

From Here to Eternity:

The Expeditionary Artworks of Thomas Joshua Cooper

One of the key tropes in American modernist photography has been the concept of the transcendental photograph, promoted firstly in the 1920s by Alfred Stieglitz, and then in the '50s by his ardent disciple, Minor White. Stieglitz developed the notion of Equivalence, proposing that photographs, rather than simply documenting surface appearance, could function like any other kind of art, as equivalents for philosophical ideas and psychological feelings. For Stieglitz, the photograph ideally would become an abstract carrier of meaning and emotion in the manner of music. Like Walker Evans, a transcendentalist of another order, Stieglitz could be said to have been in the business of introducing difficulty into photography, transforming it from a simple art into a complex one.

It was an ambitious program, taken up enthusiastically by Minor White after World War Two when he taught photography, first at the Rochester Institute of Technology and later at MIT. He also created a forum for his ideas in the quarterly magazine *Aperture*, which he cofounded, in 1952, and edited until 1975.¹

The Stieglitz/White approach was poetic and formalist, tending toward abstraction in order to thwart photography's annoying literalness. The idea was to read things in the image, rather like staring at the flickering flames of a fire and letting the imagination wander. This kind of abstract formalism, finding patterns in nature and creating compositions in the darkroom, also enjoyed a brief postwar vogue in Europe, with Dr. Otto Steinert's *Fotoform* movement of the 1950s, and his book, *Subjective Fotografie*, but White's updating of Stieglitz had a sturdier theoretical base, and also the invaluable platform of *Aperture*, which rapidly became one of the most important photographic magazines of the late twentieth century.²

Minor White's influence reached its height in the decade from the mid-1960s to the mid-'70s, its shelf life extended—unlike New Subjectivity's—because White and many of his students enthusiastically embraced the American counterculture of the times. His "spiritual" approach to photography became mixed up with such fashionable indicators of the zeitgeist as transcendental meditation, Zen Buddhism, Jungian psychology, and haiku, all personal interests of White himself—keeper of the Stieglitzian flame, sherry drinker, and self-styled guru. Issues of *Aperture* bore such titles as *An Octave of Prayer* and *Being Without Clothes*,³ and became littered with such aphorisms as "Illuminate the mind and cast shadows on the psyche"⁴ and "At times of insight The illumination of surfaces reveals that I AM within."⁵ Students were encouraged by some teachers to meditate before they made a photograph.

The patrician, elitist attitude of Stieglitz was replaced by a touchy-feely, hippy pho-



Thomas Joshua Cooper, *Looking towards Antarctica: The Drake Passage/Cape Horn, Chile, 2006–2008/*
Very near the South-most point of all South America. 59° 59' S

tography. Nothing wrong with that, it was a welcome democratization, many would say. And indeed, much interesting work was done under White's aegis, yet on the other hand, photographing rocks and tide pools or frost patterns on windows, could also be an easy way out for the simpleminded.

Then, in 1976, it all seemed to collapse. White died, and the whole Minor White School of Transcendental Photography appeared to die with the man. In a very short space of time it became something of an anachronism, and an irrelevance as far as photography's cutting edge was concerned.

This almost total collapse of a whole photographic philosophy with what seemed like inordinate haste, a philosophy that was very popular when I first became interested in the medium, has always intrigued me. Because, despite my misgivings about the quasi religious elements that accompanied it, as an approach it seems to me to be as valid as any other. Also—and this is something that those who disparage White seem to forget—he took the

notion of the photographic sequence to a new and potentially important level. I remember vividly the time White visited England in 1975, not long before he died.⁶ I heard him talk at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, then traveled up to Nottingham to attend a seminar at Trent Polytechnic, then the leading school in the country teaching his ideas.⁷

Although it seems obvious in retrospect, the demise of White's ideas was already well under way. There were a number of factors ensuring this. Firstly, landscape photographers—and transcendental photography was essentially a landscape movement, except of course for the *Be-ing Without Clothes* aspect—were becoming seduced by the New Topographical approach, which favored a dry-eyed concentration upon the man-altered rather than the unsullied landscape, viewing the natural landscape as an evidential site of sociopolitical activity and not a source of mystical solace.

Secondly, the early 1970s saw the beginnings of postmodernism. The kind of romantic individualism espoused by White was regarded by postmodernists as anathema. The whole genre of formalist modernism promoted by Stieglitz, with its elitist emphasis upon the artist's genius, universal aesthetic values, and print connoisseurship, came under particular attack. To be labeled a romantic formalist by the postmodernists was akin to being denounced as a bourgeois revisionist by Stalin.

