increasingly simulated environment dominated by the image. It is the lifeworld that Hopper hopes to reaffirm by inspiring a realization of "ontological indifference" or by presenting an observation to provoke critique—in this case, for the viewer to realize his own

alienation from urban space and the loss of sensory perception in the wake of the visual spectacle. Ostensibly, *Freeways* also assumes a reality principle—as they are photographs of real structures and real landscapes—but the series also works to undo that sense of reality. It exploits a number of contradictions: for one, the uncertainty of the viewer's orientation combined with the ambiguity of location disturbs the very notion of place within images of places. The antique look of platinum prints and the landscapes' emptiness convey the sense of time suspended, rather than a moment caught on film. The images elide their subject matter, a symbol of modernity, with the style of traditional 19th-century pictorialism, a combination that also complicates the temporal parameters—one is looking at the present as if it is a relic. Without secure specifications of time and place, the landscape seems unreal, or at least uncanny. Like Krauss' death mask, Opie's *Freeways* seem as if lifted from something that no longer exists.

But therein lies yet another contradiction because the freeways *do* exist, and moreover, Opie's physical presence as their photographer, her presence as evident in the images, bears witness. The ontological question then becomes to what extent is a freeway a real space, and is a freeway real to us in any other way other than its image? For the driver, the freeway is cinematic image, an infinite stretch of pavement disappearing at the horizon line but never actually terminating. It is also primarily a visual experience of place, a landscape always separated by a screen, framed to restrict the view to a single vantage-point, temperature-controlled and protected from the elements, and soundtracked by either white noise or the driver's preference. The highway system conditions a specific spatial understanding of the city as no longer a location, but rather an origin and terminus on a time—not a distance—continuum. Vision is implicit in this conditioning because it makes travel cinematic, rather than physical, further converting transmission over space into transmission through time. Opie's photographs evoke

the realization that a highway might be the most colonized of places within the urban environment and yet no one has actually been there. What one is looking at then is not so much a real place, but a conceptual construction. The indexical relationship between Opie's photographs thereby disrupted, as the photographic trace refers to a subject that is itself more of a manufactured concept than a corporal object, an icon without a referent. Opie's use of grandiose 19th-century pictorialist style reinforces this understanding through its nostalgia. The old-fashioned print process and reverential treatment of *Freeways* renders the depicted highways as ruins and the series as a whole as a kind of *memento mori*—not for the highway system itself, but for its iconic identity as the symbol of postwar affluence, industrial optimism, and the promise of modernity. It is a tribute to an ideological past that never actually was.

In this respect, Opie's *Freeways* enacts what Virilio refers to as "tele-vision" or a kind of synthetic vision created by a cultural dependency on technology. Technology, in Virilio's thesis, encourages one to mediate his or her experience with the world through the creation of distorted, "virtual" realities; 'cinema knowledge' and cinema vision replace true sensory engagement with the world; consciousness is manipulated by the technological interface; vision becomes cinematic. The danger of this, according to Virilio, is not only that cinematic vision replaces natural sight, but that it *substitutes for* natural sight, causing the viewer to assume firsthand knowledge and experience of the world, when in fact their comprehension has been mediated. Awareness converts to mechanized perception and the ability to discern the difference begins to atrophy. Opie's *Freeways* have the effect of halting this process and of jolting one out of a visual stupor; the series is a manifestation of how one's sense of reality has been shaped by standardized, mechanical vision.

SPACE POLITICS

Politics of space is not the same thing as politics of place or geography. An analysis of geopolitical conditions requires examining a certain landscape as the phenomenon of social and cultural development, whereas the politics of space invites philosophical introspection. It draws on a kind of humanism that focuses on perceptive changes in the individual, primarily spiritual and emotional changes that have broader implications on the development of geo-cultural phenomena. It assumes the experiential intimacy of phenomenology and applies it to spatial systems and structures, thus examining the human-environment relationship. Catherine Opie's *Freeways* are a visual expression of the politics of space because they make a political argument within their presentation of a personal journey. The photographs are both a reflection of Opie's individual encounter with the highways and a statement as to their functional purpose in regulating and limiting movement, their capacity to be a tool of social control.

For Virilio, the collapse of natural vision presents a democratic crisis that originates at the individual level. The corruption of sight necessarily accompanies a loss of dimensionality and materiality regarding one's sense of the world. Virilio articulates this in terms of time and space, positioning the two concepts on a relational axis in terms of the mode of individual perception and of cultural consciousness: as time becomes more important to experience, space decreases in importance. He aligns sensory perception and corporeality with space, and technology, speed, and virtuality with time. As matters of speed and time begin to dictate perception and behavior, the understanding and awareness of space decreases, to the point that the world becomes inarticulate, untenable, and inaccessible beyond its virtual projections: "*speed distance* obliterates the notion of physical dimension. Speed suddenly becomes a primal

dimension that defies all temporal and physical measurements."[47] Virilio is critical of time's newfound supremacy because social vitality is dependent on a bodily-perceptual engagement with the world. Such an engagement is necessarily premised on an awareness of space and place—the orientation of the body in a particular location and in relation to the environment and others within the environment. The primacy of technology in the modern world not only shifts awareness to time over space (we are now more apt to think of the "distance" of a cross-country flight as "five or six hours," as opposed to 3,000 miles, for example); it also increases cultural dependency on technology.

For Virilio, the modern city holds particular significance to philosophical inquiry because it is the physical manifestation of time's gradual displacement of space within contemporary social consciousness. The urban landscape is not simply the locus of our existence or the backdrop of where we accomplish day-to-day activities; it is the result of *how* we are existing. Although highways as the subject of Opie's *Freeways* can be analyzed as rhetorical symbols for geographical segregation, their function as images is also to provoke an awareness of our modes of living. When Colette Dartnall suggested that highways divided communities and linked *Freeways* to a sociological statement (a common interpretation in the 1990s, particularly in the wake of the 1992 Watts Riots), and Opie clarified that the freeways were largely about "separat[ing] city from the suburb,"[48] Opie was broadening the conversation to discuss the situation of the modern city. Her subject, the city of Los Angeles and its transport system, provides a visual commentary for a national trend in civic development within the United States;

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[47] Virilio, *Lost Dimension*, 18.

[48] Opie, qtd. in Dartnall, n.p.

one of increased suburbanization in which connection to a public collective, and thereby to place itself, is eroding. Social interaction, which traditionally occurs on the grounds of shared public space, becomes less and less of a possibility.

When Opie speaks of how she conceives of *Freeways*, she provides a personal account that hints at the lived experience of such archetypes of progress and the practice of continuous travel:

> They are personal in the fact that I spend a lot of time on the actual freeways. I commute to Irvine and am always stuck in traffic. So I started looking at the structures instead of the cars in front of me. In traveling the freeways, I started to think of them as the structures that would be left behind, that they are Los Angeles's monuments . . . The thing is, the images are related to L.A. and the history of L.A., but these are more about me wandering.[49]

Speaking in an interview, it is unlikely that Opie put much thought into word choice; nevertheless, the word "wandering" has interesting connotations. For one, few ever truly wander through a freeway system, to travel through it without some kind of intent—one is either en route to destination or lost, which presumes that there is still a destination being sought. "Wandering" connotes a physical meandering as well as a mental relaxation or openness. *Freeways* pictorializes both the physical element of wandering because of the anonymous location of the structures and the uncertain sense of the orientation of the viewer, but it is most palpable because the freeways are portrayed as sculptural and not functional. Or, more accurately, the photographs capture the essence of the freeway's function, which is to go everywhere, but never lead anywhere. Through their melancholic pathos, the photographs also recall a psychological and emotional displacement as much as they do a physical displacement.

[49] Opie, qtd. in Dartnall, n.p.

“Wandering” in Opie’s *Freeways* is not so much to roam through space, but rather the emotional state of being without a sense of place. It also reflects the emotional response to Virilio’s city. In the new era of technological supremacy and media saturation, the city is no longer a distinctly bounded area, but rather a passing interruption within the endless dizzying movement of urban transport, “a stopover, a point on the synoptic path of a trajectory, the ancient military glacis, ridge road, frontier or riverbank, where the spectator’s glance and the vehicle’s speed of displacement were instrumentally linked . . . there is only *habitable circulation*.”[50] This sense of placelessness that characterizes the postmodern city corresponds to the notion of anonymity of its inhabitants. The lack of a center, particularly within the endless interlace of roads, contributes to a kind of driving stupor: we live in a spatial environment that is all surface, intricate but impenetrable, and thus we experience it in a daze.

COMPULSORY SUBMISSION: THE DISAPPEARING BODY AND THE INVISIBLE SPACE

Opie’s comment regarding her wandering through the freeway system shares in the notion of highway driving as a kind of independent absentminded meditation. It hints at some of the peculiarities of freeway driving, namely the phenomenon of feeling out-of-body and outside time. Many writers, critics, and scholars have likened driving to an out-of-body experience, describing it as mind-numbing and comparing the windshield to the mesmerizing glow of the television screen, like a divider between two realities.[51] Jean Baudrillard called driving “a spectacular form of amnesia,” while Joan Didion characterized the experience as “a total

[50] Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 31.

[51] Also see Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

surrender, a concentration so intense as to seem a kind of narcosis, a rapture-of-the-freeway" in "the lull between sleeping and waking," and sociologist John Urry argues that the automobile disrupts its driver's corporeal unity, as "the car becomes an extension of the driver's body, creating new subjectivities organized around the extraordinarily disciplined 'driving body'."[52, 53, 54] To drive is to become numb, to be disengaged from the road, the surroundings, and oneself. It is perhaps testimony to Virilio's theory that cognition and ontological consciousness begin with the body, for without sensory perception of the world there can be no understanding of it. Participation in automobility is to withdraw, not only from experiencing the world, but also from critical integration with it.

More importantly, as Virilio states, this withdrawal has political consequences, as the driving-state is also a numbness that anesthetizes one from political oppression. Driving is "not a liberation from geopolitical servitude, but the extermination of space as a field of freedom of political action. We only need refer to the necessary controls and constraints of the railway, airway or highway infrastructures to see the fatal impulse: the more speed increases, the faster freedom decreases . . . No more riots, no need for much repression; to empty the streets, it's enough to promise everyone a highway."[55] This perspective is not unheard of within postmodern urban theory, which often condemns the construction of civic systems, including highways, office complexes, shopping malls, and downtown civic centers, as some kind of devil's bargain,

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[52] Jean Baudrillard, *America,* trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1988), 9.

[53] Joan Didion, *The White Album* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 83; *Play It As It Lays* (New York: Farrar, 1970), 9-10.

[54] John Urry, "The 'System of Automobility," *Theory, Culture & Society* (Vol. 21, October 2004): 31.

[55] Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 158, 49.

a system through which the State exercises control and authority over its subjects.[56] Historian Cotten Seiler argues that "as the spectacle of the lone driver provides a visual representation of selfhood, the image of the highway traffic stream represents the dominant conception of sociality and public space . . . the state and other hegemonic institutions must provide occasions and spaces for the symbolic and spectacular performance of individual will and choice—such as voting, consumption, and mobility, all practices that are unlikely to transform established arrangements of power."[57] Specific to Los Angeles, Mike Davis' chapter on "Fortress L.A." in *City of Quartz* is probably the most famous example of such an analysis. Calling Los Angeles "on the bad edge of post-modernity," Davis cites a variety of spatial and architectural design choices, such as the construction of "architecture of fear" designed to perpetuate urban alienation and private gated communities which represent the "unprecedented tendency to merge urban design, architecture, and the police apparatus into a single, comprehensive security effort."[58]

The problem with this kind of rhetoric is that it tends to express effect without fully articulating cause; it designates villains and makes them sole actors in the equation. Davis' arguments are not necessarily incorrect—there usually is a systemic structure of some kind built to preserve a concentration of power in the hands of an elite—but to abstract such systems as tools of "the State," and even to identify individual agents (as disparate as the L.A.P.D. and Frank Gehry in Davis' case), overshadows what is really a contemporary cultural condition by a somewhat overstated conflict paradigm. In the 1990s, Los Angeles was frequently invoked as the model of this kind of postmodern dystopia of State control because the outcome in the nineties

[56] Frederic Jameson's famous analysis of Los Angeles' Bonaventure Hotel and Kenneth Frampton's call for "critical regionalism" as a response to state/capitalist-controlled architecture both come to mind.

[57] Seiler, 130-131.

[58] Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 224.

(failure of the education system, police brutality, race wars, rioting, widespread unemployment, environmental disasters) of what had been promised in the postwar period (stable family life, world-class education, job opportunities, and backyard paradise) so clearly evidenced failure. George B. Leonard's famous statement, that California was "a window to the future" in which "the traditional patterns of institutions, community and class (which hold back change) are at their weakest," seems laughably naïve at the turn of the 21st century.[59] It is true that many of the city's problems stemmed from an erosion of populism and the dismantling of state-sponsored programming, as it is true that many political decisions stemmed from naked racism—Proposition 14, Proposition 187, Proposition 209, and Ronald Reagan running for Governor on an anti-welfare platform to name a few. However, Los Angeles' urban ecology is more multifaceted, an alchemy of many actors than this linearized perspective implies. The thing to ask, as a matter of balance, is perhaps not who is doing, but who is *not* doing—who is allowing? In terms of Los Angeles' built environment, much of its character stems from a response to public demand, rather than a conscious effort to control. Theorists and historians such as Davis, Michael Dear, Frederic Jameson, and Soja have written convincingly on the environs of Los Angeles as spaces of State control, but Los Angeles' geographical and architectural character are also the outcome of its populist affluence and embrace of mobility in the postwar period. This was expressed via grand building projects, many adopting International Style architecture which looks brutish today but had a sense of worldliness in the 1960s, shopping malls for commercial commerce, and of course, the tremendous expansion of the interstate highway system.

Los Angeles' highway system plays an interesting symbolic role alongside the rise and decline of California's difficult relationship with postwar populism and evidences a greater

[59] George B. Leonard, "California," *Look,* Vol. 18 (September): 31.

pluralism as to the meaning of the highway and its implications related to political oppression. The roots of L.A.'s love affair with the car actually go back further than the 1960s to the turn of the century and provided the foundation for the character of the future relationship. In the early 1900s, automobile transport fit nicely within Southern California's boosterist tradition as a natural paradise and as a bastion of individual freedom. The car could not only take a person out of the congested city into the sunshine and fresh air (its "environmental" contribution, as seen at the turn of the century), but it was also democratizing as an alternative to the wealthy trolley companies and private rail.[60] Older L.A. freeways such as the 110 and 140 are designed with this pastoral escapism in mind, winding around hill ridges in such a way that afforded spectacular views in the early half of the 20th-century and are terrifyingly hairpin today. These elements created a mythos of car travel that continued into the 1960s, a decade that emphasized the democratizing power of autotopia in its highway construction fervor. In the 1970s, this collectivism had morphed into the embrace of the car as a symbol of individual freedom, as demonstrated by the public outcry regarding the California Department of Transportation's (Caltrans) push for carpool lanes—the freeway had shifted from a grand civic statement of communal space to instrument of free-spirited independence. Joan Didion's essay "Bureaucrats" chronicled these events and her sarcasm reflects the 1970s attitude: "It occurred to me that a certain rearrangement of people's daily planning might seem, in less rarefied air than is breathed at 120 South Spring [Caltrans' then address], rather a great deal to want, but so impenetrable was the sense of higher social purpose there in the Operations Center that I did not want to express

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[60] Martin Wachs, "The Evolution of Transportation Policy in Los Angeles: Images of Past Policies and Future Prospects," *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Edited by Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 106-159.

this reservation."[61] In the 1990s, the cultural sentiment regarding the city's highway system shifted again and it became symbolic of political demise. Once the living symbol of American expansionism, exceptionalism, and liberty, it became a symbol of civic estrangement—the barrier between neighborhoods and the source of disconnect of people from place. Freeways were fundamental in forming an urban environment in which every part was accessible to all people at all times, while nevertheless preserving social alienation overall.

Postmodern theorists of the nineties were working within this scholarly ethos, which may explain the widespread condemnation of the freeway system and its production of geographical and social dispersion. Given this backdrop of the 1990s, it was logical to associate the emptiness of *Freeways* as an expression of this estrangement between individual and the public and between communities. But the photographs more cogently correspond to the cultural inconsistencies regarding the freeway system in California and Los Angeles, presenting them as both powerful, beautiful, and inspiring, but also cold, brutal, and unrelenting. The series is not simply a comment on the highway's effect on social geography, but points to something more complex: how autotopia is the product of a collective social vision at the same time that it encourages withdrawal from actual social engagement. *Freeways* is the image of automation run amok, portraying the highway as a forgotten paradigm of industrial ingenuity, one whose obsolescence is a forgone conclusion. If Opie's images were large-format, the freeways would be read as architectural, soaring monoliths—achievements of human engineering equal to Hoover Dam. In their actual size, the photographs still celebrate the superstructures, but as old artifacts. This approach falls within 1990s attitudes regarding the highway system. As historian Joe Day would write in his Forward to a mid-nineties reissue of Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles; The*

[61] Didion, *The White Album*, 84.

Architecture of Four Ecologies, almost in compensation for Banham's unbridled enthusiasm for urban sprawl: "California's once bold eight-lanes and cloverleaves look haggard and Lilliputian. When things happen in Los Angeles, they often do so in miniature. All L.A. freeways seem quaint now, as its Parkway to Pasadena always did: a microcosmic realization of a no longer startingly ambitions Big Idea."[62]

The other effect of the images' small size is that it makes the notion of human production look antiquated. Like Du Camp's images of Egyptian ruins, Opie's *Freeways* are powerful, yet also somehow slightly pathetic in the way that archaic technology looks feeble. Virilio understood vehicular transport as an intermediary step towards his notion of "pure telepresence," or a situation in which space no longer exists as a physical barrier to connectivity. Although a freeway occupies and transitions through space, it also compresses distance through speed. It is therefore an artifact of a transitional moment within this continuum in which the importance of time begins to overtake the importance of space. The emptiness of *Freeways* further suggests that technology has started to advance without human consequence or critique, a kind of technology for technology's sake: "At the close of our century, *the time of finite world is coming to an end*; we live in the beginnings of a paradoxical *miniaturization of action*, which others prefer to baptize *automation*,"[63] or, in other words, an endless cycle of production that must always be in motion, so powerful that we lose critical intention in the creation of new technology and instead become complicit in its endless automatic reinvention.

Most of the photographs of freeways in an urban setting, such as *Untitled #10, 1994*

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[62] Joe Day, "After Ecologies," foreward to *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, by Reyner Banham (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), xix.

[63] Virilio, *Speed and Politics,*156.

(1994) which has so many converging highways that they look like a veritable knot, convey this through their dizzying array of roads. They have pictorial directionality, but no narrative directionality as we have no idea where each one is coming from or going to. But even in images in which the setting is bucolic and the roads are declarative and directional, such as *Untitled #34, 1995* (1995), the openness and somewhat bleak horizontality provide a similar effect. The viewing experience, which requires the viewer to take in each image in an endless succession also enacts the notion of industry cycling out of control, almost beyond the realm of human such that organization of the machine seems futile. Each photograph is still formally identical to the rest and displayed in a way that suggests linearity, but each photograph also represents the roadways at wildly different angles and distances so it is impossible to read them sequentially. To view the series from afar, each white frame placed next to the other like clean teeth, one has the sense of regimented uniformity; viewing them up close is to experience a barrage of concrete bands. *Freeways*' long ribbons of roads, which seem to go on forever, combined with their horizontal sequential display in the gallery, is the framework of a highway project that never-ends, even though it is woefully out-of-date, "the obscure silhouette of the old fortress struggling against its inertia, for whom stasis is death."[64]

To return to the earlier question of who is doing versus who is allowing, these elements in Opie's pictures call attention to the fact that the monumental highways are a regulatory feature in the city's geography and play a dominate role in controlling residents' daily lives; yet more importantly, they illuminate our complicity in this. The highway enacts a performance of freewill. In the same way that the two roads, flanked by two identical "Standard" signs, present a

[64] Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 40.

nonsensical choice in Hopper's *Double Standard*, the highway system provides the appearance of individual autonomy, while it instead requires the "willed submission to authority . . . submit by being *free* and *in motion.*"[65] The "authority" appears via a system of regulations designed to instruct common behavior, such as speed limits and signage—supposedly the emblems of "the State"—but in actuality, the system is self-perpetuating. An increase in the number of highways increases mobility, but only in specified directions. Therefore, "by making highways, you multiply the means of control . . . people can travel indefinitely and 'freely' without being confined while being perfectly controlled."[66] As Virilio puts it, "'Good conduct' is no longer *morals* taught in public school, but driver's education,"[67] insinuating that contemporary society more and more mistakes true ethical standards and independent thought for a paler version—instruction on how to conform well.

This notion is premised on making space invisible. While on the highway, the driver cannot see the entirety of the journey, and only rarely does the freeway's sculptural form come into view. The freeway appears the same almost at every moment—the road of a raised highway forty feet up in the air looks identical to the road at sea level. The driver also is only conscious of the open road, less cognizant of the freeway as part of a system, and unaware of the system as an instrument of control. It is only off the highway that the structural network can be viewed and their incredible influence over daily life understood. This is, more or less, the responsibility of landscape art. Landscape itself is "invisible to the people who live there and must attend to

[65] Seiler, 133, 143.

[66] Giles Deleuze, qtd. in Seiler, 144.

[67] Virilio, *Speed and Politics,* 110.

immediate needs. Landscape demonstrates the advantage of distance. Only from a certain distance can an overall structure be discerned and a unique type of relationship, emotional, yet somewhat cool, be established between a human individual and reality."[68] Opie's photographs, as visual portraiture of the freeways, make the invisible space visible. They form a record of her peripatetic meditation, of her body "guilty of being out of synch," still and observing "the speed of an entire population in maneuvers."[69] *Freeways* not only documents the rebellious act of Opie stepping *out* of the car; it documents quotidian function as a monument. It is thus, a political work.

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[68] Tuan, *Escapism*,110.

[69] Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 56.

Chapter 2

Postmodern Piazza: *Mini-malls*

INTRODUCTION: MEDIATED LOCALES

Mini-malls, Catherine Opie's series of 16x41-inch black and white photographs of Los Angeles-area strip-malls, taken over the course of a year from 1997 to 1998, debuted alongside *Freeways* in the artist's exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles. The MOCA exhibition presented Opie's work as a regionalist's portrait of Los Angeles' public infrastructure, but separated the two projects' display in order to preserve their serial integrity and formal distinctions. *Freeways* retains a sense of aesthetic romanticism, while *Mini-malls* is more straightforward and detached. *Freeways* uses dramatic perspectives that encourage a more poetic tone in the images, whereas *Mini-malls* employs a routine and candid documentarian approach to its subjects and prefers a front-view perspective. The platinum print process used for *Freeways* produces gentle edges and rich tonal gradation; the digital print process used for *Mini-malls* is substantially sharper. Finally, the small size of *Freeways* encourages a feeling of intimacy and repose, whereas the larger panoramic format of *Mini-malls* (16 x 41 inches) requires a more removed, stoic viewership.

Yet, despite the exhibition's physical separation of the two series, the guiding ideas behind such divergent design decisions was not noted or discussed. It is likely that MOCA felt that showcasing work that dealt with Los Angeles' civic identity through images of its iconic freeway system and notorious plethora of strip-malls suited their institutional agenda of being the West Coast's premier modern and contemporary art venue by supporting the work of so-called

"L.A. artists," such as Opie. The museum thus presented the subject matter of *Freeways* and *Mini-malls* at face-value, as a photojournalistic recording of Los Angeles.

Landscapes, however, in their documentary role of archiving particular environments, necessarily reflect deep-seated social constructs. Their portrayal and the messages they communicate are in dialogue with contemporary culture, and a landscape is never simply an objective representation of one particular place. As geographer Yi-Fu Tuan explains: "…landscape is neither embeddedness in locality, nor a God's eye view of the world, but a position somewhere in between. From that position one can see and be sympathetic to human undertakings and human fate, yet not be totally involved. Total involvement may sometimes be necessary, but it is not always desirable, for it usually means the loss of the ability to contemplate and reflect, to disengage oneself—to escape."[70] Within a year, Opie had gone from photographing the intermediary place of travel, the veritable non-place of a municipal highway, to a different type of intermediary place, that of the mini-mall. A strange architectural hybrid of marketplace and parking lot, a mini-mall is essentially a piazza that sponsors no public gathering. Thus Opie had moved from documenting the isolated experience of transitional space, or place experienced through speed, to place attenuated to stillness. The commonality between both series is that they both observe how life in the contemporary city mediates the experience of community through a variety of locales that suggest communal interface—thousands driving *en masse* or the promise of repeated transactions in the polyglot commercial strip-mall—but foster separateness instead.

In this respect, Opie's Los Angeles landscapes and their presentation of the city as dreary,

[70] Tuan, *Escapism*, 175.

cold, and abandoned, seem a referendum on the loss of urban community. Series like *Freeways* and *Mini-malls* offer a visual complement to a broader cultural tradition that positions Los Angeles itself as the embodiment of the postmodern city in its most cynical rendering. The tradition includes noir and 'neo-noir,' in which L.A. is characterized as an endless industrial sprawl and the backdrop to a culture of apathy and disengagement; the world of *Blade Runner* and *Chinatown* and Raymond Chandler novels. Characters simply occupy space and move through it in ignorance of anyone else, and places are split into either the public spaces of violence, or private spaces providing respite from that violence, and drama occurs when the spheres are mixed. The important aspect about this characterization to note is that it is a characterization created in contrast to the modern city. It envisions the failure of modern city.

This chapter's term "postmodern piazza" refers to a point of contention within architectural criticism of the millennial period (roughly 1990-2000), and can be summarized as a concern over the supposed loss of "the piazza" as the site of traditional social gathering, and subsequent derision for its replacement by simulated and/or mediated social spaces that mimic its form by the commercial interests of late capitalism. This chapter examines Opie's *Mini-malls* as a referendum on public urban space and its influence on community, but proposes that the view is more ambiguous and perhaps even hopeful than the images' stark emptiness initially implies. It accepts the notion that these images critique Los Angeles, the postmodern city, as well as millennial urban life as the decline of street interaction; however, this chapter also proposes that *Mini-malls* also observes how the postmodern city has reformed what community means and what it means to be an urbanist. This chapter does not argue that Opie is specifically "anti-Modernist" or "pro-Los Angeles"; rather, it concludes that Opie's images record a meditation on urban exploration. The result is not an unbiased documentary, as Opie did not simply capture the

day-to-day life of strip malls, but instead deliberately fashioned images to create a heightened sense of atmosphere, one that is solitary, quiet, and somewhat mournful. This sensibility reflects Opie's familiarity with Los Angeles and the *Mini-malls* series as a meditation on how the city functions in terms of spatial effects on community and the individual. The series is in this way, less diagnostic and less combative than one might expect, given its presence alongside a longstanding critical suspicion of the postmodern city.

At issue in this observation is therefore the modernist critique itself, and a large portion of this chapter questions whether the standards of such a critique are appropriate for Los Angeles, because L.A.'s physical sprawl means that the city tends to operate outside of modernist principles. Ultimately, it will propose that Opie's treatment of mini-malls as "postmodern piazzas" is in counterpoint to the prevailing 1990s criticism of such locales, which condemned their schlock architecture as complacent with unchecked consumerism. Whereas most 1990s architectural theorists supplied a Marxist tone to their writings and suggested that the new architecture of late capitalism fostered a wholesale assault on individual determinacy, *Mini-malls* instead supplies a less confrontational view. *Mini-malls* may be a referendum on public urban space, but its perspective is in accordance to understanding the postmodern urban form as a contemporary cultural reality, instead of a violation of a nostalgic bias. Opie recognizes that mini-malls are mediated, intermediary, and flexible sites, and although the *Mini-malls* images are quietly disturbing in their emphasis on emptiness and isolation, they also appreciate the freedom of civic detachment.

The ensuing chapter thus examines *Mini-malls* from three approaches. First, I will historicize the debate within architectural and urban theory between early converts to late twentieth-century postmodern space of the 1970s and later 1990s critics. The former group is

represented primarily by Reyner Banham, whose writings on Los Angeles typify the postwar exuberance for commercial architecture, and to a lesser extent, Robert Venturi; the latter group is represented primarily by Kenneth Frampton, whose shift in interest from architecture to landscape exemplifies the growing emphasis on social geography within 1990s urban theory. It also includes some analysis of Frederic Jameson and members of the so-called "L.A. School," including Mike Davis, Michael Dear, and Edward Soja. Together, this unofficial group of millennial scholars dictated the terms of rhetoric on postcapitalist space and its expression in the postmodern city, forming the academic circumstances surrounding Opie's *Mini-malls* series.

The second section then discusses the changing role of photography in its relationship to the postmodern landscape by comparing Opie's work with that of the *New Topographics* photographers. Although *New Topographics* was merely the title of a 1970s exhibition and its contributing artists were never affiliated within a single movement, the legacy of the exhibition has proven influential enough as to render the artists' deadpan treatment of the American landscape as its own stylistic category. I use the term "*New Topographics* photographers" throughout in reference to this style, at the risk of dismissing the individual photographers' aesthetic distinctions. Opie's work often engenders comparisons with *New Topographics,* and is sometimes seen as a new wave of the movement; it is therefore important to consider how her treatment of landscape engages with the politics of the 1990s, versus how her predecessor's engaged with politics of the 1970s.

The final section of this chapter discusses the role of anxiety and crisis of selfhood as a distinctly modernist concern. Using more recent philosophical-geographical critiques of the relationship between place and self by philosopher Edward S. Casey and feminist geographer Doreen Massey, it will investigate how the panic over "loss of space," as theorized by 1990s

urbanists and architectural critics, reflects a psychological anxiety over a specifically *modernist* ideation of selfhood—that is, of conditions that ensured the stability of white, male authority. It will suggest that Opie's position derives from a more fluid sense of self as a gay woman and an L.A. transplant and that her Leftist politics combine with this pluralist identity to produce a greater reception towards ambiguity. Her *Mini-malls* images present architecture's meaning as appropriated and continually modified by use, a type of architecture that by its very indifference may also represent mobility, conversion, opportunity, and variation. Opie's attentiveness to these values reconstitutes *Mini-malls* as a far more complex consideration of its postmodern subject, the prototypical landscape icon of the intersection between postmodern architecture and postcapitalist culture.

BOOSTERISM CRUMPLES: SHIFTS IN ARCHITECTURAL CRITICISM & URBAN THEORY, C. 1970-2000

It is significant that in his seminal book, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, published in 1991, Frederic Jameson focused on architecture:

> It is in the realm of architecture, however, that modifications in aesthetic production are most dramatically visible, and that their theoretical problems have been most centrally raised and articulated; it was indeed from architectural debates that my own conception of postmodernism . . . began to emerge. More decisively than in the other arts or media, postmodernist positions in architecture have been inseparable from an implacable critique of high modernism . . . where formal criticism and analysis . . . are at one with reconsiderations on the level of urbanism and of the aesthetic institution."[71]

[71] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 2.

