

## **Questioning Power in the United States. Mitch Epstein's *American Power*: A Visual Portrayal of the Immorality of the Nation**

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### **Abstract**

Since its inception, American photography has been deeply associated with the American landscape: through the expansion and discovery of new territories, photography served as a means to claim, survey, map the territory in the name of the United States government. A tool in the hands of/for the governmental power, it has played an important role in defining national identity. The aim of this article is to explore this relationship through a case study of Mitch Epstein's monograph, *American Power* (2009). After categorizing how he visually represents power in the United States, we will further analyse his visual discourse within the context of landscape photography. This will lead to the final questioning of not only the visual depiction of power but also the actual power of the photographic depiction.

### **Résumé**

La photographie américaine est, depuis son invention, étroitement liée au paysage américain: avec l'expansion et la découverte de nouveaux territoires la photographie permit de revendiquer, tracer et configurer le nouveau territoire au nom du gouvernement des États-Unis. En tant qu'outil au service du pouvoir de l'Etat fédéral, il a joué un rôle important dans l'élaboration de l'identité nationale. Cet article propose d'analyser cette relation par une étude de cas de la monographie de Mitch Epstein, *American Power* (2009). Après avoir dressé un état des lieux des sources du pouvoir américain selon Epstein, nous poursuivrons l'analyse de son discours visuel pour enfin questionner non seulement la représentation du pouvoir mais le pouvoir de la représentation photographique.

**Key words:** United States, photography, landscape, documentary, *American Power*, Mitch Epstein

**Mots-clés :** États-Unis, photographie, paysage, documentaire, *American Power*, Mitch Epstein

### **Outline**

From photo assignment to *American Power*: circulating sites of tension  
Moral landscapes and intericonicity  
Epstein's artistic intent and beyond

## Introduction

The development of photography coincided with a period of further territorial exploration; travelers, colonizers, explorers, settlers investigated and defined their relationship to new lands by capturing images of exotic lands or categorizing new topographic features. This relationship between photography and the land has never been natural or neutral. Since the early days of exploration of the new American territory, photographers have captured the landscape and presented it as a land of opportunity and national hope, serving as a projection of economic, political and ideological power. As W.J.T. Mitchell writes, "Landscape [...] doesn't merely signify or symbolize power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power, perhaps even an agent of power that is (or frequently represents itself as) independent of human intentions" (Mitchell [1994] 2002, 1-2). Starting with some of the first American photographers such as Carleton Watkins and Timothy O'Sullivan, their photographs, much like government policy, served to control and contain the space. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, landscape photography had taken a new turn and began questioning the human relationship to nature, primarily concerned with the depiction of environmental devastation and the exploitation of the nation's resources (e.g. New Environmentalism in the 50s and 60s and the landmark exhibit "New Topographics" in the 1970s<sup>1</sup>). Fitting into this movement concerned about renewing a sense of place and a questioning of national space, the American photographer Mitch Epstein (born in 1952) clearly chooses an ambiguous title of his monograph/exhibition: *American Power*<sup>2</sup>.

*American Power* is the result of a 5-year, cross-country adventure to document sites where the United States produces nuclear, fossil fuel, hydroelectric power, wind and solar energy. Epstein creates a complex reading of American power eliciting a multitude of questions. Where indeed does the power lie? In the hands of great corporations? The government? The consumers? Is it in the land itself? Or in the lens of the photographer? This article explores the extent to which the morality of a nation may be questioned through Epstein's *American Power* while simultaneously casting light onto the limits and new possibilities for documentary photographers' to disseminate their message.

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<sup>1</sup> New Environmentalism refers to the period between the 1950s and 1960s (especially after the publishing of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962) and into the early 1970s that was marked by increasing public awareness and support for protecting the environment (from industrial development, in particular) as well as for the preservation of endangered species. At about that same time, in 1975, William Jenkins curated the photographic exhibition "New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape" at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. 168 photographs by 10 photographers (Robert Adams, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott and Stephen Shore) presented a banal, urbanized American landscape – a radical shift from the traditional vision of the aesthetically idealized American landscape epitomized by photographers such as Ansel Adams or Edward Weston.

<sup>2</sup> All the photographs from *American Power* mentioned in this article may be viewed in the same order as published in the book on Mitch Epstein's website: <http://whatisamericanpower.com/#>

## From photo assignment to *American Power*: circulating sites of tension

Much like the cover of his book, Mitch Epstein's project began with a billowing mass (Gavin Coal Power Plant, Cheshire, Ohio 2003). In 2003 he was commissioned by the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* to photograph the demolition of the small town, Cheshire, Ohio, where a "blue plume," frequently emitted from one of the nation's largest coal-fired power plants, was the source of environmental issues (Seelye, 2002). The blue resulted from the sulfur trioxide and sulfuric acid present in the vaporous discharge. Eventually the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) accused American Electric Power (AEP), owner of the power plant and the nation's largest utility, of violating the Clean Air Act. The company decided to buy out the 200-odd residents for \$20 million (Seelye, 2002). This was believed to be the first time a company dissolved an entire town (Seelye, 2002). Mitch Epstein made two trips to Cheshire over the span of a couple of weeks in order to witness the demolition of the houses, as the community would cease to exist (Goodheart, 2004). Epstein recalls, "[i]t made me want to explore how power had created this perverse situation where people were potentially poisoned and then given a fee to leave their homes and keep their mouths shut" (Epstein, 2009b).

Thus began Mitch Epstein's inquiry into the production and consumption of energy. His primary objective was to "question the power of nature, government, corporations and mass consumption in the US." (Epstein, 2009, introduction) The project began in 2003 and lasted until 2008, a date that Epstein chose to coincide symbolically with the end of the Bush-Cheney administration. Concerned with mapping the "geographical breadth" of the country by "going to every region," he ended up covering 25 states (Epstein, 2009b). His agenda was not specifically to go to areas in the US that were devastated or excessively exploited by energy power. He first chose to visit energy rich regions; historic sites of the American energy past such as the coal belt, West Texas which historically held the major oil sites that are now running dry and has become one of the nation's largest producers of wind energy or iconic areas such as Hoover Dam. Then he moved on to the politics of energy by visiting the Pentagon and the Department of Energy (Epstein, 2010,15).

