Focus, Contrast, History: Susan Wides and the Cultural Landscape

The earth's surface and the figments of the mind have a way of disintegrating into discrete regions of art. Various agents, both fictional and real, somehow trade places with each other—one cannot avoid muddy thinking when it comes to earth projects...

Robert Smithson, 1968 [1]

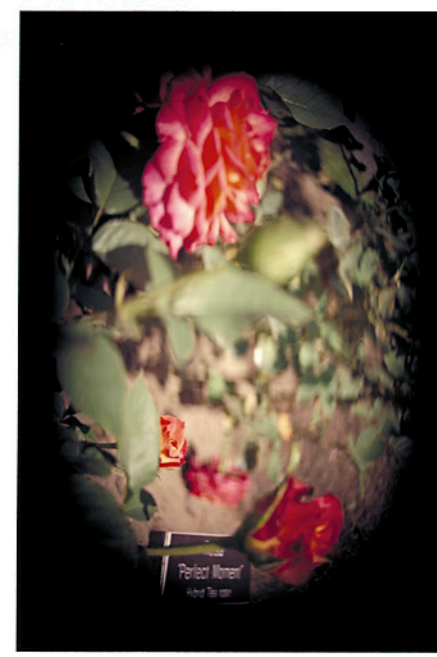
I. Focus

I can't focus. That is the first thing I notice when I look at Susan Wides' *Hudson Valley Landscape 10.15.04*. This odd and disorienting visual confusion—perhaps all the more alarming because unexpected from a photograph—seems located at the intersection of the eye and the mind, at the point where we process what we perceive. My bewilderment leads me to look again, and more intensely, in order to understand its cause. A close examination of the photograph proves to be rewarding. I now realize that some of the foliage in the foreground is in focus, but much of the rest is not. And I notice that the same peculiar variation in focus occurs in the background. Wides has explained that, using a 4x5-inch view camera, she "was able to swing or tilt the lensboard and filmholder back to create a blurred view which contained areas of sharp focus." These areas of focus are, we might say, unempirical, and are analogous to the befuddlement we may well experience when we look at the subject matter of the photograph: a car cemetery in the midst of the beautiful mountain foliage on a sun-drenched autumn day.

Whose cars are these anyway? And how did they arrive at this seemingly final resting spot? Any of them might just as well have been mine or yours. A landscape speckled with human debris is our communal creation. We see such imagery in terms of a contrast of nature to culture. But the strange use of focus in *Hudson Valley Landscape 10.15.04* transforms the foliage and the automobiles into a unified scene, brought together by a puzzle-like—or even cubist-like—fragmentation of individual parts (contrast as paradox).[3]

II. Contrasts

Our tendency to understand our environment as a contrast of nature to culture is a central theme in Susan Wides' art. In *Fresh Kills 2* (2000), one of the urban landscapes in the series Mobile Views, made just prior to the Hudson Valley landscapes of the present exhibition, thousands of sea gulls congregate and seem to thrive at a landfill. In *Untitled (Perfect Moment)* (1992), from a series of photographs taken at botanical gardens, red roses are viewed up close and out of focus, next to their name marker ("The Perfect Moment"); the presence of engraved name markers, here, and in the other botanical garden pictures, serves to remind us that the depicted flower specimens were created by human intervention. These markers also remind us that the word "culture" is contained within "horticulture." And they recall gravestones, just as the collection of assorted "dead" vehicles bring to mind a cemetery in *Hudson Valley Landscape 10.15.04*. Yet another form of probing the stereotypical opposition of nature to culture is seen in Wides' earliest series, of waxworks installations, in which we see the wolf with Little Red Riding Hood in a room decorated with floral wallpaper *(Beauty and the Beast, 1987)*, or Alice in the rabbit hole surrounded by flowers and by rabbits dressed in human attire (*Looking Glass*, 1989). To Wides, the landscape, floral, and wax museum series all explore the same "cultural landscapes."[4]