Although *Postmodernism* aspires to a larger scope and therefore examines many cultural features from painting to punk music, Jameson returns to architecture several times throughout the book, most notably in discussions of Los Angeles landmarks such as the Bonaventure Hotel and Frank Gehry's deconstructed private home. His focus on architecture specifically stems from a broader theoretical dialectic between what he codifies as spatial versus temporal realms—time being the realm of change, progress and politics; space being the realm of "a world peculiarly without transcendence and without perspective . . . and indeed without plot in any traditional sense, since all choices would be equidistant and on the same level."[72] Space, Jameson argues, has been overtaken by visual pastiche, and spatial consciousness is corrupted by inevitable multiplicity and unending surface or "depthlessness." Space literally disorients and distracts, to such a degree that any cogent critique of its systematic economic and social underpinnings is impossible. One lives in the stasis of the unyielding present, without any sense of perspective—chronological, historical, or psychic—and without any opportunity for discourse or change.

Jameson's argument is not completely new (it is different but nevertheless premised on arguments made by Ernesto Laclau and Henri Lefebvre), but it does encompass the scholarly zeitgeist of its time, specifically in its deep mistrust of contemporary space and condemnation of architecture's supposed complicity with multinational corporate capitalism. In the late 1980s and 1990s, academic discourse pertaining to architectural theory and urban planning was largely cynical and marked by anxiety. Jameson's treatise represents a theoretical grounding to more concrete, geopolitical examinations of architecture and the urban environment as represented by architecture critic Kenneth Frampton and members of the 'L.A. School.' These critics framed a discourse premised on the idea that the built environment of the postmodern city reflected a loss

[72] Jameson, 269.

of community—and thereby free democracy—and engendered an ethos of consumerism, homogenization, and apathy, all under the increasingly prevalent coercion of corporate or capitalist control.

In many ways, the story of how this suspicion of the postmodern city developed over the course of roughly twenty years is the story of boosterism crumpling under its own weight. Davis coined the catchphrase "sunshine/noir" as a way of characterizing the great disparity between Los Angeles' promise and its reality. "Sunshine/noir" was an elegant allusion to Los Angeles' noir literary and film traditions, as well as to the 19th-century "Sunshine and Shadows in New York," which have typically utilized the notion of sundrenched paradise as the perfect place to be mucked up by something horrific. The critical approach of the 1980s and 1990s was perhaps an equalizing response to the West Coast exuberance of the 1960s and 1970s and the dominance of the new city and its grand International Style building projects, bucolic suburban housing developments, and indistinct commercial spaces that placed primacy on eclectic flourishes, signage, and parking—the kind of postwar urbanism that was celebrated as new, diverse, and even egalitarian by the likes of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, and Steven Izenour in their 1972 book *Learning from Las Vegas*, and also more locally by Reyner Banham in his 1975 book, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*. Jameson derisively characterized this type of criticism as a kind of analytical populism, "fascinated precisely by this whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and *Reader's Digest* culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel: materials they no longer simply 'quote,' as

Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance,"[73] as if Venturi and his ilk were seduced by spectacle or just plain naïve.

At the heart of the disagreement is the influence of economics and specifically the shift towards an increasingly postindustrial, consumption-driven economy. Each author's interpretation of postmodern urban space and its organization stemmed largely from his relative comfort pertaining to this new economic reality. Venturi and Banham adopted a giddy, optimistic perspective that was in harmony with the politics of the Cold War: belief in American economic self-determination responded to the supposed threat of Communism. Critics of the 1980s and 1990s took a dim view of the postcapitalist economy, associating it with vast class inequity and a progressively materialistic society that sacrificed cultural depth for market viability. These political and socioeconomic biases defined responses to architectural aesthetics; thus the same roadside strip malls were described as dynamic and innovative in the 1960s and 1970s, and as lifeless and uninspiring twenty years later, despite the fact that their actual form remained unchanged.

Opie's choice of subject matter for *Mini-malls* is important within this critical history because hers is the calculated depiction of a contemporary or postmodern icon. Indeed, *Mini-malls* supplies a fitting visual accompaniment to the situation of the contemporary city, which Frampton defined as the pinnacle of modern "placelessness" that destroys communal public realms necessary for revolution.[74] In some sense, the series supplies a visual document that causes a viewer to realize and contemplate the idea of landscape "as a strangely . . . invisible

[73] Jameson, 3.

[74] Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 25.

marker of commercialization and gentrification,"[75] and in that sense, shares in the same disparagement levied upon postmodern architecture and urban planning by theorists of the 1980s and 1990s. The mini-mall, like the freeway, is among the most iconic symbols of postwar urban development because its existence is tied to car culture. The mini-mall reduces pedestrian traffic and discourages incidental interaction amongst city-dwellers because instead of walking past sidewalk businesses and interfacing with street-life, mini-mall customers make surgical strikes, parking and patronizing usually only one or two stores.

It has also altered the urban experience in two major ways. For one, the mini-mall prioritizes private consumption at the expense of public interface. Customers are no longer civically engaged, or even city-dwellers, but simply consumers. The mini-mall's treatment of space is also unique. It designates itself as a space for the exchange of goods and services, yet itself as a place is undesignated—in other words, the mini-mall eliminates spatial context entirely. Unlike an enclosed mall that provides a specified and cloistered kind of environment that is separated from the street, the mini-mall is not only indifferent and indiscriminate towards its surroundings, but it also suspends the customers' awareness of place as well. These two qualities of the mini-mall, its reduction of the public into consumers and its elimination of spatial context, make it a challenging feature of the urban landscape. If a mini-mall can exist anywhere, if it can be hypothetically removed from one city and indiscriminately inserted into another, then it poses a threat to civic character and identity. Perhaps one of its most insidious characteristics is the way in which a mini-mall suggests urbanity—it still abuts the sidewalk, it is usually two stories or less, it is still "part of" the city—while it erodes the city. Its form mimics the piazza

[75] John C. Welchman, *Recent Pasts: Art in Southern California from the 1990s to Now* (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2005), 183.

and suggests social gathering, but ultimately discourages interaction instead.

For Opie to choose such a subject implies two possibilities. One is to assume that she chose to shoot mini-malls in order to supply the ultimate image of a millennial dystopia that represents the usual critique of Los Angeles as alienating and materialistic. The other is to conclude that she chose this particular urban landscape icon in order to investigate the changing conditions of its meaning and significance as an icon. The latter of these possibilities not only presents far more interesting critical potential, but also respects the complexity of Opie's work. The mini-mall is also iconic in its relationship to Los Angeles, as it was architecturally developed specifically in L.A., dating back to the 1920s, and became "a true Los Angeles export."[76] Opie's interest in the mini-mall thereby also relates to a critical examination of Los Angeles specifically as the exemplar of the postmodern urban space, and the theories applied to the city that were central to the discourse during the mid-nineties.

FOCUS L.A.: LOS ANGELES AS PARADIGM

The concept of "the New American City," as an archetypal postmodern metropolis in which dispersion replaces centralism, and the automobile, rather than the pedestrian, determines mobility, was seen primarily as a West Coast phenomenon with Los Angeles as its paradigm. In terms of architecture and the urban environment, the particular "look" of Los Angeles—"*planned* or *designed* in a very fragmentary sense (primarily at the level of its infrastructure) but

[76] Mark Mack, qtd. in Mary Melton, "A Brief History of the Mini-Mall," *The Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 1997, accessed August 11, 2012, http://articles.latimes.com/1997/nov/16/magazine/tm-54209.

. . . infinitely *envisioned*"—however, earns both its detractors and its supporters.[77] The early 1970s saw a particular kind of West Coast urban planning "spatial boosterism" in the writings of Robert Venturi, and, with particular regard to L.A., Reyner Banham. Originally published in 1971, Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* is among the most famous studies of Los Angeles' urban geography and groundbreaking for its time as one of the first architectural studies that examined architecture in the context of topography and urban planning. Banham also hosted a 1972 BBC special, cheekily titled *Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles*, in which he toured through the neighborhoods in a sedan using a voiceover that was visually suggested as a prerecorded guidance system played on the car's 8-track tape deck. *Four Ecologies* occupies an interesting position within Los Angeles scholarship because while it is generally acknowledged as an indispensible text, its celebration of pop urbanism and schlock architecture tends to distract from the diligence of its scholarship. The book has received greater attention in more recent decades, but there was a time when *Four Ecologies* was too often deemed an example of boosterism with little appreciation to its argument that "pedestrian" architecture, like mini-malls and apartment complexes and freeways, deserved the same academic treatment as usually afforded to notable single super-structures. Unlike a new skyscraper or municipal museum, the ubiquity of postwar pedestrian architecture was more closely aligned with changes in the sociological character of cities.

Critics of the 1980s and 1990s in particular were quite sardonic regarding Banham because Banham's 1970s L.A. enthusiasm was born out of California's embrace of the postwar "Great Society" agenda, the same promise that had been rendered defunct by the tumultuous

[77] Davis, 23.

1990s. His enthusiasm for the relics of that period—freeways, residential developments, mini-malls—seemed woefully foolish two decades later. In his seminal *City of Quartz*, for example, Mike Davis wrote:

> [Banham] found virtue in almost everything disdained by traditional critics including the automobile, surfboards, hillside homes, and something called 'Los Angeles architecture' . . . Supported by his own brilliant prose, as well as by a new aesthetic climate prepared to reverse historic judgements [*sic*] in favor of 'pop' sensibilities of all kinds . . . *Four Ecologies* became a turning-point in the valuation of the city by the international intelligentsia. Adopted universally as *the* textbook on Los Angeles, it established standards—vernacular, decentralist and promiscuous—that continue to frame art world views of what is happening in California south of the Tehachapis.[78]

Davis' account reflects the prevailing attitude regarding Banham by 1990s historians, one that accuses Banham of both elitism and commercialism at the same time. Davis' ultimate point is that Banham, much like the art-world in general, is out of touch and embraces theory in favor of practical truth—is there, after all, anything that could be legitimately called 'Los Angeles architecture,' Davis suggests?

Architecture critic Kenneth Frampton was equally suspicious of Banham's populism, which was unsurprising as he had already criticized Venturi outright in his seminal essay, "Towards a Critical Regionalism," writing: "The manipulative bias of such ideologies has never been more openly expressed than in Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), wherein the author asserts that Americans do not need piazzas, since they should be at home watching television. Such reactionary attitudes emphasize the impotence of an

[78] Davis, 73-74.

urbanized populace, which has paradoxically lost the object of its urbanization."[79] In a 2003 interview for *October* magazine, Frampton admits Banham had some influence over his interests, but ultimately conveys a sense of mistrust regarding Banham, and specific discomfort with Banham's embrace of Futurism. At the heart of the matter are the two theorists' polarized reactions to capitalism. Hal Foster summed up the theoretical disagreement between Banham and Frampton rather succinctly: "In the simplest terms, the IG [the Independent Group, of which Banham was a member of] embraced certain aspects of emergent consumer culture, and the Situationists did precisely the opposite. I'd think you'd [Frampton] feel more affinity with the latter, and be skeptical of Banham's interests, say in an imagistic architecture that worked to capture a Pop world on the rise . . ."[80] Both Banham and Frampton claimed populism, but each had a different understanding of the role of consumer culture within that populism: Banham was comfortable viewing architecture as a harmonious complement to late 20th-century capitalism; Frampton's more nuanced view of capitalism, in which there were good actors and bad, observed that architecture could be coopted by either side. Frampton pointedly accused Banham of omitting the architecture of the Left in the latter's *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age.* He also critiqued consumerist architecture from a phenomenological perspective, arguing that commercial architecture denied "the potential of the body to experience at a microlevel the space made available in architectural form."[81] In other words, new commercial architecture corrupted one's physical and psychological awareness of space, a corruption that in turn had political implications by reducing one's sense of civic ownership of such spaces as well as their potential

[79] Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism," 28.

[80] Hal Foster, qtd. in Stan Allen, Kenneth Frampton, and Hal Foster, "A Conversation with Kenneth Frampton," published in *October*, Vol. 16 (Autumn, 2003): 38.

[81] Ibid., 47, 51.

to engage with others. Frampton alludes that these changes in the relationship between public space and public actor could comprise an insidiously silent affront to the public's right to assemble.

This type of critique of Banham's theories is unsurprising, given Frampton's political perspectives and their influence on his architecture criticism, particularly in the 1980s. In 1983, Frampton argued that architecture had become essentially a tool of state-capitalist control, such that architecture merely and exclusively served industrial production and commercial sale. Aesthetically, this influenced a trend in "non-design" that Frampton felt was completely "predetermined by the imperatives of production, or a transference of design to the façade as a technique to disguise the bare-bones functionalist structures underneath."[82] Frampton's reference to the emphasis on façade corresponds directly with the types of Pop architecture that Banham celebrated in the sixties. Its nineties exemplars include Michael Graves' Disney Studios Administration Building (1991), with Snow White's seven dwarfs posing as cheeky caryatids, and Frank Gehry's Chiat/Day "Binoculars Building" (1991), with a large-scale pair of binoculars by Claes Oldenburg forming the entrance. Both examples demonstrate the use of architectural flourishes and façades that have been applied to what would otherwise be relatively indistinct buildings. Gehry's Chiat/Day structure is the most obvious offender in this respect, with its standard, white parking lot seemingly simply tacked on to the gigantic binoculars. The function of such architectural flourishes was solely to get one's attention, to advertise, to render the function of building itself subservient to its presentation.

Banham referred to the same kinds of Pop architecture, found throughout Los Angeles

[82] Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance," 18.

with a historical precedent dating back to the early 20th century, as “fantasy” architecture. Writing from a more novel perspective of the 1970s, Banham summarizes the concept of Los Angeles fantasy architecture, without associating the same kind of political anxiety that Frampton attaches. Instead, his analysis is relegated more within the boundaries of designation and description:

> Fantasy is actually found only rarely in the planning of a building, or the layout of adjoining clustered structure . . . [it] is all too often a compensation for the poverty of the building behind or under it, or for the hard-nosed rationalism of the market economy, and this division between the rational, functional shell and the fantastic garnish has become more apparent as the years have passed . . . The lower down the scales of financial substance and cultural pretensions one goes, the better sense it apparently makes (and has made, visibly for a couple of decades) to buy a plain standard building shell from Butler Buildings Corporation or a similar mass-producer and add symbolic garnish to the front, top, or other parts that show. It makes even better sense, of course, to acquire an existing disused building and impose your commercial personality on it with symbolic garnishes . . . it still makes financial sense to put up relatively simple single-story boxes, and then make them tall enough to attract attention by piling up symbols and graphic art on top.[83]

Graves’ dwarfs and Gehry’s binoculars are the equivalent “symbols and graphic art” attached to provide “commercial personality” to otherwise relatively humdrum boxes, but they are examples in the extreme. Opie’s photographs of mini-malls document a far more prevalent form of the type of architecture as described by both Banham and Frampton. Although they may not be as “fantastic” as Banham’s examples or quite as Pop as the notion of Frampton’s commercial facades, the mini-malls demonstrate a bare-bones structural aesthetic given credence by signage and ornamentation. *Untitled #2* (1997) shows one such mini-mall, a corner junction of two simple architectural boxes that employs a mishmash of stereotypical “ethnic” embellishments to

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[83] Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 100-101.

make it appear more lively. The mini-mall is basic twentieth-century American modern in design, but there is a pagoda-style roof above East West Bank, in addition to gabled eaves and roofs over the left wing of the structure, covered in tiles to simulate an irimoya roof. It would be a pseudo pan-Asian shopping center, were it not for the arched brick decals applied to the windows of the King Taco Restaurant that reference the arches of a hacienda courtyard—a touch that is both humorous and cheesy-kitsch.

Few of Opie's *Mini-malls* images, however, have the same kind of supplementary ornamentation, and instead engage with the notion of Pop via its broader mercurial or commercial malleability. Most of Opie's mini-malls are plain concrete boxes, the commercial equivalent of what Banham referred to as "dingbats" in residential architecture, or "a two-story walk-up apartment-block developed over the full depth of the site, built of wood and stuccoed over . . . the dingbat, left to its own devices, often exhibits the basic characteristics of a primitive modern architecture . . . they display simple rectangular forms and flush smooth surfaces . . ."[84] Although providing an imperfect comparison, insofar as the mini-malls are commercial whereas a "dingbat" refers to a residential building, Opie's photographs suggest a commonality between the two in their emphasis on signage. The signs are so important to *Mini-malls* that Opie reportedly had revised her original intentions to print the photographs on a small scale and ended up enlarging them to 16 x 41 inches each, solely in order to make the signs legible for the viewer.[85] Dingbats, Banham observed, also utilized signage and graphic ornamentation. Without such ornaments, each apartment building would be practically indistinguishable from the next.

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[84] Banham,157.

[85] Nat Trotman, "Mini-malls," in *Catherine Opie: American Photographer* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2008): 110.

Sundry decorative elements, like starbursts, patterned stucco appliques, text-art lettering for addresses, and names like "La Traviata" and "Venice Capri" are common in L.A. residential architecture, stuck on like novelty stickers. The signs in Opie's mini-malls perform the same service, allowing visitors to identify which tenant does what, while imbuing each part with a sense of personality—albeit a feeble sense of personality, nonetheless. In *Untitled #3* (1997), the businesses have used signage in order to visually represent their wares: checkered tiles and painted script lettering for Mr. Angelo's Pizza; a juxtaposition of old-timey western font and contemporary spray-paint tagging for "Bar B. Q. Pit" on the righthand wall. Two rows of bunting-banners hang lazily over the parking lot, mimicking the telephone wires overhead—a visual irony between the suggestion of a good-time celebration within a barren lot.

None of these mini-malls (nor Banham's dingbats, for that matter) are particularly "good" architecture, in that their purpose, as Frampton observed, is to be ephemeral and innocuous, a kind of disposable architecture that supports whatever is superficially malleable: signs can be exchanged, stucco can be painted, and ornaments simply removed and replaced. The structure is perfunctory above all else, in service to rapid turnover and the exchange of goods. Politically, Frampton argued that such architecture thereby lulled patrons into a continual state of consumption—and it is not the actual consuming that is the problem, but moreover, the quality of the consumptive experience. In the case of a mini-mall in particular, the experience it offers is conceptual before it is physical or sensory. The public does not experience strip-mall shopping as a public peripatetic activity, but rather a strangely out-of-body and out-of-time endeavor in which signage and symbolism are so potent that the experience becomes almost cerebral. One can think of it as the mini-mall as an intermediary between experiencing the busy streets of 5th Avenue in Manhattan and navigating product on Amazon.com—one may be traversing a parking

lot and entering a brick-and-mortar shop, but awareness is concentrated on acquisition, much like the way one focuses almost exclusively on this title or that title on the computer screen with little mindfulness of their hand on the mouse and their fingers clicking.

Opie's *Mini-malls* photographs are indeed sensitive to Frampton's critique as they too, highlight the distancing affect of their subjects. Her images employ formal strategies that prioritize a sense of desolation and desertion. As she did when shooing *Freeways*, Opie deliberately shot strip-malls on early weekend mornings, when most shops were chained closed and sidewalk traffic was light, so that the photographs emphasize a sense of static emptiness and stillness. She used crisp digital prints so that the strong tonal contrast between black and white contributes to the sense of coldness. The stark contrast distances the viewer from the image, opposite of how the gentle shift in graytones creates intimacy between the viewer and the images comprising *Freeways*—*Mini-malls* offer an exclusively visual presentation, whereas *Freeways* suggested an element of tactility. These formal decisions augment the images' narrative content, as their emptiness counters the assumption of populism-by-capitalism. Instead of the "hustle and bustle" of a thriving city, *Mini-malls* presents the dead metropolis. No one is out and about, shops are closed (perhaps forever?), and we are left with mere remnants of urbanity.

Like *Freeways*, *Mini-malls* also deconstructs time, presenting its subject as a kind of defunct artifact, even though it is certainly a functional feature of the contemporary urban landscape. In this way, *Mini-malls* seems to foreshadow a steady march towards spatial abstraction in commerce, first from the consumerist bias of strip-malls that threaten peripatetic street life, to the standardizing effect of big-box stores like Wal-Mart that threaten the polyglot small businesses comprising the strip-malls, to Internet commerce, which threatens the entire concept of brick-and-mortar altogether. In the context of today's Internet-driven global consumer

economy, Opie's *Mini-malls* assume a sense of nostalgia that shares in Frampton's appreciation for the city as an incubator for community interaction. The difference, however, is that Frampton's critique is premised on a kind of nostalgic anxiety, whereas Opie seems to accept the changing urban environs as they are.

NEW *NEW TOPOGRAPHICS*?

The *Mini-malls* series is not without precedent, and indeed is seen as a continuation or homage to postwar photography and specifically to the work of *New Topographics* photographers of the 1970s. It is largely due to this association—which Opie herself has made—that encourages an interpretation of *Mini-malls* as critical of the postmodern city.[86] In art, the response to the new postmodern urban environment was, for the most part, sharply critical—an approach that followed within a longtime trajectory within modern American photography, dating back to Paul Strand and extending to the works of Diane Arbus and Robert Frank, in which the camera lens documents an alternative reality to prevailing cultural mythos. Whereas most of these photographs focused on people, by the 1960s, the focus had begun to shift to landscape, issuing forth a new genre within photography concerned with urban and suburban social geography. The category includes artists like Bernd and Hilla Becher, Ed Ruscha, and reached an apex in the 1970s with *New Topographics* artists: Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, William Garnett, Frank Gohlke, and Stephen Shore, to name a few. Although never a self-defined movement, these artists were corralled as "urban topographers"

[86] Catherine Opie, in an interview with Edward Robinson. See: "Catherine Opie on *New Topographics*," YouTube video, 4:57, posted by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, December 11, 2009, http://lacma.wordpress.com/2009/12/11/tour-new-topographics-with-catherine-opie/.

through the 1975 exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* at the International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, by curator William Jenkins.[87]

The *New Topographics* style is characterized by a dispassionate, documentarian approach, a certain methodic and restrained formalism, and a focus on urban or suburban subject-matter. Parking lots, housing developments, city streets, construction sites, gas stations, and industrial factories were popular subjects. In the United States, the photographic style presented a stark counterpoint to the traditional treatment of landscape: whereas traditional landscape generally meant depictions of the spectacular beauty of untouched wilderness, *New Topographics* highlighted the synthetic banality of the urban everyday. In contrast to the wide-angle, high-contrast panoramas that contributed to the idea of the "sublime" landscape of the American West, urban topographers depicted a new West Coast, one in which the environment is recreated and reformed according to human influence. The approach of urban topographers challenges the assumption that landscape photography's purpose was to inspire and enlighten, a la Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter, and instead utilizes a methodology closer to Pop Art in which imagery is presented as a mere reflection of reality without obvious sentiment.[88]

In doing so, such urbanite photographers provoked a reconsideration of the meaning of landscape, namely underscoring the fact that all landscapes, including "natural wilderness," are constructed concepts that reflect underlying social values. As one may imagine, the contemporary response to the 1975 *New Topographics* exhibition depended heavily on the

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[87] John Rohrbach, introduction to *Reframing the New Topographics*, eds. Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), xiii.

[88] Ibid., xix.

viewer's personal biases: those who believed in the American Dream admired images of tract-housing and those who romanticized nature condemned the same development projects.[89] The consensus today regarding such work is that contrary to the style's apparent "indifference," *New Topographics* photography was political and expressed concern over rapid industrialization and commercialization. It is difficult, for example, to view Frank Gohlke's *Landscape, St. Paul* (1974) and ignore the apocalyptic desolation of an empty Kmart parking lot's limitless expanse of asphalt.

Twenty years later, Opie revisited similar urban environments with the *Mini-malls* project, and the many stylistic affinities between the two projects suggest that the relationship is one of influence and tribute. Accordingly, Opie's *Mini-malls* have been interpreted along similar lines as *New Topographics* photography—as imagery that points to alienation within the postmodern city. Nat Trotman wrote in in the catalogue for Opie's 2008 Guggenheim solo exhibition, "*Mini-malls* goes out of its way to emphasize the banality of its subjects. The photographs forsake the oblique angles that transformed freeways into aesthetic abstractions as well as the rich color and bizarre architectural details that helped make the houses of Beverly Hills and Bel Air so fascinating. Without such qualities, the mini-malls' vacant storefronts and parking lots become all the more eerie."[90] The comment dovetails with much of the rhetoric surrounding *New Topographics* in its focus on documentation and homogenized banality of the urban scene.

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[89] Britt Salvesen, "'Real Estate Opportunities:' Commercial Photography as Conceptual Source in *New Topographics*," in *Reframing the New Topographics,* eds. Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 85.

[90] Nat Trotman, "Mini-malls," in *Catherine Opie: American Photographer* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2008), 110.

However, to conclude that *Mini-malls* shares the same political sentiments as those expressed in *New Topographics* in turn suggests that the series is a recycling of *New Topographics* twenty years after the fact. There are indeed clear formal affinities between the two and some referencing of the past on Opie's part, but no one has bothered to question why any artist would choose to rehash an existing template. The production of such images also responds to a different cultural milieu in the 1990s than that of the 1970s. Trotman's commentary, for example, disregards Opie's own statements regarding the series that suggest an interest in the structures as metaphors for the idea of persona: "I create an interesting contradiction by giving these functional objects, which are often seen as obtrusive and ugly, an aesthetic quality in this case to make people look at what they otherwise look past but also to make them rethink their pre-conceived notions" and "the language of the people is embedded in the body of the structures in the same way that the language is embedded on the bodies of my friends and myself as a structure of identity."[91, 92] Opie's statements, which ironically appear in Trotman's own essay, imply that *Mini-malls* does not offer the same kind of cultural critique as put forth by *New Topographics*.

New Topographics presents a lost world, or a world in which the human psyche is disengaged and incoherent, literally lost in space. Consumer culture and mass consumption play a fundamental role in this loss of selfhood and is indicted repeatedly through the *New Topographics* artists' treatment of space. Lewis Baltz, for example, took many pictures of commercial walls, usually belonging to small business-park tenants, in ways that emphasized

[91] Opie, qtd. in Dartnall, n.p.

[92] Opie, qtd. in Maura Reilly, "The Drive to Describe: An Interview with Catherine Opie," *Art Journal* 60, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 93.

flatness and the interplay of surface and transparency. *South Wall, Mazda Motors, 2121 East Main Street, Irvine, 1974* (1974) is a panoramic frontal view of the dealership's nondescript concrete building, with a grass lawn in the foreground, gravel sidewalk and somewhat baffling makeshift sculptural rock garden, and a paneled strip of large, single-pane windows. There is a conscientious display of regularity, as the stark lines of the structure and repeated rectangular shape of the windows create a visual grid. The lines are echoed in the reflection through the vertical telephone poles and horizontal telephone wires, but even the natural elements, such as the trees reflected in the windows and the rocks in the foreground, look formal, obviously planted and arranged in straight lines. Although they do not match the grid pattern, the lawn's manicured diagonal stripes, probably the result of designer mowing, reaffirm the idea of structured and domesticated nature. A concrete support in the center of the composition further stabilizes the image.

The overall effect of *South Wall, Mazda Motors* is one of a landscape that proposes order, precision, and regularity, but to such an overwhelming degree that it paradoxically becomes unnerving, stifling, and rather *dis*orienting. Perspective falters under the strength of the grid; the emphasis on two-dimensional surfaces challenges the assumption of depth. Even the shadows, normally signals of spatial recession, here instead reinforce linearity through stark contrast. Instead of a wall as a division between inside and outside, the South wall of Mazda Motors, with its repeating windows, becomes endless surface. The reflections belie the notion of landscape topography as having a distant horizon or endpoint. Here, there is no endpoint, no recession into the distance, only an uncompromising horizontal and superficial reflection. At the heart of the image is the ambiguity of place itself, for although the title informs the viewer precisely where the photography was taken, as well as the function of the building itself, the picture offers no

clues as to the actual character of that location; it is an anonymous, unknowable place without a comprehensible purpose. As these usual considerations and expected constructs of landscape imagery—setting, depth, perspective, context—collapse into anonymity, so too, does the human presence, or the viewer's presence as invoked. As a final testament to this, Baltz's own presence as the photographer is conspicuously absent from the photograph, despite the clarity of the reflection and despite the fact that the frontal vantage point makes his positioning quite clear. The absence of his reflection can presumably be explained by obstruction from the pillar, but his blatant omission from the picture is nevertheless a nod to the concept of presence becoming literally incorporeal.

This conspicuous lack of spatial context appears repeatedly in the work of many *New Topographics* photographers. John Schott's untitled images comprising the series *Route 66 Motels* (1973) utilize a similar strict frontal view and emphasis on formality. Most emphasize the center of the composition and highlight a numbing sense of balance: a lined speed-bump in one divides the picture in half while leading to a center gate, and the equally spaced planting of five trees create a linear equilibrium in another. Many *New Topographics* artists also close-cropped their images such that there is rarely a suggestion of what lies beyond the façade in the picture. Among those who did include the broader landscape, most did so specifically because the surroundings are palatably indistinct and endless. Adams' suburban developments are often in the middle of flat dirtlands; Joe Deal's aerial shots make housing developments look isolated within topographic deserts; and Frank Gohlke's images focus on human development within dying and innocuous nature. Gohlke's *Landscape, Los Angeles* (1974) is perhaps the most indicative of this critical focus in that it appears to be an image of Bunker Hill, Downtown with the Federal Building peeking up in the background. However, despite the fact that much of

Downtown was developed in the 1970s, Gohlke's particular chosen vantage point suggests instead the idea of a post-apocalyptic business development within a dry field. In other words, much of *New Topographics* works go out of their way to decontextualize place, creating in turn the ironic suggestion of place (and presence) that exists, but is nonetheless indeterminate.

Opie's images of mini-malls have a similar sense of formality and a shared sense of emptiness as the images comprising *New Topographics*, but these are light visual similarities, not formal facsimiles. Her pictures have a greater sense of depth overall and do not employ the same uncompromising frontal view as evidenced in Baltz's *South Wall, Mazda Motors*. For one, most of the mini-malls that comprise the series are constructed in L- or U-formations, rather than single rectangular boxes, and Opie chose to photograph the structures in their entirety, thereby forgoing the suggestion of a single frontal plane. The angles of the buildings help to restore a sense of depth. In addition, many of Opie's images have a greater sense of context and a greater awareness of their urban surroundings than the photographs included in *New Topographics*. Opie's *Untitled #1* (1997), perhaps the most reproduced image of the series, shows that the mini-mall is distinctly urban. The surrounding buildings, which are modernist steel blocks and create a skyline resembling a conglomeration of Legos, nevertheless establish a clear vanishing point, as well as a real and physical sense of the urban environment. The sense of depth is also reaffirmed by the Metro bus sign in the foreground, which firmly establishes Opie's and the viewer's location within the scene in a way that seems physically secure, versus the uncertainty of positioning in Baltz's *South Wall, Mazda Motors*. The same inclusion of environmental context appears throughout the *Mini-malls* series, and even when it is less obvious, such as in *Untitled #3* (1997), there is still something to provide spatial recession—in *Untitled #3* it is the telephone wires.

