Three Iterations of Place

John P. Prince
Georgia State University

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THREE ITERATIONS OF PLACE

by

JOHN PAUL PRINCE

Under the Direction of Jill Frank, MFA

ABSTRACT

*Three Iterations of Place* is an exhibition of photographs along with three photographic books that function as a trilogy exploring the concept of place. In addition to the exploration of place is the recognition of the act of seeing and the ability to visually reinterpret the landscape. This thesis investigates the process, influences, and concepts that together shape the presented body of work.

INDEX WORDS: place, new topographics, form, landscape, black and white, color
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JOHN PAUL PRINCE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2017
THREE ITERATIONS OF PLACE

by

JOHN PAUL PRINCE

Committee Chair: Jill Frank
Committee: Constance Thalken
Craig Drennen
Jason Francisco

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DEDICATION

This three years of hard work is dedicated to my mother Katharyn Prince and my brother Wade Prince who provided endless support, wisdom and unwavering belief in me at the times when I needed it most. Also thank you to the rest of my family and friends near and far for their love and support. And to Penny the best friend anyone could ask for.
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“You can do anything you like, it’s all fiction.”  - John Gossage
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1 INTRODUCTION

From the moment we’re born we start to form a bond with our surroundings, and at this point life becomes a series of steps. Maybe the first steps lead us from the crib to the living room, and then as we grow older eventually out the front door of our parent’s house and out into the world to build rapport with the space and structures around us. These early moments of mobility put us in contact with the objects that make up our immediate surroundings. We walk around, we fall down, we begin to notice and feel surfaces like a tile floor or a kitchen table and the textures of trees and grass. We perceive space divided neatly by fences and other houses that set the parameters for “our” place. Until a certain age we’ve probably been asked to stay within these parameters, so it’s not hard to imagine why we would develop an attachment to this early iteration of what we know as place.

Author Yi-Fu Tuan states in his book Space and Place “The street where one lives is a part of one’s intimate experience, the larger unit, the neighborhood is a concept. The sentiment one has for the local street corner does automatically expand in the course of time to cover the entire neighborhood.” ........ “The larger unit acquires visibility through an effort of the mind, the entire neighborhood then becomes a place.”

My early engagement with the landscape began with a hand-me-down skateboard that randomly ended up in the drainage ditch next to my driveway. Facilitated by the act of skateboarding a new found freedom continuously got me first out onto the street in front of my house, then navigating through the neighborhood to the local grocery store parking lot, and eventually all the way across town. This new activity consistently took me further away from home, thus expanding my intimate experience of place as described by Yi-Fu Tuan.

Yi-Fu Tuan’s notion of visibility and the expanded neighborhood, is how I have come to understand the development of my creative eye and what sustains my current artistic practice.
A skateboarder’s visual approach to the world is different, they see possibilities for reinterpreting the landscape that others do not, and have access to an unknowingly trained eye that highlights this “visibility” in an otherwise homogeneous suburban landscape. This perceptive attention to the landscape led to the photographs comprising my MFA thesis project.

Figure 1.1 The Street Outside of My Parent’s House, 2017

Figure 1.2 1970's Free Former Skateboard, 2017
2 GROWING THE VISION

I started skateboarding in 1983 at the age of seven, near the beginning of skateboarding’s third wave. Driven by the upsurge of new skateboard companies run by actual skateboarders and fueled by popular culture appearances in movies such as “Back to the Future”, “Thrashin”, and “Gleaming the Cube”, plenty of neighborhood kids were riding skateboards in their driveways and all over the streets of our local hilly landscape. At this time the skateboard as an object was marketed as either a toy for kids or a more expensive model sold in sporting goods stores or skateboard shops for the professional. The first version was common and was viewed as a cheap faddish toy, but the second was a symbol of commitment. This was a commitment to pain and suffering, but also an allegiance to joining an esoteric society in which style and maneuvers were currency. It was a culture full of new music, videos, and clothing that were largely mediated through magazines. Everything I was fascinated with was happening somewhere else- 1,934 miles away to be exact in sunny Southern California.

