

frieze

Lewis Baltz at Kunstmuseum Bonn

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Of the ten photographers included in the landmark exhibition 'New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape' in 1975, Lewis Baltz remains perhaps the most underrated. With a touring exhibition of a restaged 'New Topographics' in 2009–10, and the publication of Baltz's complete 'Works' in 2010, there is renewed interest in his oeuvre. His serial, unromanticized views of post-industrial development and suburban sprawl have not only proved to be prescient of a particular attitude in photography, but also seem to roughly trace the collapse of the American Dream.

Baltz's recent show at the Kunstmuseum Bonn, the first retrospective of his work in Germany, showcased many of his rarely seen early black and white series, including his best-known work, '*The new Industrial Parks near Irvine, California*' (1973–5). Having grown up in Irvine, Baltz witnessed the coastal area's transformation from rows of orange groves to strips of manicured 'industrial parks', in which low-slung, non-descript buildings disguised the activities of the booming military and aerospace industries. The images in this series feature the facades of these anonymous edifices, seen straight on, from eye level. The flat planes of garage doors and shuttered windows intersect with drainage pipes, fire escapes or white lines delineating parking spots to create rectilinear compositions. Though they are formally minimal, the works are part of a larger comment on the opacity of industry and the inhabitants of these new, functional but blank buildings. The rare glimpses Baltz gives us inside only yield the most ambiguous details: a ladder, a Mercedes, strips of fluorescent lighting, a clock on the wall that reads 6:30. At Kunstmuseum Bonn, the series was hung in a square arrangement, but these works seem to beg for a linear, sequential format to echo the sprawling horizontality of the landscape they portray.

The protracted studies that Baltz under-took throughout California and the West in the 1970s and '80s, unlike the photograph-ic road trip journals of New Topographers like Stephen Shore or John Schott, were not about discovery, or self-discovery; his approach was that of a sociologist or a surveyor, and this objective gaze proved both fruitful and influential. Although there has been much debate about whether his photographs constituted an effective sociological critique, looking at them now there is no doubt that they were meant to be a wry and incisive commentary on the underside of unfettered development – a progression that spawned subdivisions of cookie-cutter houses across the American West. The series assembled for this show, including '*The Prototype Works*' (1967–76), '*Tract Houses*' (1971), '*Park City*' (1978–80), '*San Quentin Point*' (1981–3) and '*Candlestick Point*' (1984–8) usually show exteriors and interiors of suburban houses, absent of humans. It's not clear whether these neglected sites are in the process of construction or have been abandoned to the forces of entropy. In '*Tract Houses*', Baltz shows us segments of homes from unconventional angles: flat up against their stucco exteriors, or with the lens trained on their dangling electrical sockets or ventilation grills. Though their dilapidated surfaces can sometimes look almost painterly, Baltz calls attention to the houses' shoddy, uninspired construction, cheap materials and boarded-up windows. This is anything but the great American dream of homeownership that the 1950s promised.

Though it was remarkable to see these early series together, the retrospective was missing some key works, particularly from Baltz's seminal '*Sites of Technology*' (1989–91). This series, comprising images of the interiors of technological and scientific labs and research centres, mostly in Japan and France, marked his shift to colour photography and to a larger scale. Though some of the most important works from 'Sites' were advertised in the show's publicity material and accompanying pamphlets, they didn't appear in the exhibition, making me think I had missed a room. These studies of anonymous offices and lab spaces – with their dropped ceilings, cold lighting and linoleum-tiled floors – represent Baltz's pursuit of what he has called 'things that couldn't be photographed'. Whatever the reason that so few pieces from 'Sites of Technology' were included, having more of them in the show would not only have bridged the gap between his early work and the newer colour work, it would also have illuminated its impact on contemporary photography and on those who might owe a debt to his cool, objective view of these rarely seen sites – among them Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Demand, Taryn Simon and Mitch Epstein.

In the 1990s, after Baltz moved to Europe, there is a visible shift in scale and scope in his work – to larger format, vertical images in brooding colours or taken at night. These later works, many of which were represented here, convey a more ominous and straightforward commentary on the threats of technological development. Here, Baltz has traded his minimal deadpan views for a cinematic, montaged style (some of the works even incorporate text or sound). These newer images, like the monumental seven-panel work *Ronde de Nuit* (Night Rounds, 1992) – which combines close-ups from CCTV cameras and monitors along with sites of surveillance – lack some of the rigor and precision, and even the tinges of wit and dry humour, of the earlier series. Nevertheless, Baltz's comments on the threat of the surveillance culture prove to be just as prescient as his studies of man's impact on the landscape. Together, his works form a damning record of the devastating consequences of industrial and technological progress in America.