Opie's photographs are also substantially more visually cluttered than those of her predecessors', to such a degree that the diversity of textures, graytones, and text compromise the overall compositional rigor. *Untitled #1* is ostensibly a balanced composition, with the repetition of the boxy buildings and the convergence of vanishing lines at the center. The single high-rise acts as the anchor. However, there are not only breaks in the linear repetitions (trees that pop up haphazardly and streetlights that seem more clustered than assembled in lines), there is also the variety of visual weight throughout as the viewer's eye dances from sign to sign and texture to texture. Compare, for example, the Spanish-style roof and rough brick walls of the burrito stand on the righthand side of the picture, juxtaposed with the dark mottled tree branches and slick glass façade of the building behind it. There is something refreshingly hodgepodge about the strip-mall, an energetic visual contrast to the more streamlined architecture that characterizes *South Wall, Mazda Motors*. The signs on the mini-mall itself also detract from the repeating architectural elements, such as the implied grid created by the large store windows and their black frames. Opie felt that the signs called attention to "the multicultural aspect of the city. They are not about the Starbucks and Noah's Bagels and all the other chains that are so prevalent . . . They are the Mom and Pop shops of the American Dream."[93] Here, despite the barrenness of *Mini-malls*' scenes, Opie suggests some kinship with Banham's theories: an architecture that appears as disposable schlock does so because it serves social mobility. Opie's distinction between Mom and Pop businesses and larger corporate enterprises such as Starbucks and Noah's Bagels also points to the fact that she perceives political nuances when it comes to capitalism, namely that the influx of small businesses represent a more democratic distribution of wealth. The visual clutter in her imagery, the diversity of textures and surfaces, both metaphorically

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[93] Catherine Opie, "Mini-malls: Shifting Boundaries," *Architectural Design* 69, no 7/8 (1999): 75.

represent the diverse face of the American Dream.

Opie's *Mini-malls* also makes a very different use of black and white than most *New Topographics* works in this respect. Whereas the use of black and white film was a *New Topographics* strategy to increasingly flatten and abstract space by making the environs more graphic, it is a preemptive measure in Opie's work. Had the shopping malls been shot in color, they would have lost their sense of desolation, but also their sense of repose and quiet, becoming instead a visual cacophony. In eradicating the color palette from *Mini-malls*, Opie's images certainly elicit a sense of abandonment, but her photographs are not as indifferent, cool, or calculating as *New Topographics* works. Although they do not convey emotional warmth, they do elicit a sense of emotional pathos—a phenomenological sensitivity that would have been lost in the frenzy of color. In this sense, Opie's *Mini-malls* therefore draws a very different conceptual conclusion than the criticism of their time. The series exhibits the same kind of disconnected loneliness that urbanists feared, but cleverly bypass Jameson's spatial pastiche and Frampton's charge that the postmodern city could not offer a phenomenological or emotional experience. Opie's *Mini-malls* may be mournful, but it is a stretch to call them cynical.

There is also a sense of latent optimism inherent in the fact that mini-malls are themselves fluid—they are literally the blank canvas onto which a myriad of functional definitions are applied and re-applied. Opie's photographs capture this sense of change in such a way that appears less anxiety-stricken than the dim presentation afforded by *New Topographics*. They portray a paradoxical flipside to the homogeneity of postmodern space by suggesting that the very mundane nature of strip-mall architecture also offers a resistance to definition and that such bland environments can also sponsor opportunity and variation. This interpretation thereby

introduces personhood into the equation and proposes an interesting alternate response to the connection between postmodern place and postmodern identity. The goal of *New Topographics* photography appears to be to expose the homogenization of the new urban and suburban landscape and, in turn, its standardizing effect on communities and individuals. In this construct, the viewer, faced with Gohlke's abandoned Kmart parking lot or Baltz's *South Wall* and the profound indifference of both scenic environments, encounters a disturbing loss of selfhood, or the feeling of no longer being a distinct, whole individual. Notably, the connection between place and identity became central to critical discussion in the 1990s and engendered a bias against the postmodern city because, it was assumed, that the vacuity in meaning or authenticity to postmodern architecture and landscape created a vacuity in meaning and authenticity to the contemporary self.

THINNED-OUT L.A.

> The concentric ring structure of the Chicago School was essentially a construct of the city as an organic accretion around a central, organizing core. Instead, we have identified a post-modern urban process in which the urban periphery organizes the centre within the context of a globalizing capitalism . . . Conventional city form, Chicago-style, is sacrificed in favour of a non-contiguous collage of parcelized, consumption-oriented landscapes devoid of conventional centres yet wired into electronic propinquity and nominally unified by the mythologies of the disinformation superhighway.[94]

Michael Dear's description of Los Angeles reveals a feature of the contemporary city that he

[94] Michael J. Dear, *The Postmodern Urban Condition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 158-160.

associates with postmodern urbanism: the notion of placelessness. Within the field of humanist geography and philosophy, this quality of "placelessness" that pervades the existing city in locations like empty or abandoned lots, nondescript construction (like mini-malls), or parking lots, has several terms: Robert David Sack called such locations "thinned-out places," Ignasi de Sola-Morales Rubio referred to them as "terrain vague," and Norman Klein called them simply "invisible" or "monuments to forgetting."[95] All refer to, as Edward S. Casey puts it, "the *disarray of place* . . . [places that] merge into an indifferent state that is reminiscent of nothing so much as *space* . . . Their very surface is attenuated, being open to continual reshaping and reconnecting with other surfaces," and thus also correspond to the postmodern condition of personal identity as "distracted," diffuse, and similarly "thinned-out."[96] Although not discussed specifically in Casey's work, a mini-mall is a "thinned out" paradigm because of it's flexible anonymity: a locksmith in this corner and a Chinese take-out joint in that corner; a dry cleaner's storefront one week that becomes a liquor store the next. Customers are similarly nothing but everyday consumers, whose purpose and identity is reduced to function and relative to whatever they are there to purchase.

The morphing of place into the conceptual unreal is not a recent phenomenon. Anxieties regarding the loss of "true place" come out of reactions to the developing city during the Industrial Revolution and inspired romantic notions of wilderness and nature. The 19th-century concept of wilderness as something sublime, untainted, sacred—the "natural unfallen antithesis

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[95] Robert David Sack, *Homo Geographics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Ignasi de Sola-Morales Rubio, "Terrain Vague" in *Anyplace*, ed. Cynthia C. Davidson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995); Norman Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 1997).

[96] Edward S. Casey, "Body, Self, and Landscape: A Geophilosophical Inquiry into the Place-World," in *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies*, ed., Steven Hoelscher, and Karen E. Till (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 406-407.

of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul"—was no less constructed than the idea of the modern urban core, as many scholars have demonstrated.[97] This construction arose out of dramatic economic changes: in particular, the increasingly mechanized labor of the average factory worker, whose alienation from his own body, from "natural" cycles of agricultural time, and the means of production (to use Marxist terminology), recast Nature as a restorative source.

At the turn of the millennium, the argument appears to have shifted and the concept of the prewar modern city is the savior. Now the concern is a pervading social alienation from production itself, such that the average urban resident merely consumes without producing. The resulting anxiety now leads an attempt to reclaim and glorify the concept of a bustling city in which the street sponsored a diversity of activities and social interactions, an image that approximates Jane Jacobs' celebrated vision of the ideal urban neighborhood in *The Death and Life of American Cities*. Today's concept of the ideal modern City is centralized and peripatetic, the ultimate foil to the postmodern city in which "[c]ommerce and civic uses are easily decentralized into distant chain store destinations and government centers. Homes and jobs are isolated in subdivisions and office parks."[98] Whereas in the 19th-century, Nature offered isolation and respite from the constant interfacing demanded of city-dwellers, the 21st-century looks to an older model of the city in order to *restore* public interfacing to the urban experience. New York is often heralded as the "modern city"—a restorative romantic counterpoint to Los Angeles, the "postmodern city," as a popular adage among filmmakers demonstrates: "Do not shop movie scripts about L.A. neighborhoods. That 'stuff' is identified by movie insiders as a New York

[97] William Cronon, "The Trouble With Wilderness," in *Uncommon Ground*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 80.

[98] Peter Calthorpe, *Next American Metropolis* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 17.

story, about doing the right thing, about tenements, slum lords, candy stores."[99] All Los Angeles has to offer are its "thinned-out places," areas forgotten and nondescript that "suggest absence, an access to no memory at all, a good place to dump a body."[100]

The idea of "thinned-out" places, places connected by wireless electronics and virtual mythologies, as hinted at by Dear and stated outright by Jean Baudrillard, predicts a future in which place no longer exists: "'Los Angeles' *as place* is no longer real. Instead 'Los Angeles' has become a third-order simulation that relies on the explicitly imaginary nature of surrounding tourists attractions like Disneyland and Magic Mountain to make us *believe* in its reality."[101] The postmodern millennial city is in danger of literally disappearing, of transforming into simulacra, the physical converted to the visual and the sensory converted into the immaterial.

THINNED-OUT ANGELENOS

Casey argues that the notion of losing place is profoundly disturbing, not because of any longing for the urban sidewalk or desire for the centralized city—such is a manufactured nostalgia growing out of the essential issue: the fact that placelessness corresponds to *self*-lessness. The superficiality of place reflects a more profound loss of the defined, articulated self:

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[99] Norman Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 1997), 250.

[100] Ibid., 136.

[101] Darnell M. Hunt, paraphrasing Jean Beaudrillard, in "Los Angeles as Visual World: Media, Seeing and the City," in *Visual Worlds*, ed. John R. Hall, Blake Stimpson, and Lisa Tamiris Becher (London: Routledge, 2005), 142. Jean Beaudrillard's comments on Los Angeles and Disneyland appear in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. S. F. Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 12-13.

“Thinned-out places are the sort with which we are surrounded today put the self to the test, tempting it to mimic their tenuous character by becoming itself an indecisive entity incapable of the kind of resolute action that is required in a determinately structured place like a workshop . . . a self of infinite distractibility whose own surface is continually complicated by new pleasures: in short, a self that has become (in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s arresting term) a ‘desiring machine.’”[102] It is no surprise then, that in their preoccupation with such thinned-out places *New Topographics* artists liked to photograph commercial business developments, such as Frank Gohlke’s deserted Kmart parking lot in *Landscape, St. Paul* (1974), Robert Adams’ market-street sprawl in *Colfax Avenue, Lakewood, Colorado* (1970), John Schott’s empty motel greenspace in *Untitled* (1973) and Lewis Baltz’s *South Wall, Mazda Motors, 2121 East Main Street, Irvine* (1974). Such images present such new commercial space as the creation of American culture as a society of “desiring” individuals—a society that operates on an ethos of commercial fetishism in which the potentiality of purchasing merges with the potentiality of being itself, such that a person’s sense of self is defined by endless acquisition. He or she is never fully whole in this condition, for desire is premised on lack. The self becomes defined by the desire to possess and in this sense, is also never actually present. In this way, the concept is a derivation of Jameson’s original distinction between contemporary culture as resolutely preoccupied with the spatial (versus the temporal) realms. When space only offers the unending present of ever-unfolding simulacra, selfhood and identity becomes unstable (“schizophrenic,” is Jameson’s term).

Perhaps the most arresting image that encapsulates this diluted, “desiring” individual

[102] Casey, 404, 407.

within the context of postmodern "thinned-out" place is Robert Adams' photograph *Colorado Springs, Colorado* (1968), which depicts a lone woman silhouetted in profile in the window of her single-story tract home. William Jenkins, the curator who created the *New Topographics* exhibition, famously argued that the images were objective and impartial, literal documentations of the postwar American city and suburb, and that the emphasis was on a new kind of aesthetic formalism, "conveying substantial amounts of visual information but eschewing entirely the aspects of beauty, emotion and opinion."[103] Yet, it is difficult to examine *Colorado Springs* and ignore the image's profound sense of isolation. In addition, for all the photograph's overtures towards formalism and abstraction—its strong lines, its stylistic composition, its high contrast of fields of black and white—its employment of the language of formalism ultimately critiques the very modernist standards Jenkins espoused. Rather than a "machine for living," the tract home appears as a machine dominating life. The woman is dwarfed and literally contained by the strong geometries of the windows—double-framed, even, like a screen-upon-screen. She does not so much stand inside a home or a specific place, so much as she merely occupies space. Or does she even do that? Although the photograph is of an existing house (and thereby ostensibly three-dimensional), its portrayal suggests a three-dimensional space that is transitioning into virtual space. Adams uncompromising frontal angle and the stark shapes of light and dark convert the image into an interplay of surface. The woman, in turn, is similarly reduced to surface, like a projection onto a distant television screen, a homeowner who is incidental within her own home. Logically, the house must have an interior and an exterior, but visually, the photograph suggests that the distinction no longer exists—in fact, the mirrored closet door, set directly across from the large picture window, produces an unsettling sense that the image seen

[103] William Jenkins, introduction to *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*, ed. William Jenkins (Rochester, NY: International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House, 1975), 5.

from the other side of the home is an identical reflection, a subtle nod to the collapse of spatial directionality.

Colorado Springs, Colorado invokes the postmodern "desiring machine" in several different ways. For one, the woman herself, as the picture of loneliness, appears as the symbolic "desiring machine," seemingly without identity except as the de-socialized resident. The image also provokes self-conscious spectatorship on behalf of the viewer as it highlights the distant sexual overtones of voyeurism. The viewer, in this case, becomes also a kind of "desiring machine," manifesting a kind of social curiosity about the woman in the picture. And finally, there is the sociopolitical notion of material desire juxtaposed with social desire, such that the procurement of material needs in the comfortable house, tidy lawn, and assumed quiet and safe suburban neighborhood, is mistaken for the satisfaction of emotional needs for companionship and social connectivity. The hyper-documentarian look of the picture, combined with Adams' equally distanced and formalist explanation ("The house was identical with others in the development. I felt the sadness of the figure, but I also loved the light") converts the supposed material objectivity of documentary photography into a conceptual device, in which the "perfunctory" mechanics of the medium are highlighted in order to suggest a restriction of the sociability of the artistic practice.[104]

Such an idea—the loss of self-determination—appears foreboding and unsettling throughout much of the work of the *New Topographics* artists. The question then arises, when considering Opie's work and its production in the context of a culture twenty years post-*New*

[104] Robert Adams, qtd. from the caption to *Colorado Springs, Colorado* in *The New West: Landscapes Along the Colorado Front Range* in Mark Rawlinson, "Disconsolate and Inconsolable: Neutrality and New Topographics," from *Reframing the New Topographics*, eds. Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010): 132.

Topographics, is if mini-malls are similarly “thinned out” places, does her treatment of them respond to the same kind of anxiety regarding a loss of self? Is the viewer meant to experience a similar sense of dread and anxiety when confronted with Opie’s imagery as they would be with photographs by Adams, Baltz, or Gohlke? It is significant that Opie’s treatment of the small-time commercial environs of Los Angeles stems from her being a local, with a particular curiosity and familiarity regarding the strip-malls she shoots. Her familiarity with such locations yields a distinct political methodology that is more questioning than defining or argumentative. It is less assured and more ambiguous than the condemning *New Topographics* point of view. In a 2007 interview with artist Andrea Bowers, Opie articulated how her casual, documentarian approach stemmed from a philosophy regarding the cohesion of landscape and community:

> I think it’s more that they [critics] questioned supporting pluralism . . . If you really want to talk about democracy, it can’t be considered under the guise of a singular notion of community; it has to be represented in the kind of multifaceted layers that actually exist within our world . . . And so I have to look at the United States in this broader way that I have been doing—through American cities, or documenting L.A., or looking at temporary communities of icehouses or surfers. To me it’s about trying to create a true democratic voice in relationship to my ideas about how I participate within American culture.[105]

Opie’s explanation reveals that her practice is an exercise in a multifaceted experience of a city’s formative environs—an approach that favors discovery over politics and experience over judgment. In documenting this distinctly peripatetic practice, Opie’s resulting photographs offer a view of the urban community as tenuous—anemic, even—but nevertheless resolutely present. The strip-malls may be empty, but there is still a calm sense of the promise of activity. This slight tinge of optimism also translates to Opie’s presence as the photographer and to the

[105] Opie, qtd. in *Between Artists: Andrea Bowers Catherine Opie*, 36-37.

viewer's sensibility as well, for both observers are removed, but witnesses nonetheless.

These distinctions evidence how Opie's treatment of the commercialization of Los Angeles, while visually similar to that of the *New Topographics* photographers, is more pluralist. It also illustrates a difference in reception to the postmodern city and its effects on self-determination that is influenced by identity politics in the 1990s versus the 1970s and specifically, the crisis of modernist authority that percolated discourse from the 1970s through the 1990s. Opie's *Mini-malls* do not necessarily embrace the concrete jungle or its attending emptiness, but they do offer a counterpoint to the idea that the city-dweller is wholly lost, as in literally lost in a sea of anonymous commercial structures, as well as psychologically lost, as in denied a cohesive sense of personhood. The final commentary in this chapter relates to the fact that although Opie's *Mini-malls* can be said to offer the image of fluidity in postmodern space, the series also simultaneously argues that such fluidity comes at a price—that to experience the freedom of a fluid identity, one must also succumb to a postmodern sense of placelessness. This accounts for the particular indifference of the series, as well as their queerness. To this end, recent investigations on the relationship between place, space, and identity become important—specifically in the work of philosopher Edward S. Casey and geographer Doreen Massey.

The Freedom and Price of Ambiguity: Modern Anxiety, Postmodern Reality

I have attempted to historicize the theoretical debate between the optimism of Reyner Banham and the cynicism of Kenneth Frampton as a shift in reception to an increasingly postindustrial economy. I have contended that the arguments by these two urban theorists stem from their requisite and relative comfort pertaining to a new, late 20th-century economic reality,

in which commercial planning in America became increasingly oriented towards material consumption. Big-box shopping plazas and streetside strip-malls engaged with city residents strictly as consumers. Although city-dwellers have always been assumed consumers in some sense, the new direct parking-lot-to-store-and-back emphasized the difference between life on the polyglot pedestrian sidewalk in which one interacts with the environment as an urban protagonist, and operating with a kind of functional efficiency associated with machines and automatons. As philosopher Paul C. Adams argues, "the disappearance of walks . . . directly contributes to the often observed thinning out of the meaning of place frequently associated with modernity and the reduction of sensory involvement in one's surroundings, as well as weakening place-based forms of community . . . [O]ne's senses are deprived of stimuli and . . . one's body becomes an unnecessary appendage to a mechanized system that demands immobility for the sake of production (not unlike the logic that guides the rearing of veal calves and chickens)."[106]

Adams' argument shares in the skepticism that characterizes the writings of many urban theorists of the 1990s, including Frampton, Jameson, and members of the L.A. School (Davis, Soja, Klein, and Dear come to mind), and demonstrates how space and place connects to an economic awareness marked by apprehension and fear because it appears hegemonic. The State, or large-scale capital, or corporate interests, they argue, have in one way or another reconstituted the political individual into a complacent consumer. Space and place are implicated as the physical expression of this conversion. When Klein speaks of a "topology of forgetting," for example, he is claiming that the history of socioeconomic struggles over space and spatial

[106] Paul C. Adams, "Peripatetic Imagery and Peripatetic Sense of Place," in *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies*. Ed. Paul C. Adams, Steven Hoelscher, and Karen E. Till, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001): 187.

control is quickly overwritten and ignored, such that "the towering impact of global consumer marketing and its electronic non-communities" becomes a foregone conclusion, presenting the structural emblems of consumer culture as inevitable, literally erasing any trace of democratic space.[107] Whereas Venturi and Banham's approaches to postwar architecture embraced the new economic reality as democratic—*Learning from Las Vegas* speaks of "automobile-oriented commercial architecture of urban sprawl" as an expression of "eclecticism . . . [which] provokes bold impact in the vast and complex setting of a new landscape of big spaces, high speeds, and complex programs"—later critics, perhaps with the benefit of some historical distance, resolutely condemned the postmodern city as neither eclectic nor complex, but standard and stifling.[108]

I now wish to shift the argument slightly beyond an observance of how the rhetoric related to changes in the late 20th-century American economic climate to examine how the critical perspectives of the 1990s also reflect an anxiety related to the concept of a modernist critical authority in crisis. As geographer Doreen Massey has posited:

> Who is it who is so troubled by time-space compression and a newly experienced fracturing of identity? Who is it *really* that is hankering after a notion of place as settled, a resting place? Who is it that is worrying about the breakdown of barriers supposedly containing an identity? It is at least by no means a coincidence the exultations in the uncontrollable complexity of the city (Virginia Woolf), the questioning of the very notion that a settled place to call one's own was *ever* a reality (Toni Morrison, bell hooks), the insistence that memory and recovery does not have to take the form of nostalgia (bell hooks), and the celebration of a multiplicity of home-places (Michèle le Dœuff) . . . that all this has so often come from those who were 'on the margins' of that old, settled (and anyway

[107] Klein, Norman, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 1997), 89.

[108] Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1972), 87, 8.

mythologized?) coherence.[109]

To this end, as prescient and thoughtful as Kenneth Frampton's critique of architecture in the postmodern world is, the panicked sensibility in his writings implies that a deeply personal anxiety informs his perspective. To speak of architecture and the urban landscape as "in crisis," as Frampton did in "Towards a Critical Regionalism," betrays a strong reaction towards change and cultural status quo—an actual crisis of architecture and landscape, one could argue, would be if nothing were being built or planned. Architecture and landscape are not in themselves what is at stake, but rather the definition of space and place, and in turn, the definition of selfhood. Within the new era of fluidity and mobility, there is also the downside, which is placelessness. And as the fluidity of place contributes to fluidity of identity, it also means that there is never any security, as boundaries and categories begin to break down.

What seems most unsettling to historians like Frampton is the fact that the new postmodern landscape and its accompanying architecture don't correspond very conveniently to specific "schools" or aesthetics that are traditionally defined as "enlightening" or "edifying." By the 1990s, Frampton had completely dismissed architecture as defunct, lamenting "[t]he dystopia of the megalopolis is already an irreversible historical fact: it has long since installed a new way of life, not to say a new nature."[110] Whereas in the 1980s, Frampton had articulated that the relationship between the built form and its landscape was one in which architecture should take precedence (it should take its cues from the environment, he argued, but nevertheless preserve its

[109] Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 122-3.

[110] Kenneth Frampton, "Toward an Urban Landscape," *Columbia Documents*, ed. Robert A. M. Stern, et al. vol. 4 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995): 93.

own power and distinctiveness as a structure), in the 1990s, Frampton had shifted the revolutionary potential he saw in architecture to landscape: "priority should now be afforded to landscape, rather than to freestanding built form, and second that there is a pressing need to transform certain megalopolitan types such as shopping malls, parking lots, and office parks into landscape built forms."[111] Over the course of a decade, Frampton's attitudes towards "megalopolitan types" of consumerist architecture had shifted, from dismissing them outright to calling for their reform. It was a new perspective that reflected 1990s developments in the changing nature of the contemporary city; an acceptance of the fact that in the era of postindustrial capitalism, urbanization is increasingly decentralized and as such, the modern architectural form's reliance upon the municipal core city and the permanent built form renders it incompatible with the new realities of culture and society characterized by dispersion and mutability.[112]

But the real loss is, of course, a modernist sensibility of identity, because "[p]ersonal identity is no longer a matter of sheer self-consciousness but now involves intrinsically an awareness of one's place—a specifically geographical awareness."[113] Edward Casey frames this

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[111] Kenneth Frampton, qtd. in Kelly Shannon, "From Theory to Resistance: Landscape Urbanism in Europe," in *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, ed., Charles Waldheim (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006), 144.

[112] Another indication of this change in urbanity and its affect on architecture is Frampton's colleague Hal Foster's critique of Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall, which had been completed, to great fanfare, in 2003. Foster's essay, "Master Builder" references the fact that although Gehry had designed and redesigned Disney Hall several times and had ultimately settled on the façade's construction to be travertine, the Music Center Board of Trustees requested the building to be faced in titanium because they wanted to capitalize on the success of the Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao and elevate the prestige of Disney Hall by association (see "Master Builder" in *Design and Crime* (London: Verso, 2003), 27-42.). The choice to adapt Gehry's design reflects the new disillusionment with large-scale civic building projects as commercial and more evocative of the *idea* of Good Architecture than necessarily good architecture. The Board's request envisioned Gehry as a brand before an architect.

[113] Casey, 406.

idea within a philosophical debate between modern versus postmodern views on place and space, arguing:

> [t]he entire debate between modernism and postmodernism can be expressed in terms of the still unresolved relationship—the modernist insisting on the priority of space (whether in the form of well-ordered physical space or highly structured institutional space) and the postmodernist conversely maintaining the primacy of place, and in particular, lived place . . . [place] has no privileged relationship to that space, either by way of exemplification or representation . . . To believe in such a genealogy is to buy into the modernist myth that the universe is made of pure extended space and that anything less than such infinite space, including place, follows from it by condensation or delimitation.[114]

This separation has, according to Casey, afforded a false dichotomy between the internal and subjective intellectual consciousness of the individual (or, the conceptual sense of selfhood) and the physical awareness of the body, the former being primary and eternal; the latter, perfunctory and malleable. The reality, however, is a synthesis between the two, a self that is "constituted by a core of habitudes that incorporate and continue at both psychical and physical levels, what one has experienced in particular places . . . Personal identity is no longer a matter of sheer self-consciousness but now involves intrinsically an awareness of one's place—a specifically geographical awareness . . . There is no place without self; and no self without place."[115] To believe that one's self relies upon the messy, ever-changing conditions of place is to admit a degree of fragmentation of one's identity. It disturbs the notion of defining oneself in terms of subject/object, or as an individual who is distinct from one's context, which aligns with modernist identity. It is important to note that no matter how communally focused Frampton's

[114] Casey, 404.

[115] Ibid., 409, 406.

arguments are, and no matter how closely his contemporaries in the L.A. School align their arguments to the history of a specific place, ultimately, there is the sense that theirs are criticisms engendered by modernists surveying the landscape, instead of experiencing it intrinsically.[116] In their need to define and pronounce, Frampton and his L.A. School contemporaries have little tolerance for ambiguity, uncertainty, and nuance.

The differences between a modernist relationship between identity and space and place versus the postmodern relationship can be traced artistically in the aforementioned differences in approach to landscape photography as practiced by *New Topographics* artists and Opie. The (predominately white and male) *New Topographics* photographers assess their subjects from the perspective of a removed surveyor. Despite some of their claims that they are merely documentarians or observers, there is clearly the expression of a political sentiment that is critical of the new postmodern city. Opie, on the other hand, approached the strip-malls with a similar documentarian style, but nevertheless a perspective that conveys something beyond surveying. Her presence as the artist is standoffish and objectifying, but not to the point of making specific decrees or proclamations. Hers is the sensibility of a local, and conveys the sense of investiture of the city-dweller. It is this sensibility that associates *Mini-malls* with a more postmodern conceptualizing of selfhood in its relationship to space and place, and one that enables the series to offer some political commentary or awareness, without being authoritative or prescriptive.

It is not accurate to imply that *Mini-malls* is an enthusiastic or optimistic series. One does

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[116] Doreen Massey in particular has written an extensive critique of Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies* and specifically indicts him for maintaining the "apparent authority of the overseer," in contrast to his stated intent to focus on multiplicity and plurality of the experience of Los Angeles. See: Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 217-224.

have to contend with the images' emptiness, an emptiness that narratively and conceptually implicates the aloof, perhaps even inhuman nature of the millennial dispersed city. In one sense, the political sentiment behind emptying the city falls under the idea of the dispersion of community and the loss of collective democracy. This is, at least on the surface, perfectly consistent with Opie's politics, as she has commented on the fact that traditional protest in America has started to become aesthetic or performative, rather than a true statement of solidarity or change.[117] The emptiness, in conjunction with the series' focus on exclusively commercial spaces, highlights a sensitivity to capitalist interests surpassing the needs and discourse of a social republic. Indeed, it is difficult to dismiss the obvious isolation and melancholy of *Mini-malls*. At the same time, although the empty parking lots, gray skies, and closed steel gating can imply denial, loss, and failure, there is something about Opie's *Mini-malls* that is less austere than Baltz's *South Wall, Mazda Motors* and less apocalyptic than Gohlke's *Landscape, St. Paul*. The stores are not abandoned or boarded up like the Bechers' water towers, but rather in a state of calm stasis. The strip-malls assume a more ambiguous character that is contained in their stillness: they are still and silent, but somehow also transmit potential. One could see the images as not the urban wasteland, but perhaps a respite before a typical workday.

This quizzical, documentary, and experiential approach refers to an openness on Opie's part to the idea of postmodern unstable identity. The mini-malls are perfectly in-between landscapes: innocuous and mutable, but also functional and active. They are the quintessential "thinned-out places." Frampton and his contemporaries assume that such ill-defined landscapes threaten selfhood, but Casey theorizes a more mediated argument. He maintains that the

[117] Opie, qtd. in *Between Artists: Andrea Bowers Catherine Opie*, 48-50.

assumption that one could lose his or her sense of self is as reliable a claim that place could somehow become so diffuse that is ceases to be an actual location. These are of course, physical impossibilities, but Casey's parallel point is that just as place (and self) can never simply disappear or dissolve, a shift in paradigm, from articulated space and personhood to "thinned-out" place and personhood, requires a shift in understanding, rather than the assumption of loss. He writes, "…both self and place may prosper in the very desert of the postmodern world, that gain may accompany loss: the experience of each being enhanced, rather than simply undermined in the wasteland of thinned-out places . . . the self is not only enfeebled by nonrobust places; it can also make a virtue of the circumstance by becoming more sensitive to differences between places . . . for all his or her unsettledness, learns much more about the larger world and becomes more reflective than does the person who refuses to leave the hearth."[118] Thus, the value of the "wasteland" of the mini-mall is its deference to difference and variety, its pluralism.

This embrace of multiplicity appears most cogently in the emphasis on multiculturalism in *Mini-malls*, as specifically noted by the signage. Not only are the shopfront signs in different languages, but they are often in different languages from each-other; in other words, the strip-malls are hardly ever solely Korean or solely Mexican, but a mélange of cultures cobbled together in one structure. The emphasis on these signs has obvious broader political implications, which is not just an embrace of multiculturalism in the abstract, but a very real economic commentary on how new capital is controlled and disseminated at the millennium. Economic hegemonies from important groundwork for modernist critics such as Frampton, Jameson, and Soja, whose indictment of corporate capitalism parallels their critique of postmodern space and

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[118] Casey, 409, 408. Casey's mention of "hearth" is a nod to Yi-Fu Tuan and his conclusions in *Cosmos and Hearth.*

place. What is telling about their treatment of postindustrial capitalism is that they not only posit themselves as critical authorities—galvanizing authorities, but prescriptive nonetheless—who are self-appointed stewards of the conditions of revolution, but also that they confine the victimization of disenfranchised "minorities" (women, proletariats, non-Whites, homosexuals) to a question of economics: "racism and sexism, and the need to refer to them, is recognized, but it is assumed throughout, either explicitly or implicitly, that the only axis of power which matters in relation to these distinct forms of domination is that which stems fairly directly from the relations of production. No other relations of power and dominance are seriously addressed. The fact that patriarchy, for instance, is not reducible to the terms of a debate on modes of production, is not considered."[119] Opie's *Mini-malls*, in their highlighting of a small-business economy increasingly controlled by ethnic minorities, is a quiet political response to such assumptions on behalf of such critics. The images imply that there is no need for a cohesive architectural program, because the postmodern urban environment is both the result of and the support for a newer economic reality, one that embraces the uncertainty of difference.