Thirdly, color photography finally became not only respectable, but increasingly the medium of choice for younger photographers and would-be photographic artists. Moody black-and-white landscapes, placing an emphasis upon the fine print, are much more conducive to the White aesthetic than the relative uniformity of color prints.

I mention Minor White's visit to Trent Polytechnic, because teaching there at that time was a young American called Thomas Joshua Cooper. Cooper, who hailed from the coast of northern California, was an alumnus of the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, where he studied with Beaumont Newhall and Van Deren Coke. He had come to the Midlands industrial town of Nottingham to teach alongside such British advocates of the White approach as Raymond Moore, Paul Hill, and John Blakemore.

While at Trent, Cooper began to make landscape photographs unlike any seen before in Britain.⁸ He used an ancient five-by-seven-inch view camera (and still does), making exquisite contact prints, dark but sumptuous in tone. His subject matter was almost nebulous, a rock face in a quarry, a group of boulders, and his prints bore titles like *A Quality of Dancing* and *Ritual Indication*. I thought the titles (very much in the White mold) a tad pretentious, but was entranced by the imagery. Cooper's pictures did what they promised, and gave us a post-White vision, a thoroughly original and contemporary updating of Stieglitzian transcendentalism.

The subject of the images appeared to be *genius loci*, but the spirit of place in such a specific yet indeterminate way. Cooper drew the viewer into a dialogue with each small section of the landscape, partly because of the prints' small size and their rich, intriguing

tonalities, and partly because he withdrew not only the comfort of his subjects' size—you did not know whether you were looking at an anthill or a mountain—but also a grounding in the image, whether horizon line or foreground. It was the source of the photographs' potency, because once engaged, the eye would float around the picture space, freed from the necessity to make representational sense of it, which allowed one's thoughts to wander at will. We were compelled to inhabit the space of his images, and become immersed in them, an uneasy, yet heady experience that contributed to their considerable allure. We were invited, as it were, to become the spirit of the place ourselves. So our relationship with a Cooper landscape became an intensely personal one, full of emotional power.

And Cooper has remained largely true to this aesthetic ever since, even joking that he is a one-picture photographer,⁹ though this is far from the truth. Indeed, although his work has remained admirably consistent, it has also evolved, partly as Cooper himself has evolved as an artist, and also because circumstances in the art world during the 1970s—the demise of the White School, for example, but also other shifts in fashion—necessitated that he change, or be in danger of becoming irrelevant, the worst thing that can happen to an ambitious artist. While he remained true to himself, it could be said that the theoretical platform underpinning his work shifted somewhat, or rather, broadened, and in so doing enriched his work, keeping it alive and growing.

I have mentioned that the White philosophy, and the formalist approach to photography in general, attracted the particular scorn of the postmodernists. In Britain, the Trent School, as it was called, came under fire from an establishment that largely subscribed to a politically motivated social documentary photography, theoretically underpinned by ideas revolving around representation. Photographers became obliged, rightly so, to examine how they represented women, gays, ethnic minorities, the working classes, and so on, except that toward the end of the '70s, there was a point where representation itself almost became the only acceptable subject to those advocating this new orthodoxy. Poetic, ahistorical, and apolitical photographs of rocks and trees were deemed dangerously irrelevant.

The doctrine of dialectic materialism that was an important part of the postmodern raft of theoretical tenets declared that the spiritual in art was anathema, the result of dogma and superstition. Only dealing with it in an ironic way, to mock it, in perhaps the manner of a Damien Hirst, could it be made acceptable to postmodernist dogma, which at times could be as inflexible as religious dogma.

Yet, however much materialism is promoted, aspects of the human condition remain that could be considered broadly ahistorical, or perhaps metahistorical, and largely universal, arising in the main from biological imperatives. And they will remain so until the great "Why?" can be answered satisfactorily. This fundamental question hasn't vanished with the advent of Darwin, Marx, Freud, Watson, Hawking, or anyone else. An art, however apparently disconnected with everyday material existence, that addresses any of the

biological and psychological mysteries of life, surely still has specific relevance. Stieglitz's original intention, that his imagery act upon the viewer in the manner of music or poetry in a primarily abstract way, remains an eminently laudable ambition.