I relied on magazines to feed my new passion. Full of interviews, photographic sequences, tricks to learn, and everything to keep one in the know these magazines served as my cultural guidebook and a manifesto as to how I wanted to view and portray myself to the world. Looking back, this is when the power of photographs became so important to me, even though I didn’t realize it until much later. To the young me, the photographs in magazines like Thrasher, Transworld, and PowerEdge were visceral and accessible. They provided a conduit for a shared connection to the streets of Southern California with the landscape of my hometown.
Figure 2.1 1970's Thrasher Magazine, 1984
Figure 2.2 Home Movie Still #1, 2017

Figure 2.3 Home Movie Still #2, 2017

Figure 2.4 Home Movie Still #3, 2017
2.1 Another Way of Seeing

My interest in photographs was substantial after spending the majority of my formative years relying on other’s photographs for access to a scene that wasn’t so vibrant locally. My interest in making my own photographs didn’t come until later, and other than a few snapshots I was never that interested combining the acts of photography and skateboarding, they stayed as two separate interests. Later during graduate school while immersed in photographic theory, I developed a curiosity in the ontological conflation of the two, since both photography and skateboarding share a fascination with death.

Roland Barthes states in *Camera Lucida* “All those young photographers who are at work in the world, determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know they are agents of Death. This is the way in which our time assumes Death… For Death must be somewhere in society; if it is no longer (or less intently) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life.”

“All those young photographers who are at work in the world, determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know they are agents of Death. This is the way in which our time assumes Death… For Death must be somewhere in society; if it is no longer (or less intently) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life.”

“The Photograph... represents the very subtle moment when... I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (or parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter”

Death is a continuing theme throughout the book *Camera Lucida*. Similarly, skateboarding also concerns itself with death. Skateboard graphics by companies such as Alva, Zorlac, and Powell Peralta are comprised of skulls, skeletons, as well as advertisements, like those for the “Bones Brigade”. The fascination with death also pervades skateboard communication with “You’re killin it”, “Skate or Die”, “He was shredding”, “Skate and Destroy”.

The preoccupation with death extends to the terrain in which a skateboarder needs to perform. The unnatural terrain, the man-made landscape -- concrete, steel, and plastic -- these are the materials a skateboarder seeks out. Even when natural materials are used to create makeshift ramps, they are contingent on the loss of something that was once living.
2.2 Spatial Awareness and The Man-Made Landscape

In *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* Georges Perec writes “The buildings stand one beside the other. They form a straight line. They are expected to form a line, and it’s a serious defect in them when they don’t do so.”

The man-made landscape is built with a specific purpose in mind, whether it is buildings, stairways, or parking lots. There is a conclusiveness to their intended function. The trained eye gained from skateboarding gives a spatial awareness that subverts the “finality” of an object's purpose in the man-made environment. Curbs designed for demarcation in a parking lot are used for ollieing\(^1\) over or grinding\(^2\) on. Handrails designed for assisting one in navigating stairways, help skateboarders up the stakes for a trick previously performed on the aforementioned curb. Embankments and ditches designed to channel or contain water are reused with a new intent, becoming sites of propulsion. The turf skateboarders flock to are the fringe areas. They are outskirt areas often overlooked of terrain deemed irrelevant in the eyes of the surrounding community. Many of these areas could be referred to as “non-places” a term coined by French Anthropologist Marc Augé.

\(^1\) Ollie: a maneuver in skateboarding in which the skater kicks the tail of the board down while jumping in order to make the board pop into the air.

\(^2\) Grinds are tricks that involve the skateboarder sliding along mainly relying on the use of the trucks of a skateboard.
Augé states in his book *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*.

“If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then it is a “place” – the rest would be “non-places”, such as for example highways, airports and supermarkets.”

Liminal spaces such as parking lots, underpasses, and abandoned architecture are perfect for the act of skateboarding because of the freedom they allow, but these spaces also come with an unpredictable nature. One day they are here and the next they are gone. It takes awareness and discernment to see the potential in these so-called irrelevant places.

In addition to viewing the man-made landscape, there is also how one engages with it. The Situationist International and their practice of psychogeography is a perfect example of this and I see skateboarding as a continuation of this idea. The Situationists subvert the concept of architecture and infrastructure as a guide that tells us where to walk, what paths to take, where to stop. They embrace wanderlust, a sort of undoing of your knowledge of a familiar territory. Often using maps of different cities to traverse their own, cutting up maps and rearranging them, anything to circumvent the expected ways of engaging with the environment. This thoughtfulness and attention to movement began to make its way into my artistic process.