Untitled (Perfect Moment), 1992
chromogenic print

III. The Cultural Landscape and Personal History

Fresh Kills 2 (Mobile Views Series), 2000
chromogenic print

Each of us creates our own "cultural landscape": in our gardens, our homes, our offices and studios, even in our cars, e-mail, and snail mail. The cultural landscapes of Wides' personal spaces correspond strikingly and unmistakably to those she creates in her photographs. The same passions, thoughts, and questions are present everywhere. While she was working on the wax museum pictures, for example, Wides also acquired some wax heads and hands at an auction of items from the Coney Island wax museum, which had recently shut its doors. She displayed these objects lovingly and artfully among other personal treasures in her New York City apartment, creating a virtual installation within her living space. A contributor to this installation was her partner (now husband), the artist Jim Holl, whose series of wax heads, *Times, a Century of Busts* (1989-91), hung on the wall and occupied an important place in the composition. Not only the objects, but also the living beings in Wides' life mesh seamlessly with her artistic concerns..

Nature has always been central to Wides's living environment, too. The window ledges and rooftop of her apartment are more than functional architectural elements: they are places for her to grow herbs, vegetables, and flowers. That which does not grow there, she collects from the Union Square Farmers' Market, which happens to be located just down the block from her Manhattan home. More extensive gardening opportunities have presented themselves to her during summers spent on the far reaches of Long Island and, in recent years, in Catskill. The time traveling to and from these places, and the views of nature out the window in transit, are also a part of Wides' living environment that is echoed in her art, as she is well aware.

> In transit between Manhattan and the Hamptons over the years, I was always moved by the view approaching the fire-damaged Pine Barrens near Westhampton out the Jitney's window. A few years had passed since the fire, so some lush life was returning to the floor of the forest and a few of its half-burnt trees. It embodied the opposites that I am often drawn to reconcile in my photographs.[5]

Travel abroad affords Wides the occasion to embrace, in a single vision, the natural and cultural offerings of a different place. In a postcard sent from Italy, she writes, "[I am] in a Florence art daze trance. The farmhouse (villa) where we are staying is perched on a ridge overlooking magical landscape of shifting lights." The picture on this postcard likewise captures the entanglement of nature and culture: a detail from *Primavera (Allegory of Spring)* by the fifteenth-century painter Sandro Botticelli, it shows a landscape setting with the west wind, Zephyr, chasing the nymph Chloris ("green"); their fingers, draperies, and wind-blown hair are elegantly stylized, and a spray of flowers emerges from Chloris's mouth and overlaps the floral pattern on the dress of Flora, into whom Chloris is in the process of being transformed (Flora's arm is just visible at the edge of the postcard).[6]

The visual traces of the cultural landscape of more recent times are present in other postcards I have received from Wides. One year she gave me, as a birthday card, a postcard showing the launch of the Apollo 8 spacecraft (heading for the moon). The spacecraft just taking off is seen in the background, while grass and silhouettes of tree branches and foliage inhabit the foreground. Indeed, the composition is such that the rocket seems to take off from between the dead-looking branches, as if they were its launching pad. There is also a silhouette of a long-necked bird in flight (perhaps a goose, or a crane or other such bird typical of the tropical climate of Florida). The parallel between mechanized and natural flight is like the web of discarded cars and fall foliage reaching its height of beauty just before death in *Hudson Valley Landscape 10.15.04.*

IV. History

As her interest in the two postcards I just described intimates, Wides sees our world as deeply rooted in history. Art history is a subset of the history on which she reflects. Her up-close views of flowers may lead us back to Georgia O'Keeffe's flower paintings of the 1920s (and the debate about whether this imagery is specifically "female," or "feminist"). Her Hudson Valley landscapes pay direct homage to the eponymous nineteenth-century painters whose work she has carefully researched in recent years. Yet Wides' approach to history (a word that, to her, must be almost synonymous with "cultural landscape") as constantly in a state of being born and dying, is perhaps closest in spirit not to any painter (or photographer), but to the Earthworks artist, Robert Smithson, who in the late 1960s and early 1970s was obsessed with the interdependence of these extremes of existence. Smithson, like Wides, paid special attention to why certain landscapes are noticed while other ones are ignored. Indeed, for Smithson, careful looking constituted art in and of itself. The complex relationship of mind to matter (Smithson's "muddy thinking") is another concern Wides shares with Smithson.[7]

