A BEAUTIFUL LANDSCAPE

BY KIM KNOPPERS

1.
Imagine: the landscape of Yosemite National Park in California, 250 kilometres east of San Francisco in the Sierra Nevada. You can probably see it before you without ever having been there. By now millions of photos must have been taken by the tourists who immerse themselves in it every day. Yet the landscape photos by classic American photographer Ansel Adams (1902-1984) are still the best known. Over the years they have been reproduced in countless books and calendars, and they float about all over the internet. These are the photos that have determined the image of the American West in the twentieth century, crystal clear black-and-white shots of spectacular mountain landscapes in which Adams carefully avoids all traces of the tourist industry and the day-trippers. He created an ideal image of the landscape, a romantic longing for a timeless paradise – and extremely aesthetically pleasing pictures at the same time.

Ansel Adams was a tireless campaigner for the environment and more politically active than his work would suggest. From the age of seventeen he was a member of the Sierra Club, one of the oldest and biggest environmental organizations in the world. Adams' photos were first actively deployed when the Sierra Club was campaigning to turn the Kings Canyon Region, a four-hour drive from Yosemite, into a national park. Walter Starr, a prominent businessman, along with the president of the Sierra Club, asked Adams to make a book in memory of his son, who had died as a young man while mountaineering. *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir trail* appeared in 1938 in a limited print run of 500 copies and was Adams' first photobook. The photographer sent a copy to Harold Ickes, US Secretary of the Interior, who in turn gave it to President Roosevelt to persuade him to lend his support to the Kings Canyon National Park initiative. On 4 March 1940 Roosevelt signed a law making Kings Canyon an official part of the national parks system. The head of the national park service said to Adams, 'I realized that a silent but most effective voice in the campaign was your own book.'[1]

Ansel Adams was not the only photographer on the Sierra Club's board of directors. The less well known Eliot Porter (1901-1990) was another who enthusiastically occupied that dual role. Like those of Adams, Porter's photos were seen by millions and shared with American presidents and members of congress. What set them apart was colour, used by Porter to show both the beauty of nature and its fragility. In contrast to Adams' sweeping views and spectacular panoramas, Porter often zoomed in on details of the landscape. He believed that close-ups of nature were better able to convey the complexity of ecological interaction. His book *The Place No One Knew: Glen Canyon on the Colorado* was published by the Sierra Club as part of an attempt to prevent the building of a hydroelectric power station. The colour photos of gulches, rock walls and hidden canyons, all carved out by flowing rivers, failed to stop the building of the dam, but they did contribute to the decision to review all building projects along rivers in the American West and to the passing of the Wilderness Act in 1964. Enthusiastic reactions to his work, as well as the political



Eliot Porter (1901-1990), Pool in a Brook, Pond Brook, Near Whiteface, New Hampshire, October 1953. Dye imbibition print ©Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas P1990.58.7.9

influence it turned out to have, made Porter realize that he could set himself up as a defender of nature. He could use photography to make people aware of natural beauty.[2]

Early photographers such as Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter portrayed the allure and mystique of nature in order to persuade people to treat it with care. Their beautiful photos were deeply moving, and the photographers hoped to show people how important it was to preserve the last remaining bits of wilderness on earth. They used their photos to lobby presidents and members of congress. Drawing attention to the beauty of the earth and depicting it without any trace of human activity was a strategy essential to their activist efforts on behalf of conservation groups.

2.
The start of the Anthropocene, an epoch in which the climate on earth and its atmosphere are influenced by human activity such as deforestation, the burning of fossil fuels, large-scale agriculture, mining, livestock farming and the hunting of endangered animals, coincides with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Small-scale workplaces expanded to become major factories, railways were laid, cities grew explosively, oil was pumped out of the ground and electricity was discovered. This was also the time in which photography was invented, one of the miracles of modern science in the nineteenth century. The combination of light and chemistry made reality visible with a great degree of precision.

Against the background of the rise of modern science, the National Geographic Society was established in 1888. Nine months later the society began publishing the world-famous magazine with its yellow border. It was intended as a contribution to public knowledge of geography and to stimulate conservation efforts. From 1905 onwards photography was of overriding importance to the society's efforts. Beautiful photos of spectacular nature were used to bring home to people how valuable the natural world is. This strategy contributed to the immense success of *National Geographic* worldwide. But last year something extraordinary happened – in Indonesia, where the organization did something it had never done before. It published its Indonesia issue of November 2015 without a cover image. Instead the cover read:



Cover Image for *National Geographic Indonesia*, November 2015



Video Still from *FOREST LAW / SELVA JURÍDICA ON THE COSMOPOLITICS OF AMAZONIA*, 2014
© Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares, courtesy of the artists

'Sorry: There are no beautiful images of climate change. Can we survive?' *National Geographic*, which had deployed photography almost from the very beginning to convince people of the importance of nature, laid it aside.