Opie has alluded to such an economic awareness in relation to her *American Cities* project, a broad endeavor to document American cities that has spanned several decades, which includes *Mini-malls*: "The location I choose to photograph, be it Wall Street, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, or the downtown of Minneapolis, creates an economic examination of how cities function in America. All of it is about shared economy."[120] She also referred specifically to the *Mini-malls* photographs as indicative of the "utopian notion of difference that is integral to the

[119] Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 221.

[120] Opie, qtd. in *Between Artists: Andrea Bowers Catherine Opie*, 18.

American Dream."[121] The two quotations indicate that *Mini-malls* is more of a response to the cynical documentarian style of its *New Topographics* predecessors, challenging the viewer to examine the millennial economic reality as not specifically destructive or standardizing, but perhaps simply the beginnings of a simple regime change, from the stability of a predominately white-male articulated landscape, to one that embraces continual renewal, change, and shifts in standards.

Perhaps the most powerful expression of this embrace of multiplicity comes from the way *Mini-malls* accommodates a sense of observational presence in a way that is distinct from the documentarian voyeur that characterizes the viewer of Adams' *Colorado Springs* or Baltz's *South Wall*. *New Topographics* photography tends to create the viewer's sense of removal from the scene. In part, this removal derives similarly from the suggestion of detachment on the part of the photographer. In some cases, the photographer's absence is more literal or conspicuous, as is Baltz's in relation to *South Wall*, or it can simply be the suggestion of impartiality that predominates most *New Topographics* works. Adams is obviously "present" as the photographer of *Colorado Springs*, but his presence as the picture-taker is overtaken by an image that underscores the viewer's sense of voyeurism—Adams is thereby a "backstage" presence, if anything. More importantly, however, is the viewer's sensitivity to isolation and stillness when viewing *Colorado Springs* or *South Wall*. The viewer witnesses his or her own separateness reflected in the lone housewife of *Colorado Springs*—a woman that cryptically seems part of a simulated environment that the viewer is somehow a part of as the voyeur, but completely outside of as well. The viewer of *South Wall* encounters an uncompromising linearity of a building façade, so organized and surface-oriented, that it suggests itself as the static screen.

[121] Opie, qtd. in Reilly, 95.

Both *Colorado Springs* and *South Wall* present the postmodern environment to the viewer as a world that is essentially unreal, and that sense of unreality comes as a direct result of particular choices regarding the composition and design of the photographs. The frontal perspective provides a heightened sense of balance, surface, linearity, and flatness, all of which create a sense of space being not only static, but depthless or even 'unspatial.' In this sense the photographs visually recreate Jameson's conceptual ideation of the postmodern condition as the schizoid experience of the spatial. In Jameson's thesis, postmodern space is simultaneous and instantaneous, amorphously and exclusively present, without the sense of linear time. He has thus compared the experience of space as cognitive pinball, or schizophrenia:

> The connection between this kind of linguistic malfunction and the psyche of the schizophrenic may then be grasped by way of a twofold proposition: first, that personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one's present; and, second, that such active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time. If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time.[122]

To this end, Adams and Baltz have crafted images that remove context, both spatial and temporal, in order to prevent what Jameson refers to as the necessary "unification of past and future with one's present."[123] The conspicuous lack of depth relates to the loss of spatial context, while the compositional balance suggests an equalizing sameness such that the landscape

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[122] Jameson, 26-27.

[123] Ibid., 26.

becomes provocatively unchanging or frozen. The woman in Adams' image exists seemingly outside of space and time, literally disconnected from her surroundings. Thus, the images utilize the disorienting flatness in order to allude to existence as forever caught in a frenetic, decontextualized, present.

However, as Massey points out, Jameson's assumptions conceptualize space in such a way that dismisses its fundamental social construct, "as the simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales, from the most local level to the most global . . . the spatial is socially constituted . . . [and] the simultaneous coexistence of social relations . . . cannot be conceptualized as other than dynamic."[124] This sociability of space is not schizoid or instantaneous, but perhaps merely, to use Massey's term, simultaneous: a distinction that highlights the nature of postmodern space as not one that demands understanding all at once, but one that supports continual change. Implicit in this reconceptualization is the suggestion that the only people who are disturbed by this continual change are people who wish to corral it, not necessarily those who are content to exist within it. Adams' and Baltz's photographs engage with the former desire to control, or to achieve instantaneous and all-encompassing understanding of the urban world by literally composing their images in a dominant framework.

Opie's images, by contrast, imply simultaneous existence, as her images suggest her presence in the scene as a civic observer. Their compositions are balanced and highly "designed," yet somehow still preserve the informality of a street snapshot. The inclusion of the street in the foreground of the *Mini-malls* photographs, as well as their urban backdrops (bits of residential roofing and treetops behind the strip-malls, neighboring buildings, bus stops and

[124] Doreen Massey, "Politics and Space/Time," *New Left Review* 196, November-December (1992), 80.

street signs), helps to contextualize her position as the photographer, as well as the viewer's. In addition, despite the relative calm tone and formal composure of Opie's photographs, there are pointed references to a sense of happenstance.

The bus-stop sign in the foreground of *Untitled #1* for instance, is an interesting inclusion. It is a framing device that contextualizes the viewer's perspective visually, but also narratively, as it alludes to the image as a scene one might view while waiting for the bus. In doing so, it also makes one's viewership more participatory than removed. The image begins to appear more like a record of one moment in time that has been captured and excised from a street-life that is otherwise in continuous change—it is, after all, a reminder of things literally coming and going. In another image, *Untitled #15*, Opie recounts how a Pizza Hut exists in one corner of the strip-mall and a mom-and-pop pizzeria competes with it in the other, a juxtaposition that she associated with the casual haphazard nature of urban development: "I like those little things that happen. That's why I'm so invested in being a documentary photographer."[125] Opie's comment also points to what Massey has discussed as the intrinsic element of "chaos" in the spatial: "Such relative locations are produced out of the independent operation of separate determinations . . . Thus, the chaos of the spatial results from the happenstance juxtapositions, the accidental separations, the often paradoxical nature of the spatial arrangements that result from the operation of all these causalities."[126] In other words, Opie's *Mini-malls* engage with these essential elements of space and call attention to their indeterminacy as a means of fluidity and change. Viewers of *Mini-malls* are not confronted with

[125] Catherine Opie, qtd. in "Catherine Opie, Mini-malls," YouTube video, 2:21, posted by "gettymuseum," August 20, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jup-0A3x1hI.

[126] Massey, "Politics and Space/Time," 81.

the removed thesis that characterizes *Colorado Springs* or *South Wall*, but rather a specifically personal experience of the city that has been documented.

Another way of putting this is to acknowledge that a sense of being is always—and always has been—mediated via one's environment. "When space-time compression is seen as disorientating, and as threatening to fracture personal identities (as well as those of place) then a recourse to place as a source of authenticity and stability may be one of the responses. But just as the notion of single coherent and stable identities has been questioned, so too could geographers work to undermine the exactly parallel claims which are made about the identity of place. The geography of social relations forces us to recognize our interconnectedness, and underscores the fact that both personal identity and the identity of those envelops of space-time in which and between which we live and move (and have our 'Being') are constructed precisely through that interconnectedness."[127] In their interplay between stillness and impending activity, between homogeneous architectural construction and eclectic flourish, and between the postmodern distillation of interaction via consumerism and the living body of the American Dream, *Mini-malls* requires its viewers to acknowledge the essential facts of urban life: that place is never static, but always shifting. In turn, as self is fundamentally influenced by place and the environs one inhabits, self is also never static or unique in a singular, clarified manner. Opie's approach to the civic environs of Los Angeles progressively presents this awareness, challenging the so-called "threat" of postmodern space.

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[127] Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 122.

Chapter 3

Lost Domestic

INTRODUCTION: 'BURB-LAND

Catherine Opie's photograph *Valencia Landscape #1* (1987) cogently encapsulates American suburbia: its subject is not, in fact, the actual suburban development, or houses, streets, or homeowners, but rather a literal sign for it. Valencia is an affluent community, planned and constructed in 1987 in the City of Santa Clarita, on the eastern border of Los Angeles County and close to CalArts where Opie attended graduate school. The Valencia sign, as captured in Opie's image, is built into a California hillside, a quasi-landscape-art emblem, with lettering in white gravel set into a green lawn. The bone-white of the gravel used to make the letters and the development's trademark flower-like insignia contrasts the deep jade grass, while the entire tableau in turn contrasts the beige dry brush of the natural flora and fauna of the hillside, enabling the sign to be read quickly and clearly by passerby's on the nearby Interstate 5 freeway. Opie's photograph lends the scene a forlorn tone. The hillside is set against a hazy gray sky, while rusty water pipes and telephone poles rise out of brown shrubbery. An empty dirt road meanders towards the horizon. The sign's pristine stylization ends up looking strange and false, out of place in an otherwise gloomy and desolate rural environment.

The designated Valencia land-sign symbolizes a particular kind of domestication and sanitization. In its emphasis on the separation, control, and manicuring of the land, the image is quintessentially evocative of suburbia. The plot in the photograph displays two forms of enclosures: the gravel that creates the even lettering is delineated by whitewashed wooden

outlines and the entire sign is enclosed by a chain-link fence, separating the pastoral force-grown and manicured grass from the natural surrounding topography. The sign itself communicates qualities most associate with suburbia, such as the promise of the good life, the security of the American Dream, as well as a kind of naïve idealism. With its emerald grass—such a deep shade that it most likely receives a boost from dye—the plot may be just a sign, yet it manages to present itself, and advertise the development, as a Garden of Eden within the parched grassland.

Valencia Landscape #1 shares in a common critique of planned communities as inauthentic. Environmental historian William Cronon captured this particular character of suburbia in some observations about Irvine, California, another planned city located in Orange County, about one hour's drive from Los Angeles:

> What most struck many of us after living in Irvine for a time was not just the transformation of the local ecosystem but the way its idealized nature reflects underlying assumptions about order and community. It is a city where everything has been given its proper place so that nothing need ever interfere with anything else. Everything is well under control . . . It was all so peaceful, so Edenic and natural, that one would surely have thought it would be easy to get used to. And yet somehow I never did . . . Orange County is a place so constructed that it verges on becoming still another form of nature: *nature as virtual reality*.[128]

In a broader respect, Cronon's description also typifies the portrayal of a distinctly Southern Californian cult of domesticity overall, one that, like a mirage, appears simultaneously true, yet also fabricated at the same time: "Versions of the California Dream are as various as the people

[128] William Cronon, "Introduction," from *Uncommon Ground*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), 42-43.

who come here in search of fulfillment. Yet every dream, it seems has a similar sequel, one that spells disillusion . . . reminders that the California Dream often mocks the reality."[129]

Domestic space is contested space. It is not, however, contested between polarities so often associated with California and the generalized concept of suburbia overall, which is the supposed opposition between an idealization and its undesirable reality. Suburban domesticity is a nuanced balance of equal parts real and unreal, and its ideal manufactures and interacts with its reality. Suburbia is both the private sphere of an individual house and its surrounding neighborhood community and as such, it pronounces a kind of dramatic dissonance between an external order that promises a certain stability and specified character of that community, and an internal *dis*order that suggests freedom in privacy and the opportunity to live, unencumbered in one's own fenced backyard, however one would wish. Suburbia is fundamentally complex and unstable, constantly negotiating this separateness with collectivism, appealing simultaneously to both a profound cultural normalcy *and* to the deviance and eccentricities of independence. Just as sociocultural traditions can be both nostalgic and stifling, individualism can also be both liberating and isolating, and it is the friction between these conflicting characters that produce the complicated vision—and perhaps reality—of the American suburb.

Domesticity is among the most prevalent themes in Opie's work and comprises the largest topical subset within Opie's broader interest in various forms of Americana (football, surfing, fishing, and *American Cities* have all been topics in her works). To date, she has produced six photographic series that explicitly examine private space: *Master Plan* (1988-9), *Houses* (1995-6),

[129] Blake Allmendinger, "All About Eden," from *Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000*, eds. Stephanie Barron, Sheri Bernstein, and Ilene Susan Fort (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 113.

Domestics (1995-8)*, Landscapes* (1995-6)*, 1999* (1999), and *In and Around Home* (2004-5), notwithstanding the number of ways in which domesticity and traditional American family life are indirectly invoked in other series, including her *Self-Portrait* triptych (*Cutting* (1993), *Pervert* (1994), *Nursing* (2004), and the projects *Children* (2004) and *High-School Football* (2008). The frequency with which Opie invokes the domestic sphere might be unexpected to those who associate her with LGBT activism and sexual exhibitionism, but Opie has always desired family life. In some ways, she thereby embodies the tension of suburbia itself, between convention and deviance, community and privacy, and performance versus relaxation. It is likely that her explorations of suburbia and domestic life represent a certain spatial dissent or discomfort specific to LGBT individuals living in the United States, especially during the 1980s and 1990s. At that time, although transgendered and transsexual individuals were acknowledged as a distinct population or collective (as opposed to a censored underground community, or an ignored community, or isolated cases of sexual deviancy, as was often the case in earlier decades), they were generally corralled into standard definitions that assumed all members were for one, male, but also that they were determined to live single and promiscuous in the gay enclaves of cities like New York and San Francisco. To be gay, it was assumed, was also to subscribe to a particular kind of urban nomadism that rejected the nuclear family of the American Dream and the domestic settlement of the American suburb. The pervading cultural wisdom of the time subscribed to a stereotype of mutual hostility: the suburbs might be intolerant of LGBT families, but LGBT individuals did not want suburbia anyway.

Opie's interest in suburbia and the domestic sphere is to some extent a response to the realization that achieving family life usually demands sacrifice of the urban singleton social structure, an exchange that might be more acute for a gay woman, given the political issues

surrounding LGBT identity and the contested meaning of living an "LGBT lifestyle." To a degree, Opie's ongoing exploration of domesticity therefore represents a personal investigation of communities she would one day join, engendered by the uneasiness of leaving the community she belonged to in the urban sphere, and a way of assessing how she could allow both components of her identity to coexist. Tellingly, throughout her 1990s oeuvre, the two elements of her person—leather-wearing-S/M dyke versus wife-mother-homeowner—are more or less segregated by series.

There is, however, one image that captures the collision between these two worlds. The first of Opie's three *Self-Portrait*s, *Cutting* (1993) documents the completion of body-art in her back. In the photograph, Opie faces away from the camera, showing off a domestic scene of a lesbian couple in front of a house on a sunny day that has been incised into her flesh. The cuts are childlike and crude, bleeding droplets like angry tears, their violence a pointed contradiction to the idyllic scene. *Cutting* conveys that the two spheres or two identities of being a lesbian and being a participant in traditional domesticity can only exist in violent conflict within the same person; the promise of the American Dream is both an aspiration and a wound, forever a part of Opie's body, as well as her consciousness.

Opie's first examination of domesticity is her Master of Fine Arts thesis *Master Plan,* a photojournalistic project produced five years prior to *Cutting* in 1988, when Opie was a student at CalArts. The project examined the environs of the Valencia housing development, and is the series to which *Valencia Landscape #1*, the work discussed at the opening of this chapter, belongs. *Master Plan* assumes a removed aesthetic and latent criticality that is in harmony with Opie's sense of frustration at the time at being culturally incompatible with a life she also desired, an internal opposition so forcibly commemorated later in *Cutting*. *Master Plan* also

thereby carries the distinction of being the origin of an emotional trajectory for Opie, from the dissonance between hostility and desire for suburbia, to an eventual peace between two supposed (and ultimately false) cultural polarities. At the terminus of this trajectory are two works, one of which, 2004's *Nursing,* responds directly to *Cutting*. *Nursing* forms the third image to the *Self-Portrait* triptych. The first two images, *Cutting* and *Pervert* (1994) originally comprised a diptych steeped in sexual violence as both recorded Opie's participation in sado-masochistic practices: *Cutting* displays the domestic scene carving, while *Pervert* shows Opie topless, in an S/M leather hood, with needles piercing the length of her arms and a second incision across her chest of calligraphy reading "PERVERT." The violence later becomes pointedly resolved with the addition of *Nursing* a decade later, an image in which Opie breastfeeds her son Oliver, the two of them performing a contemporary Madonna and Child. In *Nursing*, the "PERVERT" incision has faded to a ghostly scar, still present but resolved, and literally integrated into her skin.

The second work to suggest a point of resolution for Opie and her adoption of a domestic role is *In and Around Home* (2004), a collection of images that documents her family life. *In and Around Home* is in many ways *Master Plan*'s counterpart, recapitulating a similar collage-like visual eclecticism geared towards providing a portrait of a neighborhood, but in *In and Around Home*, the neighborhood is L.A.'s West Adams, a middle-class urban suburb south of Downtown, versus *Master Plan*'s focus on the more upscale and uniform character of Valencia. Although *In and Around Home* shares the same kind of documentarian approach as *Master Plan*, it nevertheless contrasts *Master Plan* with its sense of intimacy. Not only are the images in *In and Around Home* of Opie's private space and family members, and not only is West Adams conveniently more eclectic in flavor than Valencia as a neighborhood, but West Adams is also

conscientiously shot with a sense of casualness that diverges from the pervading sense of alienation, intrusion, and formality that characterizes her earlier images of Valencia. The correspondent aesthetic between the two series, spaced nearly fifteen years apart, combined with their contradictory emotional response to suburban domestic life, reflects Opie's transformation from an emerging artist, unsure about the possibility of integrating her sexual orientation with "normal" family life, to a mature woman who has successfully achieved such a life with her character in tact—an LBGT artist finally claiming the American Dream as rightfully hers.

This explanation follows a biographical logic, but it is simplistic when applied to a conceptual logic. It is clear that Opie's response to the cookie-cutter face of Valencia is critical and that her response to West Adams' diversity is more celebratory in turn. It is a preference that reflects her Leftist bias and rejects a certain conservative traditionalism prized in Valencia versus the more liberal values of West Adams; however, Opie is not documenting a process of assimilation, of normalizing herself, or of reverse-"Othering" traditional domesticity. For one, an opposition between the culturally 'normal' and its alternatives is always one of hierarchy in which no matter which side is championed, the established majority always maintains its authority. Knowing one is outside of the authoritative cultural normality, as Opie is, is not the same thing as believing that normality is standard—if anything, being outside of the cultural normality is to realize that 'normalcy' itself is constructed, and not natural as the nomenclature suggests. In observing Opie's transition into domesticity, it is important to clarify that her biographical circumstances do not preclude her from critically rejecting the notion of suburban normality altogether. To speak of Opie's domesticity as an 'achievement' or an 'adoption' is thereby misleading; it is more appropriate to describe it as examining how culturally antithetical ideals are coordinated on a personal level.

In addition, biography has always had a complicated influence in Opie's work specifically because although her works are personal, they use the personal in a specific way, manipulating cultural expectations of subjectivity and its supposed stability, intelligibility, and boundaries. In the case of her repeated use of domesticity as a theme throughout her career, the transition from conflict to assimilation is true, but to take a broader perspective on the topic, a more provocative direction is to explore how Opie engages the subject of privacy itself and how she surveys her own very private life through communicative and public artistic expression. In this respect, landscape is a suitable genre because of the fact that it simultaneously invokes the private and the public in its representation of personal subjectivity within the physical manifestations of culture. Historically, landscape also generally supports the notion of identity as distinct, with recognizable confines that separate the individual from place. In such a paradigm, place plays a supporting role, revealing the parameters of identity through comparison. Place merely receives its inhabitants in such a way that the exteriority of place clarifies the individual's interiority—the physical relationship for person and place is one of literally locating that person. This physical relationship thereby represents the metaphorical "locating" of that person's selfhood; geographies are thereby assumed to be the stable basis of cardinal orientation that offers not only literal but metaphorical coordinates for their inhabitants.

Opie so openly invokes her own biography throughout her career that it is unlikely her study of domesticity is a simply chronology of coming to terms with social expectations as a gay woman; rather, her photography works to expose the inherent instabilities of spatial geographies as cultural geographies that are active, expressive, and endlessly constructing new conditions of various environs—and how those instabilities parallel the complex and unyielding instabilities of identity. One of these instabilities is the fundamental underlying friction between the definite

character we *ascribe* to both place and self, and the indefinite nature that both *actually* epitomize.

Series produced during the 1990s in between the *Master Plan* and *In and Around Home*, such as *Houses* (1995-6) and *Domestics* (1995-8), indicate Opie's movement in this critical direction. *Domestics*, a series for which Opie traveled around the country and documented lesbian-headed households in their (often rural and suburban) homes with their families, is generally clear in its conceptual challenge to American traditionalism. *Houses*, a series of photographs of residences in the wealthy Los Angeles enclaves of Beverly Hills and Bel-Air, is perhaps more cryptic in this respect because its style is similarly objective and detached as *Freeways* and *Mini-malls*. Due to these similarities in aesthetic between the *Houses* series and the works discussed earlier in this dissertation, and in keeping with this dissertation's focus on specificity of place and on Los Angeles, my analysis in this chapter pertains to the series *Houses* over *Domestics*. Like *Freeways* and *Mini-malls*, *Houses* suggests opposition towards the inequities of wealth as expressed in the exclusionary privatized use of space by Los Angeles' affluent population—similar to the way in which a freeway contains the tension of being a public work and sponsoring communal use by individuals who are nevertheless isolated from one-another. Opie's sense of opposition as demonstrated in *Houses*, however, shifts from the jeers she levies on Valencia in *Master Plan* to one tempered somewhat by contemplation and pity.

This chapter is therefore largely about the struggle for definition, a theme that preoccupies Opie's treatment of domesticity in layers. One is suburbia's endless contest between the ideal and the real, another is Opie's struggle to coopt the American Dream for herself and the process of integrating its changing character with her own, and a third is how the struggle for definitions of place parallel struggles for definition of identity. The conclusion is that neither

place nor person is ultimately definable—their characters are not the result of such a struggle per se; they *are* the continued and changing negotiation between the values proposed and those enacted. Opie's photographs of domestic space do not so much disturb the heteronormative paradigm as they expose that its actuality is, in fact, imaginary. Her suburban series explore the ways people create a sense of belonging and negotiate individual difference within the cultural parameters established for belonging, and how this negotiation is influenced by the organization and social character of space. Thus, the landscapes are shot in such a way that the contrast between the ideal and the real is presented as an eternal negotiation—a conflict that is never resolved, and because it is never resolved, makes definition impossible. Identity, of both person and of place, is then revealed to exist only in permanent disturbance, and Opie's suburban landscapes make this disturbance visible.

This chapter will examine three major works that represent the arc of Opie's relationship to domesticity, beginning with its origins in *Master Plan* and ending with *In and Around Home*, with one intermediary series, *Houses*. The three projects in context with one another construct a gradual development in how Opie conceived of suburban life: *Master Plan* represents an early phase in which Opie is the most critical and opposed to the vision of traditional domesticity as propagated by its subject, the Los Angeles housing development Valencia; *Houses* represents an intermediate phase in which Opie's sense of opposition becomes increasingly nuanced; and *In and Around Home* suggests a point at which Opie achieved a sense of harmony between her identity as a gay woman and the implied values and cultural definitions of domesticity. Within this investigation of Opie's development as an artist, wife, and mother, this chapter will also discuss the development of a specific critical oeuvre that examines the relationship between place and identity within her sixteen-year odyssey home.

Domestic Fantasy

Catherine Opie's MFA thesis *Master Plan* (1987-1988) might have the distinction of being her most comprehensive project in terms of the sheer number of images, as well as her most rudimentary in terms of concept. Its 200-plus images cover a range of artistic productions, including panoramic landscapes, interiors and still-life tableaus, portraits, and photocollages, and represent Opie's keen eye for the thematic impact of otherwise subtle details, as well as her ability to capture the everyday in a way that is highly formalist but not mannered or contrived and still respectful of candid normality.[130] The range of imagery highlights technical prowess, as do the photographs' clean color and overall clarity. Its overt criticism of modern suburbia, however, reads as relatively heavy-handed.

Master Plan documents the then-burgeoning housing development of Valencia, which was being constructed concurrently with Opie's MFA tenure at CalArts and had just opened at the time she embarked on the project. The series involves a kind of visual narrative progression: it progresses from panoramas of Valencia's surrounding landscapes and advertising signage, to external images of individual houses, to interiors of a specific house belonging to a single family—the Dickasons, and finally to a family portrait of the Dickasons themselves.[131] The series maintains documentarian coldness overall, but still creates a sense of discovery, as viewers

[130] To clarify, Opie shot over two-hundred photographs for *Master Plan*, but has displayed the series in different arrangements over the years, which makes the secure parameters of the piece difficult to define. For a 2006 exhibition at the Orange County Museum of Art for example, Opie selected fifty-four prints to represent the project. Given the series' age and its status as an MFA thesis, the rarity of its exhibition, and diffuse exhibition style, it is also difficult to find reproductions of all types of photographs that comprise the series (I have not been able to find one for any of the reported "residential layouts"—housing layouts juxtaposed with text detailing community regulations—for example); however, the series is described in Nat Turner, "Master Plan," from *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, 33.

[131] Reportedly, Opie had profiled two Valencia families; however, images most frequently available to the public are photographs only of the Dickason family.

are slowly introduced to life within Valencia. The developing sense of connectivity is achieved through the movement from the images of depopulated exteriors to the interior shots of the Dickason home, the latter of which documents artifacts of the family's daily life, as well as the actual family. Viewers thus experience a kind of physical revelation as they make their way into Valencia from the surrounding roads to the Dickason's living room, as well as a conceptual one from ignorance to familiarity, as they progress from landscapes to portraits of the inhabitants. As they become physically and theoretically 'closer' to the Dickasons, viewers receive more and more glimpses into the Dickason's lifestyle: there is a pile of laundry to do, a cluttered bulletin board, and framed pictures of family elders, all of which adds a human element to an otherwise rigidly composed and regulated environment.

These nods to daily life are merely glimmers, however, and the emotional tone of the narrative remains detached overall. It is not as if viewers are treated to actual intimacy with the Dickasons. The household is still orderly and homogenous. The series' terminus at the family portrait (*Dickason Family Portrait* (1987)) portrays the family as affected, as if its members are trying to achieve a platonic ideal of the American family, rather than simply being themselves. All three people are dressed formally and are carefully groomed, and posed in a patriarchal arrangement. The living room is similarly stiff, decorated to convey a sense of conservative affluence with plush blue carpeting and matching curtains, dark Chippendale furniture, and clean, waxy houseplants. The image is of a contemporary American family, but on the whole telegraphs nostalgia for postwar Americana. A constant air of fabrication pervades *Master Plan*, as if the entire development is a desperate charade to maintain a blissfully narrow definition of the American suburb and the American family. Opie's treatment of *Master Plan*'s various subjects in terms of composition and style augments this sensitivity through aloof objectivity.

Master Plan thus conceptually argues that American domesticity and suburbia is a disturbed fantasy of control, heterocentric uniformity, naivety, conspicuous consumption, and acute gendering.

For the most part, Opie chose to represent the Dickason family through their possessions in carefully chosen vignettes of the empty interior rooms. She photographed furniture and tchotchkes in lieu of the family members themselves, save for the final portrait. *Dickason Family Interior #8* (1987) depicts the family's hallway console and bulletin board containing mundane objects that are prototypically arranged for an average family. There is a white lamp and kitschy Crayola clock resting on the console, and a cork bulletin board with family snapshots on the wall that has been covered in folksy-country wallpaper. By virtue of immortalizing the scene, the photograph invites scrutiny of the mundane. *Dickason Family Interior #8* calls attention the photo-saturation on the wall, and in particular, the surreal inclusion of a publicity photograph of the Keaton family from *Family Ties*, along with a signed headshot of its star, Michael J. Fox. Of course, one can naturally assume the Dickasons are merely fans of the show and the pictures are mementos in the same way that others might display a signed baseball card or playbill, but when presented with the images of images, the composition implies the idea of the suburban family as its own pastiche—a mannered and performative existence. The bulletin board is a veritable rabbit's hole of illusions, juxtaposing images of a real family that supposedly inhabits the space, yet is nowhere to be seen, with pictures of a fake family whose artificiality is exposed by the headshot of a real actor who plays one of the characters. Michael J. Fox, however, is also unreal in this format as headshots are a form of advertising, like the *Billboard*s, and as 'genuine' as the sentiment scrawled over his image.

Opie's explanation for *Master Plan* supports this argument, in that she has discussed the piece as an expression of her personal struggle to achieve similar domestic bliss while her identity as a lesbian culturally excludes her from the suburban ideal. Her treatment of Valencia thereby supports the classic critique of the suburbs as a corruption of the individual, a place where its residents "suffered from oppressive conformity, landscapes of monotony, and a culture of shallowness . . . [and] deployed community . . . [in] a kind of destructive redefinition of the concept . . . they tipped the scales so far away from inclusive, bridging communities to exclusive, bonding communities, . . . from a positive source of human fulfillment and acceptance into a destructive tool of exclusivity and inequality," as historian Becky Nicolaides puts it.[132] Nicolaides' "destructive exclusivity" was originally theorized by postwar scholars as the outcome of either isolation within "an asylum for the preservation of illusion" as Lewis Mumford wrote and visually represented in Robert Adams' *Colorado Springs, Colorado* (1968), or, paradoxically, as the outcome of the complete opposite problem of too much community and excessive neighborly scrutiny in William H. Whyte's thesis and envisioned by sitcoms like *Desperate Housewives*.[133] "Suburbia," in its modest common cultural characterization, is usually a blend of these two ideas into the stereotype of the suburbs as a place of delusion, superficiality, and repression—a place where social pressure to live up to an idealized American Dream makes it impossible to cultivate a genuine identity or self-determined American Dream. The suburbs have thus become conceptualized as a place of fissure between the real and ideal, the site of manufactured domesticity and counterfeit family life.

[132] Becky Nicolaides, "How Hell Moved from the City to the Suburbs," from *The New Suburban History*, eds. Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 95, 97.

[133] Lewis Mumford qtd. in Nicolaides, 94.

While it is an appropriate reading to interpret *Master Plan* as a critique of suburbia, it is faulty and incomplete to conclude that it *only* condemns its subject. For one, such a reading dismisses telling details from Opie's biography and the fact that Opie's interest in domesticity arises from her internal conflict of being a subscriber (albeit, a critical one). The voyeuristic elements of the series point towards a sense of curiosity on behalf of its creator. Guggenheim Museum curator Jennifer Blessing correctly notes circumstances from Opie's upbringing that would influence a critical approach:

> Opie has described how she felt as an outsider looking in at this community, but she had spent her high school years living in a place like this near San Diego. In fact, her father was a real estate agent and wanted Opie to get her license, so while *Master Plan* critiques the enforcement of gender stereotypes and economic exclusions in middle-class American society, it is also the artists' personal reckoning with her past and a statement of her conscious refusal to define herself within the paternalistic model of her own family.[134]

However, Blessing equivocates slightly in her statement, because while it is true that Opie does not define her own domesticity in a "paternalistic model," the logic overall is problematic within the context of Opie's subsequent work which collectively demonstrates that rather than moving away from her heteronormative past, she is reconciling her sense of attachment to it with her adulthood. Opie described her artistic interest in domesticity as "suffused with longing. A lot of this is about my own desire. I've never had a successful domestic relationship. I've always wanted one."[135] Her personal investiture in the American Dream alludes to *Master Plan* as a

[134] Jennifer, "Catherine Opie: American Photographer," in *Catherine Opie: American Photographer,* 25.