V. Focus

This point returns us to the topic of focus. Here is what Wides says on this topic, in the context of discussing her Mobile Views series:

> Time often seems to stream by in a blur, broken in upon by those wonderful instants of concentrated clarity. When I put on my glasses, the world comes into focus, but not a single, steady sharpness. Particular things are intensified in my awareness while other things recede or disappear.... I was contemplating the processes of remembering and forgetting. It was these kinds of subjective perceptual cognitions that I was interested in exploring in Mobile Views.[8]

Our memory (of ourselves, of history) and our vision are selective. The mystery of this selectivity is what Wides aims to capture through the odd use of focus in her photographs.

Thinking about this aim has brought to the surface memories of where I met Susan Wides. It was in an attic of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Housed in this attic was the Photograph Studio of the museum, where prints of art were made to order and photographic negatives were archived. In 1979, early in my graduate school career, I got a job cataloguing negatives. Several fascinating individuals worked in the Photograph Studio: there was the flamboyant boss with the long raccoon coat, the opera singer with the magnetic yet distant personality, the portrait painter with the gorgeous clear blue eyes—and, Susan Wides. She is the one person in this group with whom I remain in touch. Wides' job at the Photograph Studio was to develop black-and-white photographic prints. She would dip a white sheet of paper into a chemical solution, and gradually the image would come into focus and reveal itself. Artists often make important discoveries from the work they do solely to earn a living. (Julio González's job at a car factory eventually led him, in the 1920s, to apply welding to the creation of sculpture, and Richard Serra's job in a steel mill while he was a college student led him, in the 1970s, to his selection of steel as his preferred sculptural material.) Wides' day-in and day-out practice of watching images emerge by degrees from the photographic paper no doubt contributed in important ways to her technical and conceptual experimentation with focus. Through her unusual and unique approach to focus, she helps us see the world around us in fresh ways.

Reva Wolf, June 19, 2006

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[1] Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," *Artforum 7* (September 1968): 44.

[2] Susan Wides, e-mail correspondence with the author, June 19, 2006. In this passage, Wides refers specifically to the Mobile Views photographs, but the same technique was used in the Hudson River Landscape series. Indeed, Wides views this more recent series as an extension and subset of Mobile Views.

[3] See John Norwich, interview with Susan Wides ("Artist Perspective: Susan Wides"), *Hampton Jitney 13* (2004): 13.

[4] Susan Wides, e-mail correspondence with the author, June 1, 2006.

[5] Norwich, 13.

[6] Botticelli's attempt to represent movement and transformation in the *Primavera* and in the *Birth of Venus* is a focus of the influential cultural historian Aby Warburg's 1893 dissertation. Warburg's discussion of Botticelli's paintings in terms of the fifteenth-century Florentine comprehension of movement as a significant element of ancient aesthetics, and his linking of Botticelli's work to the contemporaneous use of wax voti, are both relevant to the photographic interests of Wides. For an intriguing discussion of these two aspects of Warburg's dissertation, see Matthew Rampley, "From Symbol to Allegory: Aby Warburg's Theory of Art," *Art Bulletin 79* (March 1997): 41-55. Another recent consideration of Warburg's fascination with transformation and motion is Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, trans. Sophie Hawkes (Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books, MIT Press, 2004).

[7] Smithson discusses these ideas in "A Sedimentation of the Mind" (see note 1), 44-50.

[8] Susan Wides, e-mail correspondence with the author, June 19, 2006. On focus as metaphor in Wides' work, also see Madeleine Frank, *Susan Wides: Mobile Views*, exhibition brochure (New York: Kim Foster Gallery, 1998), unpaged.