The project was initially conceived for exhibition and was shown around the United States and across Europe. The accompanying book is illustrated with over 60 color prints in which "each picture stands on its own but can also have a dialogue with the others" (Epstein, 2009b). It has won several awards including the Prix Pictet in 2011. Each photograph is accompanied by a legend which specifies the place and the year, grounding it in space and time. Together, in the same vein as *New Topographics*, the photographs in *American Power* offer yet again a new topographic survey of the American landscape in that they provide a 21<sup>st</sup> century visual exploration and identification of a specific space and Americans' relationship to that space.

The strength of *American Power* lies in Epstein's ability to depict visually the complex reality surrounding environmental issues in America. He points out that:

[...] the project began about energy, but quickly became about power in all its dimensions—not only voltage power, but governmental and corporate power. The power of nature. The power of community. An artist's power. *American Power* came to mean all these things and question their balance (Epstein, 2009b).

Indeed, an analysis of the 63 photographs of *American Power* confirms that they could fit into 1 of 5 categories: Energy as a source of production, Corporate Interests, the Disempowered Majorities, as well as the power of Government, and Nature.

**Energy as a source of power:** As could be expected in a book on energy, photographs of almost all sources of energy in America are depicted: nuclear (Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Repository, Nevada 2007), fossil fuel (Wyodak Coal Mine, Wyoming 2008), hydroelectric power (Hoover Dam and Lake Mead, Nevada/Arizona 2007), wind (Altamont Pass Wind Farm, California II 2007) and solar energy (Solar Powered House, Kalapana, Hawaii 2008), just to provide a few examples. Even though a small number of photographs do not explicitly illustrate energy production, they nevertheless maintain an indirect link. Beyond the simple taxonomy of American energy production, multiple messages regarding power permeate the photographs, as some tend to be more critical than others. Epstein asserts a rather positive vision of the future, "I included pictures in *American Power* of renewable energy – wind, biotech and solar – to show that a healthier, more economical and compassionate way of life is possible" (Epstein, 2011). However, the visual discourse does not appear to be quite as positive and forward-looking as he indicates. On the contrary, many of the photographs of alternative energy sources provide a more dismal reality or questionable effectiveness. Take for example the seemingly "burnt" wind blades of the wind turbine in the arid, desolate Californian landscape (Palm Springs, California III, 2007), the kitsch irony of the solar cooker (Solar Oven, Kawaihae, Hawaii 2008) or even the desolate isolation of the house on the lava bed (Solar Powered House, Kalapana, Hawaii 2008).

**Corporate interests:** These interests are visually pervasive and the extent of corporate power is reinforced through the use of sheer scale – the scale of land being used, and the scale of industry, both amplified through the large size of the prints<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, Epstein chose to use large format photography in order to obtain the acuity, depth and richness of information he hoped would create an intense visual experience for the viewer. He acknowledges,

I was making pictures that were large in scope in a metaphorical, conceptual way, but also in a physical way. I was often looking at very big landscapes, and I was torn with this very notion of "Supersize Me" as a kind of cultural phenomena and identity. So I made the largest pictures I had ever made: 70×90 inches. This was a new form for me (Epstein, 2009b).

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<sup>3</sup> According to Susan Bright, "In contemporary landscape photography there is a trend, as there is in many of the other genres, to print work large" ([2005] 2011, 49).



Fig. 1 Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, Spring 2011



Fig. 2 Open Eye Gallery Liverpool, December 2011

The viewer is struck by the massive structures such as the BP Carson Refinery, California 2007, one of the iconic images of the project, as well as by the extensive exploitation and wreckage of the earth's resources to fuel energy production, as was seen in the case of

Wyodak Coal Mine or Amos Coal Power Plant in West Virginia (Amos Coal Power Plant III, Winfield, West Virginia 2007).

**The Disempowered Majorities:** The ramifications of corporate power is enhanced through contrasting visions between those who benefit from corporate power and those who are subject to its dominance: the disempowered majorities. From the onset of his project, the effect of corporate power is made explicit, the primary example being illustrated by the word “Gone” inscribed on the roof of one of the houses belonging to the now non-existent town of Cheshire (Cheshire, Ohio 2004). Photographs also highlight the effect of corporate dominance over markets such as photographs of independent gas stations – relics of the past (Snyder, Texas 2005 or Port of Beaumont, Texas 2006). Individuals, whose daily lives are subject to industrial pollution of the land they depend upon for substance and recreation, have been made visible (Rancho Seco Nuclear Power Plant, Herald, California 2005 or Big Bend Coal Power Station, Apollo Beach, Florida 2005 or Fort Pierce, Florida 2005 or Hanford Nuclear Reservation, Washington 2006). Mitch Epstein was extremely sensitive to corporate power and its capacity to impose upon individuals. While shooting his project, he personally experienced recurring encounters with law enforcement officials ranging from security guards to FBI agents who questioned his rights to photograph various corporate sites despite the fact that he was on public land. He recalled, “Their actions were illegal under the Constitution as I knew it, before the Patriot Act. The fury I felt about losing my freedom as an artist fuelled a desire to keep working and get the better of the system” (Epstein, 2009b). The counter example was symbolized in the portrait of “Boots,” the lone Cheshire rebel, who refused to be compliant to AEP’s use of power and exerted her individual rights to remain in her home (Beulah “Boots” Hern, Cheshire, Ohio 2004 and Beulah “Boots” Hern’s House, Cheshire, Ohio 2004). These multiple perspectives tend to portray corporate power as a destructive and exploitive source of power.

**Government power:** Epstein’s landscapes of Government power focused on security issues like those he encountered during what he characterized as the Bush/Cheney era of paranoia and anxiety revolving around the threat of terrorism (Grand Gulf Nuclear Regulatory Office, Mississippi 2006 or Omaha, Nebraska 2008 and “Freedom Mine” Beulah, North Dakota 2005 as well as Republican National Convention, Xcel Energy Center, Saint Paul, Minnesota 2008). Aaron Schuman points out that, “within contemporary America, it is no longer nature, but our “brutal use” of nature that is aggressively protected” (Schuman, 2008). This is especially true as seen in relation to nuclear energy promoted during this time<sup>4</sup> (Grand Gulf Nuclear Power Plant, Mississippi II 2006). Government power was also seen as being closely tied to corporate power as indicated by the gigantic American flag covering the entire façade of the BP Refinery (BP Carson Refinery, California 2007), for example.