[135] Opie, qtd. in Reilly, 86-7.

series that is less pejorative than it may first appear. Opie may have used Valencia as a symbol for heteronormative exclusion, but at the same time, at the heart of this type of critique is the conundrum of desiring what one also opposes—or is seen as oppositional to.

Opie's conflicted perspective highlights the fact that modern suburbia is conflicted and contradictory as a concept as well. Political ideologies are often projected heavily onto the suburbs, with critics pointing to its history of documented discriminatory policies like redlining, and supporters invoking the blindness of the competitive market. It is true that the majority of American suburbs remain white and serve higher-income populations, a feature that urban historian Dolores Hayden attributes to powerful development lobbies and their alliances with pro-business governance and legislation.[136] Yet, as Nicolaides points out, it is also true that the American suburb nevertheless developed too broadly and too rapidly to be as white and homogenous as often assumed, as it is also true that the suburbs continue to increase their diversity.[137] Historian Michael Jones-Correa, basing on his conclusion on analysis of the 2000 Census, argues that "the increasing racial and ethnic diversity within suburbs, however, signals that either these exclusionary tactics are working less well or perhaps are now targeted more at protecting property interests than in maintaining racial segregation."[138] Jones-Correa concludes that in spite of its historically racist practices, suburbia today is a market commodity like anything else, and thereby sold to anyone who will buy it. It seems that at the heart of the debate

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[136] Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 230.

[137] Nicolaides, 80-98.

[138] Michael Jones-Correa, "Reshaping the American Dream," from *The New Suburban History,* eds. Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 187. In the same paper, Jones-Correa also cites the 2000 Census which demonstrates that 48% of immigrants, 31% of blacks, 44% of Hispanics, and 51% of Asian Americans lived in suburbs.

is what to believe about the suburbanites themselves: critics like Hayden tend to ignore them entirely, as if suburban consumption is entirely the result of corporate manipulation, while defenders like Jones-Correa bestow perhaps too much faith in the belief in market forces and that such market forces are equitable.

The fissure regarding suburban residents and their role as active participants versus passive recipients is even more apparent in regards to the stereotype of the suburbs as cultural wastelands, "lambasted . . . as banal areas of tract houses . . . a mindless consumer utopia."[139] The tremendous growth of suburbs in the United States within the last sixty years poses a potential challenge to this image, for "[i]f the suburbs offered only social anguish and failure, why did Americans keep moving to them in ever-rising numbers?" Nicolaides asks.[140] In fact, as columnist David Brooks observed in 2004, "modern suburbia is merely the latest iteration of the American dream . . . When you move through suburbia . . . you see the most unexpected things: lesbian dentists, Iranian McMansions, Korean megachurches, outlaw-biker subdevelopments, Orthodox shtetls with Hasidic families walking past strip malls on their way to shul."[141] The suburbs developed in a way that reflects the increasingly diverse character of the United States in general, as well as the impact of progressive political movements; it is more their image that is entrenched in the same 1950s narrative.

Hayden argues suburbia's image developed out of a long intellectual tradition within

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[139] Hayden, 15.

[140] Nicolaides, 96.

[141] David Brooks, "Our Sprawling, Supersize Utopia," from *Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes*, ed. Andrew Blauvelt (New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2008), 27. Published in conjunction with the exhibition, "Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes" shown at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. (February 16-August 17, 2008).

urban history of looking at the city as the engine of economic and cultural development and heritage. The urban-centric approach thus neglected to examine the suburbs outside the shadow the great metropolis. Two of the most well-known critics of the American suburb, Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford, never actually lived in the suburbs themselves, and both critique the suburbs exclusively in relation to cities—as the city's antithesis, rather than an entity unique unto itself.[142] The influence of Jacobs and Mumford was so profound that it inspired the narrative of suburbia as stifling "keeping up with the Joneses" conventionality. That is not to say the suburbs were never exclusionary, conservative, or uninspired; simply that the concept of it tends to overshadow how it actually is.

There are thus two suburbias, the one that people live in and the one of cultural imagination, and this "cultural imagination" can be either abysmally conformist or enthusiastically optimistic. *Master Plan* is unique in its treatment of suburbia because of the way in which it acknowledges suburbia as an indeterminate domain constructed through all three visions—the critique, the ideal, the actual—that construct a reality is never really authentic in one particular category. Suburbia's composite reality is mirrored in the collage construction of *Master Plan*, such that its comprehensive style and breadth of subjects create a multifaceted study. The approach also emphasizes that Opie's role as the contemporary artist took its cues from documentary photography and that the project, while not impartial, retains a certain element of distance and discovery. It is this method that allows the contrast between fantasy and reality to emerge in single images, as Opie uses artistic selection, composition, and juxtaposition to provide a seemingly organic impression.

[142] Nicolaides, 84-91.

LITTLE THINGS

This coexistence of the ideal and real emerges subtly in many other images from *Master Plan* and is largely the result of Opie's inclusion and emphasis on details—ephemera that create a portrait of everyday suburban living. These "little things" encourage engagement with the series that is similar to the way a viewer might engage with a Renaissance scene painting in which small elements carry symbolic meaning. Opie's *Master Plan* photographs are not specifically allegorical, but her choice of which details and scene elements to include in her documentation of the master planned community and Dickason family are significant and often carry some kind of cultural inference. The viewer, for example, is expected to perceive Valencia and the Dickasons a certain way, which is influenced by the small details pertaining to life in the suburbs in Opie's compositions.

To look closer at *Dickason Family Interior #8* and its inclusion of the *Family Ties* photographs, is to see a more equalized comparison between the publicity materials and the family's real pictures. Were it not for the border and publicity text surrounding Fox's headshot and the familiarity of the *Family Ties* still, the two images could blend in seamlessly with the Dickason's own photographs. Instead, the wooden frame of the bulletin board creates a barrier between the real and the fake families. Normally, one would expect that the ideal—the Keaton family in this case—to be the archetype that reality aspires to, but in *Dickason Family Interior #8*, the mythos of the Keatons seems instead to merely reflect or echo the Dickasons' reality, implying that the Dickasons' lifestyle is on par with the fictional Keatons'. The Dickasons' life appears genuinely idyllic—documented in photographs of happy family and friends who parasail and picnic at duck ponds and send their children to schools with other children from like-minded families. The juxtaposition and similarity between the *Family Ties* stills and the Dickasons'

photographs suggests the Dickasons, aside from being apparent fans, also perhaps consider the Keatons their equivalent sitcom counterpart, moreso than their idols.

In capturing the micro day-to-day reality, Opie captures suburbia on a more intimate level. There are regular "real life" elements throughout many of the *Master Plan* images, all of which have the effect of humanizing their environs. The red car and blue recycling bin in *Plan*s *71* and *73* (1986) for example, force the viewer to acknowledge the presence of the house's residents because of the inclusion of waste receptacles and cars, contradicting the interpretation of the images as model homes. Despite the advertising language Opie collaged beneath the images, the houses cannot be understood as model homes if people are living in them. Even in their mimicry of real estate advertising, the *Plan*s still reference the objects of everyday living. In examining these elements of the everyday, mixed indeterminately with elements of fantasy, the viewer is left with the impression that suburbia is one part actual and one part aspirational—and that to live in suburbia is to accommodate both. Like *Dickason Family Interior #8* and the fictional Keaton family scrapbooked among the existing Dickason family, *Master Plan* questions the categories of "authentic" and "imaginary": if one needs the other to exist, then the two have a strange mutual equivalency and therefore, Valencia is itself and its promise at the same time.

There are of course some images, such as *Boys Billboard* and *Girl Billboard* (1986) that are explicit as critique. The two *Billboard*s are companion photographs that depict corresponding billboards advertising Valencia. One contains the image of three boys in baseball uniforms; the other has a smiling pig-tailed girl. Both advertise with the same quotation: "We/I come home to Valencia." The children are all Caucasian and conservatively gendered with pink ribbons for the girl and Little League outfits for the boys (and one might also observe that the boys are given an activity whereas the girl merely needs to be cute). The children Norman-Rockwellesque and

photorealistically painted, rather than photographed. This is a detail that might be lost when driving by, but because it is presented in a photograph intended for more leisurely contemplation, the photorealistic renderings make viewers all the more aware of fantasy. They heighten the fact that such fresh-faced images don't exist in real life. Opie's photograph shows that the surrounding areas where the billboards have been erected are relatively rural, but derelict as well. The *Boys Billboard* straddles industrial debris, while the shrubbery beneath the *Girl Billboard* looks like a half-hearted attempt to beautify the dirt patch in front of it. The natural textures of the foliage also contrast the billboards' gleaming white backgrounds and crisp typeface, suggesting that Valencia, and its appeal to heteronormative aspirations, are both artificial and out of place, literally without context.

As the *Master Plan* series is meant to be viewed as a photojournalistic collage, the relationship between images matters, and because the *Billboard*s do not exist as an isolated diptych, they could be said to occupy a pointedly uninformed moment in the narrative of the entire series, representing the state of critical suspicion that arises without knowing much about what is actually there. The sexual politics, for example, that are evident in the *Billboard* pictures are echoed in *Dickason Family*, but whereas the *Billboard*s perpetuate obvious gender constructions, they also participate in a broader discussion between their fantasy and the reality of people who choose to live in Valencia. Taken in isolation, the pictures of the smiling girl and baseball players and the image of the Dickasons suggest a desperate appeal to the idea of a white, heteronormative, nuclear family of the suburbs. However, in dialogue, the manufactured perfectionism of the billboards offsets the pretense of *Dickason Family* and it becomes difficult to dismiss the family portrait as a self-deluded throwback to 1950s Levittown domestics. The billboards are fanciful nostalgia, but the Dickason family is a real family and they really do sit in

those living room chairs and water those plants. The *Dickason Family* thereby becomes the three-dimensional, flesh-and-blood actualization of the gloss of the *Billboard* photographs, suggesting that while the idealization evident in the advertisements might be unobtainable and naïve, their cultural corollary is authentic and therefore, valid in its own right.

As the series moves physically from the surrounding environs to the residents' living room, and narratively from distance to intimacy, it presents itself as a document of the process of Opie familiarizing herself with Valencia and the Dickason family. It records the transition from voyeurism to acquaintance. Within this framework, the way in which Opie constructed *Master Plan* and the photographic methods she used to address landscape recast the series as a documentation of land-use and community that is relatively unsure in terms of political or critical agenda. Opie's decision to shoot Valencia as a journey, in which photographs record every little detail as it is (rather than positioned as allegory), reconstitutes *Master Plan* as a series of voyeurism and desire.

Critique Versus Voyeurism

Opie's treatment of suburbia in *Master Plan* is unique within the broader suburban-photographic oeuvre largely because of its appeal to the personal and to sincerity. It is a series that undermines the stereotype of suburbia by comparing it with its reality—a tactic that is not unknown to artistic treatments of American domesticity—but whereas the typical comparative lends itself to sarcasm, Opie's is tempered. Unlike the works of artists like Sam Durant, whose photocollages insert chintz and Chippendale into case-study house interiors, and Gregory Crewdson, whose staged photographs satirically combine the idealized and optimistic

contentment of postwar Americana with eerie and disturbing undertones, *Master Plan* does more to problematize Valencia's stereotypical moments than challenge its supposedly innate quaintness and naivety. This is because both Durant and Crewdson create pastiche by comparing cultural identities to cultural identities, as opposed to fantasy and reality. Even in cases when the actual lived reality appears, such as in the work of Tina Barney, there is a sense of things being presented as unreal. Although Barney's photographs suggest a comparable tension between artifice and reality that is also evident in Opie's photographs of the Dickasons, Barney's images are explicitly about artifice. Barney asserts that she does not pose her subjects, but the resulting photographs read as staged nonetheless. Her work presents the privileged WASP lifestyle as a form of *comedia del'arte*, in which her family and friends are relegated to characters and their private homes to stage sets. Thus Barney treats suburbia as a form of denial, as if it is an attractive veneer applied to a disturbed reality. Her subjects appear to live in a way in which every detail of their lives, from the design of their sofas, their choice of social groups, and even their postures, is calculated.

Opie, on the other hand, never denies Valencia its truth, and instead seems intent upon discovering it throughout *Master Plan*. Her images of the Dickason home are artful in their formalism and obviously consciously framed to highlight the hollow conventionality of the interiors, they do not present themselves as specifically staged. Instead the images simply document life 'as is': the interiors are tidy, but laundry still has to be done, beds haphazardly made, and there is the occasional obligatory clutter. Even in their self-portrait, which does not document everyday attire or behavior, the Dickasons are not presented in attempting to be perfect per se, but rather invested in a fairly humdrum normalized cultural ritual of how the family photograph is taken. In other words, one could consider their starched chinos and stiff

arrangement as a sign of inauthenticity at the same time that their behavior in taking a family portrait is utterly ordinary, and natural for the act of posing for a photograph. In that one image, the aspirational Dickason family—the family that is poised and emotionally and physically harmonious in their patriarchal arrangement and their coordinated living room—is no more and not less real than the everyday people who own a Crayola crayon clock and pile up dirty laundry. It is the juxtaposition of the different facets of the Dickason family that alters the sardonic tone of the posed portrait. The American suburb has a way of merging the ideal and real, and Opie's photographs, which combine the critical eye of an outsider with the curiosity of a tourist, have a way of realizing the delicate balance.

PANORAMA VERSUS PORTRAIT

Not quite wilderness, not quite city, and not quite as idyllic as it often claims to be, suburbia is a place where traditional concepts of landscape and land-use delineation become murky. A person's physical vantage point of suburbia affects whether it appears as a separate opposition to the urban city or to undeveloped wilderness, or as a middle-ground appendage to both. Standing apart, utilizing the faraway, overseeing view of a removed tower or mountaintop or airplane, the suburbs appear physically distinct and culturally uniform, an artificial "feature" encoded into the land and inscribed by borders. It is only from the view from within that their eclecticism and their true status as the murky "middle-ground" between landscape categories, such as city and wilderness, become realized. Opie's decision to shoot the landscapes and interiors of Valencia in a narrative style underscores the voyeuristic intimacy, constantly foiling

the expectations afforded by visual distance—consistency, demarcation, and clarity—with the messiness of its lived reality.

Landscape art in general often treats place as an object. Its distancing vantage point "is to be carried away by the city's hold. One's body is no longer crisscrossed by the streets that bind and re-bind it following some law of their own . . . It places him at a distance. It changes an enchanting world into a text. Just to be this seeing point creates the fiction of knowledge . . . that transforms the city's complexity into readability."[143] It is also in contrast to how landscape photography, and specifically in its treatment of 20th-century suburbia, handles place. Photography has been influential in shaping the cultural ideation of suburbia. It supplied a visual expression to the developing scholarly narratives, in particular because it offered the only way of actually seeing sprawl, as the aerial view or distant-tower perspective is generally exclusive to photography. Suburbia manages to compass both the pitfall of sprawl as infinite and endlessness and the pitfall of residential exceptionalism as breeding grounds for racial and class exclusion, becoming somehow about infinite excess and containment at the same time. Photography enables this conceptual dissonance because it can capture suburbia's borders with the absence of the horizon—the horizon being a key feature that distinguishes definitive place from boundless space—through the use of aerial perspective.[144]

Suburbia's borders (and its sprawl), for example, are usually only visible through aerial photographs. Photographers have thus used the aerial shot to their advantage in order to criticize sprawl. Both William Garnett's photographs of Lakewood, California and Ed Ruscha's series

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[143] Michel de Certeau "Practices of Space," in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985),122-4.

[144] Casey, 419.

Parking Lots show the rigid and relentless homogeneity of suburban sprawl—it is endless in Garnett's work and enclosed in Ruscha's, but nevertheless pushed to the point of abstraction via the bird's-eye view. The distant perspective thereby supplies a visual counterpoint to the distended and inanimate abstract way one may *feel* in huge parking lots and identical neighborhood streets of planned communities. Other landscape photographers, such as Robert Adams and Matthew Moore, have also examined suburbia as an encroachment on the American frontier. Adams' treatment of Denver, Colorado emphasizes the contrast between the clean-lined houses and their mountainous backdrops; Moore produces images of planned developments in their otherwise incongruous surroundings, such as *Mirage* (2007), which shows the outlines of future houses within a desert-like expanse.

Despite the fact that few of them contain people, Opie's *Master Plan* photographs almost all read like portraits or "landscape-portraits"—literally, portraits of the landscape. This particular photographic approach in turn lends place a kind of subjectivity, as if Valencia itself is not merely a setting, but also an identity with subtly expressive qualities and a kind of manner of being. To this end, *Master Plan* never allows the presence of specific place to dissolve into abstract space; or, more simply put, Opie portrays Valencia in a series of portraits that become the collected expression of Valencia as a neighborhood, in contrast to Garnett's photographs of Lakewood, which convert the development into a boundless spatial concept.

WHO INHABITS WHOM: *HOUSES*

Although the photojournalistic or collaged narrative arrangement of *Master Plan* would reappear almost fifteen years later in Opie's piece *In and Around Home*, series she produced in

between demonstrated a turn towards systematic formalism. It is significant that these series include the portrait works Opie is the most famous for, as well as the Los Angeles-focused landscapes that are the subject of this dissertation: *Freeways*, *Mini-malls*, and *Houses* (1995-6). It is also significant that there was such a clear aesthetic break between Opie's vision for *Master Plan* and the turn to stylistic repetition that would follow with her next series, *Being and Having* (1991), especially considering that *Master Plan* veritably concluded Opie's scholarship and *Being and Having* heralded the beginning of her professional career. The shift is particularly evident in comparing Opie's treatment of domestic space during the nineties via the series *Houses* to how she had handled the subject for *Master Plan*. For *Houses*, Opie roamed the affluent Los Angeles neighborhoods of Beverly Hills and Bel-Air and took photographs of individual facades from the street. The pictures are similar to *Mini-malls* in composition or to the *Plan*s photographs from *Master Plan* in that they use a dispassionate frontal view. They are also full-color and Opie shot them all in similar weather so that the tone and lighting are similar image to image.

Although *Houses* and *Master Plan* have little in common in terms of their formal attributes, they correspond in terms of their subject matter: Beverly Hills and Bel-Air are not specifically planned development communities like Valencia, but they are specifically residential enclaves within the larger city and designed with the suburban template in mind in that they are not really integrated into the city.[145] The design for living for both Beverly Hills and Bel-Air is

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[145] It is inaccurate to imply Beverly Hills and Bel-Air were not planned developments—both areas were developed by commercial interests—but these early twentieth-century developments were different late twentieth-century models like Valencia. I make the distinction because Beverly Hills and Bel-Air were never developed to be a cohesive and collective community in the same way that Valencia was intended. As testament to this, late twentieth-century developments like Valencia are usually property-managed by a single company, require various living standards and housing regulations such as noise restrictions, pre-approved color palettes for external color-schemes, and bans on laundry lines, and also include various monthly community and housing fees for the general upkeep of the neighborhood.

based on the model of hub-and-spoke suburbanism and residents must drive to and from houses to work. This is not, of course, unique for the rest of Los Angeles, which is often referred to as the "city of suburbs"; however, the description ignores the fact that while Los Angeles developed under the influence of rail development and car-culture, it also has neighborhoods (Koreatown, the Rampart, Boyle Heights, southeast Santa Monica and northeast Pasadena, to name a few) that are integrated within business districts and connect to a more urban model. In fact, in comparison to a neighborhood like Koreatown, the distance that neighborhoods like Beverly Hills and Bel-Air affect becomes even more obvious—and "distance" does not necessarily refer to physical proximity, as both neighborhoods are close to commercial hubs, but rather to an aesthetic and psychological distancing affected by their design.

Driving through Bel-Air—and one must drive as there are no sidewalks—can make one forget they are in one of the largest metropolises in the world. There are few houses that are visible from the street and most are bordered by tall walls and lush greenery (supposedly, Bel-Air issues the most business licenses for gardening than anything else). The famous Bel-Air gates, a combination of white stone supports and two-story arched wrought iron doors, herald the entrance to Old East Bel-Air off of Sunset Boulevard. Significantly, these gates, which are open year-round, have no guard houses, and are only at one particular entrance to the neighborhood (as opposed to the myriad of other ways one can access Bel-Air), do not offer actual security; they merely symbolize it. Most parts of Beverly Hills, particularly the enclaves in the hills above Sunset have the same large estates, hidden somewhere behind walls and hedges, on streets that often lack sidewalks. It is the sort of communicative distancing of the built environment—the large residences, long driveways and huge setbacks, the very wide streets, and the variety of security features (some inconspicuous like security cameras and some obvious like neighborhood

watch signs)—that create the sense of suburbia built as a series of downsized fortresses. There is also a different feel about the relatively small signage used to announce both neighborhoods than the huge hillside sign for Valencia. Both neighborhoods have small street signs (Beverly Hill's brown shield is more well-known, but Bel-Air also has a black sign in front of the gates with lettering in white neon), features that are not unique among suburban developments (many of which plaster community titles across entrance walls), yet seem more like they are putting visitors 'on notice' they are entering particular areas. They are less like advertisements, less welcoming, and more like boundary warnings.

PORTRAIT OF A DOMICILE

There are two dominant ways to read *Houses*. One is a sociocultural or geocultural examination that aligns with landscape and how landscapes are typically read; the other is a metaphorical and more psychological or emotional conceptualization that aligns more closely with portraiture. The more common assessment falls within the conceptual coordinates normally reserved for landscape, which analyzes the images as a representation of geographical politics. This approach notes how the titles call out two famously wealthy neighborhoods as a way of introducing the subject of class inequity. It is a theory that understands *Houses* as an indictment of urban space as divided and detached, the embodiment of what geographical philosopher Henri Lefebvre referred to as "capitalist space," or the systematic division of land according to a hierarchy of ownership, the result of which is a situation in which there is no community, but

only an artificial grid to divide those who have lots from those who have less.[146] *House #9, Bel-Air* (1995) is a clear example of this, with its constrained architectural symmetry, bright white stucco, and potted tropical palms contrasting the backdrop of bucolic hillside behind it. The gridded driveway itself conjures up the notion of Lefebvre's grid, comprised of privately-owned lots—a conceptual geometry overlaid onto natural topography. The evident critique in this portrayal of the residences, as also articulated by Lefebvre, is that it produces a capitalist socialization in which everyone is obsessed with where they are in the hierarchy, which in turn produces competition and hostility between citizens. Opie's photographs illustrate that apparently, living large also requires living in isolation and paranoia. Capitalist space, as Lefebvre theorized, thereby erodes community, such that "the public life around which a community forms has withered amid an overdetermined desire for privacy, with the result that the homes within the neighborhood are little more than isolated domains."[147]

The suggestion of Opie's (and the viewers') emotional alienation as an outsider to the neighborhoods is not merely a matter of proximity. It is not, in itself, Opie's physical position behind the gates, but rather the fact that she is taking pictures of the houses from the street that creates a sense of unease. The tension arises more form the fact that the residences convey tacit suspicion of the street and that the streets themselves sponsor little community activity. The relationship between the outsider (Opie), the insider (the house), and the environment (the sidewalk or street) are forged via a relational negotiation that is culturally encoded and spatially expressed. The normal equilibrium between the residences of Beverly Hills and Bel-Air and their

[146] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1991): 229-291.

[147] Trotman, "Houses," in *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*, 95.

streets is one of physical separation. All of the *Houses* are recessed from the streets, using huge driveways reminiscent of castle moats. The driveways and carports also allude to the supremacy of the automobile in Los Angeles and reaffirm the neighborhoods' streets as thoroughfares for private cars, a characterization that obscures the streets' actual status as municipal property and in turn, as access ways for the public. The unease that pervades the series arises out of the fact that Opie's presence on the street and her act of photographing the houses, despite her holding the legal right to do both, is, at least for these neighborhoods, a form of cultural transgression.

The houses that Opie selected for the series certainly augment this type of broad socioeconomic critique. The residences are in some ways typical of the neighborhoods—they are large, with details that suggest wealth (custom architectural features and design details applied to otherwise utilitarian and mundane attributes, such as cobblestoned carports, fanciful mailboxes, and windows for attic crawl-spaces), and they are pristine like mausoleums—but within isolated images, they are interesting specimens, combining discrete design elements in a way that is almost comical in their mishmash whole. Despite the fact that the houses are so manicured, they are also rather kitsch: ionic columns supporting pitched metal-seamed roofs, seventies white-iron filigree gates in front of modernist boxes, one-story houses sporting mansard roofs. During a 2007 lecture at photo l.a., Opie said that she had thought of the residences comprising her series *Houses* as similar to people's faces, such that the haphazard combination of architectural features were like the hodgepodge nature of a person's face and his or her fashionable 'decoration' of it—that much like a person's face changed over time to take on vestiges of past experiences, so too would the exterior of a private home. She added that the notion of an architectural façade was

similar to the notion of a person, such that there is an exterior presentation that protects and hides the inaccessible interior life.[148]

The explanation, and the exchange of one 'façade' for another, is more clumsy than clever, and a relatively unsophisticated metaphorical description from an artist who is usually more articulate. The association of façade to face is conceptually thin when taken literally; however, it does suggest that Opie's intent with *Houses* was to align a subject most often associated with landscape, with portraiture. If Opie's comments that argue the houses are metaphors for the human face are returned to the discussion, then the themes of identity, personhood, and self-determination—all concepts normally reserved for Opie's contemporaneous portrait series—have a more essential relationship with her landscape series as well. It is also not solely Opie's comments that suggest this comparison, but it is also evident in the formal construction of the *Houses* photographs, which look more like portraits of the residences as if they were people, rather than settings or environments. The strict frontal gaze, the emphasis on architectural façade as if it were a public face, and the eerie sense of each house asserting its own presence contribute to the provocative assertion of *Houses*: place is an entity, rather than a location. It also refers to broader ideas about the complexities of subjectivity, or between interiority versus exteriority as expressed through the articulation of domestic space.

FACE AND FAÇADE

One thing that Opie's explanation brings to light is how heavily focused *Houses* is on

[148] Catherine Opie, (lecture, photo l.a., Santa Monica, CA, January 11, 2009).

façade. Despite the fact that it shares the same taxonomic look, the same formal rigidity, and the same emptiness as *Freeways* and *Mini-malls*, it is also the 'flattest' of her landscape series. The frontal angle emphasizes each residence as a flat plane, versus the extension of space to fill the lot behind it. If anything, there is some recession of space in *front* of each house, created by the distance of big lawns, carports, and porticos, but even that recession is disrupted by the fact that most of the residences have features that in some way create a flat plane in front of the façade. The most obvious of these are large gates, evident in *House #3, Beverly Hills* (1995), which not only flatten the picture plane, but also create the sense of façade in front of façade, or a stacking of surfaces. Not every shot in the series has these gates, but many of them do have more subtle allusions to planar barriers, like the row of individual shrubs in *House #2, Bel-Air* (1995) and the portico and columns that frame the doors of *House #9, Bel-Air* (1995). It is also quite obvious that Opie chose the subjects for *Houses* based on their appeal to security. The huge fortress-like doors, the gates, and occasional intercom pads and alarm system lawn signs, all call attention to the households' desire for personal privacy, but also the overall separateness of the neighborhoods. The emphasis on the 'face' of each house, in addition to their security features that keep the domestic world separate from the public street, enacts Opie's metaphor of a house as the geocultural coordinate for identity's interior/exterior binary.

As an entity, icon, or portrait, a house assumes elements associated with personhood, such that the façade becomes a permeable barrier between exterior and interior. The exterior performs and disseminates certain social constructs—wealth, formality, discretion, cleanliness, whiteness—while it also encloses an interior sanctuary that is the respite of private life: a private life that usually does not completely share in the values expressed on the exterior. Yet the images comprising *Houses* present facades almost as exclusive, stand-alone entities. While not as flat as

movie sets, the residences nevertheless deflect attention away from their supposed interior lives. In other words, a typical interpretation would be to think of a housing façade as a kind of membrane, with one side communicating something outwards and the other securing the interior. Usually, this characterization influences ironic comparisons between inside and out. Photographs from Gregory Crewdson's series *Beneath the Roses* (2003-5) are staged theatrical scenes taken of domestic interiors, but their pointed use of reflections through mirrors and windows as a means of revealing and also mediating the views of otherwise hidden angles, as well as the use of windows as either framing devices or conspicuous light sources, typify this critique of suburbia as a comfortable exterior concealing a turbulent interior. Like Robert Adams' *Colorado Springs, Colorado* (1968), such stereotypical constructions of suburbia apply the idea of the self as a contrast between inner desire and outward serenity to the surrounding environs, and the house becomes metaphor for the modern-day suburban human condition.

Opie's *Houses*, however, discourages that kind of interpretation of comparing inside to outside, or private and public; instead she focuses attention onto the façade in and of itself. The layering of series of planes stacked one in front of each-other—gates in front of doors, for example—makes what might be beyond the exterior walls rather unimportant: the viewers' attention is directed towards the exteriors themselves. The façades, made up of so many of its owners' aesthetic whims that both represent the personalities and tastes of those who live inside as well as present a certain face to the world, become active and expressive sites. They become a visible negotiation between public and private. The sober and almost anesthetic style of *Houses*, as well as the repetitive design of individual pictures within the context of a series, is an approach that is unique within Opie's domestic oeuvre—she had shot homey interiors with lesbian-headed families and couples for *Domestics* and used a similar collage style for *In and*

Around Home that she had used for *Master Plan*—but it is not unique within the entire body of her work. It reappears in the objectifying repetitious way she shot many series, landscapes and portraits alike, in which identity and character, of person or of place, is presentational.

Even more significant is the fact that this presentational character of each house does not allow the subject to metaphorically engage the construct of interior versus exterior. Instead, a negotiation transpires over the exterior as a discursive site between those who live within the walls and those who are outside. Opie's presence is thus eerily invoked throughout *Houses*, specifically because the security features assume her (unwelcome) presence. The resulting dialogue between Opie as the implied eye and her subject is markedly less authoritative on Opie's part, than the kind of implicit critique evident in her images of Valencia. It is also more anesthetic and less personal than the sincere and quaint photographs she took of her household for *In and Around Home*. Rather than being the expression of personal growth, from Opie's own critical distance from domesticity to her adoption of traditional home-life, the progression and the differences between styles is likely the development of a discursive strategy. One of the problems with *Master Plan* is that the series lends itself to the argument it is an attack on the suburbs. Such a reading, however, is premised on assumptions regarding "marginalized" identity. It relies on reducing and essentializing Opie herself into a butch tattooed lesbian who must therefore be exclusively and forever outside the decidedly heteronormative environment of Valencia—or any other American-family-oriented domestic arrangement. It assumes that Opie critiques the suburban 'norm' as the disenfranchised 'Other,' when such categroies are neither static nor stable nor oppositional.