But not, it seemed, in the mid-1970s. It is easy to decry fashions in art and culture, but if a particular style becomes outmoded, it impacts upon practitioners' careers, in ways that differ from the trivial and the merely annoying to the fundamental. By the advent of the '80s, many of those still working in the Stieglitzian tradition were left on the outside looking in, many giving up altogether or languishing in artistic obscurity. Cooper's art, however, was just too good to be ignored completely, whatever the vagaries of cultural fashion. Furthermore, a new development in British art allowed him to reposition himself, neither at the expense of what he was doing, nor at the risk of losing his integrity, but in terms of giving him a slightly different goal at which to aim.

In the early 1970s, another landscape trope had entered British art—art, it should be stressed, not photography. Part of the conceptualist/minimalist art movement was Land art, which began in America in the late '60s, where artists such as Robert Smithson made large-scale sculptural interventions in the landscape, partly to demonstrate that they could work on an industrial scale, partly in response to the commercialism of the art market, partly to protest the disengagement of high modernism from social issues, and partly in response to environmental concerns, which were becoming something of an issue. The *New Topographics* exhibition, as well as being about photo-aesthetics, also evinced some of the cognizance being taken about the state of the planet.

There was also a typically British branch of Land art, much more modest than the American, and concerned with, among other things, photography. British artists such as Richard Long and Hamish Fulton more or less invented a mode of Land art akin to performance art. Indeed, both have disclaimed the Land artist tag and have described themselves as "walking artists." They would make long trips into the wilderness and designate the walk itself as the work of art, although it was their careful documentation of each trip—in the form of surrogate objects like photographs, texts, maps, phototext pieces—that was exhibited (and sold) in the gallery back home. Long also made frequent direct sculptural interventions in the landscape with rocks or deadwood, even by scraping lines in the ground. His famous work of 1967, *A Line Made by Walking*, can be credited with starting the genre of Land sculpture. Fulton was less of an interventionist, he usually contented himself with taking photographs. But truth to tell, both men's work shared a number of similar characteristics, and superficially, it could sometimes be difficult to tell the difference between them. Long himself considers Fulton the better photographer: "I am not really a great photographer, sometimes my photographs almost by chance are quite beautiful, whereas Hamish Fulton is a natural photographer. He has a great feeling for landscape images."¹⁰

But both are fine photographers within the context of what they do. Except that what they do is not “photography.” Theoretically, they do not consider themselves photographers at all in the strict sense. In their work, the photograph serves as a surrogate or mnemonic for the actual experience of the journeys, which are the real works of art.

It is a moot point that most photographs made by most photographers are mnemonics for some kind of experience. Long and Fulton were among the first in the artworld to be described as artists utilizing photography rather than photographers *per se*, and in the 1970s cultural climate—where art and photography did not mix on the same social level—“sculptor,” “conceptual artist,” “Land artist,” or “walking artist”—anything but “photographer”—was a much more pragmatic thing to style oneself. Another leading British conceptual artist, the late Keith Arnatt, condemned himself to years of artistic obscurity when he began to practice straight photography rather than take a more conceptual approach, and worse, when he declared himself happy to be known as a photographer. Back in the 1970s, there was a lot in a name.

The example of Long and Fulton, however, enabled Thomas Cooper to look at his work in a different way, and take a different approach, augmenting the romantic spiritualism with concerns related to history, and addressing postmodern rather than modernist theory. In short, he was able to construct a broader, and more acceptable theoretical platform than romantic formalism. Of course, Cooper’s work itself also changed, without losing its salient characteristics—its tonal richness, his particular sense of floating space and indeterminate scale. By his willingness to embrace new ideas, Cooper’s work became richer, and more relevant, while the work of those stuck in a traditional Stieglitzian mode simply atrophied.

What Long and Fulton brought to landscape art was a sense of personal interaction, not just in the sense of looking, but in being. Much photography since the 1950s has been about articulating personal experience, not simply experience from a lofty, aesthetic viewpoint, but from an intimate, lived viewpoint—the so-called diaristic mode, which has burgeoned beyond all measure with digital photography, blogs, Flickr, and the like. It might be thought that this would be anathema to the postmodernists, extreme subjectivity replacing the proper objectivity and reasoned distance expected of an artist working with a documentary medium such as photography. It is not, however. From a certain postmodern perspective, a personal approach is merely admitting that everything is subjective, and by admitting it, critiquing it, one is making work that, so to speak, explores the problems of making representations as it is doing so.