**Nature:** Notwithstanding, the major forces of both government and corporations, power seems to be checked by nature – a reminder of man’s ephemeral status. The photographs function as a reminder of nature’s cyclical destruction pattern and its impact upon man’s linear notion of progress. During the time period Epstein worked on *American Power*, Hurricane Katrina pounded upon the southern part of the United States causing unprecedented

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<sup>4</sup> See Jon Gertner’s article in the *New York Times*, “Atomic Balm,” (2006), for example.

damage and deaths<sup>5</sup>. Thus, Epstein's inquiry into Hurricane Katrina shows the power of nature and its ability to wreck havoc. Twisted steel of the maimed oilrig "Ocean Warwick" stands in contrast to the peaceful representation of the scene's warm, soft hues (Ocean Warwick Oil Platform, Dauphine Island, Alabama 2005). Like a monument of war, the platform stands as a testimony to man's futile attempt to control nature. In Mississippi nature – symbolized by a tree still standing – remains the focal point as man is reduced to symbolic debris (Biloxi, Mississippi 2005). The storm's consequences affect consumption and production of energy, and individual lives (Martha Murphy and Charlie Biggs, Pass Christian, Mississippi 2005), but also serve as a commentary on climate change in addition to more classic depictions of global warming – such as a glacier receding – (Exit Glacier, Kenai Fjords National Park, Alaska 2007).

By giving voice to the various powers at play, Epstein presents the viewer with a multifaceted and complex reality in which each of the "powers" seemingly has their *raison d'être*. However, while confronting the photographs and contemplating the dynamics of the multiple powers circulating within these American landscapes, the irresolvable tension become visually apparent; the viewer questions where the power lies and which is more legitimate. Nevertheless, the comprehensive message warns that the American land is being excessively exploited and unlike the seemingly infinite resources of the "Land of Plenty," its primary resources are diminishing. According to Epstein's artist statement as expressed for the Prix Pictet, the fault lies in "the dangerous trinity of corporate power, consumerist advertising and citizens who believe the old American Dream that improving your lot means having more and using more." A seemingly incongruous photograph provides a stark vision of "Old Sparky," the electric chair that was used in West Virginia during the 50s (West Virginia State Penitentiary, Moundsville 2007). Yet, following the logic of the series of photographs within the book, this photograph of the electric chair seems to work as a decoder of Epstein's ultimate argument and illustrates Epstein's intention to yet again force the spectator to confront head-on the United States' questionable use of power. How does this visual survey of America make Epstein's moral message recognizable (as opposed to just being a projection of the viewers own perspective upon the photographs)?

### **"Moral landscapes" and intericonicity<sup>6</sup>**

*American Power* reflects the hybridized strategies characteristic of contemporary photography<sup>7</sup>. Initiated as a photojournalistic endeavor, the photographic work of *American Power* overlaps art, landscape and documentary photography. The subject content places it in the realm of landscape photography. At the same time, reporting on contemporary environmental and social issues places it within the documentary genre to which Mitch Epstein combines techniques of art photography to aestheticize these issues<sup>8</sup>. By

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<sup>5</sup> Hurricane Katrina hit the states of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama on the Gulf Coast of the United States on August 29, 2005. It resulted in hundreds of thousands of displaced people, over \$100 billion in damages and over 1,800 deaths.

<sup>6</sup> "Moral landscape" is a phrase borrowed from Fred Ritchin *Bending the Frame* (2013, 19).

<sup>7</sup> Susan Bright refers rather to "a collapsing of boundaries" ([2005] 2011, 13).

<sup>8</sup> The aesthetical treatment of horrifying, problematic or controversial issues has been a problem for documentary photographers since the 20th century as they have been faced with the dilemma of creating a balance between subject and style. Photographers such as Sebastião Salgado have been the targets of such criticism and writers such as Susan Sontag have dwelled in length upon the issue (See *On Photography* (1977)

photographically visualizing landscape, Epstein tapped into the vein of art photography hoping to nuance reality and inner complexities faced by Americans in relation to American power. This hybridization is critical to his work in tracing the landscape as a message of power.

The documentary genre aims at being a critical eye upon society<sup>9</sup>. In addition to explaining and bearing witness, its ultimate objective could also be considered to rally support, action or reform. The photographer (journalist or documentarian) finds his moral role in bearing witness, providing “facts” in an effort to raise the public’s consciousness about social issues<sup>10</sup>. Morality is linked to journalism and documentary through the status of the photograph as document, which is synonymous with “evidence” (Clarke, 1997, 145). In point of fact, Bright reminds us that “[t]raditionally, photography’s power has resided in its referentiality and indexicality, making it the perfect vehicle with which to deal with ‘real’ life” (Bright [2005] 2011, 157). However, today the photographic document as objective account has reached a mythical status since the recognized subjectivity of the photographer (and the photograph), in addition to the digital age’s impact, have brought to the forefront the photograph’s capacity to interpret more than its ability to present the truth. Epstein admits he long ago moved away from the canon of objectivity inherent to documentary:

[...] I’d learned [...] that photographers should never interfere with or alter their subject. I long ago crossed that line [...] I will move or add or subtract an object or ask someone to be still or turn if I think it helps the picture. (Epstein, 2009b).