As many feminist scholars have argued, the categorical separation of "normal" and "Other" is in itself exclusive and compliant with modern patriarchy.[149] In reality, subjectivity is "constructed around multiple axes of identification and difference" and within postmodern feminism, there is "a resistance to locating oneself at the centre and to identification of any sort."[150] Tellingly, Opie has rejected such a binary opposition in interviews. Of her later series *Domestics*, she claimed, "I wanted to create a visual language of people living together, images about domestic space. I wanted to talk about community and family and not make it into 'We're normal,' which drives me crazy."[151] *Domestics* is not a co-opting of heterosexual normalcy and *Master Plan* is not a tirade against heterosexual normalcy; both strategies would thereby end up privileging heteronormative culture as the moral authority. Instead, it is more likely that both series investigate how identity and social roles are formed and reformed within the context of place, "to show the ways in which gendered, racialised and classed identities are fluid and constituted in place—and therefore in different ways in different places."[152] This reading also observes how the unstable nature of suburbia, when properly investigated beyond its stereotype, complements the corresponding unstable categories of identity. In order to convey the relationship between social identity and social place, however, the critical opposing perspective does not work, simply because it is too prescriptive. The objectifying gaze of Opie's *Houses* may result from the realization that the comprehensive narrative mode she had used for *Master Plan*

[149] See, for example, Doreen Massey's essay "Flexible Sexism," in *Space, Place and Gender*, 212-247, and Minh-Ha Trinh, "Contton and Iron" from *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 327-335.

[150] Geraldine Pratt and Susan Hanson, "Geography and the construction of difference," *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 1, no. 1 (1994): 6.

[151] Catherine Opie, qtd. in Cherry Smyth, "Signage on the Body," *Diva* 52 (September 2000): 11.

[152] Pratt and Hanson, 6.

created an argument that positioned her as the Other against the norm. Instead, *Houses*' detachment became the viable mode for expressing the struggle for definition.

In and Around Home, but Domesticated?

Opie would keep the same objective detachment for much of her work from the 1990s, and produce taxonomy after taxonomy on a variety of subjects. In 2004, however, almost fifteen years after *Master Plan*, she also produced *In and Around Home* (2004-5). The series is not necessarily a break from her stylistic approach of the 1990s, but it is notable within her entire body of work in that it is the one series that shares the same comprehensive collaged approach of *Master Plan*. *Master Plan* and *In and Around Home* are unique in embracing a panoply of image-types that constitute specific series. In fact, the two series, *Master Plan* and *In and Around Home* are so similar in concept that it is strange they are never associated with one-another.

There are, however, some important differences in their correspondence. For *In and Around Home*, Opie took pictures of her neighborhood, home, and family, creating a photodocumentary collage of her private life but the series is not as methodical in its approach as *Master Plan*. *Master Plan* chronicles and spatializes the experience of Valencia. Viewers get a kind of visual tour of the development, from panoramas of Valencia's surrounding areas, to housing exteriors, to housing interiors, and finally to envision the family themselves. *In and Around Home* is more hodgepodge and casual. There is no progressive narrative, no provocative text, no staged portraits. In contrast to the prescribed stiffness of *Master Plan*'s images, the *In and Around Home* photographs are casual; most invoke the perspective and sensibility of being

in the scene, instead of the presentational style of *Master Plan*, although it does contain a similar mixture of exterior shots, interiors, and portraits.

In and Around Home is also markedly intimate, as one would expect, given that Opie's partner and son appear in the images, but it also formally more intimate as well. *Sunday Morning Breakfast* (2004), for example, places the viewer at the kitchen table, with plates of half-eaten eggs in the foreground, looking towards the tableau of Opie's son playing with the family dog framed by the kitchen doorway. The image literally invites the viewer in, and the viewer is intended to exist imaginatively in Opie's private space. By contrast, interior images from *Master Plan* are deliberately composed to unsettle the viewer, making the viewer more voyeur and trespasser than guest. *Dickason Family Interior #2* (1987) not only presents a rather awkward viewing angle, as the eye-level is low in relation to the distance from the chair, but an uncomfortable one as well. In particular, the spatial tension between the wall's flatness and its recession towards the hallway creates a sense of unease, as the wall becomes both confrontational and defensive at the same time. The image also places the viewer almost on top of the chair and maybe a foot away from the wall—a somewhat weird location to stand in a room—while the formal arrangement of the artwork and furniture augment an anxious, uptight feeling. The differences between the two images imply that there is a certain sense of autobiographical development on Opie's part as she has come to inhabit the lifestyle that she once could only spectate.

The comparison between *Sunday Morning Breakfast* and *Dickason Family Interior #2* demonstrates a rather interesting difference between how the two series overall present interior space. With its frequent attention to walls, oftentimes to the point that the walls are somewhat intrusive, as in *Dickason Family Interior #2* or even the subject of the photograph itself, such as

the bulletin board in *Dickason Family Interior #8*, *Master Plan* seems preoccupied with enclosed space. This treatment of space is not a likely explicit conceptual strategy for *Master Plan*, but when compared to the images comprising *In and Around Home*, which almost always include a deep recession into space, it becomes obvious as a compositional tendency. The images comprising *In and Around Home* not only admit spatial recession, but they consciously call attention to the permeability of the house's boundaries, as the viewer's eye is guided repeatedly through uninterrupted sightlines through open doorways. The way in which *In and Around Home* treats space and the way in which it grants the viewer unrestricted access to Opie's home life have been interpreted as an invitation to the viewer or an 'opening up' on Opie's part. It also appears to augment the changes in Opie's relationship to domesticity, as evident in comparing *In and Around Home*'s *Oliver in a Tutu* (2004) with the portrait of the Dickason family. Opie's son Oliver embodies a jubilant blend of heavily-gendered attire, wearing a USC football t-shirt with a pink tutu, a necklace, and crown. He also stands in front of the washing machine, while a woman sweeps the porch in the background, highlighting the notion of a laundry as women's work. Oliver is shown three times in *In and Around Home*, always in some form of play. By contrast, the son in *Dickason Family,* sits stiffly in prim clothing, the embodiment of performance, both of manner and of his gender.

The two boys appear to represent two kinds of domesticity, one that is formal and controlled and another that is open and casual, and the trajectory between them appears to represent Opie coming to terms with her own sense of domesticity or even laying claim to domestic life. At the same time, that explanation for the correspondences between the two series, in both their style and subjects, is strangely unsatisfying because for all of *Master Plan*'s apparent mannerism and for all of *In and Around Home*'s apparent sincerity, both series

complicate these qualities. Opie's pictures of the Dickason family home are not staged and it is unlikely she asked the Dickasons to wear certain clothes; therefore, we are forced to assume that the Dickasons are, in a paradoxical reversal, authentic in their surroundings. The voyeuristic character of Opie's photographs for the series also heightens this sense of intruding on the Dickason's private life, of seeing it without pretense. By the same token, *In and Around Home* is assuredly personal and intimate in its all-access pass to Opie's residence, but at the same time, there is something that challenges that intimacy in emphasizing just how accessible Opie is and in making the visuals so *consciously* unencumbered. To ignore this compositional strategy is to suggest the unlikely interpretation that the comprehensive views that Opie provides in *In and Around Home* are a means of simply attempting the most complete picture of her home-life and family, or the most comprehensive sharing of otherwise sacred space.

WHERE TO BE ONE'S SELF

Like any other series in Opie's body of work, *In and Around Home*'s images are constructed images, and the spatial extension that allows the viewer to take in progressive spaces from one end of the house to the next, from exterior to interior spaces and vice-versa, imply that the shots of home are not necessarily only about the tension between public and private space, but moreover about transparency. The threshold in *In and Around Home* is less of a stable separation between inside and out. Instead it is a transitional moment, and highlighting its presence suggests that the series is not so much revealing Opie, but questioning what "private domesticity" really means, and extent from that, how "private self" is defined. *In and Around Home* questions whether the self a definition in and of itself and what role might spatial context

play in the remaking of the self. Throughout, glimpses of Opie appear, from who she lives with, to the values she imparts to her child, to what she eats for breakfast, and yet, the single most unknowable figure, the most slippery concept, is nevertheless Opie herself. *My Studio, Suzanne's Work* (2005) is a provocative example, because the image and the title imply Opie's presence, but it she is impossible to locate—both physically or literally, but also metaphorically as well, as the picture and its title create confusion. One plausible explanation is that the room across the way is Opie's studio and the artwork on its far wall is "*Suzanne's Work*." In this paradigm, Opie's presence and identity is invoked by her lit studio, as well as her presence as the photographer. It is not entirely clear from this image though, whether "*Suzanne's Work*" refers to the artwork or to the photograph itself, especially considering that another piece from *In and Around Home*, *Me and Nika by Julie* (2005), informs the viewer that Julie is the photographer and not Opie—perhaps 'Suzanne' is the photographer of *My Studio, Suzanne's Work*. This is also to say nothing of the fact that unless someone is familiar with Opie's biography and knows "Julie" refers to Julie Burleigh, Opie's partner, the different names make the referents in the title somewhat difficult to interpret.

In addition, combining "my studio" with "Suzanne's work," and "Me" and "by Julie" in the two works' titles hint at confusion regarding the artist as her own subject and identity as acting or acted upon. If the studio belongs to Opie, then it is interesting that it's Suzanne's art that is highlighted for attention. If the entire portfolio is Opie's product, then to what degree is the picture of her and the dog Julie's output? It is not clear whether the image of Opie in the doorway in *Me and Nika by Julie* was serendipitous and Julie took the picture of her own volition, or if Julie was directed by Opie to take the picture who had posed the shot beforehand,

to say nothing of who completed the editing. Figuring out which one is true is not the point; it is the confusion between the possibilities that emphasizes the untenable nature of identity.

Regardless of whether the picture was conceptualized, photographed, and edited by Julie or if Julie simply pressed the shutter-release, the image and its caption still inform the viewer that the authenticity of authorship is to be questioned. In her own elision between artist and subject, Opie thereby becomes the figure that questions reality and representation. As she sits in the threshold between public and private space, or between outside and inside worlds, Opie also suggests that she is both the designer of her surroundings but also designed by them, just as her selfhood is constructed as much by the outside (Julie's view, and ours), as it is an interior context. Perhaps this is why the views of her household are so extensive. Perhaps it is an opening up of the sacred as several critics have argued, but it seems more invested in overturning a false contrast between interiority and objectivity, a way of suggesting that such boundaries are more tenuous than assumed by creating sightlines that are literal through-and-throughs.[153] Coupled with the different aspects of domestic work and life that affirm Opie's many roles—wife, mother, dog-lover, artist, lesbian, homeowner—these compositional strategies support the notion that one's identity is a matter of proximity and in part constructed by whatever role others automatically bestow upon that person within a specified relationship.

At the back of the *Me and Nika by Julie*, almost invisible in the dark, are the two glowing eyes of Opie's second dog, reminding the viewer that the murkiness in the background is still constructed space and not an amorphous void, and acting as a secondary coordinate to correspond with Julie, or the viewer, who stands on the opposite side of Opie—two ghostlike

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[153] For the argument that *In and Around Home* opens up Opie's 'sacred space,' see Jessica Hough, "Rainbow Kite," in *Catherine Opie*: *1999/In and Around Home* (Italy: Graphicom, 2006), 117-121.

presences that contextualize Opie in the middle. *Me and Nika by Julie* is the only formal portrait of Opie, but not the only time that she appears in the series. She also appears reflected in a red Mylar balloon in *The Bloods, Memorial* (2004), and her shadow appears at the lower lefthand corner of *Neighborhood Garage* (2005). Her decision to include these references to her presence in the images dismantles the pretense of objectivity and instead underscores the fact that just as her gaze bestows a kind of significance to place, the place also supplies definition to her.

The idea of spatial geography constructing and reconstructing the self occurs throughout *In and Around Home*, which, with its collaged record of West Adams bodegas, Martin Luther King Jr. parades, USC football tailgates, sex-offender protests, memorials for gang bangers and murals commemorating Pope John-Paul II, presents a community that would seem like the perfect counterpoint to the sanitized isolation of *Master Plan*'s Valencia. Coupled with the numerous political elements in the series, such as Opie's Polaroid vignettes of current events on television (a photographic technique that curator Jessica Hough notes questions veracity in contemporary news media) and a picture of voting both with Opie's open ballot, *In and Around Home* does indicate a certain defiance to the suburbanism as advertised by planned developments like Valencia, as well as a reclaiming of the definitions for residential community.[154] It can also be said that the references to the women in Opie's life, Suzanne and her partner Julie, also hint at Opie's domestic world as a comfortable covenant between her gay community, her artistic community, and the typical day-to-day of a nuclear family, another foil to Valencia's markedly narrow—straight, white, wealthy—conceptualization of domesticity.

Given the number of times that Opie has expressed her liberal views in print, it would be

[154] Hough, 120.

incorrect to argue that Opie does not stand opposed to the kind of gender, racial, and class politics invoked by Valencia, or that *In and Around Home* is her preferred expression of community in contrast to *Master Plan*. My argument does not refute the understanding of Opie's politics, but instead proposes that beyond those politics, there is a calculated and thoughtful examination of how such external coordinates relate to and inform the realities of the inner-self and of how permeable those 'boundaries' are. In this sense, the transition from *Master Plan* to *In and Around Home* may not be a case of a homosexual simply reclaiming the idea of domesticity, but rather a revision of the concept of selfhood as enclosed and separate interiority and selfhood that has little separation from external context and relationships. *Master Plan* represents the first conceptualization of identity, in which conflict appears within Opie between derision towards Valencia's construct of the American Dream that rejects her, and desire for the very same.

On the wall in *Dickason Family Interior #2* (1987) is a framed reproduction of Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*. The image-upon-image quietly, yet powerfully alludes to Opie's central conflict between 'aberrant' identity aspiring for the heteronormative American Dream. Wyeth's protagonist, who in real life had been modeled by Wyeth's paraplegic neighbor, stands in for Opie herself, banished from the homestead, her enigmatic pose suggesting either yearning or loathing or both, locked together in paralysis. It is an image that suggests Opie's conceptualization of her identity as conflict between her sexual identity and the social norm. This view is perhaps reformed in *Christmas West Adams* (2004), a shot taken out the window from inside Opie's home. The interior is darkened, save for lights on a Christmas tree, and the only thing that the viewer can make out is the outside world of the neighborhood street, framed through a large picture-window. In front of the window is a rainbow banner, emblazoned with the words "SAY NO To the Bush Agenda," its lettering backwards to the viewer's perspective as

it is meant as a statement to passer-bys. Sexuality, normally the purview of the private sphere, is provocatively on display, literally written on the house, a possible metaphor for the way in which homosexuality tends to define a person from the outside in. *Christmas West Adams* is not a form of redemption in the sense that although it implies the harmonious union of disparate elements (homosexuality, Christianity, privacy, publicity), it does not simply 'prove' Opie's integration into her domestic role, so much as it seems to propose that for Opie, there is a lack of distinction between the foundations of external expression and internal self. It is an image that demonstrates how the very idea of such boundaries is perhaps a falsehood, for it is the outside that is visible in the image, and the outside that supplies the necessary visual context to a dark and shadowy interior; yet it is also the opaque interior that frames and contextualizes the outside in turn.

The complicated relationship that defines identity for Opie are expressed throughout these examinations of domestic space, provocatively at least as much or more than they are expressed through portraiture, the traditional domain for questions of identity. The seemingly disparate concepts appear to have been separate throughout Opie's work, particularly throughout the 1990s, in which landscapes are kept wholly distinct not just in subject matter but also tone and character, from portraits; however, Opie's relationship to domesticity as a reoccurring theme throughout her body of work sheds light on the way in which space has a fundamental connection to identity. Such connections will be explored in the next and final chapter that endeavors to explain how Opie's seemingly separate directions between landscapes and portraits are actually an integrated project in which identity is a coordinate of geocultural space.

Chapter 4

Places Without People and People Without Place

INTRODUCTION: A MATTER OF FRAMING

This dissertation has concentrated on the changing definitions and importance of space and place, and thus, analyses has focused on Catherine Opie's landscape photography. Although it is logical and certainly more strategic to confine the terms of discussion to only those series that adopt place as their subjects, doing so also permits a glaring omission of what have become iconic images within Opie's oeuvre—her portraits—and specifically, portraits that comprise three significant and defining series for Opie: *Being and Having* (1991), *Portraits* (1993-1997), and *Self-Portraits* (1993-2004). This chapter introduces Opie's treatment of people to the discussion, but with a particular analytical framing of examining portrait works in conversation with landscape. Produced alongside most of the place series discussed in earlier chapters (with exception to Opie's MFA thesis *Master Plan*), Opie's portrait series, which are overtly political in their explorations of gay identity and gender, seem opposed to, or at least dissociative of, her relatively cool and prosaic landscapes: compare, for example, any of the photographs comprising *Freeways* or *Mini-malls* to those comprising her portrait series, such as the splashy Technicolor and poster-sized image of tattooed *Ron Athey* (1994) or the brash expression of sexuality and violence in Opie's *Self-Portrait, Pervert* (1994). My primary goal here is not necessarily to join an already well-established body of literature devoted to Opie's portraits, but to explore the works in context and to answer the question of what one of two seemingly divergent directions

that Opie undertook throughout the 1990s, a preoccupation with place, has to do with the other, a preoccupation with the body, sexuality, and identity.

It is my argument that the seemingly dissonant landscape and portrait series Opie produced during the 1990s do, in fact, share some correspondence. I propose that they collectively offer a decade-long study of the ways in which identity is spatially constructed, and that her awareness of this phenomenon stems from having to negotiate between several coordinates of her own identity as a gay woman. While it is in some sense obvious to describe identity as adaptive to one's surrounds, or that "identity means different things in different places and time . . . [and that] geography is at the heart of this process; identities get hardened and rigidified in part because social life takes place in and through space,"[155] the statement only appears obvious because the idea of 'spatially-constructed identity' is often misinterpreted as referring to how subjectivity shifts in behavior or expression. In fact, my term 'spatially-constructed identity' refers to the collapse of the subjectivity as defined by a distinction between subject/object and a reinstatement of the "living body, being at once 'subject' *and* 'object'," as Henri Lefebvre puts it.[156] The role of space in this paradigm is to mediate an endless interaction between inside and outside (or between subjects and objects), such that "we may say that every spatial envelope implies a barrier between inside and out, but that this barrier is always relative and, in the case of membranes, always permeable . . . the spatio-temporal reality of [the] body . . . is neither substance, nor entity, nor mechanism, nor flux, nor closed system."[157] In other words, who we are is synonymous with where we are.

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[155] Pratt and Hanson, 6.

[156] Lefebvre, 406. My emphasis.

[157] Ibid., 176, 196.

For all the critical interest Opie's photographic series have inspired—both portraits and landscape—it is somewhat remarkable that the aggregate rhetoric maintains a conceptual divide between her two primary interests of people and places. In cases when Opie's work has been displayed as a retrospective (as opposed to single series), the series are usually discussed chronologically—an approach that is certainly not inappropriate, but nevertheless implies that each series was produced outside the context of other series. This is not to argue that Opie intended her projects to rely upon one another for context or to have an explicit dialogue because each of her series was certainly conceived as an independent project and all of them function as unique and complete narratives in and of themselves. It is, however, to suggest that in perpetuating a chronological framing for Opie's works, critical rhetoric has overlooked the possibilities engendered by two basic details. One is the fact that while Opie's landscape and portrait series throughout the 1990s can be organized chronologically by completion date, they actually overlap in terms of production. The second and more significant oversight dismisses the formal consistency pervading Opie's major works of the 1990s.

Regardless of whether her series are comprised of portraits or landscapes, and despite the relative changes in tone (the dispassion and subtlety of her landscapes versus the intimacy and political assertiveness of her portraits), Opie's works of the 1990s are rigidly serial; each series is comprised of images that are identically sized, colored, composed, and lit.[158] Rather than continuing the trend of considering each series in seclusion, the time has come to look at a

[158] A mild exception is *Portraits*, which employs three different sizes and displays sitters in different positions with slightly different framings—some are full-body, life-sized portraits and others are busts or ¾-torso views; most subjects stare directly at the camera, but not all of them do, and there are a few that contain two people rather than one. Nevertheless, the overall "look" of *Portraits* is intentionally cohesive, with all of its sitters decontextualized and posed in front of brightly-colored backgrounds.

specific period, roughly 1990-1999, in which Opie's works share an explicit taxonomy, as a distinct movement within her career. Doing so not only invites rich philosophical considerations regarding the connection between identity and place, but also acknowledges Opie's taxonomic stylistic approach as a conceptual and critical tactic, and not just the expression or development of a personal style. Applying this new framing to Opie's work that explores the 1990s as one conceptual period within her entire body of work synthesizes the relationship between place and identity.

In 2003, roughly fifteen years after completing *Master Plan*, Opie described her work as an ongoing practice in "disturbing the devices that society imposes on variant communities to keep them 'ghettoized' by class, race, sexuality and gender. It's important that my work be seductive as a visual language, as I want to keep the viewer engaged. *This allows for multiple readings which challenge the viewers to consider both people and space in their various complexities.*"[159] My emphasis here is to underscore Opie's explicit joining of people and place as connected constructs, as well as her rejection of determinancy. Instead, Opie proposes conceptual fluidity, inviting a multiplicity of readings from viewers regarding the 'varied complexities' of her subjects. Accordingly, Opie's portrait works repeatedly challenge categorization: the sitters of *Portraits* contest traditional gender roles (there are also three portraits within the series that document one subject's female-to-male sexual reassignment), and her fresh body carvings in both *Self-Portrait*s (*Cutting*, 1993 and *Pervert*, 1994) are inflamed and bleed, emphasizing tattoo as an act of alteration instead of its categorical permanence. The carving in *Pervert* is shown faded in the last picture (*Nursing*, 2004), added ten years later, to

[159] Catherine Opie, qtd. in "Herb Alpert Award in the Arts." http://herbalpertawards.org/artist/2003/catherine-opie (accessed August 18, 2011). My emphasis.

emphasize the tension between permanence and growth. Her landscape series also allude to change and transformation, but use an opposite effect. These present space and place as frozen in time or outside of time, like archeological evidence of a past civilization, and it is the viewer's presence that activates a realization of temporal distance.[160]

The portraits present people in flux; the landscapes present locations in stasis, but in viewing the portraits, one is as aware of each sitter's fidelity to some sense of true being despite his or her noncomformity, and in viewing the landscapes, one is aware of the fact that settlements are never really 'settled,' no matter how enduring they appear. There is a kind of correspondent mirroring between Opie's portraits and landscapes that can be summarized as an intentional confusion between incongruous notions, that of constancy versus instability, or essence versus fluidity. The disagreement between such terms is often condensed into a challenge to the philosophical construction of Cartesian models, in which there is an internal/external conception of personhood or the Cartesian self as distinct from the surrounding world. The problem with the Cartesian self, as articulated by many poststructuralist scholars, is that it assumes a stable and central subjectivity around which things revolve. As Judith Butler famously revealed, gender itself is a "stylization . . . a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" that is based upon the supposedly secure criteria of biology.[161]

Opie's sexuality thus becomes a factor in this investigation, as she represents not only

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[160] The phrase "temporal distance" comes from Rosalind Krauss in a summary of Roland Barthes' discussion regarding the unique time-paradox that photography presents. See Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 2," 65.

[161] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, London: Routledge, 1990: 33.

conceptual identity but also bodily materiality as comprised of opposing tensions. Opie's sense of self is both fixed, in that her homosexuality is fixed—an unchanging and essential identifying feature—but also fluid, as the realization of sexual preference and her engagement with the categories of sexuality and gender produces a fractured selfhood that interacts with community, environment, and ego differently, on an ever-changing conditional basis. To return to my earlier adage that *who* is synonymous with *where*, it is not as simple as saying Opie is gay and her expression of her sexuality is contingent upon where she is, or that 'stasis' is the Cartesian self and 'flux' refers to its expression. Instead, 'identity' (and 'gayness' in Opie's works) only seem like essentialist cores in a purely intellectual context; the reality of either concept is created and recreated exclusively via interaction with the outside world and is only knowable or recognizable through the senses. The awareness that one is male or female, young or old, gay or straight, emerges from sensory social context: how one is looked at, or spoken to, for example. As the senses are what interact with our environs, the environs are in turn what form the reality of our identities, creating definition through relations and experience. As the environmental context continuously changes, so too do the coordinates of identity; hence identity is a conditional consequence of space and place.

These observations in turn propose that the expression of a disjointed sense of self is informed by Opie's marginalized gender and sexuality. This chapter thereby utilizes a diverse selection of socioeconomic, gender, and place theories, and integrates foundational ideas posited by a variety of scholars. Henri Lefebvre in particular serves as the theoretical grounding for this chapter, and much of my analysis is premised specifically on observations he makes in *The Production of Space* (1974; 1991, in English), each one contributing to its central principle: that space is socially constructed and therefore constructs the social. As a sociologically-minded

philosopher, Lefebvre's writings therefore often invoke collective subjects and actors, such as "the city," "capitalist society," and "urbanity." This invocation of the collective also aligns Lefebvre well with similarly sociologically-focused intellectuals such as Edward Soja, but perhaps not as neatly or at least as immediately in reference to those who emphasize the role of personal agency in their writings, such as bell hooks—or to Catherine Opie's portraits and her markedly more subjective and personal lens. Within its broadminded macro-views, however, *The Production of Space* does intermittently return to the individual and to the more intimate effects of spatiality—notably, Lefebvre invokes the individual body. In addition, while *The Production of Space*'s endeavor to expose a vast and invisible spatial system as the result of recapitulating cultural hegemonies might sound more hyperbolic than revolutionary in today's cultural climate, its core observation—that the symbiotic complicity between social space and societal power structures keeps such hierarchies hidden and furthermore presents them as natural or inevitable—has dramatic implications in Opie's work.

Lefebvre's arguments, however, are proposed as universal, thereby suffering from patriarchal and heterosexual blindness—which is not to suggest overt sexism, so much as to point out that his theories are simply not as useful in relation to direct considerations of gender and of homosexuality. Therefore, my analysis also relies on theories put forth by feminist scholars, namely bell hooks and Doreen Massey, two intellectuals who have maintained a spatial focus in their focus on gender and identity. The association is not arbitrary either: Massey was influenced by Lefebvre and references his work in her own, and although hooks has not mentioned Lefebvre directly, she is certainly versed in his theories and her writings invoke a

spatial awareness that has been observed to connect powerfully to Lefebvrian concepts.[162] These scholars have collectively made groundbreaking philosophical inquiries into the field of space and place theory, specifically in spatially-constructed identity and politics. Finally, my analysis borrows from Rosalind Krauss in order to discuss the use and effects of taxonomy in photography, as well as the complicated relationship between the photograph and its subject, and the photographic image's assumed veracity. Opie has been quite specific about her interest in documentary photography, or to put it more aptly, in the photograph-as-document. Krauss' observations about the complex and problematic assumptions regarding the photograph's 'veracity' are useful in probing Opie's relationship to the camera and how the artist engages with the expectations and opportunities of the medium.

This chapter first discusses matters of style in relation to how taxonomic formalism is a particularly useful approach to contemporary photography, with respect to distinct conceptual issues that are specific to the medium. The second section uses Lefebvre's theories on space in conjunction with Krauss' writings on photography in order to explain how the objectifying character of the serial image offers a beneficial template for demonstrating how identity is neither absolute nor coherent, or ever truly knowable. The last half of this chapter, comprising three sections, then turns to Opie's portraiture. While it acknowledges and discusses the identity and sexual politics of Opie's human subjects, it concentrates on examining portraits more or less spatially. This includes centering analysis on the backgrounds, rather than the sitters, but also the kind of vision that these portraits require of their audiences. Opie's photographs disturb certain assumptions as to how one views portraiture, creating images that resist identification or

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[162] Edward Soja makes connections between hooks and Lefebvre. He also describes a personal conversation with hooks in which she talked about Lefebvre's influence on her writings. See Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, 104-5.

labeling; at the same time, they balance the presence of people with the presence of *space*, by making the brightly-colored grounds an active—rather than passive—feature of the images. The subjects of *Portraits* defy categorization and labeling, a quality that Opie exploits through her treatment of space (or lack thereof, as is the case with *Portraits*). In contrast to much of the criticism that has heavily prioritized the personalities of the sitters as members of Opie's LGBT community, I argue that space, and other criteria of formal design, is just as important and constructive in the examination of identity as the sitters themselves, despite their gender-bending appearances. This last section thereby offers a complement to the first three chapters, which have focused exclusively on landscape, supplying the "people without place" component of the title.

NON-CATEGORICAL CATEGORIZING

There is a little-known series Opie completed after *Master Plan* and after graduating from CalArts in 1990 called *A Long Way From Paris*. This series documents the struggle in Opie's then-neighborhood MacArthur Park between preservation, destruction, and gentrification. The imagery combines photography with mixed media, as Opie often photographed houses that had been burned for insurance money and made triptychs by combining them with panels containing varied objects and clothing from the wreckage. With the addition of a "Raymond Chandler-esque text," *A Long Way From Paris* continues the same kind of reliance on narrative that *Master Plan* does, but with one important development: "*Master Plan* was done in 200

photographs—this was done in five with a text."[163] Opie's statement hints at the fact that following *Master Plan*, her series would become tighter and more refined, embracing a pared-down formalism and rigid serialism. The pointed reference to "a text" as part of the work also reveals Opie's awareness of the effect of captioning an image, and in turn suggesting that the lack of long-form statements or captioning in her work since then is a conscious choice, as is the way she chooses to capitalize on one way text *is* conventionally used for artworks: the title. Throughout Opie's entire body of work, but particularly regarding works she produced throughout the 1990s, these formal attributes become the dominant discursive mode. It is therefore relevant and necessary to explore the effects of serialization, taxonomy, and captioning in reference specifically to photography and the particular challenges and theoretical assumptions about the media.

The unifying theme that informs Opie's work of 1990s, for portraits and landscapes alike, is a resistance to categorization. In the case of her portrait work, this resistance is generally understood in terms of her personal relationship with the sitters, such that the subjects in the photographs are individuated beyond their LGBT status. In addition, most of Opie's sitters, including herself, are people that defy traditional gender categories: some are undergoing gender reassignment, some perform gender, and some appear androgynous. These manipulations of such gender categories are also a collective challenge to the concept that gender is natural at all. Having said that, the repetition of form within the series and the fact that each image aesthetically mimics the next, has a way of defeating the attempts to individuate subjects as well. Opie's portraits of the 1990s honor their subjects (all personal friends of Opie) with great

[163] Opie, qtd. in "Documenting Communities: An Interview With Catherine Opie," from *Los Angeles, I'm Yours*. Interview: Kyle Fitzpatrick, posted July 9, 2012 (http://www.laimyours.com/21858/documenting-communities-an-interview-with-catherine-opie/).

sincerity, but employ a presentational style that is constructed, and at times even mannered. Despite the fact that each sitter is honored as an individual, pictorially one is still somehow interchangeable with the next.

