

# Frank Gohlke: Thoughts on Landscape

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Frank Gohlke, Grain Elevator in Field.

There is something peculiar about the way we attribute the clarity of some photographs to the world itself. I try to reinforce that paradox by making photographs that convince the viewer that those revelations, that order, that potential for meaning, are coming from the world and not the photograph.  
— Frank Gohlke, 1979

For three decades Frank Gohlke has been a leading figure in landscape photography. He entered the international scene in 1975 as one of ten artists featured in the groundbreaking George Eastman House exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, which is generating renewed interest due to a restaging of the show, now on a nine-city international tour. *New Topographics* heralded an emerging generation of landscape photographers who questioned the prevailing romantic and pictorial paradigms embodied in the work of such canonical photographers as Ansel Adams. In addition to Gohlke, the exhibition featured Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore and Henry Wessel, Jr. Exploring what they saw as the collisions and tensions between humans and the "natural" environment, these photographers acknowledged their more naturalist predecessors while also distancing themselves from the tradition; in the catalogue for the 1975 show, curator William Jenkins described the photographs as "eschewing entirely the aspects of beauty, emotion and opinion." Whether or not this accurately described the artists' intentions (Gohlke strongly disagrees), in retrospect we had a more politically nuanced view of the "man-altered landscape." *New Topographics* has entered the annals of art history as a paradigm shift in photography, one that suggests a collective ambivalence about how industrial development and decay, urbanization and suburbanization, affect our notions of landscape. In the years since, Gohlke has continued to make photographs that reflect the

dynamic relationship between humankind and nature, unsettling the practices of landscape representation. His photography has recently been the subject of a retrospective exhibition, *Accommodating Nature*, organized by the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth; and now his collected writings have been published.



Frank Gohlke, *A Woman Watering Her Garden, Near Kirville Mississippi, 1986.*

Gohlke is unusual among photographers for his willingness and ability to articulate his ideas verbally as well visually. *Thoughts on Landscape: Collected Writings and Interviews* [Hol Art Books, 2009] compiles three decades of essays, lectures, interviews and artist statements, in chronological order, allowing us to experience Gohlke's keen observations of distinctive American landscapes, inspired by his upbringing in the oil-rich plains of North Texas and his stint as a graduate student in literature at Yale. His writings chronicle a steady progression in his art practice and in the work of other photographers, as well as in his own life.

Gohlke's oeuvre is marked by a preoccupation with framing landscape as a manmade construct: an artifact of the way we live, a projection of human actions, ideals and aspirations onto the horizon. Landscape is where the human and the natural worlds connect, and in Gohlke's view, humanity's power is limited, fragile and temporary. "What is the web of relationships that one perceives in the visual appearance of things?," he asks. "What particular objects in the landscape — natural or human — give one a sense of that incredibly complex tissue of causality, that makes things look the way they do?" (page 49) In these pages readers can chart Gohlke's recurrent fascinations, as he gazes on landscapes that vary greatly in scale, from those that result from geological processes and extreme natural forces to those that are apparently non-dramatic, such as front lawns, meandering rivers and plowed fields.



Frank Gohlke, Grain Elevator and Lightning Flash, Lamesa, Texas, 1975.

Followers of Gohlke's career will know that this sort of intense scrutiny informed the photographs of large-scale landscapes, including those that explored, for instance, the aftermath of the eruption of Mount St. Helens in Washington. "Like other extreme places, Mount St. Helens inspires revelations, not all of them comforting," he writes, in "Mount St. Helens: Photographer's Notes," from 2005. "It is hard to sustain a belief in the centrality of the human adventure in the face of such overwhelming power and manifest indifference. But if one's place in the world seems diminished in importance as a result, the universe itself seems a much more interesting place to be." (page 243)

In their scale and landscape, Gohlke's photographs of Mount St. Helens seem reminiscent of Ansel Adams's images; yet the work of the two is acutely different. Where Adams idealizes — some would say fetishizes — the wilderness, Gohlke focuses on the disruptions and tectonics that have produced the landscape. Even in a scene seemingly devoid of humans, he connects his images directly with human consciousness: "But I would be less than candid if I did not admit that one of the many things that has drawn me to Mount St. Helens is the fear (and the fascination engendered by it) that it is an image of our future," he writes in "A Volatile Core," first published in 1985. "Mount St. Helens is the only place on the continent where one can see so clearly the effects of forces comparable in scale to those produced by nuclear weapons." (page 97)



Ansel Adams, Clearing Winter Storm, 1942.



Frank Gohlke, View of Mount St. Helens from Vicinity of Spud Mountain, Six Miles West of Mount St. Helens, Washington, 1982.