Today, documentary photography may still be seen, as John Szarkowski suggested in 1978, as “windows” onto the world<sup>11</sup>. Windows frame the world we see. These windows that documentary photography provides, Fred Ritchin explains, “demand that one look through them, both as a prerequisite of citizenship and as a moral obligation”(2013, 9). As documentarian, Mitch Epstein imparts upon his work a moral message begging to be heeded in that his photographs question the morality of various aspects of American power. He explicates, “Making this work has made me call into question [...] what it means to be an American at this point in time and what choices we face as a society. Will we pursue our individualism to such a degree that we become an inefficient, immoral society?” (Epstein, 2009b). His work explores the intricacies in evaluating the notions of what could be considered right or wrong, good or bad policy or code of conduct depending upon where the power lies. He explains:

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and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003)). Particularly pertinent to the dialogue between photography and traumatic landscapes, one could cite photographers such as Emmet Gowin, Richard Misrach, Joel Sternfeld, Mishka Henner, Edward Burtynsky or the collective work *Altered Landscapes* (Wolfe (2011)).

<sup>9</sup> The social vein of documentary photography truly emerges at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with photographers such as Jacob Riis or Lewis Hine (See Olivier Lugon, *Le style documentaire*, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Claude Cookman in his book *American Photojournalism* asserts, “The view from inside the profession and across several decades reveals that most photojournalists adopt a humanist point of view as they strive to make the world better with their pictures” (2009, 265). He continues, “they believe they can prompt those who view their images in newspapers and on Web sites and television to create the political will to change things for the better” (2009, 266).

<sup>11</sup> John Szarkowski curated a major photograph exhibit, “Mirrors and Widows: American Photography Since 1960,” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (July 28 – October 2, 1978). Szarkowski explained that the photograph is seen as a “window” – through which the exterior world is explored in all its presence and reality.

[...] you could see energy production as benefiting society, as a good thing, essential to our progress over the last hundred years. But you could also see energy, as it's been handled in the US, as the essence of capital irresponsibility. *American Power* holds these two sides of the coin" (Epstein, 2009b).

As *American Power* unfolds, it dwells far beyond a Manichean vision of just "two sides of the same coin."

Through intericonicity<sup>12</sup> these sites of tension become moral landscapes. As a means to criticize contemporary American society and the Bush administration policies, intericonicity plays a major role by evoking sentiments of nostalgia for a lost paradise present in American iconology. On one level Epstein refers back to classic constructs of landscape photography and painting. On another level, he recycles formal techniques from other contemporary (landscape) photographers.

Interest in American landscape by fine art painters began in the early 1800s and in 19<sup>th</sup> century America a belief in "Christianized naturalism" transcended theological boundaries and conflated God and nature<sup>13</sup>. America's vast wilderness came to represent both God's original creation, untouched by human hands, and the legendary place where human cultivation of the land began. *American Power* recycled some of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American landscape painters' subjects and techniques and more specifically the moralism embodied within these works. Epstein embraced this role as 21<sup>st</sup> century documentary photographer in somewhat the same manner as Thomas Cole saw the role of the artist as being a moral one (Phol [2002] 2012, 145). While Cole painted the perfection of God's creation, Epstein photographed its disappearance, and near obliteration. This lush, idealized landscape may be seen in the examples the *Catskills* by Asher Brown Durand or Thomas Cole's *Garden of Eden*; both of which depict the luxurious nature as all encompassing with rich, green foliage in the foreground framing the hazy mountain in the background.

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<sup>12</sup> Intericonicity is a term derived from the notion of intertextuality which was first used by Julia Kristeva in her essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1966) where she defines it as a "mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva 85 in Moi, 1986, 37). In this respect, an extremely simplified definition of intericonicity consists in the recognition of a known image within a new image.

<sup>13</sup> In *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875*, Barbara Novak points out, "[b]y the time Emerson wrote *Nature* in 1836, the terms "God" and "nature" were often the same thing, and could be used interchangeably" ([1980] 2007, 23).



Fig. 3 *The Catskills*, Asher Brown Durand, 1859



Fig. 4 *Garden of Eden*, Thomas Cole, 1828

Epstein's BP Carson oil refinery has been framed in a similar manner: a low angle shot allows Epstein to include leafage in the upper right and left hand corners. Nonetheless, the foliage no longer surrounds the entire frame, it had to make place for the predominant industrial façade.

Nature is receding, being pushed out by the now all-encompassing industry that bleeds off the page from right to left. Has the viewer walked through the Garden of Eden only to find at the end of the luxurious garden that the mountain has been transformed into a majestic intertwining of steel? A view of another oil refinery, this time in New Orleans, Louisiana, plays once again with the codes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century artists (Chalmette Oil Refinery, New Orleans, Louisiana II 2007). Nature is even more present and framing the bright central figure. The mowed lawn leads the viewer's eye through the lane of orderly lined trees to the center of the photograph to discover not the culmination of God's creation, but man's control, exploitation and dominance – an oil refinery. The idealized landscapes of God's nature have given way to bleak industrialization in Epstein's 21<sup>st</sup> century version of Thomas Cole's *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*.



Fig. 5 *Expulsion From the Garden of Eden*, Thomas Cole, 1828

The Niagara Falls, a recurrent theme for 19<sup>th</sup> century artists (John Trumbull – 1808, Thomas Cole – 1830, Frederic Edwin Church – 1857), offered a statement of nationhood and the unlimited power of American empire (Phol [2002] 2012, 160).



Fig. 6 *Niagara Falls*, Frederic Edwin Church, 1857

Epstein echoes Church's sublime depiction by also placing the viewer within the dangerous waters (Niagara Falls, New York 2005). Despite the threat of the churning waves, nature doesn't frighten man as the casual subjects, who resemble quite closely Titian's *Adam and Eve*, venture in the waters.



Fig. 7 *Adam and Eve*, Titian, circa 1550

The Niagara no longer offers a metaphor for the unlimited power of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American empire, but of man's naïve arrogance regarding nature. This is Epstein's 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the fall of man. Their paradise ends not from Eve plucking the apple but from Adam consuming an industrial soft drink. The end of innocence isn't so innocent as they knowingly enter the metaphorical dangerous waters of the consumer society, of unrestrained production and consumption.