Long’s and Fulton’s work was not only about how we relate to the land in a complex way—physically, culturally, psychologically, historically—but also about how we make representations, or maps, of these relationships. As Long has stated: “These walks are recorded or described in my work in three ways; in maps, photographs, or text works,

using whatever form is the most appropriate for each different idea. All these forms feed the imagination, they are the distillation of experience.”¹¹

Long deliberately chose nominally objective, scientific means to describe the walks in order to distance the work from the romantic landscape tradition. Maps provided measured (in both senses of the word) information. His texts utilized the dry, impassive tones of the surveyor or geographer: “A LINE OF 33 STONES / A WALK OF 33 DAYS.” And his photography was as far from art photography as it was possible to get—initially developed at the corner drugstore, as artless as that of Ed Ruscha. If diaristic, they were diaries of objective fact—got up, did this, ate that—rather than diaries detailing emotion. We know where Long went—how long it took him and so on—but we know nothing of his feelings—whether he was awed, or unimpressed, hot, cold, tired. The scientific and the objective held sway. For Long, “walking—as art—provided an ideal means to explore relationships between time, distance, geography and measurement.”¹²

Although the work’s primary references were conceptual art, minimal art, even *Arte Povera*, and the “anti-reference,” as it were, was romantic art, in Long’s and Fulton’s photographic pieces there was a reference they probably never even knew about, at least in the early days. In a review of a Hamish Fulton exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1976, I wrote the following: “I do not know whether Fulton has even heard the name, but I was continually reminded in his work of the photographs of Timothy O’Sullivan, and other early photographers of the American West.”¹³

In particular, it was the mapping and measuring aspect of the work that invited what at first seemed a rather speculative comparison: “O’Sullivan and his fellow photographers were much more than makers of landscape images. Usually members of government survey teams, they were instrumentally involved in the cartography process, of mapping and recording the physical and spatial structure of the land. O’Sullivan’s work is especially redolent of a recording, measuring process: he often included a human figure or figures placed at various points within the picture to impart a sense of scale, and in his famous Spanish Conquest Inscription Rock, even laid a rule upon the rock to delineate its precise dimensions.”¹⁴

Timothy O’Sullivan is someone who has always been of the utmost importance to Thomas Joshua Cooper, ever since he made what he has termed his first “real” photograph, down the See Canyon in central California, in 1969. It is his example that might be kept in mind when Cooper aligned his work more with the objective, measured mode of the Long/Fulton axis, and when he began one of the most ambitious photographic projects any photographer or artist has attempted in the last twenty-five years. That project, which is not far off completion, is The Atlantic Basin Project—The World’s Edge. It was conceived in 1992, after Cooper had read a particular book, although elements of the work were already in place, and had been for some years.

Photography is a natural medium for grand projects. The conceptual framework of a grand project limits the medium's inherent tendency to be promiscuous in an imagistic sense, yet takes full advantage of its profligacy. Profligacy without promiscuity—it is such a perfect combination that I wonder why more photographers do not attempt them. Of course, grand projects are more easily conceived of than brought to fruition. They demand perspicacity, obduracy, and dedication, an approach not necessarily commensurate with the quick results—and quick rewards—young photographers seem to demand these days.

The ultimate grand photographic project—though he may not have thought of it as such—was Eugène Atget's thirty-year exploration of Paris and French culture. Then there was August Sander's *People of the Twentieth Century*, and coming up to date, Bernd and Hilla Becher's work on the typologies of industrial structures. Robert Adams's decades of work photographing the American West, although like Atget, unacknowledged as a grand project, will also, I think, eventually be seen as one.

So Cooper is in some pretty starry company. Inspired initially by the historian William Manchester's 1992 book, *A World Lit Only By Fire*,¹⁵ Cooper resolved to photograph the edges of the Atlantic Ocean—the northern, southern, eastern, and western perimeters of the ocean that divides the Old World (Europe and Africa) with the New World (North and South America). In his book, Manchester postulates that the most important achievement of the Renaissance was Portuguese sailor Ferdinand Magellan's circumnavigation of the world, which took place from 1519 to 1522. Magellan's epic voyage, argues Manchester, not only proved that the world was round, but in so doing, it challenged the Roman Catholic Church's Eurocentric view of civilization and also helped to confirm the tendency toward secularism and humanism in the Renaissance, marking the beginning of the Enlightenment.

