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New Topographics

Britt Salvesen

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The New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape was one of those rare exhibitions that permanently alters how an art form is perceived. Held at the International Museum of Photography in Rochester, New York, in January 1975, it was curated by William Jenkins, who brought together ten contemporary photographers: Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore and Henry Wessel, Jr. Signaling the emergence of a new approach to landscape, the show effectively gave a name to a movement or style, although even today, the term "New Topographics"--more a conceptual gist than a precise adjective--is used to characterize the work of artists not yet born when the exhibition was held. Although the exhibit's ambitions were hardly so grand, New Topographics has since come to be understood as marking a paradigm shift, for the show occurred just as photography ceased to be an isolated, self-defined practice and took its place within the contemporary art world. Arguably the last traditionally photographic style, New Topographics was also the first Photoconceptual style. In different ways, the artists thoughtfully engaged with their medium and its history, while simultaneously absorbing such issues as environmentalism, capitalism and national identity. In this vital reassessment of the genre, essays by Britt Salvesen and Alison Nordström accompany illustrations of selected works from the 1975 exhibition, with installation views and contextual comparisons, to demonstrate both the historical significance of New Topographics and its continued relevance today. The book also includes an illustrated checklist of the 1975 exhibition and an extensive bibliography.

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