On another level, Epstein executes a radical shift in style by recycling formal techniques and composition from contemporary photographers all the while maintaining the moralistic discourse. He draws on visual references from artists who participated in the exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* that was displayed at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York in 1975<sup>14</sup>. Collectively, photographers such as Robert Adams, Stephen Shore or Lewis Baltz rejected the idealized vision of nature that had reached its apogee in Ansel Adams' photographs. They shifted their perspective and presented a stark suburbanized landscape of dull uniformity. The similarity in subject matter can be seen in Robert Adams' Tract housing, North Glenn and Thornton, Colorado, 1973 reflected in Epstein's Signal Hill, Long Beach, California 2007 or Adams' Tract House, Westminster,

<sup>14</sup> A brief selection of photographs from *New Topographics* may be seen on the *Guardian's* website : <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2010/feb/08/new-topographics-landscape-photography>

Colorado, 1974 seen in Epstein's Moss Landing Power Plant, California 2007. Even the titles focus on place and time, thus serving a topographic landmarks of the nation's past.

In the *New Topographics* thematics of the 70s the natural environment was still quite present but being eroded away by urban sprawl and industrial development. *American Power* has taken their vision one step further and almost removed any nature that seemed to be left. Stephen Shore was the only photographer to use color in *New Topographics*. Mitch Epstein, also a precursor in the use of color photography, at times in *American Power* intentionally accentuated a sentiment of monotony through techniques of over saturation and high exposure. The bleak, vacant urban landscape underscores modern concerns about alienation and isolation within contemporary society. The viewer gazes in awe at the enormity of industrial power that obliterates and poisons the little bit of nature that is left. The only sign of nature visible at the Vogtle site is the blue sky and clouds mixing with clouds of pollution emanating from stacks (Vogtle Nuclear Power Plant, Waynesboro, Georgia 2006). In Bernd and Hilla Becher's *Pit Head*, the dilapidated industrial structure seems to be succumbing to nature, as wilderness seems to be maintaining or regaining ground (Pit head, Bear Valley, Pennsylvania 1974). In Epstein's photographs, landscape has been irrevocably altered by industry and policy. The vast American wilderness is no longer a landscape for cultivation; it has been displaced by the immensity of the encroaching industrialization and urbanization. The land is completely exhausted. Industry is not integrated with the natural environment; the bit of nature that remains has been pushed to the margins of society as in the photograph of Reactor 9 where nature is dwarfed on the sides as the few trees provide a notion of the enormity of the building (Reactor 9, Hanford Nuclear Reservation, Washington 2006). The mythical peaceful coexistence of man and nature has given way to power games between them.

A more contemporary influence upon Epstein's photographs in *American Power* could be seen in Andreas Gursky, characterized for his use of large-scale photographs often focusing on human consumption and consumerism. Taken from a high angle with a reduced perspective, the photos pull objects in and erase space between subjects as in his famous 99 cent, 1999. While admittedly not part of the American landscape iconology, the connection between Gursky and Epstein's work could be qualified as a co-incidence in part (but not solely) fostered by the trend in the contemporary art market to print large work (Bright, 2011, 49). Epstein's photo of Las Vegas appears to be a hybridization of Gursky's saturated, monumental photographs and aerial survey photographs of American landscape found with some of the photographs in "New Topographics" (Las Vegas, Nevada 2007). The formal techniques create a saturated space entirely devoted to commentary on excess. Inundated with details creating a repetitive mosaic of color, the photograph abstracts reality and instructs the viewer about modern oblivion to the consumer society.

These few examples of intericonicity and borrowing functioned to further anchor meaning for the viewer and to highlight Epstein's perspective that "America [...] appears to have transformed from a land of plenty into one of fear, greed and devastation" (Schuman, 2008). To guide the viewer's understanding of the moralist message contained in the documentary/landscape photographs of *American Power*, Epstein recycled discourses and techniques predominant in early American landscape painting and contemporary landscape photography.

Thus far, this article has attempted to demonstrate the postulate set forward by Jean Kempf that “the contemporary landscape photograph has set itself free from its referent, and thus from its metaphoric value. It has replaced it by an internal metonymic network (of images), a self-referential one in which images dialogue with other images” (2014, 9). However, where this “death of the metaphor” has left the American landscape “wasted” and “exhausted”, the intent of this article was to show that this internal dialogue, as uncreative and self-replicating as it may be, actually enhances the moralistic message and makes it easily understood by a large audience, which is the case of documentary photography that aims to instigate change. However, one must admit that photographs seem to be speaking upon deaf ears (or rather upon blind eyes) as calls against global warming, child abuse, war or any other social cause are messages that have been reiterated generation after generation to no avail. Is documentary photography powerless? Was Epstein able to transform his documentary series into an environmentally activist art form?

### Epstein's artistic intent and beyond

Turning back to Epstein's statement made during his 2009 interview with Richard Woodward, he put forward that one of the aims of *American Power* was also to question the “artists' power”<sup>15</sup>. The question remains: to what extent were Epstein's photographs able to communicate his message calling for environmental awareness and change in the United States?

Even if it is difficult to quantify the impact of documentary photography, there are notable examples of the practice/genre exerting a power upon viewers<sup>16</sup>. Documentary photography is known to have prompted the passing of legislation: Lewis Hine's photographs inspired legislators to pass laws against child labor and Ansel Adam's lobbied Congress with his photographs for the creation of Kings Canyon National Park (created in 1940), for example. In regards to the environment, Bill Anders' photograph of the Earth from space culminated in increased environmental awareness and galvanized the first Earth Day in 1970. Photographs such as “Accidental Napalm” (Nick Ut, 1972) or those from Abu Ghraib prison (2003-2004) led to public outcry (both nationally and internationally) and questioned the legitimacy of American international policy. Two final concrete examples from *Life* magazine demonstrate photographs ability to arouse readers' emotional reaction to the point of donating money and objects: the 1951 photo essay by W. Eugene Smith of a midwife's impoverished working conditions and the 1987 photo essay by Mary Ellen Mark of the homeless Damm family.

Despite this fragmentary list, photographers (and editors) do not have access to a crystal ball showing which photograph may have an effect on the spectator, or even what effect that could be. Doubt about impact persists. In his book *Bending the Frame*, Fred Ritchin points out that while great means are invested to measure photographs' impact in marketing and in politics to test the desired effect, this is not so in journalism. (2013, 25)

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<sup>15</sup> “[...] the project began about energy, but quickly became about power in all its dimensions – not only voltage power, but governmental and corporate power. The power of nature. The power of community. An artist's power. *American Power* came to mean all these things and question their balance” (Epstein, 2009b).