The idea for the project also came after Cooper had begun to photograph the sea seriously, in what was a fundamental change of direction.¹⁶ The kind of landscape photography practiced by Cooper is almost always concerned with time and change, and deriving from that concern, with elemental forces.

In photographing the land, the forces implied are measured by geological time, in eons. Such immense, long-term forces are also at work with the sea and with water, but visually, the power of water is much more apparent. This, I feel, is one reason why people respond more readily to photographs of water, although there may also be some universal subconscious memory within us, that draws us back instinctively to the element from which we came. I know of one very successful landscape photographer whose prints sell for very high prices. He makes images of the sea and of the desert that to my mind are equally compelling, though not, it seems, to others. Indeed, I personally prefer the desert pictures, yet the sea images outsell them easily. As John Masefield wrote, the siren call of the sea "is a wild call and a clear call, that may not be denied."¹⁷

It was not, however, a commercial decision that drew Thomas Cooper to the sea, but that siren call, and the rich mythological and historical associations he could give his pictures by heeding it. The work leading to The Atlantic Basin Project was made after Cooper began to teach at the Glasgow School of Art, and became enamored of the kind of northern landscape celebrated in Celtic and Norse mythology. It was a landscape of dense pine forests and wild seas that reminded him, he says,¹⁸ of the redwood groves and surging Pacific Ocean back home in northern California. He began to photograph in Scotland, Ireland, Iceland, and Scandinavia, gradually turning his attention from rocks and trees to water, and then the ocean.

An important work in three parts, entitled *A PREMONITIONAL WORK: The Giant's Causeway: Message for M.S.* (1986–88) prefigures both the iconography and associative symbolism of The Atlantic Basin Project, so a description of it seems relevant. The first part, *EMERGING*, shows the strange, twisted basalt formations of the isle of Staffa, in the Inner Hebrides. On a rock promontory, a flight of steps has been cut, either leading into or out of the water. The second image, *SUBMERGING*, depicts the tops of the basalt "columns" that are such a feature of Staffa, gradually submerged by the sea. The third image, *EMERGING*, takes us across to County Antrim, in Northern Ireland, and the similar basalt columns that constitute the province's great natural tourist attraction, the Giant's Causeway. Three images that are about geological connections and also historical connections, since early Christianity spread from the north of Ireland to the islands and west coast of Scotland, while the Vikings sowed alarm down the coasts of Scotland and Ireland.

The work appeared in *Dreaming the Gokstadt*,¹⁹ Cooper's book of images connecting the northern lands of Scandinavia, Iceland, Scotland, and Ireland, its title inspired by the discovery in Norway, near the village of Gokstadt, of a thousand-year-old Viking ship that had been buried in the ground. This was a project therefore about the connections between things—the cultural connections that have endured for centuries, the natural connections that have endured for eons. Here are the beginnings of The Atlantic Basin Project. It was the Vikings, of course, who first made voyages across the Atlantic, initially founding a colony on Greenland, and then reaching the North American mainland itself.

Much contemporary landscape photography is concerned with photographing the land as a kind of cultural map, sites of associations past and present, natural and cultural, mythological and historical. The sea is no different, although it might not be so apparent visually. Every ocean current and sea lane is part of a complex pattern, marking not only voyages by humankind, areas for fishing, but also the spread of faunal and floral species, carried by winds, tides, and currents. And on a geological scale, the oceans fill the voids left after continental land masses split away from each other.

But how does one photograph this? You cannot even stand easily on a boat in the

middle of the sea and photograph it, at least not with a large view camera on a tripod. The resultant pictures would probably tell us little anyway. So, as in his *EMERGING SUBMERGING EMERGING* triptych, Cooper photographs the edges, the points where the land meets the sea, and where, so to speak, we may make the conceptual leap across the void.

He chooses his places to photograph carefully, using *The Times Comprehensive Atlas of the World* to determine the extremities in which he is interested (the furthest point north, or west, and so on), supplementing these with places with specific historical or geographical associations (where some voyager landed or set sail, a particular bay or estuary). This factual information, and mathematical map references, are embedded in the picture titles—akin to, although not as dense as the textual references Roni Horn incorporated in her set of pictures of the River Thames.²⁰

Showing something of the land as well as the sea is important. It not only gives a grounding to the imagery but acts as the springboard for our imaginative leaps. Cooper continues with the free-floating compositions he has always favored, inviting us, as it were, to throw ourselves into the pictures and give ourselves up to them. Ben Tufnell has written an essay about Thomas Joshua Cooper entitled “Gazing at the Void,”²¹ and that is entirely pertinent, but “Entering the Void” might have been an equally valid choice of title.

