

Waste Land

David T. Hanson



Afterword

Thawing Entropy: The Work of David T. Hanson

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David T. Hanson's work has been consistently read as focusing on the ugly, offering us "hideous" landscapes "no one wishes to see." A *Newsweek* (March 19, 2016) review of the book *Wilderness to Wasteland*, a collection of four series of Hanson's work from 1982 to 1987, was crystal clear in its headline: "Superfund Superstar: David Hanson Takes Beautiful Photographs of Hideous Places." This theme is evident and constant in most of the commentary on his work, where authors compete for synonyms of *ugly*, finding new terms that range from grotesque to monstrous to debased. For the preface of Hanson's first book, *Waste Land: Meditations on a Ravaged Landscape* (1997), the writer and environmental activist Wendell Berry expressed his admiration for an artist who succeeded in showing us what we "do not wish to see now," exposing "the topography of our open wounds."²

The line between the ugly and the beautiful has shifted countless times over the course of history; the standard of beauty as a criterion for good art has long been gone, left behind with the "art for art's sake" movement of the late nineteenth century. Hanson does not want to beautify what has previously been considered ugly. On the contrary, he wants to leave it that way. Ugliness, for him, should be privileged because it is closer to actual reality. According to Hanson, the "ugliness of industrial spaces . . . represented reality much more than the master photographers' work he [studied] in graduate school in the early 1980s."³

What would happen if artists and viewers focused as intensely on ugliness as they have on beauty? Hanson's choice of the word *Waste Land* as the title of one of his series tempts us toward such a shift, one suggested even by the etymology of this term. Something in the common use of the composite word *wasteland* caused its meaning to flip in the span of a few decades. Its definition went from "land in its natural, uncultivated state" in the late nineteenth century to accommodate a secondary definition: "land (esp. that which is surrounded by developed land) not used or unfit for cultivation or building and allowed to run wild," in the early twentieth century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the origin of the first definition of "natural" land to 1887 and of land "unfit for cultivation" to 1922, the year of publication of T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, which used the word in the new sense.⁴

What changes in the culture at large served as a catalyst leading to the attribution of a negative valance to the definition of the term? How did wastelands change from being simply “uncultivated land” to “unfit for cultivation”? Equally dramatic is a change that occurred a century later, from the last decades of the twentieth century to the first decades of the new millennium, in artistic landscape photography. During those years, the clean modernist aesthetic favored by curators of photography of the mid-1970s (associated with the *New Topographics* movement) gave way to different kinds of visual statements, some of them only partially photographic, that aimed to capture a new relationship to landscape.⁵ Hanson’s work is an essential example of this transformation.

Hanson was born in Billings, Montana. He was first exposed to artistic photography and its history as a student at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. He studied history, read the classics, and enjoyed modern and contemporary literature. He dissected T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* with the poet and classics scholar Dudley Fitts in one classroom and studied avant-garde film in the next. At an elite New England prep school, this impressionable young student from the American West discovered French New Wave cinema and Italian Neorealism. In the films of Alain Resnais, Michelangelo Antonioni, Vittorio De Sica, Federico Fellini, and others, he found something he had never seen before. He excelled in his studies, and when it came time to choose a college, he decided to return to the West and attend Stanford University over Yale and Harvard. There he enrolled in the only photography class offered by the university.

Hanson was armed with a degree in English literature and studies in creative writing from Stanford, but his interest in photography had also grown. After graduating, he decided to study with the photographer Minor White in Arlington, Massachusetts, and at the Center for Photographic Studies in Louisville, Kentucky. Then, in 1975, he returned to Phillips Academy, where he taught for three years as an art instructor. The next year, Andover’s Addison Gallery of American Art started exhibiting NASA’s photographs from Skylab and the Apollo and Landsat missions, among others. NASA was not only looking at the stars (predictably), but looking down on us. It was the latter photographs that made it into the museum’s collection: air force bases, pipelines, thermal plants, coastal

areas, agricultural and forest land, wheat farms and oil refineries, as well as cities as seen from outer space. Were they art? Or were NASA's satellites simply spying on us?

After a few years at Andover, Hanson spent a year photographing in France and Italy on a Camargo Foundation Fellowship and then worked for a year as an assistant to the photographer Frederick Sommer. Soon afterward, he obtained a formal education in the arts by completing an MFA degree at the Rhode Island School of Design, where he was later hired as an instructor of photography.