That cover of *National Geographic Indonesia* underlines the fact that in the Anthropocene the use of a few beautiful photographic images to prompt changes in human behaviour is no longer tenable. How can the effects of human dealings on earth, in which an important part is played by relationships between science, power, politics, economics, law and technology, be depicted by artists?

3.
More and more contemporary artists are attempting to examine the major theoretical macro issues surrounding the Anthropocene in their work by zooming in on specific examples. At the core of their efforts is artistic exploration in which different disciplines come together. They use photography, video, film and archive material, and often unusual collaborations arise. Among these artists are, arguably at least, Ursula Biemann, Arman Linke, The Otolith Group (Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar), The Canary Project (founded by Edward Morris and Susannah Sayler) and World of Matter (initiated by Ursula Biemann).
The exhibition *Forest Law* by Ursula Biemann and Paolo Tavares had its premiere in the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, but I saw it at BAK in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in 2015. In a large space a video was shown on two screens. Silent, zoomed-out images of the green rainforest of Sarayaku in Ecuador alternate with documentary shots of forest-dwellers who explain why the forest is important not only to them but to the world as a whole. They describe from their own experience the battles they have waged to protect their environment and a groundbreaking court case, based on their cosmology of the living forest. One of those interviewed says, 'It was important through the process to make the Court of Justice understand how enmeshed the people of Sarayaku are with the mountains, the lagoons, the trees; with the Amasanga, the Sacharuna, the Yashingu; and with all the natural spaces that include invisible beings, the protectors regulating the ecosystem. These beings have more fundamental rights than any of us because they are the ones who protect.'

The interviews are interspersed at regular intervals by film of products being gathered from the natural world. Slowly a table in the forest becomes covered



Installation shot from *FOREST LAW | SELVA JURÍDICA ON THE COSMOPOLITICS OF AMAZONIA*, 2014
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with all kinds of green plants. 'This is my pharmacy. [...] In the last two hundred years of industrialized life, the world viewed nature as a provider of resources, without respecting it. But we have to understand that nature is alive, that's why she gives us food, that's why she reacts, that's why she defends herself. […] These are the concepts we put forth in court.' Another table is slowly filled by a man in a white suit. He takes samples from the ground and puts them on the table. In the publication that accompanies the exhibition we read that he is carrying out forensic tests in one of the open pits of the Lago Agrio oilfields.[3]

The video in *Forest Law* does not stand in isolation but is part of a presentation in which archival material, legal documents, cartographic analyses and fragments of court cases are brought together to form a kaleidoscopic whole that shows different perspectives on the case. The exhibition offers a disturbing portrait of human-earth interaction, and the viewer is provided with plenty of background information and food for thought. Beauty as a means of persuasion is not abandoned altogether, but it is placed within a context that helps to tell a complex story about today's world. That story can no longer be captured in a single idealized image of nature, as it was by Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter. The effects on the earth of human activities are part of long-term processes in which changes are not immediately visible. Nor are they always particularly photogenic. There is a need, furthermore, to provide an insight into the complex relationships between science, power, politics, economics, law and technology. As a result, projects have arisen of which photography is a part but other media such as video or sound are at least as important in conveying the complexity of the material. The challenge for the coming years is to attract the attention of opinion-formers, decision-makers and a wide audience, so that such projects do not remain confined to the exclusive terrain of the white cube or the black box.

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ai2KI3s2c8w on *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail*
2 Paul Martineau and Eliot Porter. *In the Realm of Nature*, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2012
3 Ursula Biemann and Paolo Tavares, *Forest Law*, Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, 2014

KIM KNOPPERS (b. 1976, NL) has been a curator at Foam Museum since 2011. She was previously curator at De Beyerd Center of Contemporary Art. She has curated group exhibitions including *Remind* (2003), *Exotics* (2008) *Snow is White* (2010, together with Joris Jansen) and *Re-Search* (2012), and solo exhibitions by WassinkLundgren, Onorato & Krebs, Jan Hoek, Lorenzo Vitturi, Jan Rosseel, JH Engström, Geert Goiris and Broomberg & Chanarin amongst others. She lives and works in Amsterdam.

THOMAS

I KNOW I WILL SEE
WHAT I HAVE SEEN BEFORE

ALBDORF