<sup>16</sup> Power being understood as drawing people's attention to a subject and resulting in some sort of action – donation of money, protest, etc.

Nonetheless, the artist and his medium *are* sources of power in their capacity of publicizing issues or situations that are unknown, unnoticed or (intentionally?) ignored. W.J.T Mitchell explains,

Landscape as a cultural medium... naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site ([1994] 2002, 2).

This power derived from the medium is tactfully demonstrated in Epstein's *American Power* landscape/documentary photographs. As stated earlier, the vast wilderness and abundant resources in the United States have fueled a desire for continual "progress," but the increasing desecration of nature ever since 19<sup>th</sup> century conquest and settlement and 20<sup>th</sup> century industrialization and urbanization has been a continual concern for Americans. Epstein is following previous photographers' attempts to awaken Americans' consciousness to the fact that nature's resources are limited and to open their eyes to the costs of uncontrolled consumption on society<sup>17</sup>. The two photographs that open *American Power* (and which are also among the most frequently reproduced) both make conspicuous the artist's capacity to reveal the artificial aspect of landscape (Amos Coal Power Plant, Raymond City, West Virginia 2004 and Poca High School and Amos Coal Power Plant, West Virginia 2004). The first photograph of Amos Coal Plant presents an almost pastoral setting of a quaint American neighborhood. In the foreground we can see a tidy, peaceful suburban backyard at the beginning of spring – the trees don't yet have their leaves but the burst of bright flowers punctuates the photograph with small splashes of color. However, in the background, looming behind a veil of fog, appears the thermal reactor of Amos. In the second photograph, that of Poca High School, the landscape is visually separated into two levels as well: in the foreground a high school football team is seen practicing. Their everyday-activities appear completely undisturbed by the menacing power plant actively spewing out clouds of polluted steam – a seemingly invisible aspect of/in their space. For Epstein, "the whole notion of power was often something hidden and, in a sense, very potent" (Epstein, 2010, 13). By representing the surroundings that have been "naturalized" for the inhabitants through the focus of the camera lens, Epstein brings them under scrutiny and into question. His framing of this landscape through the lens of the camera compels the viewer to look at and to see the denatured and spoiled space. In yet again another photograph, Epstein brings to the viewer's attention the egotistical, short-termed vision of the United States' use of its natural resources, water and energy (Altamont Pass Wind Farm, California II 2007). A bright green patch of golf course (notorious for tremendous water consumption) is contrasted against the drought-stricken, barren, even dull Californian landscape that also doubles as a wind farm. The photograph highlights not only the ridiculousness of environmental policies (or lack of), but also Americans' ability to ignore the situation (as illustrated through the obliviousness of the golfers). In these cases, Epstein has demonstrated that one of the central powers of

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<sup>17</sup> This includes photographers such as Robert Adams and Lewis Baltz who participated in the *New Topographics* exhibit in the 70s, but also more contemporary photographers such as Richard Misrach, Mark Klett, Chris Jordan or even Catherine Opie. We could also mention the 2011-2012 exhibit organized by the Nevada Museum of Art, *The Altered Landscape: Photographs of a Changing Environment*, that featured a hundred photographers both American and foreign since the environment is now considered a global issue, stretching beyond national boundaries.

photographers lies in their ability to draw attention to landscapes that have been “naturalized” by refocusing on them and bringing them into question.

The direct impact of Epstein's photographs in *American Power* on his audience remains unknown, but the documenting of the landscape definitely made a powerful impression upon the photographer. Epstein pointed out, “I didn't start with any kind of specific political agenda” (Kennedy, 2009). In yet another interview he added, “I am not an environmentalist. I'm an artist. So I wasn't seeking to do environmental reporting in any proactive way. In fact, it's the work itself that profoundly politicized me” (Epstein, 2010, 15). Because of the indeterminate extent of power of (landscape and documentary) photography, Mitch Epstein and Susan Bell, his wife who helped him edit his projects, sought to extend the reach of *American Power* beyond the traditional boundaries. Even if they recognized that “books are more democratic and enduring than exhibitions” they felt they needed to explore different media to meet their object to “inspire people to look harder at their landscape and how they relate to it” (Epstein, 2009b). He added, “In the end, we both felt the need to do more than create a museum or gallery exhibition and book. We wanted my pictures to prompt people outside the intelligentsia to think harder about protecting their environment” (Epstein, 2009b).

Their ambitious plans to expand the project to a broader audience “beyond the art world” (Epstein, 2011) included: 1) “hijack[ing] the tools of advertising” by creating a series of billboards and transportation posters in several regions where Epstein had taken pictures including West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Texas and Nevada; 2) collaborating with art and environmental organizations; 3) launching a website ([www.whatisamericanpower.com](http://www.whatisamericanpower.com)) with photographs from the series and increased text “explaining the environmental facts behind the photographs” 4) creating an *American Power* booklet and curriculum guide for secondary school teachers (Epstein, 2009b).

The reality, for reasons unknown to this author (but most likely a lack of funding), was much more limited than their original plans/intentions. The “art ad campaign” as he called it only ended up running in Ohio. The billboard campaign was launched in Columbus and Cincinnati Ohio on April 12, 2010, coinciding with 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Earth Day. Epstein explains his geographical choice,

I decided that Ohio was the right place to begin this project for several reasons: because the first pictures were made in Ohio, because American Electric Power, which is the largest in the country period, their corporate headquarters are there, and also Ohio is a state that is just very pivotal, it is a very energy-driven state (Epstein, 2010, 20).

Of the few billboards that ran, instead of mixing the photographs with famous sayings<sup>18</sup>, they invited the viewer to visit the website [www.whatisamericanpower.com](http://www.whatisamericanpower.com).