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3 In an essay and book of the same title, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995), Marc Augé coined the phrase "non-place" to refer to anthropological spaces of transience that do not hold enough significance to be regarded as "places".

4 The Situationist International (1957–1972) was a relatively small yet influential Paris-based group that had its origins in the avant garde artistic tradition.

5 Psychogeography was defined in 1955 by Guy Debord as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals. It has links to the Situationist International."
Figure 2.5 Skate Spot #1, 2017

Figure 2.6 Skate Spot #2, 2017
Figure 2.7 Skate Spot #3, 2017

Figure 2.8 Skate Spot #4, 2017
3 SELF IN THE EXPANDED FIELD

While my skateboarding was my first commitment to a creative endeavor, my artistic life in photography started with my undergraduate studies. My background in photography before graduate school was primarily technical with no mention of photographic theory. Time was spent learning practical applications: the ins and outs of a multitude of cameras, learning to light tabletop still lifes, and countless hours perfecting photographic prints. All this technical knowledge was helpful, but ultimately left me feeling unsatisfied and with a portfolio of photographs devoid of any real personal meaning. This feeling was strong enough that I didn’t make photographs for a couple years after I finished school. I never stopped wanting to make pictures, I just couldn’t see the pictures I wanted to make, the drive to figure it out is what led me into grad school.

I spent the first semester of graduate school shaking a few bad habits from my undergraduate studies, habits like thinking there was a right or wrong way to make pictures, However, I eventually realized that the technical skill I had learned was exactly what I needed to make images that were sometimes formally austere and detached and at other times warm or sentimental. The feeling created by the mixing of these types of images, thoughtfully brought together was very exciting to me. The first year of grad school I also realized I had a lot of reading and researching ahead of me. What I saw as a disadvantage quickly became a driving force to devour all the information I could take in, buying as many photography books as I could afford, and before realizing it, amassing a decent photobook collection.
The more photobooks I discovered, the more I noticed the importance of image sequencing. I was fascinated by the way images affect one another when put side by side, how unplanned threads emerge because of how the photographs were arranged.

“If a single picture is worth those proverbial thousand words, it would seem that a series of pictures, bound up together as one body of work, cultivates a very different sort of narrative.”

“I like the way a bunch of pictures unfold, unraveling and weaving back together, predicting and chasing one another, suggesting comprehension within diversity and leaving room for the variability contained in continuity.”

- Carlo McCormick “The Context of Company”

3.1 Influential Books

“It is possibly useful to think of creative photography as a narrow but deep area between the cinema and the novel.” - Lewis Baltz

Photography books have always been my preferred way of engaging with photographs. It is an intimate experience and a democratic way of sharing work with the world. Until I discovered Robert Adams’ *The New West*, I wasn’t all that interested in landscape photography. But Adams’ work, and that of Lewis Baltz and the New Topographics, startled and confused me. The work wasn’t simply about the beautiful and romantic, it was difficult and complex. Some of the images were hard to look at with the printing high key and full of contrast, just like the scene itself. And I had never seen landscape photographs that were critical and subversive, scenes that showed the effects of late capitalism and highlighting the results of human impact. (Fig. 3.2)
Adams presented the beautiful and the unnerving in the same frame. (Fig. 3.1) depicts a woman in what seems like suburban isolation, while at the same time showing us a manicured lawn bathed in warm sunlight. This juxtaposition of opposing elements led me to think more about what makes a photograph successful.

“Why is Form beautiful? Because, I think, it helps us confront our worst fear, the suspicion that life may be chaos and that therefore our suffering is without meaning.”

- Robert Adams
Figure 3.1 Colorado Springs, Colorado, *The New West*, Robert Adams, 1974
Figure 3.2 Newly Occupied Tract Houses, *The New West*, Robert Adams, 1974
Paul Graham’s book *A Shimmer of Possibility* was another big moment of discovery for me as a photographer. A twelve volume set of thin bound books inspired by Anton Chekhov’s short stories and exploring the banal nature of life. The book captures sequences of everyday, routine life experiences, subverting the idea of a “decisive moment”. The sequences in *A Shimmer of Possibility* quickly reminded me of the sequences I was fond of in those early skateboard magazines. The sequence offers a cinematic feel, while also elaborating on the still photographs stationary moment and alluding to what could come before or soon follow. What I find so interesting about Paul Graham’s work is his ability to situate simple and complex ideas right next to one another. For instance, his emphasis on the controls of the camera, the aperture, and shutter speeds to speak about social issues such as the invisibility, class, and the passing of time.