The literature thus far has been resistant to this observation and is still committed to the idea that Opie's portraits, because they are of herself and her community, because they are so reverent, and because the sitters happen to be LBGT, then these series must be about celebrating individuality and nonconformity. To say that one portrait—or one person—is 'interchangeable with the next' does not sound in the spirit of Opie's work and dismissive of those depicted, as if to corral them back into stereotype. However, when individuality is made to be the centerpiece of Opie's work, its serial style, particularly in the case of *Portraits*, is either excised from discussion entirely or subjected to contorted theory:

> Opie's sitters in the *Portraits* . . . are a delightfully motley crew, and the defining accouterments and variety of shots . . . spell heterogeneity despite the rigid parameters of the series. Most striking, the range of color backgrounds (crimson, hot orange, celestial blue, lime green, violet) refuses the repetitive consistency of the typical bland studio backdrop, arguing that each subject is still an individual, even though a member of the tribe. It is as if Opie's friends, identified by name in each photograph's title, radiate their own color auras.[164]

Jennifer Blessing's allusions to new-age metaphors (different temperaments yielding different colored 'auras') provides an interpretation that is fanciful, unreasoned, and ultimately, a bit arbitrary, considering that if the colored backgrounds are meant to keep each person distinct, then why would the same color be used for several different people? That is not to say that Blessing's description is wrong—she is correct that there is a sense of diversity within a shared

[164] Blessing, 13.

collectivism in the series—but that it is perhaps a biased one, and tentatively considerate of decades of LGBT individuals fighting to be defined by singular character and not their sexuality, and of the resistance within LGBT communities to being typecast as all one "type." Politically, the assertion that perhaps Opie's photographic serials do more to elide the differences between each person rather than distinguish between them invites some thorny discussion.

Aesthetically, however, the uniformity and repetition are fundamental aspects of Opie's work and to analyze her photographs without taking their serial composition into account is to ignore the obvious. Even to observe, as Blessing does, the fact that *Portraits* undertakes a "variety of shots" is somewhat of a manipulation of the stylistic intent. It is true that *Portraits* observes variances within the series. There are two different sizes used—a large full-scale size at 60 by 30 inches, and a smaller size at 20 by 16 inches—and sitters are shown both full-body and bust, and seated and standing. Most look directly at the camera, but a few do not. There is also a series, *Mike and Sky* (1993), of three images of the same couple and the only images in *Portraits* in which there are two individuals in the same image. On the whole, however, the series works as a cohesive whole and these variances operate much like the variances within *Freeways*, in which wide-angle landscapes were juxtaposed with images of the freeways in close-up—which is to say that the variations of individual images do not seem to be as important as the series' regimented character overall.

More to the point is the fact that *Portraits* is one among five other major series produced during the same decade that are heavily ordered, to the point that the aesthetic vision seems mechanical rather than artistic. This has already been shown to be evident in Opie's landscapes; it is also true of Opie's portraits. The first portrait series Opie completed, *Being and Having* (1990-1991) is one such example, as its images utilize the same perspective, composition,

design, and size. To argue that the minor liberties in *Portraits* have some significant meaning is to suggest that *Portraits* is an outlier to the overwhelmingly predominant oeuvre of the period. Instead, it is more likely that *Portraits* engages with similar conceptual strategies as the series that were produced concurrently with it and likewise, thus share in a similar design aesthetic. Opie's photographs of the period appear objective, as if they were taken by property surveyors (if landscapes) or yearbook photographers (if portraits), and oftentimes this primary look of objectivity acts as opposition to the more subtle touches of artistry and authorship, whether it is an unlikely angle in shooting a freeway, or the close-cropping of the women in *Being and Having*, or the choice of colors in *Portraits*. It is the tension between these two polarities that characterizes much of Opie's work, and in order to undertake an analysis of that tension, attention to the photographs' rigid formalism must be equal to the attention bestowed onto their individual subjects.

THE PARADOX OF *BEING AND HAVING*: A CASE-STUDY OF SERIAL PORTRAITS

It is far more productive to consider how Opie engages with repetition in her work and to question why the serial format would be the compositional choice for portraiture. The question is especially provocative considering that portraiture as a genre is usually assumed to be a record or study of individual subjectivity, and that photography as a medium also generally assumes the comprehension and meaning of truth. When combined, these two aspects of both genre and medium tend to imply individualism by default in the sense that the photographic image of a person is considered a representation of who they are, including all the slippery problems imbued in the very phrase "who they are." Opie uses a stylistic construction that upsets and defies these

presumptions of both medium and genre, but not because she really wants to answer the question of who someone *really* is, but rather because she wants to represent the nuances of being itself, in which case, the question of who someone is, becomes irrelevant because it is ultimately unknowable. The tension in Opie's work is a disagreement between two ways of framing identity: one in which the self is a distinct and unified construct and thereby definable, and one in which the self is indistinct from surroundings, or "spatially-constructed" and indefinite. The argument is not so much of a disagreement between real versus performative, but rather an observation that the performative *is* the real and that both constitute 'truth.'

This nuance becomes particularly obvious in reference to Opie's series *Being and Having* (1991), her first portrait series completed after *Master Plan*, and probably her earliest well-known professional work. The project features close-cropped images of Opie's lesbian friends wearing fake mustaches, each one in front of the same yellow backdrop, framed in the same dark wood, and named with the same brass plates attached at the bottom of each picture, like Old Master paintings or specimen plaques. The nameplates are engraved with the sitters' nicknames as frequently used in sexual roleplay, most of them vaguely male-sounding: "Bo," "Ingin," and "Papa Bear," for example. Some of the women are also costumed in various sartorial markers of machismo, like bandanas and baseball caps, facial prison tattoos, and dangling cigarettes. The costumes refer to "a particular subculture within the lesbian community, which took drag not just as a theoretical model but as a central feature of its daily practice. That subculture, known as Daddy/Boy, avoided borrowing its model for cross-dressing from the heterosexual world, turning instead to a phenomenon in which members of gay male couples adopted differing levels of sexual authority . . . Such play was not always welcome within the lesbian mainstream, which

saw Daddy/Boy as a retreat from, or even a betrayal of, its woman-identified ethics."[165] The women thus blur the lines of not one, but several cultural categories: they are lesbians performing masculinity, which makes them not feminine enough to be "proper" lesbians, at the same time that they are not truly male. These contradictions are also hinted at by the title. *Being and Having* is a Lacanian reference that has a unique relationship to specifically lesbian sexuality, in which women are both "being the phallus" as well as having it, and thus embodying the paradox of being two genders at once.

Through the references to roleplay in the nicknames on the placards, the costuming, and the mustaches, the series imbues photographic portraiture—a genre that usually assumes some degree of authentication expressed through a medium often associated with validity—with performance. The two spheres of performative and authentic identity are both genuine and constitutive of the sitters, who have internalized their performance and perform their identity in co-existence. In that sense, the most important argument that *Being and Having* makes is that both of these attributes—portraits-as-truth and portraits-as-performance—are equal. The serial taxonomic form of the series creates this conflicted balance by blurring the distinctions between subjectivity and objectivity and between artificiality and truth. Each woman is distinct, and honored as such, but the images' repetition nevertheless converts the subjects from being individuals to specimens. The yellow backgrounds imply both artificiality because of their hypercolored manufactured look, but also reverence, as they also reference the gold-leaf backgrounds used in medieval panel paintings. The backgrounds, in conjunction with the close-cropped framing around each woman's head, put the spotlight on each woman's face, but

[165] Trotman, 43.

nonetheless convert the women into icons. The resulting images are so heavily imbued with notes of artifice—the mustaches alone are a clear signifier of Judith Butler's 'gender performance'—that it is impossible to argue that the portraits are meant to be true representations of their subjects. The subjects certainly inhabit contradictions just by their very nature of their sexual orientation, an aspect that the stylized elements of *Being and Having* highlight--each sitter is identified by name, but none of the names are real; each sitter is both female and male--but it is the repetition of the imagery, the photographs' serial motif, that crystallizes the challenge to notions of sincerity and discernment in contemporary portraiture.

SERIALS, METONYMY, AND THE INDEX: OPIE'S INVESTIGATION OF THE LIMITS AND POTENTIAL OF DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Being and Having is among the most structurally consistent of Opie's serials, sharing a similar rigidity to *Freeways*, *Mini-malls*, and *Houses*, in which there is no variation to the format. There are—albeit minor—variations in her portrait series, *Self-Portrait*s and *Portraits.* The *Self-Portrait*s, although they are all 40 by 30 inches in size and are essentially portrait busts, have slightly different croppings of Opie's body, and their backgrounds are different (although all lush baroque fabrics). *Portraits* takes a few more liberties, as discussed earlier in this chapter, involving the cropping and directional gaze of the sitters. Overall, however, all of these series are intended to be cohesive and narrative serials, grouped together into topical studies. The uniform repetition offers a discursive challenge to the conventions of portraiture itself, as well as the particularly passive kind of viewership that photography tends to allow. Much has been made about the lack of context for Opie's sitters, with comparisons to Hans Holbein, whom Opie has referenced herself as a model of noble portrait style, and who's aesthetic conventions imbue her

own subjects with similar reverence.[166] Specific to *Being and Having*, Opie has also argued that shooting each sitter in front of flat color or an 'unspatial' backdrop, instead of "in the streets or at the clubs where they go-go dance with mustaches and jock-straps on," was a strategy to prevent reductivist viewing. She felt that to portray her friends in the physical or spatial context of their lifestyles would allow viewers to interpret each woman as a character or as actors partaking in a cultural niche, defined entirely by sexual preference.[167] If Opie were to have shot her friends performing activities that actually were representative of them and their lifestyles, then the viewer would likely automatically marginalize the women into stereotypes, and probably without even realizing their tendency to do so.

The quote thus in turn seems to suggest that removing her subjects from particular environments was a stylistic means for forcing the viewer to contend with each person 'as is,' but this is not the case. Opie's images combine the artificial with the real—*Being and Having* is probably the clearest exemplar of this trait, but it can still be said for *Portraits* and *Self-Portrait*s—and the taxonomic stylization of her series is necessary in order to achieve that contradiction visually. Opie's photography embraces the medium's metonymic traits, capitalizing on the assumption that photography mechanically reproduces an excision from reality. Hers is a manipulation of documentarian formalism such that it complicates and challenges viewership, making the viewer more conscious of the ways in which photography complicates, rather than reflects, truth. Unless digitally retouched or altered, a photograph cannot

[166] Catherine Opie has frequently invoked Hans Holbein as an inspiration for her portraits: Catherine Opie, (lecture, photo l.a., Santa Monica, CA, January 11, 2009).

[167] Catherine Opie, qtd. in David Hirsh, "The Artist's Roles," *New York Native* 10, no 51 (December 2, 1991): 36. In Trotman, 43.

record physical impossibilities. It generally assumes that whatever its subject, that subject actually existed at the time the photograph was taken, for "it is the order of the natural world that imprints itself on the photographic emulsion and subsequently the photographic print. This quality of transfer or trace gives the photograph its documentary status, its undeniable veracity," as Rosalind Krauss famously remarked.[168]

Serials are among the most documentarian of photographic arrangement, as their mechanical look presumes objectivity, and heightens the idea of a photograph as a record from reality. Very consistent serials, such as those by Bernd and Hilla Becher or Ed Ruscha's various collections of palm trees and gas stations, recall the scientific documentation of data. Even portraits, which by virtue of the fact their subjects are human and therefore less easily characterized as 'specimens,' can be relegated to the perfunctory through serial stylization. Thomas Ruff's close-cropped photographs recall passport photos; even Opie's *Portraits* are reminiscent of a yearbook. Due to photography's association with veracity and objectivity, the medium often lends itself to the questions and difficulties of those very qualities: Jeff Wall, for example, mixes staged and natural scenes; Thomas Demand constructs photographs of quasi-realistic models of office-cubicle life; and Cindy Sherman dresses up as feminine archetypes that are nevertheless all her. Opie's work falls along these lines in that her series also complicate the meaning of truth, but she is distinguished by the fact that compared to a great many other contemporary photographers, particularly those within the Becher School that became wildly popular in the 1980s and 1990s, her work is unabashedly sincere and emotionally vulnerable.

Photographic serialization tends to be a very formal concept. Krauss, writing from a

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[168] Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 2," 59-60.

poststructuralist position in the 1970s, characterized the photograph as a “trace” of its referent, arguing that “[t]he connective tissue binding the objects contained by the photograph is that of the world itself, rather than that of a cultural system. In the photograph’s distance from what could be called syntax one finds the mute presence of an uncoded event.” [169] She thereby separates the photograph’s relationship to its subject, which is rooted in reality or “the world itself,” from the photograph’s relationship to the viewer, which is characterized by the viewer’s “indexical” relationship to the image—in short, the photograph may record reality, but its meaning is rooted in cultural association. Krauss’s discussion of the photograph as an index thereby supplies a theoretical counterpoint to the assumption of the camera as a recorder of reality. The index, as a form of metonymy, therefore suggests that knowledge and understanding of the world in general is comprised of an endlessly varied and infinite metonymy anyway—things exist independently, but they are only knowable in relation in relation to one-another, rather than in and of themselves. Thus, the photograph itself is a facsimile of the world, but also freed of any particular coding or convention, until it is supplied by the viewer. The photograph records, and therefore accepts the expansive and indefinite nature of the world, but it is also a medium through which the viewer both receives and projects an entire lexicon of content, both real and imagined.[170]

Photography is thereby well-suited to questioning broad-minded sociocultural movements, and many photographers capitalize on a particularly documentarian approach from an aesthetic and formal mindset, pushing the image towards abstraction to push most interpretive

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[169] Henri Lefebvre’s comments on photography as metonymy appear in *The Production of Space,* 59-60.

[170] Ignasi de Sola-Morales Rubio, “Terrain Vague” in *Anyplace*, ed. Cynthia C. Davidson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995): 119.

consciousness onto the viewer, who revisits his own indexical relationship to the subject and supplies his own cultural 'syntax' to the image. The photographic image is a presentation that the viewer is to grapple with interpretively, and thus, many contemporary photographers intend their works to resonate within fairly expansive conceptual discourses: nationalism and history (the Bechers); mass-consumption (Ruscha); feminism (Sherman). Opie's works of course handle similarly broad-minded topics as well, and clearly the portrait works of the 1990s observe the social politics of LGBT acceptance. Opie's work, however, is also about her and operates on very personal terms—more clearly personal than any of the aforementioned contemporary photographers. In an attempt to bridge the generalized social content with the localized personal content, the general consensus has become that Opie puts her personal life at the forefront of her work as a way of honoring and legitimating LGBT individuals and lifestyles in response to the collective cultural prejudices and biases they struggle against. Put in terms of formalism, this argument proposes that Opie's use of a documentary photojournalistic style in order to express highly personal subjects is a way of defeating the categorical objectification that conceptually accompanies the style, and extent from that, the categorical stereotyping that tends to accompany those who identify as LGBT. Without the artist's mediating presence (or at least the visual reduction of its presence), the viewer must confront his or her own cultural assumptions towards the images.

But, at the same time, Opie certainly does have a mediating presence in relationship to her work, which in many ways revolves around her cult of personality. Krauss argued that in its indexical relationship to the viewer, photography relies on the context surrounding viewership in a way that many other art forms do not. She specifically cited captioning, narrative, and succession as the kinds of context that can inform the photographic image, arguing that "the

successive parts of the works in question articulate into a kind of cinematic narrative; and that narrative in turn becomes an explanatory supplement to the works."[171] A photograph, in other words, is interwoven into the entire visual and conceptual lexicon that surrounds it. For Opie's work, the central narrative or "explanatory supplement" is Opie herself, and that is not just the natural consequence of being a living artist and having to promote her own work; it is by conceptual design. As a result, Opie's work is subject to a constant need for identification of who each person is, what their relationship is to her, where each landscape is located and why she would be in that location. The personal nature of Opie's work, however, is not a way of challenging the falsities of cultural categories by positioning herself as the subjective authority, as many critics seem to feel. The constant need to identify subjects in Opie's photographs, such as knowing Oliver is her son, that "Bo" is her alter-ego, that West Adams is home, only obscures the fact that on the whole, the identification that Opie's images assert, such as naming the sitters of her portraits, is usually confronted and questioned at the same time it is offered: who is "Papa Bear," for example? Opie's narrative presence in her work is not a means of offering herself as the axis of authenticity; it is in fact, the opposite, a way of presenting the way in which artifice is internalized. Her presence is constant, but often intentionally confused—she is both photographer and subject, herself and her sexual personas—as a means of heightening the awareness that her own identity, as the subjective cult-of-personality that acts as the central axis to the body of her work, is in itself unstable, negotiated, and reformed anyway by the viewer.

It is in this sense that Opie's portraits cut both ways: it is not just the cultural categories that are being challenged, but the presumed sanctity of the individuals as well. The typical

[171] Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 2," 66.

critique, which argues that Opie's sitters represent the reality confronting false social stigmas associated with being gay or transgendered, relies on a conceptual understanding that presumes the individual has an identity that is distinct, whole, and knowable in contrast to the collective. Opie's series, however, present her subjects' individual identities as a negotiation with their community identity—like the women of *Being and Having* being partially identified by roles they perform in the Daddy/Boy community—so that in some sense, both the collective stereotypes and the individuals themselves are real and also unreal, and mutually constructive of each-other. If, Krauss posits, photography is a form of metonymy, such that it substitutes the photographed image (the part) for the reality it references (the whole) in which the part is related to the whole via associative properties that form the viewer's indexical relationship to the image, then the medium seems entirely metaphorically appropriate for handling the topic of LGBT identity. One's sexual orientation is itself a fixed reality and intrinsic to that person's existence, similar to the way in which a photograph is fundamentally tethered to the real world. At the same time, the lived experience of being LGBT is subject to endless cultural negotiation, similar to the way in which a photograph's meaning is entirely cultural. Opie's serials are intent upon exposing and manipulating metonymy for what it is: a form of mutualism in which the whole informs the nature of the parts, and the parts also constitute the whole. Within that relationship, there is no hierarchy, and no essential truth, only endless mediation.

OPIE'S *SELF-PORTRAIT*S OF BOTH/AND: THE LEFEBVRIAN REJECTION OF CARTESIAN SELF

The deliberate confusion between artifice and truth is most provocative and relevant in reference to Opie's series of *Self-Portrait*s, which in 1993 and 1994 were a diptych comprised of

Cutting and *Pervert* and would later become a triptych a decade later with *Nursing* (2004). The original diptych is one of Opie's most violent works: *Cutting* is a shot of Opie's naked torso from behind, her back bearing a painful carving of a lesbian domestic scene; *Pervert* is a shot of Opie topless in leather bondage costume, with a set of needles piercing the length of both arms and a newly-incised tattoo across her chest of the word "Pervert" in ornate calligraphy. The images are challenging and violent, but despite their intensity, Opie herself is calm and resolute. The photographs thus appear confrontational, defiant and proud, but are also about avoidance and shame. Opie bears her breasts, but not her face, and her deeply personal hopes, her sexual orientation, and her sexual habits, are on display for the viewer, but inaccessible to Opie herself. The violence inflicted upon the body supplies a visceral expression for—or perhaps relief from—Opie's emotional turmoil. The stillness of her body also suggests endurance, endurance that is both literally represented, as the painful body art would have taken hours to complete, and metaphorically invoked, as her body becomes the passive site of ongoing conflict.

These images thus clearly accentuate the confusion of subjectivity and objectivity in the dual role Opie plays as both artist and subject. Her passivity, expressed not only through the mutilation of her flesh—markings that Opie could not have done herself—but through Opie's resigned pose and hidden face, is significant in this respect. Opie is invoked as the active subject in that she is the artist, and has presumably designed and orchestrated the shots, but she is portrayed as an object more than a subject. The figure presented to the viewer is not really Opie's body so much as a relic of artistry and injury. Highlighting the self-objectification is the fact that the portraits allow Opie to see herself in ways that are only possible through photography—she cannot normally view herself from the back and she cannot see herself while hooded. In this sense, she is thus her own object as well. Opie's photographs thus go beyond the physical

limitations of seeing oneself in the mirror; however, at the same time, as literally and metaphorically naked as the photographs are, they conceal as much as they expose. One may assume that the woman in bondage gear is, in fact, a "pervert," but one also realizes that the label and costume don't say much as far as who the woman in the picture actually *is*. Opie's self-characterization as a "Pervert" makes her image strangely more cryptic than clarifying. At the same time that Opie objectifies herself, she also provokes curiosity about her subjectivity. Her *Self-Portrait*s hint that there must be something deeper beyond the wounded bodies, something behind the mask. The resulting interplay between subjectivity/objectivity is so balanced that the images never really promote one over the other. Instead, they vibrate somewhere in between.

Opie has spoken of the *Self-Portrait* images as a liberal response to the political clamor of the late 1980s and early 1990s over defunding the National Endowment for the Arts, to the cultural hostility she had experienced as a lesbian, and to the AIDS epidemic that was disproportionately affecting the LGBT community.[172] This explanation, while true in terms of the political climate that had some influence over the creation of the images, is also deceptively simple and does not satisfy the complexity of the images, nor speak to their philosophical effects. For one, it is an argument premised on defining Opie as disenfranchised from the dominant heterosexual culture and codifies Opie into the "Other" versus the "norm." Moreover, it underscores Opie's physical body as symbolism or a form of protest against external social values, at the expense of considering its role as representative of internal consternation and as a discursive site between external and internal definition. Not only does Opie's 1990s diptych present the collision of two traditionally separate identities—white picket fence versus sado-

[172] Catherine Opie, qtd. in Suzanne Muchnic, "L.A. Story," *Artnews* 97, no. 8 (September 1998): 152.

masochistic lesbian sexuality—but also various conceptual contradictions: violence used to express both resolute defiance and inner turmoil and victimization, self-expression and self-loathing, confrontation and avoidance. To further complicate matters, who exactly is the 'pervert' in this viewing scenario—is the word a label for Opie herself, or is it calling attention to the way the viewer participates in a fetishistic spectacle by looking at Opie? Of course the answer is both.

The *Self-Portraits* thereby express post-Cartesian subjectivity. They challenge the typical conception of the Cartesian self, a philosophical conception of subjectivity as a private, self-contained distinction from the world. The Cartesian self creates the classic binary of the internal versus the external, a concept that Henri Lefebvre argued was a philosophical error in *The Production of Space*:

> By conceiving of the subject without an object (the pure thinking 'I' or *res cognitans*), and of the object without a subject (the body-as-machine or *res extensa*), philosophy created an irrevocable rift in what it was trying to define . . . The living body, being at once 'subject' and 'object' cannot tolerate such conceptual division, and consequently philosophical concepts fall into the category of the 'signs of non-body.' Under the reign of King Logos, the reign of true space, the mental and social were sundered, as were the directly lived and conceived and the subject and object . . . A closure thus comes to separate within from without, so establishing the living body as a 'distinct body.' It is a quite relative closure, however and has nothing in common with a logical division or abstract split. The membranes in question generally remain permeable, punctured by pores and orifices. Traffic back and forth, so far from stopping, tends to increase and become more differentiated, embracing both energy exchange (alimentation, respiration, excretion) and information exchange (the sensory apparatus). The whole history of life has been characterized by an incessant diversification and intensification of the interaction between inside and outside . . . we may say that every spatial envelope implies a barrier between inside and out, but that this barrier is always relative and, in the case of membranes, always permeable.[173]

[173] Lefebvre, 406, 176.

Lefebvre thus argues that existence is informed as much by the sensory body as it is understood through analytical thought, and that to separate one from the other is to falsify the human condition into an abstraction of being. The Cartesian model thereby celebrates the way in which the mind fractures experience and mediates the senses, and Lefebvre's invocation of the body's permeable 'membranes' is intended in contrast to the predominant reliance upon vision—which is a sensory intake, but one that when elevated above all else contributes to an abstracted and removed sense of the world.

Opie's response to this primacy of vision is not only to create images that impart the visceral effects of bodily violence, but also to craft images that force viewers to be complicit in their own viewership. The *Self-Portrait*s are remarkably clear in this sense. The bleeding and irritated markings on her body address the viewer as a witness to violence committed in the past, or prior to the pictures being taken, but also as witness to the pain of the present, as captured in the still moment of the photographic image. The collapse of visual 'tenses' is Opie's challenge to photography's necessary condition as a "paradox of presence seen as past" so that the viewer retains the immediacy of their viewership, becoming a participant more so than an observer.[174] The diptych is also an aesthetic experience, and the collapse of the physical sadism of the past along with the detached vision of the present into a single photographic image makes the violence of the gaze explicit. Opie endures the pain of her body art, it seems, for viewing pleasure—in other words, to present herself to the viewer as an aesthetic experience. These communicative elements, which make the diptych so evocative of a covenant between its subject and the viewer, help to emphasize Opie's subjectivity as a post-Cartesian manifestation. Her

[174] Krauss paraphrasing Roland Barthes in "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 2," 65.

definition is as much a point of self-expression as it is completed and informed by the viewer's presence. The images collapse vision into a kind of time-suspended and space-suspended abstraction: by offering images of herself from the front and the back and in various states of undress, Opie hints at reconstituting the body's physical corporeality; yet, because the images lack complete continuity from one perspective to another, they force the viewer to create the connectivity between the two, in turn provoking a pointedly self-conscious viewership that is aware of the way in which Opie's body is only completed in the context of its sister image, and through the viewer's reconstruction.

In the act of photographing herself, Opie also invokes Krauss' articulation of photography as an expression of Lacan's 'mirror stage' through the indexical relationship between the photograph and the viewer. The 'mirror stage' refers to the period when children realize themselves as differentiated individuals, as opposed to universal presences, and begin the process by recognizing their mirror images—literally recognizing themselves from an exterior position: "The self is felt, at this stage, only as an *image* of the self; and insofar as the child initially recognizes himself as an other, there is inscribed in that experience a primary alienation." [175] The idea is not unlike Lefebvre's articulation of the post-Cartesian self in the sense that the idea of a differentiated identity exists only in the context of a point of reference: the self is always relational. Opie's *Self-Portrait*s capitalize on several aspects specific to photograph as a medium that highlights how contemporary portraiture is not about 'capturing' its subject, but rather, is a kind of performance in itself—a negotiation between the artist or viewer and the subject, who offers both identifying and alienating features. The *Self-Portrait* diptych

[175] Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 1," *October* 3 (Summer, 1977): 69.

offers two layers of this simultaneous identification and alienation. One is the photograph's narrative and how it represents Opie's ability to 'see herself' simultaneously as both authentic but also separate. She uses the photograph to record literal 'out of body' perspectives of herself that she cannot achieve normally. The second is a more metaphysical operation that occurs in viewers, who both look upon Opie as a separate individual, but also identify with Opie and imaginatively look upon the body in front of them as if they *were* her, effectively identifying with the artist while also feeling a profound Otherness at the same time. These two senses of identification and alienation combine with the spatial and temporal collapse, thus creating two images of the artist that expose how identity is constituted by its context, of which there is no constancy of time or place.

Identity on the Margin: An Addendum to Lefebvre

Despite his political anti-chauvinism, Lefebvre's influence in terms of postmodern feminism and feminist geography is complicated because he was invested in the binary of dividing gender exclusively into male and female, and because his comments on sexuality are entirely predicated on heterosexuality. While certainly relevant to Opie's works, Lefebvre's theories are limited by these attributes in their application to an artist like Opie who challenges traditional modes of gender and sexuality. The phrase 'on the margin' borrows from bell hooks, whose essay "Choosing the Margin" describes the formative influence of being 'marginalized.' The word references both its sense as a social prejudice, as well as a physical exclusion, both of which produce a psychic or intellectual distance from the self. For hooks, this marginalization intersects with several coordinates of identity (race, wealth, education, gender, and sexuality),

but it is also a spatial margin as well and refers to her childhood growing up in black neighborhoods that were physically removed from white neighborhoods.[176] From one's position on the margin, as either a member of the culturally disenfranchised or spatially removed, or (usually) both, she can, in a sense see herself with greater objectivity, literally as if viewing herself from a distant vantage point. Doing so on a regular basis creates an identity that is fractured and relational. hooks' articulation of difference as spatially-constructed was influential within post-colonial feminism, particularly within the field of geography, and she is one among many feminist geographers to examine identity as a variable manifestation of equally-variable spatial circumstance. In addition, hooks also wrote about domestic space as being important to the formation of feminine identity, a progressive idea within feminist theory, which had traditionally considered homeplace the site of patriarchal oppression. [177] For these reasons, hooks' articulation of marginalized identity forms the theoretical foundation for discussing how Opie's conception of identity bears some relationship to her interest in landscape.

In the early nineties, concurrent with the production of Opie's portrait series, it was hooks who influenced a reclaiming of the margin and a renouncement of the central-Authority versus peripheral-Other. Instead, hooks argued, cultural hegemonies are not merely prescriptive for those marginalized on the outside, but also productive; that is, the experience of being 'Other' or of being repressed is not a passive existence, but active. Subjugation begets both a sense of the self as subordinate *and* as subversive and being on the margin outside of the dominant culture is

[176] hooks never references geographic theory directly in her essay; however, Edward Soja observed that the influence of Lefebvre is evident. Soja also reveals that in a personal conversation with hooks, she discussed Lefebvre's influence on her writings. See Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, 104-105.

[177] For an overview of hooks' influence on feminist geographies with particular respect to domesticity, see Pratt and Hanson, 5-29.

not simply to be lacking, but to possess an inherent sense of multiplicity and of alternatives. hooks articulated this realization through her personal experience as an African-American intellectual growing up in the deep South, a strategy that in itself challenges the supposed objectivism and generalizing of what was usually a male and Anglocentric viewpoint in traditional U.S. academia:

> Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole. This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us with an oppositional world-view—a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity.[178]

Opie's images enact hooks' observation that to be a member of a subordinate or marginalized class is to be imbued with a double-consciousness, such that identity is completely discursive and multiple.

What bell hooks supplies, and what Opie represents, is a refinement of Lefebvre's explanation regarding the relationship between spatial abstraction, the erosion of subjectivity, and violence of desire. One becomes acutely aware that the gaze directed at Opie's *Self-Portrait* diptych, although certainly sexualized, nevertheless resists being codified as specifically male, just as Opie as the subject resists being codified as the feminine object. Although she is on display and vulnerable in the damages inflicted upon her flesh, Opie retains a sense of repose and agency in both *Cutting* and *Pervert*. The gaze is also not necessarily male, as the references to

[178] bell hooks quotes from her own preface to *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* in her essay "Choosing the Margin," from *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, (Boston: South End Press, 1990): 149.

Opie's lesbianism and her S/M sexuality also indict a specifically lesbian gaze as well, within a female-to-female viewership. Within a heteronormative, and thus patriarchic paradigm, "to look at and enjoy the sites of patriarchal culture, we women must become nominal transvestites. We must assume a masculine position or masochistically enjoy the sight of woman's humiliation," writes Griselda Pollock.[179] The viewer of *Cutting* and of *Pervert* doesn't necessarily has to become male, but rather is implied as female to partake in a sexual gaze, because of the works' indictment of homosexuality. *Pervert* literalizes the masochism that Pollock references: it is all about fetish, but resists the gaze from fetishizing. Its sexual elements—Opie's bare breasts, the suggestive label incised across her chest, the S/M costume—all suggest defiance rather than complicity. At the same time, however, the same attributes also convey such passivity that they simultaneously indict the viewer as witness. In giving the viewer permission to witness her pride as well as her humiliation, Opie reveals viewership as participatory, something that sexism actively obscures.

