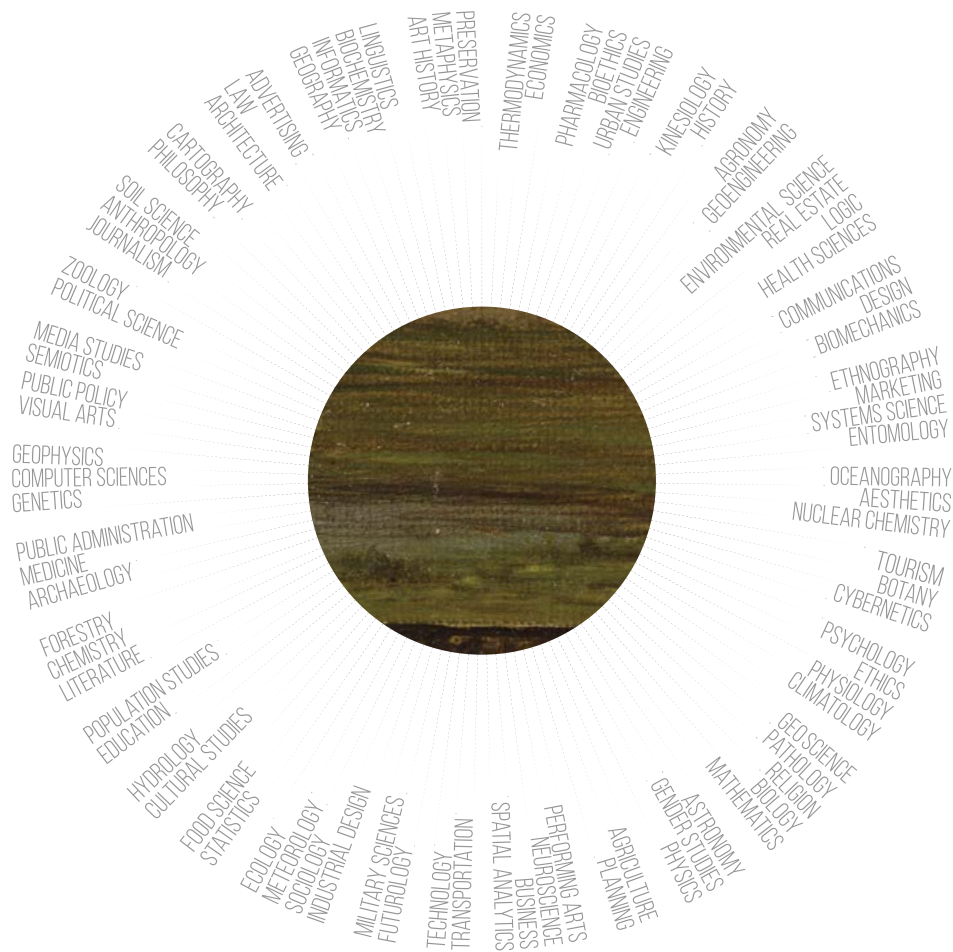




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www.laplusjournal.com
laplus@design.upenn.edu

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media /'mɪdɪjə/

plural form of

medium /'mɪdɪjəm/

noun

- any raw material or mode of expression used in an artistic or creative activity: *four pictures were set in the walls., mosaics, they seemed—but he did not examine their medium closely.*
- any physical material used for recording or reproducing data, images, or sound: *in the process of registering sounds, the recording medium being transparent ribbon coated with an opaque substance.*
- an intervening substance through which a force acts on objects at a distance or through which impressions are conveyed to the senses; any substance considered with regard to its properties as a vehicle of light or sound: *the air, which is the medium of musick and of all sounds.*
- a pervading or enveloping substance; the substance in which an organism lives; one's environment, conditions of life, or usual social setting: *the aetherial medium (wherein all the stars and planets do swim).*

Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd Edition

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Ann Reynolds teaches art history and gender and sexuality studies at the University of Texas at Austin. She is currently completing a book entitled *Imagining an Altogether: Cinema, Surrealism, and New York 1940–1970*. Her recent publications include essays on surrealist animation and Cold War politics, queer aesthetics, Joan Jonas, Ruth Asawa, Jack Smith, and Zoe Leonard. She is also the author of *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (MIT Press, 2003).