“Normally, photography offers these frozen shards of time where the world is ossified into a singular moment. I’ve struggled to get away from that brittle, crystalline notion by inviting time into the work, making it a quality that you feel and experience. “

- Paul Graham
Figure 3.3 Pittsburgh (man cutting grass), *A Shimmer of Possibility*, 2007
3.2 Process and Momentum

It wasn’t until after my first year that I began to figure out my interest and my process for making work. I knew that I wanted to be outside in the world making pictures, looking, responding to my environment, and collecting information. The chart below (fig. 3.5) shows the plane of artistic process in four quadrants and the four influences that come into play when I am out making photographs. I find it interesting to think about the percentage of elements influencing my picture making process on this plane. Thinking about what images could be plotted in what area, how all my pictures are a percentage of certain quadrants. Photographs guided by intuition and experimentation one day can inspire and inform the next photographs to be led by intention and execution. I’m interested in the photographs’ ability to render the world, to reductive visual qualities. My process starts with an environment that is reduced down to what is meaningful and necessary. Unlike the written page, the photograph reveals to you all information at once, which in a way is just hiding the information differently. I often think about what is the least amount of content I can have in a photograph and have it still work for me, as well as how much information can be included in the frame yet be thoughtful and composed. I like the idea of visual momentum, traversing the environment, the feeling of coming in close to a subject and focusing on details contrasted with pulling back for a sense of openness or lack of restriction. These ideas were at the forefront when I started what would eventually become Three Iterations of Place.
Figure 3.4 Process Diagram
3.3 Three Iterations of Place

*Three Iterations of Place* was not originally conceived as a trilogy. The project began with a body of work titled *Future Primitive*, the title referencing an early skateboard video by the Powell Peralta company. The title also refers to the idea of a journey designed specifically for gathering information, like the Situationists trying to find a new way to engage with their environment. I wanted to look at a familiar area---the place where I grew up---in an unfamiliar way.

Forest Park, Georgia, the town where I was raised, doesn’t feel like I remember it. Though familiar, it has become less so as time passes. None of my friends live there anymore. Some places are the same, many have changed. Looking for a beginning point, it occurred to me to start photographing the areas that held some sort of anonymous qualities in an attempt to tap a feeling of displacement and, at the same time, tread a line between detachment and sentimentality. I wanted the work to feel like movement through the landscape; responding to stimuli while cognizant of the act of seeing in order to compile collections of information.

The images are deliberately untitled with a number in the sequence to emphasis the sensation of placelessness. “Untitled (3)” (Fig. 3.5) was made early in the series and emphasizes the idea of discernment and visibility. A seemingly simple formal composition of landscaping next to a building reminded me of the objects we live with and how they are often designed to be ignored. The landscaping is well manicured and meant to be invisible. The minute it becomes unruly, it sticks out and catches our attention.
The sequence *Future Primitive* begins with an image of an interior, (fig. 3.6) A curtain with worn holes forms a topographical type shape glowing with outside light peeking through and suggests the beginning of a journey. The work ends with an outside view of a motel room that evokes the eerie feeling of human presence. This final image encapsulates the essence of the entire body of work culminating with the feeling of movement and recognition of perception unknown.
Figure 3.6 Untitled (1), Future Primitive, 2015
Figure 3.7 Untitled (14), 2015
The second body of work in *Three Iterations of Place* is titled *Aluminum City*. In May of 2016 I was awarded a grant from Georgia State University to pursue a new area of focus while I was still creating the elements that would become *Future Primitive*. *Aluminum City* is a body of work culminating from multiple visits to a town named New Kensington. It is roughly twenty miles north of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and the home of the Alcoa Aluminum Company.