During his long drives back home from the Northeast to visit family, he noticed a landscape radically different from the one explored by his artistic contemporaries. He would make a stop at the mining town of Colstrip, Montana, photographing it over several years in raw, luscious nudity. Hanson would later publish a body of work of eighty-two color photographs under the unassuming name of the town. He started at ground level, focusing on the strip mine, power plant, company housing, and trailer parks, culminating with aerial views. He would have photographed it from the outer atmosphere, if only he could. When Hanson was a teenager, he had seen views of aerial surveillance techniques during the Cuban missile crisis, when "the American public first saw aerial photographic 'evidence' of Soviet activities."⁶ In years to come, he would make this perspective his own: it was "the most appropriate form of representation for the late twentieth-century landscape."⁷

His next series, *Minuteman Missile Sites* (1984-85), was even more graphic than *Colstrip, Montana*. From the air, Hanson photographed secret nuclear silos that contained missiles nearly a hundred times more powerful than the atomic bombs that had been used against the Japanese. It was arduous, even repetitive work. Hanson photographed twenty missile silos and the launch-control facilities of nearly a thousand silos spread across eighty thousand square miles in eight states.

During that decade, as a young photographer, Hanson would empty his coffers and spend every cent of the Guggenheim award he had just received to photograph from the sky some of the most polluted, toxic, hazardous, and secret sites in the United States. Twenty-three of his photographs would soon be exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York. The exhibit's curator,

John Szarkowski, had been persuaded that they merited entrance into his *New Photography* exhibition, which was designed “to show three or four photographers whose work—individually and collectively—seems to represent the most interesting achievements of recent photography.”⁸

Hanson then went off to search for industrial waste sites, mines, smelters, wood-processing plants, landfills and illicit dumps, large petrochemical complexes, water-contamination sites, nuclear weapons plants, and nerve-gas disposal areas, arming himself with a list of the four hundred thousand hazardous waste sites that the Environmental Protection Agency was monitoring. From those he selected sixty-seven, making them the subject of his series *Waste Land*.

The creation of landscape art and the exploration of nature have long gone hand-in-hand. In 1926 the Canadian art critic Frederick B. Housser described the “new type of artist” as someone who “puts on the outfit of the bushwhacker and prospector, closes with his environment; paddles, portages and makes camp; sleeps in the out-of-doors under the stars, climbs mountains with his sketch box on his back.”⁹ By the first decades of the twentieth century, the artist’s studio had lost its walls completely. With Hanson, it would soon lose its tethers, its sense of grounding. With this transformation, American landscape would also lose its beauty.

Hanson’s work is frequently placed within the great tradition of American landscape art, including the nineteenth-century paintings of Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church, and Albert Bierstadt of the Hudson River valley and the American West; the photographs of Timothy O’Sullivan of Nevada, Arizona, Idaho, and New Mexico; and the work of the magisterial Ansel Adams and the innovative color photographer Eliot Porter. But Hanson surveys the surveyor, hunts the hunter, and adopts the view of the prospector who is after the prospector. Instead of photographing majestic redwoods, pristine valleys, powerful geological structures, or sensual and sinuous topography amenable to the construction of new roads and rail routes, he chooses places that have been already claimed, mined, bulldozed, destroyed, and desecrated. Working within the tradition of American landscape, he turns against his predecessors to produce anti-prospector art. Instead of playing the age-old game of discovery—the traveling photographer who wants to be the first to arrive—instead

of treading lightly on virgin territory and exposing it, Hanson offers us the comparatively unprivileged position of the last man who can still leave. The exoticism of his destinations is extreme for an uncommon reason: they are exclusive *because no one wants to be there*.

Hanson is widely celebrated as an environmental-activist photographer, in the tradition of his well-known predecessors. Eliot Porter's photographs circulated among U.S. presidents and congressmen to remind them of the urgent need to pass environmental legislation and to establish new national parks and wilderness areas. They were influential in helping pass the Wilderness Act of 1964 and in blocking two federal dam projects in the Grand Canyon.¹⁰ Hanson has imitated that strategy with the help of the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Mineral Policy Center. Every member of Congress received a copy of his 1997 monograph, *Waste Land: Meditations on a Ravaged Landscape*. Hanson's work is a call to environmental action, but in what way, specifically?

Joyce Carol Oates, in the foreword to *Wilderness to Wasteland*, considers Hanson's work as a "heroic synthesis of two impulses: the wish to record, to educate, and to protest; and the wish to find an arresting sort of beauty in even these debased images." The writer William Kittredge praises Hanson's work for motivating environmental action: "We have to quit wrecking the world piecemeal—bite by bite." Hanson shows us where to start, by offering us a sordid reminder that we are in the "business of manufacturing a homemade coffin in space." The *Newsweek* review of Hanson's work admired it for this same reason: "*Wilderness to Wasteland* is being published as the nation grapples with the water contamination crisis in Flint, Michigan. There are many Flints in the United States." We might even think of Hanson as the Erin Brockovich of the art world; indeed, his early activism predates hers by decades, as he has been consistently photographing subjects at the center of litigation and lawsuits seeking to curb what he describes as an "insidious form of social discrimination and environmental injustice."¹¹