I have talked elsewhere of a relationship between Cooper’s work and the philosophical legacy of Arthur Schopenhauer, and I think it is apparent in this sense of gazing at, or entering the void. It is an unsettling, highly ambiguous feeling, with both consoling and despairing aspects. Are we casting ourselves into the waters, or will we swoop and fly over them, like a seagull? Cooper’s pictures, although among the most undeniably beautiful in contemporary art, have their distinctly disturbing aspects. That, it could be argued, is true beauty.

There is often a nagging sense of existential dread lurking in the dark recesses of the swirling waters. Our compulsion to enter the picture space can be regarded as a reflection of the Schopenhauerian denial of the will, which he saw as the supreme achievement of human consciousness. This is especially at work in Cooper’s stunning two-part image of Gullfoss (Golden) Falls in Iceland, *A PREMONITIONAL WORK message to Timothy O’Sullivan* (1987), where, in the second picture, we are drawn almost compulsively into the churning depths.

But the corollary of the desire for self-annihilation is transcendence, and it is the transcendental aspect of Cooper’s vision that generally informs his work; we are persuaded to be the gull rather than the drowned man. In Schopenhauerian terms, this equates to something that Minor White, with his penchant for Zen Buddhism, would have understood perfectly, and which deep down, underlies our need to get out into nature—a deeply subconscious desire to return to an all-embracing oneness with the universe. The two

impulses—two sides of the same coin in effect—positive and negative, light and dark, coexist in Cooper’s imagery, frequently together in the same picture, and their perception is often dependent upon what the viewer brings to it.

In this particular aspect, I feel that the artist closest to Thomas Joshua Cooper in sensibility is another pillar of the northern transcendental mode, Mark Rothko.²² Formally, Cooper’s pictures often display a flat, yet shimmering field, and exhibit a seductive, yet dangerous allure. Like a Rothko painting, a Cooper photograph attracts (for most of the time), but also repels (for some of the time), presenting a point of entry for the most part, but sometimes forming a barrier.

Their attraction, however, tends to hold sway. I believe—like those of Long and Fulton—that Cooper’s photographs are essentially “path” pictures, that genre of landscape image invented by the Dutch, whereby a path or a road is used as a device to draw the viewer into the picture space. In Cooper’s case, the path is less a formal one than a psychological one. In Cooper’s views of the ocean, there is usually no path in the sense of spatial recession, because the space in his imagery tends to be flattened somewhat. When you photograph the sea from a height, you don’t get perspective, but a sense of a flat, vertical plane. Nevertheless, as I have stressed throughout this essay, Cooper pulls us in like few other artists (the link with Rothko), and the whole psychological feel of his imagery connotes a path, but one which—although free and unrestrained in that we are not restricted by the physical confines of the track—is hedged about with uncertainties and ambiguities.

The Atlantic Basin Project, as frequently happens with grand projects, has appeared in distinct tranches over the years, in the form of various books and exhibitions. As I write this, the latest installment has just appeared in the shape of the book and exhibition, *True*, shown at Thomas Cooper’s London gallery, Haunch of Venison.²³ It was one of his more spectacular shows, fitting perfectly into the elegant rooms of the gallery’s Burlington House location. *True* explored the extremities of The Atlantic Basin Project, the extremities both in a conceptual sense, and in the sense that the Arctic and Antarctic, the areas covered by the work in the exhibition, represent the most remote areas on Earth. At Prime Head, the northernmost point of continental Antarctica, Cooper made photographs at a place where, as Ben Tufnell notes, “fewer people have stood than have stood on the moon.”²⁴

At this point, I could possibly detail the expense involved and the sheer logistics of getting a photographer, view camera, and tripod to a place like this, a place so dangerous that the ship that took Cooper there ventured beyond the limits of its Lloyd’s insurance cover. The heroics involved are similar to those of the early pioneers, like Timothy O’Sullivan, carrying their heavy glass plates by mule train, coating the plates, exposing them while wet, then developing them on the spot in a darkened tent. And in this sense, Cooper is truly an expeditionary artist, a true descendent of O’Sullivan. His photographic artworks are records of exploration and discovery, as well as equivalents for psychological states.