It is, however, imprecise to interpret *Pervert* or *Cutting* as images solely intended to target patriarchy specifically. Instead, *Pervert* challenges gender specificity in general, addressing the viewer who is simultaneously both male and female: Opie is sexualized, like the feminine object of the male gaze, but also painfully subjugated, reflecting the masochism of being the fetishized female object mirrored back to the female gaze. This does, of course, indirectly challenge patriarchy, as sexism is premised on the strict gender differentials that allow

[179] Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art*, (London: Routledge, 1988): 85. The quotation also appears in Massey's essay "Flexible Sexism," where Massey articulates Pollock's point as a personal anecdote related to the differences in the way that she interprets the work of David Salle, in response to David Harvey's criticism, writing, "Any deeper meaning in the picture . . . was entirely obliterated from my reading position, by the sexism of the image used to convey it." See Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 231.

male to be the center or universal and female to be the margin or alternative, but in attacking the binary overall, Opie's *Self-Portrait*s challenge essentialism for all coordinates of identity. As bell hooks notes, "[p]ostmodernism critiques of essentialism which challenge notions of universality and static over-determined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of self and the assertion of agency . . . Such a critique allows us to affirm multiple black identities, varied black experience. It also challenges colonial imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy."[180] hooks centers her argument on blackness, but it certainly applies to Opie, as not only a lesbian, but an S/M lesbian. As curator Jennifer Blessing has noted, S/M was a subculture within the LGBT community was often viewed as antagonistic to certain types of feminism, which argued that sadomasochism was the sexual expression of misogyny, as well as antagonistic to a prevailing assumption about the culture of lesbianism, which assumed a soft and hyper-feminine characterization.[181] S/M lesbians like Opie thereby confused the boundaries of 'mainstream' lesbianism, on top of the gender boundaries that she was also clouding. The word "PERVERT" thereby becomes a double-entendre, referring to Opie's cultural status, but also to the conditions of viewership itself as having been 'perverted.'

Gender plays a prominent role in Opie's portraiture, and always in the context of destabilizing categorical identity. The subjects of *Portraits* in particular are often people of indeterminate sex or people who perform gender in one way or another. Opie herself appeared in drag in *Portraits*, as "Bo," her male alter-ego (which also is her moniker for her own appearance in *Being and Having* as well). This attentiveness to gender performance undoubtedly had a much

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[180] hooks, 28.

[181] Blessing, 16-17.

closer connection to political activism in the 1990s than it would today, and would have also appeared more radical and progressive twenty years ago. Similarly, the cultural and social critiques of theorists like hooks tend to be relegated to a particular moment within academia and in some ways can create the impression that Opie's works are related to a limited and specified political agenda, drawn upon the specific circumstances in which they were produced. Opie's works certainly align with gender-specific theories that were current of the time, but the goal here has been to supply such theories as an extension of Lefebvre's ideas, to demonstrate how the universal extends beyond a white, heterocentric perspective. Opie's works are not simply about gender or LGBT politics; rather they privilege gender and LGBT politics as a more obvious realization of a basic human condition—the post-Cartesian self—and in so doing, demonstrate how difference is not in opposition to the universal, but rather how it may be the clearest expression of the universal.

Of particular importance, however, within hooks' commentary and within the general position of non-normative cultural geographic studies is the comparative lack of anxiety. Lefebvre's scathing critique, a philosophical premise for many geosocial critics including Mike Davis, David Harvey, James Howard Kunstler, and Edward Soja, contains a sense of alarm that betrays the fact that the belief in an incoherent, decentralized self is most threatening to those who enjoy the privilege of assuming their particularized self and specific identity is a universal; that to reveal the alternative is to lose a privileged status. This is not necessarily a criticism of Lefebvre's ideas, which are influential nonetheless, but instead a comment pertaining to the applications of such theories. Most feminist geographers' writings not only offer a sense of resignation to the concept of a fractured self, but clarify a dual sense of both frustration at the

failure of a false universal to apply to them, as well as a general optimism as to the possibilities of inhabiting a non-Cartesian self.

In examining Opie's 1990s work—photographs taken by a lesbian in her early thirties—it is important to note these perspectival differences because it shifts the purpose and reception of her work. Although Lefebvre's commentary on the relationship between self and place is indeed relevant to Opie's work, to assume the panic within a highly male-centric neo-Marxism is to "rely on a conception of the subject as a fully centered and intentional 'individual' capable of willfully producing social change," in turn producing the argument that Opie's portraits of the gender-bending culturally disenfranchised merely coopt those identities into an existing hierarchical framework.[182] To observe the optimism of postmodern cultural geographers like hooks, however, is to embrace a multifaceted vision of identity that progresses beyond an exclusive and privileged concept of subjectivity. Opie's portraits do not seek to reaffirm the sanctity of the individual within historically exclusive terms. They instead point to changing the conditions of how we conceive of individuality in general. This slight addendum to my interpretation of key Lefebvrian concepts is important to note in advance of the final section of this chapter, which details some of Opie's most celebrated works, *Portraits*, in a somewhat unorthodox way, centering analysis on the backgrounds rather than the subjects themselves. Lefebvre still offers a vital interpretive mode in this analysis, but it would be remiss to omit the influence of postmodern cultural politics on Opie's works, as they both support Lefebvrian ideas, but not the dystopian future that Lefebvre himself seems to fear. The distinction is also necessary because of the fact that Opie's outspoken political liberalism has led to an eliding of the political

[182] Amelia Jones, "Bodies and Subjects in the Technologized Self-Portrait: The Work of Laura Aguilar," from *Aztlán*, 32, no. 2 (Fall 1998): 203-220.

elements in her work with strategies drawn from an older neo-Marxism that Lefebvre championed. Although the politics inherent in Opie's work are sympathetic with the progressive Leftism, they are also consistently divergent as well.

TRANS-GAY: A LEFEBVRIAN READING OF THE ICONS OF ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE AND THE SUBJECTS OF CATHERINE OPIE

Less obvious, however, is the way in which Opie's blank backgrounds perform any differently than any other blank background. Admittedly, the differences are a matter of nuance, but noticeable, distinct, and impactful nonetheless. Abstract, neutral geometry, like the backdrops for school pictures, are no less essentializing, having the effect of flattening subjects into icons or objects. To illustrate the difference, consider how Robert Mapplethorpe's portraits operate formally in comparison to Opie's. For his images of nude men and his self-portraits, including those that are sexually explicit, Mapplethorpe focused on creating a highly refined aesthetic quality, using male models and emphasizing their athletic, idealized physiques, cultivating a sense of tableau and balance for his more overtly transgressive erotic images. Even pictures that convey sexual violence or S/M practices still preserve an air of elegant repose, a pointed contrast between form and content. The viewer of Mapplethorpe's photographs is still presented with LGBT subject matter, but has an entirely different viewing relationship to the images than he does with Opie's: he is encouraged to consume, observe, and perhaps appreciate Mapplethorpe's subjects as if they were specimens, but not relate to them. The view is a formal one, and spectatorship that is supported not only by the contrast of black and white film, but also by the disappearance of spatial context, and the conversion of the body in space into the body

made into a black object on white ground. Viewers are meant to objectively devour or aesthetically consume Mapplethorpe's subjects.

Central to this difference in viewership is not only related to nuances as to how Mapplethorpe and Opie treat space, but also how they treat the body, and how the body is also implicated in the production of space. Simply put, Mapplethorpe's bodies are Classical. They are not only classically beautiful, but closed, distinct, and whole. This is not only a quality of the content in the photograph, but moreover a condition of viewership. While one might claim that the cropping of the figures disrupts their wholeness, or that the bodies shown in intimate embrace, with one literally intruding beyond the boundaries of another, offers a political statement through the jarring juxtaposition of the unspoiled whole versus sexual trespass, these are all nevertheless interpretive readings. They do not alter the way in which the images themselves are viewed—the content is still made to be aesthetic first, not specifically relatable, and to encourage spectatorship. Despite their overtures to the body in its nudity and to its permeability in the portrayal of sexual acts, Mapplethorpe's photographs tend to invoke a purely visual experience that lends itself to a highly intellectual, and somewhat removed, interpretation. Opie's portraits are of course a visual experience as well, but by contrast and perhaps unexpectedly, they are more sensually communicative with the viewer than Mapplethorpe's. Mapplethorpe's portraits may privilege the nude form as well as sexual activity, but it is Opie's that invite a greater bodily sensitivity within the viewer. *Portraits* operates in ways that are more nuanced, forcing its viewers to relate to its subjects, not as objects, but as other subjects as well. The colored backgrounds, or the visual 'spaces' of each picture reinforce this kind of relationship between viewer and subject because they disallow the symbolic presence of a setting. Instead, the viewer has only the symbolism that is expressed, quite literally, through each sitter's body,

written into the flesh in the form of tattoos, worn over the body in various forms of costume, and conveyed via the body in expressions, gazes, and gestures. This is precisely what Opie refers to when she discusses how her friends are “representing the world through their body.”[183]

Opie thus achieves an audience that overturns the abstract, hyper-cerebral and classifying way of viewing and returns it to a relationship of exchange. Her images enact what Lefebvre referred to as a lived and productive experience of space, or a naturalized experience of space—the space enacted upon and responsive to the body, rather than the analytical mind. Lefebvre posited that the bodily experience and expression of space affected the overall understanding of space:

> Long before space, as perceived by and for the ‘I,’ began to appear as split and divided, as a realm of merely virtual or deferred tensions and contacts. Long before space emerged as a medium of far-off possibilities, as the locus of potentiality. For, long before analyzing, separating intellect, long before formal knowledge, there was an intelligence of the body.
>
> …A closure thus comes to separate within from without, so establishing the living being as a ‘distinct body.’ It is quite a relative closure, however, and has nothing in common with a logical division or abstract split. The membranes in question generally remain permeable, punctured by pores and orifices. Traffic back and forth, so far from stopping, tends to increase and become more differentiated, embracing both energy exchange (alimentation, respiration, excretion) and information exchange (the sensory apparatus). The whole history of life has been characterized by an incessant diversification and intensification of the interaction between inside and outside . . . we may say that every spatial envelope implies a barrier between inside and out, but that this barrier is always relative, and in the case of membranes, always permeable.[184]

According to Lefebvre, Cartesian individuality is thus premised on intellectualizing the

[183] Catherine Opie, qtd. in Smyth, *Damn Fine Art by New Lesbian Artists*, 44.

[184] Lefebvre, 174, 196.

relationship between self and space as a distinction between the body within spatial context. As Lefebvre points out, this distinction, however, is purely intellectual, as the body continuously interacts with space in a literal fashion through its orifices and membranes. The interesting difference between Mapplethorpe and Opie's photographs is how each engages their requisite viewers. Mapplethorpe's portraits actually demonstrate Lefebvrian concepts literally—literally putting the permeability of bodies on display for the viewers, his men offering their bodies as discursive sites. In doing so, Mapplethorpe's subjects become objects onto which social projections are made.

The spatial backgrounds of Mapplethorpe's photographs, however, as homogeneous, abstract 'containers' for their subjects, admit and allow the overlying paradigm of conceiving whatever is positioned in front of, or within, such space as a distinct object, the way "an empty container accepts any collection of separable and separate items . . . [and thus] justifies a *strategy* of separation."[185]As a result, although Mapplethorpe's imagery makes a powerful political statement, their visual strategy remains one premised on a kind of intellectual distance. Opie's LGBT subjects, however, inhabit spatial contexts that appear like abstract backdrops or surrounds, but nevertheless assert themselves as their own presences. The backgrounds' bright color possesses a kind of physicality that prevents them from becoming abstracted into homogenous space. As a result, the relationship between the sitters and space becomes one that is more pointedly and immediately relational, calling attention to the way in which the body "*is* space and *has* its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space…[it] transcends the realm of 'thingness,' for it embraces relationships and movements." [186] In other

[185] Lefebvre, 170.

[186] Ibid., 170, 174.

words, in making the space inhabited by his subjects a passive site, Mapplethorpe also thereby encourages viewing his subjects as objects or 'things,' a quality about his photographs that is reinforced by the abstracting starkness of black and white, the crisp linear distinction of the bodies against their backgrounds, and the objectifying way in which they are cropped that converts them from people into notational entities.

By contrast, in making her backgrounds more actively present, Opie's subjects not only retain their subjecthood but also subtly challenge the assumed divisiveness between external and internal or within from without. For one, as Lefebvre argues, space is not simply context but "first of all *my body*, and then it is my body's counterpart or 'other,' its mirror-image or shadow: it is the shifting intersection between that which touches, penetrates, threatens or benefits my body on the one hand, and all other bodies on another."[187] The presence of Opie's backgrounds thus calls attention to the way in which social space is mediated through the body. Although the viewer cannot physically engage with Opie's subjects, his viewership itself, transpiring over the space in between him and the image and beyond the surface of the photograph itself, is highlighted as a kind of engagement, in which the subjects in view both express their specificity and separateness, as well as reflect his own values back onto himself. Rather than inhabiting authentic or encoded identities, Opie's sitters become dispersed, their presence bolstered by the presence of the colors behind them, and mediated with the viewers in front of them. So writes Lefebvre: "The 'other' is present, facing the ego: a body facing another body. The 'other' is impenetrable save through violence or through love as the object of expenditures of energy, of aggression, or desire. Here external is also internal inasmuch as the 'other' is another body, a

[187] Lefebvre, 184.

vulnerable flesh, an accessible symmetry."[188] Thus, when considering the politics of marginality as a feature of Opie's work as particularly invoked through her portraits of those identifying as LGBT, the point is not to present such people as 'normalized' as a means of hopefully integrating them into the cultural 'norm,' but rather to offer images of those who may reflect and relate to the viewers themselves, bolstering a sensitivity to symmetric equality overall.

Opie's choice of using individuals who challenge traditional gender roles and refuse categorical sexual identities (gay, straight, bi—ambiguous gender and sexuality coincide, as who can say whether a woman who identifies as male is in a homosexual or heterosexual relationship with her male significant other?) bolsters the change in viewership as well. Mapplethorpe's images seem to intend the viewer to be male—either invoked as a homosexual viewer through their sexualized content, or to have their supposedly normative heterosexual viewership exposed as a conditional construction. But what is the sexuality of the viewer if the object of their gaze is—not sex*less*—but sexually ambiguous? *Justin Bond* (1993), who sports a corset and long blonde hair, is a man in the guise of a woman, as the informed by the title. As such, Bond can be the object of both male and female sexuality, as well as homosexual and heterosexual viewership, in varying combinations, and in being so, he does not become the passive site of the viewer's sexuality in the same way a female nude absorbs the male gaze without question; instead, he reflects the viewer's sexuality back onto the viewer. The effect is similar to the way in which Mapplethorpe's nude force the viewer to acknowledge their own sexualized viewership one way or another, but Opie's *Portraits* do not just indict the viewer; they create an exchange between the viewer and the subject in the work. The willful gender-fluidity of *Justin Bond* means that as the viewer struggles to identify Bond, the viewer is also symmetrically forced to identify

[188] Lefebvre, 174.

themselves within the different permutations of sexual viewership. This relational viewing is the product of many of Opie's *Portraits*, but is most explicit in consideration of women and men who dress in drag, among them *Jerome Caja* (1993), *Divinity Fudge* (1997), and *Bo* (1994).

The expression is still visual; the backgrounds are still flat; photographs are still outside and exempt from time, but through the creation of a space that is forcibly present, Opie reformulates how the viewer relates to a visual medium, and in turn, how a viewer might relate to the individuals portrayed. It is not simply a virtue of the photographs being portraits of individuals, most of whom make their uniqueness quite apparent, it is a means of demonstrating viewers' own tendencies back onto them. The images show their viewers, literally, that when extracted from the usual confines of space, it becomes possible to engage sensibilities beyond the usual confines and contexts that informs and defines others. The disturbance in space subtle supports a disturbance in automatic cultural reception. It is not just that Opie's subjects request their viewers' full attention or ask to be accepted and appreciated in their unconventionality; it is more that they resist being held at arm's length.

Where Do We Go From Here? Abstract Space, Ambiguous Sex, and the Cultural Encoding of Place, Space, and Self

The last element to consider in this analysis of Opie's portraits is to return to the role of space and to articulate the relationship between people and place as expressed through both her landscape and portrait series. My argument here continues to rely on Lefebvre's observations, in particular, his theories regarding the ways in which space has become abstracted in contemporary society. It was Lefebvre's contention that under the Cartesian model, space had become intellectually neutral, natural, and invisible. His term 'abstract space' referred to space

literally abstracted into an arbitrary organization of purpose that society in turn relates to in an abstract manner—to think of space as a series of plots or areas, but without a bodily sense of direction or location, much in the way one might interact with space as portrayed on a map. Lefebvre argued abstract space is a capitalist invention in that civic spaces continuously reaffirm the existing systems of power they were borne out of, but appear impartial. A civic plaza is one such example: it offers itself as a place for protest or civic engagement at the same time that it corrals revolution into preordained spatial power constructs, promising free speech, but not freedom itself. Instead, it positions the vocal minority into the space of surveillance by the majority of those in power.

Abstract space is also tautological in this way, it "takes the effect for the cause, and the goal for the reason why that goal is pursued. A representation which passes itself off as a *concept*, when it is merely an image, a mirror, and a mirage; and which, instead of challenging, instead of refusing, merely *reflects*. And what does such a specular reflection reflect? It reflects the result thought," writes Lefebvre.[189] In other words, abstract space is both the instrument and the result of social power constructs, and it disguises this relationship through its abstraction, converting lived experience into conceptual data. To do this, abstract space also requires a subject, so that the subject takes on symbolic importance, while abstract space implies itself as the neutral context: "Abstraction passes for an 'absence'—as distinct from the concrete 'presence' of objects, of things. Nothing could be more false. For abstraction's *modus operandi* is devastation, destruction . . . Signs have something lethal about them—not by virtue of 'latent' or so-called unconscious forces, but, on the contrary, by virtue of the forced introduction of

[189] Lefebvre, 287.

abstraction into nature."[190] In its relationship to capitalism, abstract space is implicit upon imposing order, regularity, and the conditions of normality as dictated by the dominant social hierarchies.

The backgrounds of most portraits appear as the same kind of neutral surround that one assumes in the Cartesian model—amorphous space that sets the person apart as a distinct and defined object within it. Opie's *Portraits* allow their backgrounds to reference this abstract, Cartesian form of space, but their bright color prevents them from being amorphous or detached or inconspicuous. Instead, the backgrounds themselves become almost like heightened spatial performance, backgrounds performing the roles of 'Backgrounds,' with a capital "B." It is related to the ways in which the sitters present various types of gender performance. The men and women of Opie's *Portraits* not only assume different gender roles, but many assume those roles in heightened sexual characterizations. *Justin Bond* is a prototypical ultra-feminine woman; Catherine Opie as *Bo* is an ultra-masculine man. It is the backgrounds' bright Technicolor artificiality, along with their strange interplay of light, color and surface that makes it questionable as to whether they are colored walls, sheets of paper, colored backlights, or digital alterations, that defy the Lefebvrian criticism of abstract space's tendency to present itself as natural, just as the sitters themselves present gender as heavily encoded, rather than biologically (or 'naturally') ordained.

But in segregating LGBT subjects outside of any spatial context, Opie also provokes a rather uncomfortable question, namely *where* do such people exist in life? The perhaps chilling political effect of *Portraits* is the suggestion that those who identify as LGBT literally cannot

[190] Lefebvre, 289.

exist in space; instead, they are relegated to *no* place, or a place of absence. And yet, as *Portraits* prove, such individuals are not 'absent.' In fact, because the *Portraits* work to honor and reaffirm the existence of such individuals, they also expose at the fact that the LGBT community is often invisible as far as mainstream culture is concerned, and in turn pose a foil to such invisibility (or at the very least, the indistinctness afforded by stereotype). The contrast between the real people and the unreal space thereby becomes a productive and critically fertile one: if existence means to take up space and to live is necessarily to inhabit, then how can real individuals exist in unreal space? Whereas the blank backgrounds behind the sitters of Thomas Ruff's photographs support a certain abstraction of their humanity, synergistically converting each person into unreal anonymity, Opie's backgrounds conflict with the lively complexity of their subjects, thereby exposing the injustice of an ignored community, but also the falsity of social space as unsystematic or unencoded.

When put into the context of Opie's *Self-Portraits*, which bracket *Portraits*, as the diptych of her inner-conflict regarding traditional family life (*Cutting* and *Pervert,* 1993-1994) corresponds with the earliest portraits and the single shot of her comfortably inhabiting the role of nursing mother (*Nursing*, 2004) occurs in the decade following the last images in *Portraits*, as well as her ongoing interest in domesticity as a subject, it becomes apparent that the exposure of how space—particularly private or residential space—is encrypted to support various social constructions is a large focus within Opie's oeuvre. In regards to residential space, Lefebvre noted that definitions of traditional family living were "linked to naturalness through genitality . . . [Familial space] is the guarantor of meaning as well as of social (spatial) practice. Shattered by a host of separations and segregations, social unity is able to reconstitute itself at the level of

the family unit, for the purposes of, and by means of, generalized reproduction."[191] His is a Marxist argument that concentrates on the relationship between economic production and social relationships, in this case arguing that the development of modern residential space in the form of zones or development communities, forms specific social practices that support capitalist economic growth. These practices are those that abstract sensory experience, such as overriding natural circadian rhythm with a sense of place and time engendered via the travel between suburb and city-center, as well as normalizing social relationships into cursory, non-sensory, and supplemental 'leisure' activities. This is why, Lefebvre argues, modern housing corrals all bodily acts of intimacy into private space beyond the public sphere of a house.

Included in Lefebvre's argument, which is of particular importance to Opie as a gay individual, is the need to homogenize these relationships into an exclusively heteronormative character and to create space that prioritizes the social movement of heterosexual families. There are two types of 'reproduction' at play, one material and one sexual or biological, but postmodern abstract space conflates them both:

> A characteristic contradiction of abstract space consists in the fact that, although it denies the sensual and the sexual, its only immediate point of reference is genitality: the family unit, the type of dwelling (apartment, bungalow, cottage, etc.), fatherhood and motherhood, and the assumption that fertility and fulfillment are identical. The reproduction of social relations is thus crudely conflated with biological reproduction, which is itself conceived of in the crudest and most simplistic way imaginable. In *spatial practice*, the reproduction of social relations is predominant. The *representation of space*, in thrall to both knowledge and power, leaves only the narrowest leeway to *representational spaces*, which are limited works, images, and memories whose content, whether sensory, sensual or sexual, is so far displaced that it barely achieves symbolic force . . . Inasmuch as adolescents are unable to challenge either the dominant system's imperious architecture or its deployment of signs, it is only by

[191] Lefebvre, 183, 185.

> way of revolt that they have any prospect of recovering the world of differences—the natural, the sensory/sensual, sexuality and pleasure.[192]

If one lives in a world in which the bulk of symbolic language is bound up in a biologically-reproductive and hence, heterosexual foundation, then one begins to see the unnaturalness of social constructions. The realization is twofold. Since the everyday practices of space seek to repress sexuality and thereby supply a lexicon of signs and systems to represent emotional desire and fulfillment in the place of actual sensuousness, one realization is that the cultural systems are directed towards a homogenous type of sensuality and sexuality. The second, perhaps more unnerving realization, is that if one's sexual identity does not conform to such cultural systems or is not reflected in its signs, then there is less possibility for sublimating it, thus creating the tendency to feel self-defined by one's sexuality, within a world that is both tacitly dismissive of that sexual identity *and* hyper-focused on reinforcing the sexuality as a single descriptor of those in the gender-ambiguous minority.

Capitalist space, however, does in fact yield truly revolutionary space beyond how it is typically presented in the civic plaza or the street or the D.C. mall. Lefebvre called such revolutionary space "contradictory," because their revolutionary potential lay in the fact that they are literally outside the capitalist system and reject preordained functions. Rather, they in fact refuse to be 'functional' at all. Typically, these are empty lots, "box cities," squatters' apartments, and abandoned property—places that obstruct or refuse to foster capitalist productivity and instead tend to support lifestyles and behaviors that also counter prevailing social structures, such as supporting the homeless, illegal aliens, and countercultural or unlawful

[192] Lefebvre, 49-50.

communities. In addition to the literal reference to "contradictory space" through the complete removal of space in *Portraits*, Opie's works overall have consistently engaged with spaces in ways that highlight when they are contradictory, documenting various forms of 'non-space': the freeway shoulder used as pedestrian walkway in order to document roadways as static sculpture rather than transitional spaces; strip-malls that are closed for business; houses without inhabitants and individuals who do not inhabit space. *Portraits* is simply the counterpoint examination of social space and its influence on cultural identity within a focus on identity as the primary object, rather than space (or landscape).

The focus on unconventional uses of space would pointedly become more important in Opie's works produced after 2000. These later series, which include namely *Icehouses* (2001) and *Surfers* (2003), examine the intersection between truly contradictory spaces and their potential for community inclusion and belonging. To this end, both *Icehouses* and *Surfers* document communities that are notably transient, made up of people whose tangential interests deposit them in close proximity to one-another at a particular time and place, but not in a way that mobilizes them as a determined collective. In these series, the landscapes of the frozen Minnesota lakes and morning on the Pacific Ocean respectively are almost amorphous. The pristine snow becomes a blank white canvas, and the fog on the sea becomes a haze of gray, such that both environments appear to extend forever in all directions, heightening the ephemeral nature of the communities whose temporary inhabitation lends the scenes virtually their only senses of coordinates, creating horizon lines that are otherwise obscured from view. In these series, the two communities do not occupy specified locales, but rather create specified locales by their very presence, literally socially *producing* space, to use a Lefebvrian term. They also suggest that Opie's perspective on the relationship between place and identity is one in which

their mutual dependency offers both the terror of indeterminancy—and the possibilities inherent in it as well.

Conclusion

Continual Presence

This dissertation began with the premise that the framing of Catherine Opie's works has been to place them within a conventional chronology, one that has encouraged critics to examine each series more or less in isolation and to in turn, overlook the formalist approach that is shared between her portraits and landscapes of the 1990s. The practice of conceiving her works sequentially, in addition to grouping them by subject matter, has clouded adequate critique of the ways in which her portraits and landscapes construct a dialogue with one another. I have attempted to provide analyses of her works under this premise, placing primary focus on the landscapes, rather than the portraits, in part because Opie's landscapes have received less scholarly attention. The emphasis on landscape here, however, extends beyond addressing a critical lapse and also argues that considerations of place *should* be privileged as part of the discourse on Opie's treatment of identity. This is to say, essentially, that in Opie's oeuvre, landscape is the form of visual expression that underlies the thematic conditions of selfhood, in at least equal, if not greater, degree than her portraits.

It is perhaps an unconventional argument to say that pictures of scenery have more to say about identity than pictures of people. Certain critical constructs are oftentimes conventional to the reception of particular artistic forms: a self-portrait, for example, alludes to the artist's balance of subjectivity and objectivity, the practice of expressing one's familiar, core self, and also of seeing oneself anew. Opie's portraits overturn expectations, intentionally disturbing such conventions of viewership. Most of them are aimed at declassifying. She presents viewers with

portraits of individuals of ambiguous gender, portraits of children and adolescents whose identities are still forming, and self-portraits that challenge the very dialectic construction of subjectivity versus objectivity, proposing instead that the relationship is so flexible and nuanced, that categorizing the self into such conceptual distinctions is an artificial construct.

There is a sociopolitical reason for challenging these categories, as "[u]nderstanding identity as itself constructed, relationally and dialogically, and as fluid, in-process, heterogeneous, can, like understanding that we are all 'strangers to ourselves,' as Kristeva puts it, help us move beyond racism and sexism, beyond anger and fear, and move *toward* compassion and love . . . Reimagining subjectivity will not be a *sufficient* condition for eliminating or even diminishing racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of domination but it seems to me to be a *necessary* condition."[193] The irony of realizing the self is 'constructed, relationally and dialogically, and as fluid, in-process, heterogeneous' in the context of creating a more tolerant community is that the old categories of self/Other tend to be preserved within the social realm—that is, it is among people that one tends to assume she is a complete subject, in comparison to those around her. In this respect, Opie's portraits defy aspects of prescriptive viewership—they disallow the audience's desire to label their subjects as masculine/feminine or gay/straight, for example—but the terms of this challenge are still in the realm of categorization. The need to categorize itself is a secondary disruption; the primary and most obvious challenge is to the terms applied to the labels, not the application of labels itself. One of the problems with portraiture in this sense is that it encourages a kind of viewership that tends to be prescriptive,

[193] Marilyn Edelstein, "Love, Politics, and Ethics in the Postmodern Feminist Work of bell hooks and Julia Kristeva," in *Critical Perspectives on bell hooks*, Maria del Guadalupe Davidson and George Yancy, eds., (New York: Routledge, 2009): 195.

rather than relational: *they*, the sitters, may be unreadable, but their resistance to classification does not preclude them from being identified as Other, separate from *me*, the viewer.

The value of landscape, and what I have tried to demonstrate through this study, is that it can alter the conditions of viewing. As Yi-Fu Tuan puts it:

> "Landscape" has a curious significance for human beings. The word itself is heartwarming, like "home," but with a cooler tone. One may think landscape a common and even universal way of perceiving and experiencing, but this is not the case . . . it is a specialized way of seeing . . . I say that landscape is made up of "place" and "space," the place of stability and confinement and the space of vulnerability and freedom. Some of life's fundamental polarities are thus presented. But survival does not by any means exhaust landscape's appeal. Aesthetics is a factor too. Aesthetically, landscape satisfies a human need for harmonious resolution between such basic binaries of human experience as vertical and horizontal, foreground, and background, illumination and darkness.[194]

Landscape is exceptional in the manner that Tuan elucidates in that the form is itself virtual, an extracted and composed construction of reality, yet it acutely reflects the complexity, the paradoxes, and the ambiguity of lived experience. This reflection not only parallels Opie's interest in preserving the same murky intricacies of how identity is made and remade, but it also offers a more appropriate strategy to present this idea, for the reflection emerges by altering the manner in which we view, deepening and expanding the subject beyond the view itself. If, as Edelstein writes, alterity has to be overcome within the subject in order to respect and bridge alterity in others, then engagement with the 'strangeness' of one's own selfhood is not as

[194] Tuan, *Escapism*, 175.

successfully encouraged by the sociability created in portraiture as it is by the solitude engaged by landscape.[195]

This limitation in portraiture may be why Opie has abandoned the sitter-in-despatialized-context format of the very series that made her famous, although it is difficult to say whether it is an exclusively conceptual choice or if it observes commercial concerns as well.[196] Nevertheless, Opie still references the same two themes of identity and community in her present work as in series she produced twenty years ago, yet, her work has for the most part evolved to combine portraits and landscapes into series such as *Surfers* (2004), *In and Around Home* (2004-5), and *High-School Football* (2008), which return to a similar kind of documentary, photojournalistic narrative that she used in 1988 for *Master Plan*. Opie has also produced landscape series that utilize the same aesthetic strategies that she has been using since the nineties. Such series include *Skyways* (2001), *Icehouses* (2001), *Twelve Miles to the Horizon* (2010), and her ongoing project, *American Cities*, all of which offer visions of place that are depopulated and rendered in such a way that their formal qualities hint at abstraction. This continuing preoccupation with landscape, in the context of Opie's consistency when it comes to her applied themes of community and identity, suggests that it is in place, rather than people, that she finds the richest possibilities.

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[195] Marilyn Edelstein interprets and paraphrasing Julia Kristeva's theory of self-estrangement. See: Edelstein, 193.

[196] The fact that the portrait series in question were the source of Opie's early success may also have been a reason to resist repeating their format, as she may have been wary of being typecast. Alternatively, she may also have been pressured to produce stylistically identical series for the same reason.

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