Hanson's photography, intriguingly, is unconcerned with the sites of industrial accidents (such as Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, or Bhopal) that command most media attention. His sight is instead a foresight concerned with slow rather than sudden accidents. They are cadenced disasters that will

continue into the future. In this respect, he is more of a futurographer than a photographer. In a world that is constantly asking, "What went wrong?" he focuses on what has gone wrong and is still going wrong, scrutinizing intentional and deliberate actions rather than happenstance or human error. His work shows neither a dystopia nor a utopia, but simply our nowtopia, one so entrenched in time that it may never go away. While Adams, Porter, and their numerous imitators were preoccupied with photographing environments at risk of disappearance, Hanson is concerned with what might stay around for too long.

Hanson's attention focuses on the ravages left behind by no sudden accidents, no unpredictable factors, nor the forgivable sins adored by the media, but rather by micro-disasters hidden in each and every day, hour, second, and split second. The "nearly half-million hazardous waste sites spread across the United States" attract him precisely because they will be there for him and generations to follow to examine at leisure.¹² Instead of focusing on the beautiful (but rare) black-swan events, he turns his eyes on dirty white swans with the potential to outlive us for millions of years. Contamination "resulting from nuclear production [has] the most deadly and long-lasting effects on the land and its inhabitants."¹³ With Hanson behind the lens, the camera is no longer used in its traditional capacity to freeze the present, to capture an instant in an imperishable record that would otherwise whiz by. Its function is the opposite: it offers the possibility of thawing the future by letting us see, if only for a comparatively short span of time that comprises the history of photography itself, images of disasters that are becoming eternal.

While the romantic look of Adams's photographs earned them a place in the time capsules inside the spacecrafts Voyager 1 and 2, there is no need for Hanson's photographs to go into outer space. His photographs are not about a beautiful civilization that might one day disappear but rather about a mediocre one that might not. And because there is nothing particularly civilized in them, nothing particularly uncivilized, nothing all-too human, and nothing even inhuman, the animal-mineral-vegetable-human-alien divides blurs under our eyes. Hanson offers us a Copernican revolution of a different sort, where we no longer care if the Earth revolves around the Sun or the Moon around the

Earth; where mined uranium isotopes are just as likely to explode as a supernova. On Earth he finds a lunar landscape more inhospitable than Mars's.

Hanson's photographs are forensics not bothered by the particularity of specific crimes. His aesthetic is not that of the detective's fingerprint, the telling blood stain, or the embarrassing mug shots of nineteenth-century criminology (or late-night television). Instead, he displays majestic terracides stretched wide across our entire North American landscape. Through their repetitive specificity (name, city, and state), we learn that there is a long list of many others just like them.

Hanson has been concerned with disclosing the top-secret military experiments and illegal disposal of toxic waste by contractors working on behalf of the Department of Energy. The sociologist and social activist Andrew Ross lauds this aspect of his work. According to Ross, it offers a "stunning documentary of a century of organized state terrorism against the North American land, its species and its peoples." "The most damning evidence," he wrote about *Waste Land*, "cannot be hidden from the intrepid aerial photographer."¹⁴ Since Hanson completed his *Minuteman Missile Sites* series, artists have wanted to peek even more. Galleries and millionaire art collectors cannot wait to hang state-secrets on their pristine white walls.¹⁵ But the similarities between Hanson and most preceding and current environmental-activist photographers are superficial. Hanson's work reveals links between environmental exploration, activism, and artistic photography that are deeper than mere promissory art gallery-activism fare.

The Icarus-Faust-Frankenstein theme of hubris runs strong across Hanson's interpreters. Viewers have found evidence in his photographs of how "we have set ourselves apart as gods, and now we feel we have the right to burn, bulldoze, plow, pave, poison, clear-cut, denude, and lay waste any part of the Earth that suits us."¹⁶ Hanson's work is unabashedly apocalyptic. His free use of these spiritual and religious tropes is echoed by those of his numerous critics. As Hanson himself describes, "What we seem to be reenacting in our own time is a central myth of the Judeo-Christian religions: the Fall and the Expulsion from the Garden." Hanson discloses a "self-fulfilling prophecy" in which "we attempt to rival the power of 'the gods' and as punishment for our hubris, we cast ourselves into a

Paradise Lost."¹⁷ Elsewhere in his writing, we get a sense of a Paradise worthy of being visited in the classiest nature gear: "lush mountain valleys and pristine creeks and rivers with abundant wetlands and rich aquatic life."¹⁸ Yet Hanson breaks these clichés by having us turn the page and encounter the sparse church interior of the First Baptist Church of Colstrip, Montana.