But whatever the heroics involved in getting there—and that is the basic challenge for any photographer, to “get there”—they do not guarantee the pictures will be any good, or, given that Cooper makes only one exposure per motif, there will be any usable result at all. It’s not the place to go to and discover you’ve forgotten your exposure meter, or your focusing loupe, as even Ansel Adams did on occasion. The pictures from Prime Head, however, are superb.

Here, where Cooper is literally “gazing at the void,” the degree of existential terror is at its most apparent. The poles, of course, are where global warming is having a fundamental effect, with the icecaps covering the polar seas diminishing year by year—with potentially disastrous consequences. So it is here that Cooper’s imagery deals most immediately, not only with the past and present, but with the future. In the future, a photographer will not be able to make such Arctic images—at least in summer—because the places where Cooper stood will be open water instead of icecap.

There is a great sense of history in all The Atlantic Basin Project, but in the near-black and near-white images, it is at its most vivid, with connotations ranging from a nuclear whiteout to a time when, thanks to humankind’s own shortsightedness, the Earth may become a dark, silent void, at least in terms of viable life-forms. In the black pictures, there is a clear premonition of the ultimate question. Would the last human leaving the planet please switch off the lights?

So we are a long way from the hippy coziness of the more flaccid elements of the White School in the 1960s and ’70s. But then Thomas Joshua Cooper always was. And he is also a long way from the British understatement—not that there is anything wrong with that—of Long and Fulton. The dark side of the psyche was present in his work from the beginning, and has, if anything, increased over the duration of The Atlantic Basin Project.

But alongside the bleakness, there is also rapture. Not many contemporary artists deal with rapture; it is not, I feel, a quality prized much by the postmodernists.

This contrasting of light and dark is typically Schopenhauerian, and from Schopenhauer, of course, it is but a short step to Richard Wagner. There is something distinctly Wagnerian about the art of Thomas Cooper, in terms of its epic scale, in its willingness to work slowly in an era of unmitigated haste—and in its rapture. A great part of the second act of that most Schopenhauerian of Wagner’s music dramas, *Tristan und Isolde*, involves an intoxicating philosophical discussion about the forces of light and dark, ruminating upon life and death, day and night, and much of Cooper’s art reflects this. Cooper’s old view camera and lens might not produce prints that are quite as sharp as a more modern combination, but it makes up for that in tonal quality, and that for him is what is of more importance. As Peter Bunnell has written about the formal qualities of the imagery:

“Light, and the sensation of darkness, is central to the meaning or portent of these pictures. One senses a gravity in them, as he seeks both the point of maximum obscurity and

the point of greatest luminosity. For Cooper it is the darkness and the light that creates the whole: that is, the world we inhabit. For him, times of day are of enormous importance. They echo in microcosm the passage of historical time. Night is part of the whole, emphatically so, and moonlight is a light he loves deeply.²⁵

The sea, and water, also played a large part in Wagnerian mythology. His *Flying Dutchman* was doomed, perhaps like Cooper, to wander the seas in search of redemption, and the first act of *Tristan und Isolde* takes place on the Atlantic, or more precisely the Irish Sea. It is, among other things, about the power of love to redeem humankind's inherent desire for transcendent self-annihilation.

I shall end with some thoughts about Cooper and Wagner that I have long held, and feel are even more pertinent to his sea pictures, although since I first made this comparison,²⁶ Cooper's art has broadened and deepened in a most satisfying way. At the end of *Tristan und Isolde*, in the opera's last, wonderful cadences, accompanied by, as Thomas Mann put it, "that ascent of the violins that passeth all understanding," the lovers Tristan and Isolde finally reach their Schopenhauerian nirvana. They attain a blissful state of nonexistence, transcending earthly desire by becoming subsumed into the elemental swell of the natural fabric—melting, drowning, sinking into *höchste Lust*, the highest ecstasy. Like another of Cooper's great heroes, the American transcendental poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, they become nothing, yet see all.

Cooper's pictures, I think, really do evoke those kinds of thoughts, and those kinds of ideas, and many others, swim about in Cooper's turbulent, surging seas. In an essay for the catalog of an exhibition of seascape photography held in Tucson in 1998—an exhibition including Cooper—the writer James Hamilton-Paterson wrote that the seascape "offers aesthetic and sensual ravishment with underpinnings of annihilation: very much an art form for our time."²⁷ Those remarks may be applied particularly to the seascapes of Thomas Joshua Cooper. Almost single-handedly, he has proved that there is life, and relevance, in the transcendental photographic tradition of Alfred Stieglitz and Minor White—and indeed, has taken it to a new level.