Starting in 1891 Alcoa sustained New Kensington, and when the company essentially abandoned the town in the early 1960’s, it ended over 5 decades of growth and led to a relentless population decline that has reached double digits almost every decade since. New Kensington exhibits many of the classic signs of wear and effect from American post-industrialization but offers its own unique account reflected from its exceptional origin story. What brought me to New Kensington was my family’s roots there and in the surrounding areas, however I approached this work somewhat differently than *Future Primitive*. Despite my familial connections, I never lived there. I never experienced the decline and decay the town and its population endured over the last 50+ years. I was an outsider. A basic tenet of post industrialization is the shift from production to services, a switch to the information age, so I taken aback when, out on one of walks making photographs, I had a serendipitous encounter. While photographing an unusual window display of an antiquated computer, (fig. 3.8) I heard a voice from behind me say “Did you get a good picture?”. Startled, I replied, “Maybe”. I was then invited into a storefront that housed a giant room full obselete computer systems. Massive Mainframe Computer systems not unlike the ones my mother worked alongside at the Pentagon on her first job. I spent a few hours photographing what was interesting to me in this ad hoc computer museum, and then headed back outside. Later that day I began to think about the work and its connection to my mother and her past. How these computers embodied unwanted or difficult change. Once back home and after discussions with
my thesis committee, connections to this town outside of my family roots started to become clearer. This town wasn’t unlike Forest Park, Georgia. Fort Gillem, an army base located in Forest Park, was the employer for significant portion of the local community (including my mother and many of my friend’s parents) It was decommissioned a few years prior and while it didn’t have extreme effect that the Alcoa closing had on New Kensington, it wasn’t a good sign for the future of the town. It was at this point, I started to feel the work begin to change. Maybe the first hint that this wasn’t just three separate bodies of work. That there was a conceptual or non-spatial yet parallel place that had existed all along between these geographical locations.
Figure 3.8 Computer Window Display, 2016
Figure 3.9 Large Scale Computer System, 2016
Figure 3.10 9th Street, 2016
Figure 3.11 Large Scale Computer System 2, 2016
By the time I finished working on the final body of work titled *Slight Recollection*, I knew that my mother was the underlying thread connecting them all. She was the reason I grew up in Forest Park, she was the connection that sent me to New Kensington, Pennsylvania, and just like I had started this photographic journey in Forest Park, I knew I wanted to end it there. Only closer, mostly within the parameters of the house I grew up in. At this point, my mother and I share a lot of similarities with our place in life. Both solo and happy but arriving there by different routes. Me- focused on my nascent career at the moment and not married but expecting to be someday. Her a widow after 40+ plus years of marriage to her first real love. Happily content living the retirement they had always dreamed of and worked towards but without the partner she’d always expected would be there with her. This realization led me to think a lot about these steps or phases in life and how as you get older the roles of mother and child can begin to blur. I became interested in the day to day routines my mother would perform as shown in a photograph of a bag with flies on it in the backyard, (fig. 3.12) the same routines we all have our version of, or as Paul Graham puts it, *the quotidian aspects of daily life*. The images in *Slight Recollection* suggest a sense of full-heartedness mixed with a sense of longing, as well as the difficult realization that maybe “our place” exists as much or more mentally as it does physically. The mental place that interrelates with its geographical counterpart is also subject to the same frailties and potential for reinterpretation. Just as elements of the landscape can find uses far removed from their intended purposes, our mental, emotional and stage of life places can have enormous value in their actualization, even though they may be far different than what was dreamed, planned or anticipated.
Figure 3.12 Mom’s Bag, 2016
Figure 3.13  Sherwood and Cypress, 2016
Figure 3.14  Mom, 2016
4 THESIS EXHIBITION

The installation of *Three Iterations of Place* was a thoughtfully constructed exhibition that includes a trilogy of works separated by individual books that also includes wall-hung framed images. The images from *Future Primitive* were 20x25 inches and all hung at the same height on the wall. This created a baseline for which the other two bodies of work of various sizes would be installed. Three self made artist books were displayed on a custom bookstand facing the room, each body of work was shown separately in the books and all of the work was intermixed on the walls, giving viewers the ability to see the work function in two different ways simultaneously.
Figure 4.1 Installation Shot #1, 2017
Figure 4.2 Installation Shot #2, 2017
Figure 4.3 Installation Shot #1, 2017
Figure 4.4 Installation Shot #4, 2017
Figure 4.5 Installation Shot #5, 2017
Figure 4.6 Installation Shot #6, 2017
Figure 4.7 Installation Shot #7, 2017
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