The website is perhaps the most effective extension of *American Power* in that it provides a means to reach a large audience and to transmit Epstein's educational message,

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<sup>18</sup> Epstein planned that “The billboards will have short quotes from eminent American voices ranging from Walt Whitman and Thoreau to Susan Sontag and Malcolm X. For instance, across the smoke picture is written in bold letters, ‘This is the air that bathes the globe.’ That's Whitman. Or written across the Hoover Dam is the Sioux proverb, ‘the frog does not drink up the pond in which he lives.’” (Epstein, 2009b)

Americans, myself included, need to learn restraint and a greater consciousness of our neighbor's needs [...] there is so much excess these days, so much we could cut out of our lives without sacrificing comfort. Americans need to stop feeling so entitled to every luxury at our disposal [...]. It is hard for the American renegade spirit to adapt to this new era, where social cooperation and compromise are as important as individual rights. (Epstein, 2009b)

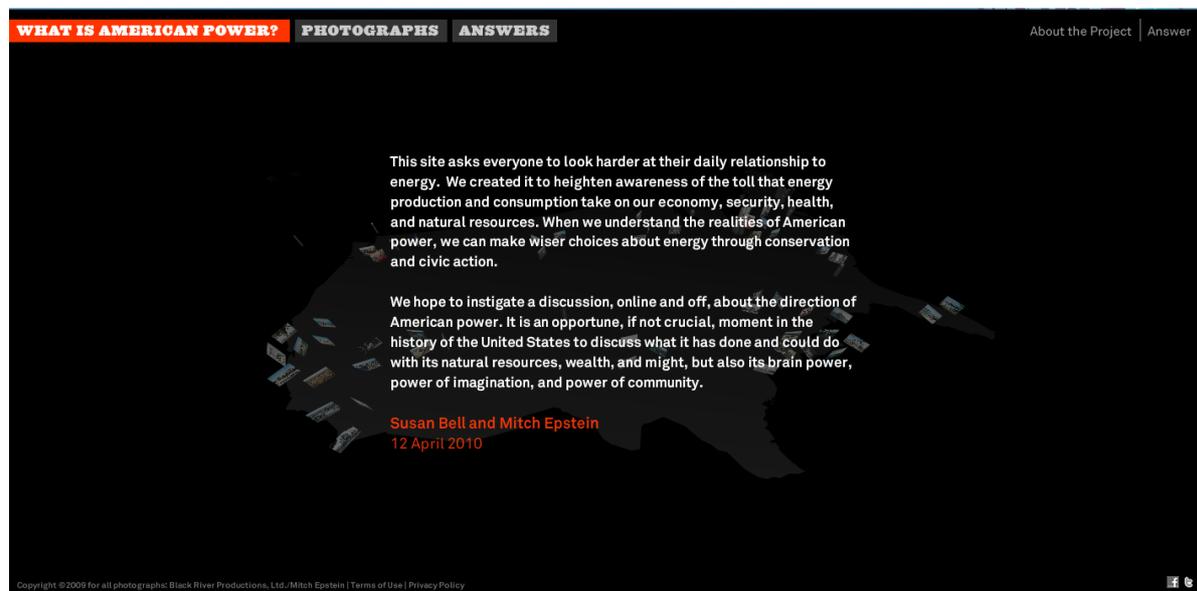


Fig. 8 Screenshot of www.whatisamericanpower.com

The website serves as an effective means of exploiting the possibilities Internet and social media have to offer. As this article has made clear through the use of hyperlinks, all the photographs that were visible for a limited period of time to a restricted number of people who were willing and able to pay to attend the exhibitions or to buy his monograph may be freely accessed on Internet. Additionally, it supplements a certain authority of the image through mapping and through what Epstein calls the “backstory”. The use of the “backstory” once again creates a certain hybridity of genres reaching into the journalistic aspect which requires text to provide the context (and limit the ambiguity) of the photographs; further anchoring, in this case Epstein’s photographs the immorality of the nation as invisible toxins are identified and destruction specified. This extension of the genre is therefore an extension of authority through the access to supplemental truth/proof.

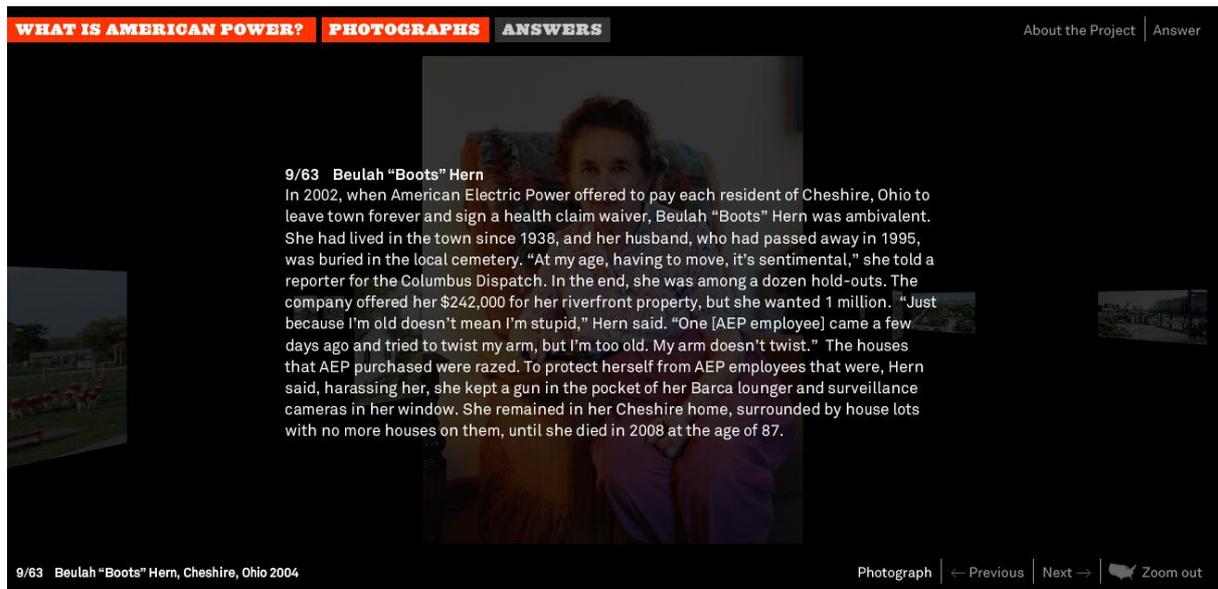


Fig. 9 Screenshot "Backstory" photo 9, Beulah "Boots" Hern, Cheshire, Ohio 2004

www.whatisamericanpower.com also extends the static photographs of *American Power* into collaborative documentary through interactive definitions to the question: What is American Power?