Humankind perhaps—probably—is heading en masse to collective extinction and self-annihilation. In the face of such a fate, Thomas Joshua Cooper's art may offer us small solace, as does any art, but it is an undoubtedly beautiful, poetic, thoughtful, and provocative solace.

Notes

1. *Aperture* was cofounded by White, Ansel Adams, Barbara Morgan, Dorothea Lange, and Nancy and Beaumont Newhall, as well as Melton Ferris, Ernest Louie, and Dody Warren.
2. Dr. Otto Steinert, ed., *Subjektive Fotografie: Ein Bildband moderner europäischer Fotografie* (Subjective Photography: A Collection of Modern European Photography) (Bonn, Germany: Brüder Auer, 1952).
3. Minor White, ed., *Being Without Clothes* (Millerton, New York), *Aperture*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 1970, and *An*

- Octave of Prayer* (Millerton, New York), *Aperture*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1972.
4. Minor White, ed., *Light* (Millerton, New York), *Aperture*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1968, p. 12.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
 6. White visited England in November 1975. He died on June 24, 1976, in Boston, at the age of sixty-eight.
 7. Trent Polytechnic shared a joint photography MA course with Derby College of Art, a sister town some fourteen miles from Nottingham. John Blakemore and Richard Sadler were the leading teachers at Derby; Cooper, Paul Hill, and Raymond Moore at Nottingham.
 8. Cooper had actually been making images since 1969, but prior to his arrival in Britain, his work had been little seen there, if at all.
 9. Ben Tufnell, "Gazing at the Void: Some Notes on Thomas Joshua Cooper's Polar Pictures," in Thomas Joshua Cooper, *True* (London: Haunch of Venison, 2009).
 10. Richard Long, "Interview with Martina Giezen (1985–1986)," in Ben Tufnell, ed., *Richard Long: Selected Statements and Interviews* (London: Haunch of Venison, 2007), p. 90.
 11. Richard Long, statement entitled *Bristol 2000*, at www.richardlong.org.
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. Gerry Badger, "New Topographics: Hamish Fulton at the ICA," in *British Journal of Photography* (London), Vol. 123, No. 6,041, May 7, 1976, p. 385.
 14. *Ibid.*
 15. William Manchester, *A World Lit Only By Fire: The Medieval Mind and the Renaissance* (Boston and London: Little Brown and Company, 1992).
 16. Cooper recalls reading Manchester as far back as 1989, citing his exhibit *The Swelling of the Sea*, shown at Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow, in 1990, as the first outcome of his decision to make The Atlantic Basin Project. Clearly the project was in embryo and taking shape in his mind some years before Manchester's book confirmed it. Telephone conversation with Cooper and the author, July 13, 2009.
 17. John Masefield, "Sea Fever," from *Salt-Water Ballads*, 1913.
 18. Telephone conversation with Thomas Joshua Cooper and the author, May 25, 2009.
 19. Thomas Joshua Cooper, *Dreaming the Gokstad: Northern Lands and Islands* (Edinburgh: Graeme Murray, 1988).
 20. See Roni Horn, *Still Water* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: SITE Santa Fe in collaboration with the Lannan Foundation, 2000).
 21. Tufnell, "Gazing at the Void," in Thomas Joshua Cooper, *True*.
 22. See Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), for a discussion of Rothko and Northern Transcendentalism. Cooper, I believe, falls perfectly within this tradition.
 23. See Thomas Joshua Cooper, *True*. The exhibition was on view, May 1 to May 30, 2009.
 24. Tufnell, "Gazing at the Void," p. 27.
 25. Peter C. Bunnell, "Thomas Joshua Cooper: The Temperaments," in Peter C. Bunnell, *Inside the Photograph: Writings on Twentieth-Century Photography* (New York: Aperture, 2009), pp. 250–51.
 26. Gerry Badger, in Gerry Badger and Peter Turner, *Photo Texts* (London: Travelling Light, 1988), p. 141.
 27. James Hamilton-Paterson, "The Cultural Impact of Oceans," in Trudy Wilner Stack, ed., *Sea Change: The Seascape in Contemporary Photography* (Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, 1998), p. 12.