New Topographics was a career springboard for Gohlke, but his practice soon outgrew that identification. In a 1978 interview for *Northlight: Photography at Arizona State University*, published shortly after his first solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Gohlke explained that he was not comfortable being pigeonholed by the label. "I think most of us were and are primarily concerned with understanding the things we photograph in their largest relationships to land and culture, and the particularities of social existence," he says. "And that's really the province of geography, not topography. . ." (page 49) This is telling. While Gohlke's early work resonated with contemporaries such as Stephen Shore and Robert Adams, it was also influenced by the cross-disciplinary interrogation, happening in the 1970s and '80s, of such seemingly benign terms such as geography, topography, place, space and landscape. In that era cultural geographers and architectural theorists were challenging the assumptions of these fields; Gohlke acknowledges this cross-pollination in his writings of the early '90s, tracing progressive points of influence from fellow photographers to authors such as Carl Sauer, David Lowenthal, Yi-Fu Tuan and Reyner Banham. Especially meaningful was the work of John Brinckerhoff Jackson, editor of the journal *Landscape* from 1951 to 1968, in particular his ongoing discussion of vernacular landscapes.

A benefit of the chronological structure of *Thoughts on Landscape* is that we can trace the conceptual progression of Gohlke's photography and writing through topics that he has pursued over extended periods. For instance, he has been scrutinizing grain elevators in the American Midwest and Great Plains for many years, photographing these structures and their surroundings from 1971 to 1977, and writing on the topic until 1992. In a 1985 interview for the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program, Gohlke reflects on artists' processes of "finding their subject," much as writers "find their voice." He explains that the themes he gleaned from the grain elevator project helped to solidify his work processes. In an essay from 1992, "Measures of Emptiness: Grain Elevators in the American Landscape," Gohlke elaborates on his fascination with the relationships of human and natural orders. "The grain elevators could not be considered in isolation from the landscape; the building and its concept were inseparable," he writes. "At the same time, I was beginning to realize that the landscape is not a collection of fixed objects on a static spatial grid but a fluid and dynamic set of relationships. Its appearance is the result of a multitude of forces acting in time on the land itself and its human accretions." (page 137)



Frank Gohlke, from a 2003 photographic survey of Queens, New York, in collaboration with Joel Sternfeld.

Gohlke came to see grain elevators as an embodiment of the complex ways in which nature, humanity and perception intersect. Originally fascinated by their forms, which seemed to symbolize pure function, he was drawn to them much as were European Modernist architects like Le Corbusier, who in *Towards a New Architecture*, of 1923, described these simple, undecorated machine-buildings as the "first fruits of a new age." Through researching their history, however, Gohlke familiarized himself with their (outmoded) central role in the functioning of rural communities, in this way moving past his obsession with their formal qualities to realize their significance as markers in an otherwise uniform and flat landscape. And after years of photographing grain elevators from various distances and heights, including climbing on top of them, he concluded that the quintessential view "is obtained through the windshield of a car or truck while traveling on a highway in Kansas or Oklahoma or the Texas Panhandle. It is not a static view, but one that begins just as the elevator becomes visible above the center line, about five miles out of town, and continues until it disappears in the vibration of the rearview mirror." (page 143)

Gohlke's recent works continue to explore the tenuous relationship between humanity and nature, generally at a scale closer to everyday perception. In 2003, he conducted a decidedly urban photographic survey of Queens, New York, with fellow photographer Joel Sternfeld, whose images of the pre-renovation High

Line in Manhattan show the clear influence of Gohlke. And also around that time, he collaborated with landscape historian and poet Herbert Gottfried: the two surveyed the land within a single line of latitude, 42°30" North, moving from the Atlantic Ocean west to the Massachusetts–New York border, a strip of land approximately one mile wide and 165 miles long. Geo-tagging their sites as they traversed Massachusetts by car and by foot, the project makes no claim to be an exhaustive survey; instead it celebrates the arbitrariness of boundaries and the centrality of imagination in transforming terrain into place.



Frank Gohlke, from 42°30" North Latitude, in collaboration with Herbert Gottfried, circa 2003.

Thoughts on Landscape stands sturdily as a work of literature in its own right, yet it is best read along with, or after, viewing Gohlke's work in the monograph prepared for *Accommodating Nature*, which includes essays by curator John Rohrbach and writer Rebecca Solnit as well as some of Gohlke's writings. In these he writes introspectively about his career, expressing a life-long anxiety he has had about his work. What has driven him to the literal and figurative margins of landscape? He has a response, but not an answer: "We have to understand a problem before we can solve it." He continues: "I would sometimes advance this modest proposition to defend my choices of subject matter, which some people found irritatingly perverse, cynical, depressing, and boring. The gloss of social responsibility occasionally distracted my critics, but it unfortunately also confused me. In some sense, what I was doing was perverse, for I was drawn to photograph in places where I didn't particularly like to be. I would say 'I love these places,' and I didn't really, at least not in the sense my audience probably thought. I was secretly afraid that the discrepancy indicated some irremediable bad faith at the heart of my enterprise, but I didn't know what I could do about

it since I didn't want to do anything else. It took some time for me to understand that my discomfort was a sign that I was where I needed to be." (page 287-288)