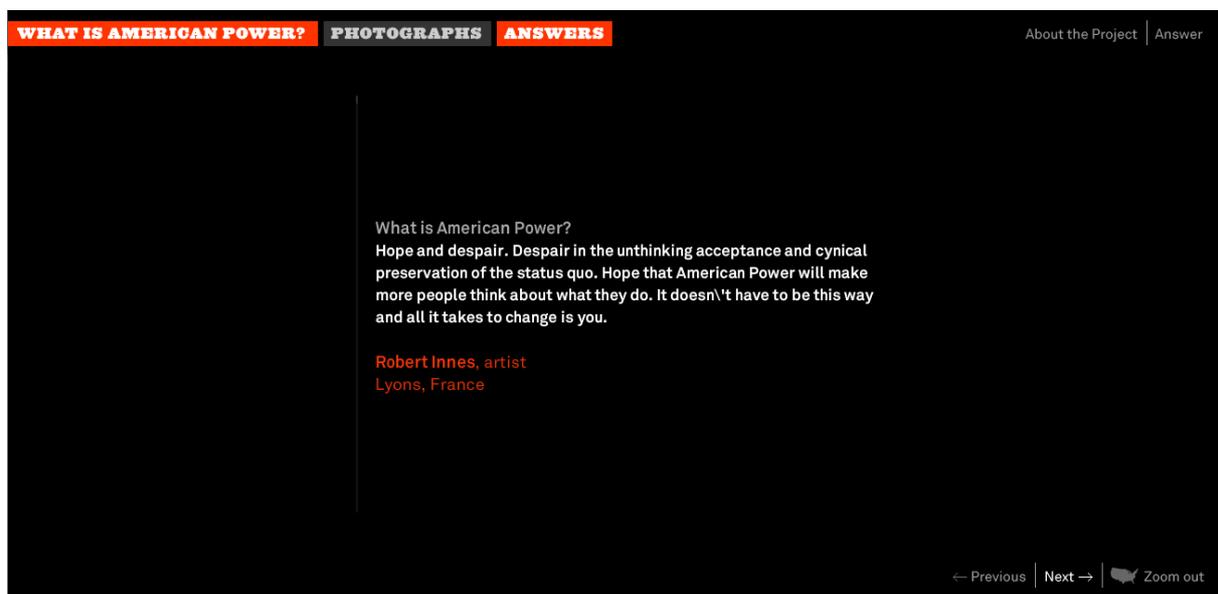


Fig. 11 Screenshot "Answers"

By connecting people concerned about the environment, it provides a platform to create a dialogue among people beyond the boundaries of the United States, to people from around the world, thus reemphasizing Epstein's intention to make Americans aware that the impact of policies concerning the environment are not limited in scope to national borders. Collaborative documentary is one of the ways in which contemporary photographers hope to

increase the reach, thus the power, of their images<sup>19</sup>. In this manner, photographers are not just providing a specific representation of the world to the viewer, they invite the viewer to interact, hence expanding the dialogue and influencing the meaning through multiple interpretations.

## Conclusion

*American Power* was a disheartening project for Mitch Epstein,

I was burnt out at the end of five years of road trips and making photographs and being hassled by the police and reading about the damage our society has done and seeing that damage being done – all those people working for coal plants or oil companies who are understandably frightened of losing their jobs to new energy. I'd been living in what felt like a vortex of demoralizing imagery and information, and I'd had enough. I'd said everything I had to say in my photographs (Epstein, 2009b).

Did he say enough and did he say it effectively? In Epstein's *American Power*, the artist's power has been clearly illustrated in his capacity to increase awareness about environmental issues affecting the United States to an audience outside the circle of art aficionados. While the overall impact remains difficult to quantify, *American Power* has contributed to a dialogue among artists aiming to increase the public's consciousness regarding the limits to the "Land of Plenty." Through his documentary photographs of the contemporary American landscape, Epstein has refocused attention to an immoral use by corporations and the American government of the country's power resources all the while highlighting the insidious effects this use has upon the environment and the people who depend upon it. Epstein goes as far as to offer Americans a new mode of behavior and a new American Dream,

[...] the U.S. has exported its model of unrestricted growth around the world in the form of mass consumption, corporatism and sprawl. We need to now export a revised model of growth, a revised American Dream (Epstein, 2011).

Are these photographs powerful enough to stoke the American consciousness, to awaken the public from its consumption coma? Do spectators need to be shocked in much the same manner as photographs illustrating the horrors of war? Or in this image-saturated society, following the arguments asserted by Susan Sontag, are poignant photos just exploitations of beauty and means for spectator futile voyeurism? Can (documentary) photography do more than just inspire and provoke? Do social, political, economic or any other issue important to being a citizen of the world need to be aestheticized through photography to gain editorial or viewer attention and result in citizen action?

*American Power*, just like that of the photographer is powerful, but limited.

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<sup>19</sup> See for example the article in this issue of e-CRINI by Emily Schiffer that discusses her collaborative documentary photographic project *Seeing Potential*.

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## **Biographical Information**

Jane Bayly, Associate professor of North American studies at the University of Nantes, is the author of a doctoral thesis analyzing *Life* magazine and American nationalism taken to extremes within the pages of the newsmagazine between 1944 and 1950. More recently she has published several articles focusing on photography and American culture. She is particularly interested in photojournalism and documentary photography's role in the (de)construction of national identity.

## **Notice biographique**

Jane Bayly, Maître de Conférences en études nord américaines à l'Université de Nantes, est l'auteur d'une thèse portant sur le magazine *Life* et le nationalisme américain porté à son paroxysme dans les pages du « newsmagazine » entre 1944-1950. Depuis, elle a publié plusieurs articles relatifs à la photographie et la culture américaine. Elle s'intéresse particulièrement au photojournalisme et à la photographie documentaire dans la (dé)construction identitaire nationale.