We are kneeling at its pulpit before boarding an airplane that will disclose the view from up high. What comes next are Hanson's triptych compositions for his *Waste Land* series: in each work, his photograph of a site from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's "Superfund" of toxic sites is flanked on the left by a map and on the right by a descriptive text from the EPA. Have we left the church just by virtue of turning a page to disclose his next photograph? The format that follows imitates that of traditional Christian iconography, showing the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit. The map (to the left) is the territory (to the right), the territory (to the right) is the map (to the left), and both refer back to the centerpiece: an aerial photograph.

Stop for a second and reread Hanson's words; take a closer look at his photographs: "What we seem to be reenacting in our own time is a central myth of the Judeo-Christian religions: the Fall and the Expulsion from the Garden." Hanson does not rehash the myth yet one more time: he instead asks us to think about how we are reenacting it, and reenacting it, and reenacting it, once again. The difference is key to understanding his photographs: colorful clues as to how we can start freeing ourselves from the hypnotizing hold of a circular, messianic myth in place for millennia that has landed us in the very same place we are trying to leave.

Since the late nineteenth century, since the time of Nietzsche, a solution to the world's problems has been placed in the hope of finding a "Caesar with the Soul of Christ." It is this enhanced being who might save us from the sprawling wastelands of modern technology. "Nietzsche," lauded the philosopher Martin Heidegger, "from his supreme peak saw far ahead of it all, as early as the eighteen-eighties." He had the perfect phrase for thinking about the devastation of the modern world: "the simple, because thoughtful, words: 'The wasteland grows.' It means, the devastation is growing wider."¹⁹ The devastation is, indeed, growing wider.

Hanson has no such superpowers; no supreme peak to stand on; no permanent cloud in the heavens from which to get a view from up high; no fixed pulpit from which to pontificate. He does not have the supervision of Nietzsche's superman or the blessings of Heideggerian philosophy. His abilities are greater, because they are more modest (and therefore bolder). He can rent an airplane; he has a camera; he gives us art.

1. Alexander Nazaryan, "Superfund Superstar: David Hanson Takes Beautiful Photographs of Hideous Places," *Newsweek*, March 19, 2016, 60, available at www.newsweek.com.
2. Wendell Berry, preface to *Waste Land: Meditations on a Ravaged Landscape*, by David T. Hanson (New York: Aperture, 1997), 3. This text is published as the foreword in the present volume.
3. Nazaryan, "Superfund Superstar," online edition only, <http://www.newsweek.com/2016/04/29/david-hanson-photography-wilderness-wasteland-449169.html>.
4. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "wasteland," accessed April 17, 2018, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/226037?redirectedFrom=wasteland>.
5. *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, exhibition held at the International Museum of Photography, George Eastman House (Rochester, N.Y.), October 1975–February 1976.
6. David T. Hanson, introduction to *Waste Land: Meditations on a Ravaged Landscape* (New York: Aperture, 1997), 7n2.
7. Hanson, introduction to *Waste Land*, 5.
8. John Szarkowski, press release for the exhibition *New Photography 2*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 1986, n.p.
9. F. B. Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1926), 15.
10. Jimena Canales, "Living Color: Jimena Canales on the Art of Eliot Porter," *Artforum* 53, no. 1 (2014): 334–41.
11. Joyce Carol Oates, foreword to *Wilderness to Wasteland*, by David T. Hanson (Fairfield, Iowa: Taverner Press, 2016), 8; William Kittredge, "Eating Ourselves Alive," in *Waste Land: Meditations on a Ravaged Landscape* (New York: Aperture, 1997), 8; Nazaryan, "Superfund Superstar," 62; and David T. Hanson, "Notes on *Waste Land*," in *Waste Land: Meditations on a Ravaged Landscape* (New York: Aperture, 1997), 151. This final source is reprinted in the present volume.
12. Hanson, "Notes on *Waste Land*," 149.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Andrew Ross, quoted in Nazaryan, "Superfund Superstar," 62.
15. There are many examples of such pieces, including Richard Misrach's celebrated *Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West* and the photographic work of Trevor Paglen. For Paglen, see Jimena Canales, "Operational Art," in *Visibility Machines: Harun Farocki and Trevor Paglen* (Baltimore: Baltimore Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, 2014), 37–54.
16. Peter Montague and Maria B. Pellerano, "Moving into Hubris," in *Waste Land: Meditations on a Ravaged Landscape* (New York: Aperture, 1997), 52.
17. Hanson, "Notes on *Waste Land*," 152.
18. Hanson, introduction to *Waste Land*, 7.
19. Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 29.