✚ ART HISTORY, PHOTOGRAPHY

Given its various meanings, mediation can either slow things down or speed things up. One sense of the term denotes careful analysis of the situations—and, often, grievances—of various parties to encourage mutual understanding and, ultimately, mutually beneficial solutions. The other sense of mediation implies shaping a perception of reality through the selection and repetition of a limited set of streamlined information, often without calling attention to the operations involved. Most archives are the product of both types of mediation, although these processes can be relatively opaque to a user. When photographs enter archives, their status as documents and/or works of art can become particularly confounding for archivists and users because of long-held assumptions about photography as a medium: that it is fundamentally unmediated or inherently so. This is particularly true when photographs possess evidence that they have served multiple functions. For example, fine art or press photographs, initially shaped by an individual aesthetic in response to a specific subject or situation, can also become stock photographs available for reproduction at varying scales and levels of quality in various types of publications, accompanied by distinct framing texts. A photograph's potential flexibility as it passes from one function to another benefits from a relatively weak visual rhetoric that, when shaping a relatively reticent subject, can render it practically invisible. In this essay, I address the relationship between weak visual rhetoric and water pollution in media environments such as the Magnum Photos Photography Collection and consider how these environments can appear to constitute *and* perpetuate water's presumed lack of specificity as an image and resource while the consequences of water pollution, its multiple agents and victims, and possible solutions are displaced by a desire to render water and pollution visible in a particular way. The privileging of the readily visible can impede the perception of the inherent complexity of such environments—both mediatic and aquatic—and the development of workable solutions through a more deliberate process of mediation.

My thinking about this problem draws directly and indirectly on several somewhat discrete, recent, and ongoing discussions within and across disciplines. These discussions address the privileging of the visual or a tension between data and pictorial representation in the production of knowledge about ecological crises;¹ disconnects between archivists' archives theory and historians' theories of the archive, especially in relation to the categorization and analysis of photographs;² shifting ontologies of the photograph as a product of extractive materials, as a physical object, and as an image that circulates in various dematerialized forms;³ and the various ways in which artists, journalists, political scientists, and sociologists make and use photographs to convey information about water pollution and access to potable water.⁴ What connects all of these discussions and makes them mutually productive for my consideration of the Magnum Photos Photography Collection's water pollution imagery is a shared concern with the unstable status of the photograph as a document and representational mode and its pliant materiality and form in relation to its content and contexts – what the archival scholar Joan Schwartz calls the problem of “photographs *as* archives as well as *in* archives.”⁵

The Magnum Photos Photography Collection, which is housed at the Harry Ransom Center [HRC] in Austin, TX, consists of approximately 200,000 working prints of photographs from the library of the New York bureau of Magnum Photos, an international photographers’ cooperative founded in 1947 by Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa, George Rodger, and David Seymour. The photographs—primarily gelatin silver press prints—date from 1929 to 2004, when Magnum switched to a fully digital database.⁶ Within the cooperative, individual photographers retain the copyright to their images, which ensures that their work can circulate within multiple contexts beyond the initial commissions while remaining under their control. From its inception, the New York Magnum Photos Photography Library was organized by photographer as well as by broad subject classifications. According to curator and photo historian Alison Nordström, “The decision to place a particular photograph in a particular box would have been made by a librarian or perhaps an editor, but the categories would have evolved through use, and apparently subjective judgments would have been shaped by knowledge of the market and its demands.”⁷ Therefore, press photographs could and did function as stock photographs. Agents could still commission work, but they could also locate what they might need for a newspaper or magazine article, textbook, or photobook from the already extant library comprised of the member photographers’ work and distilled by librarians or editors into “distros”—packaged groupings of forty-five or more photographs accompanied by brief explanatory texts written by Magnum editors based on photographers’ notes.⁸

Once this working photographic print library moved to the HRC in 2010, it became solely a photographic print collection or archive. The HRC accession librarians preserved Magnum’s original organizational system as well as they could, and, in some cases, they have retained portions of the original folders with their handwritten categories together with the photographs filed in these folders. But the photographs lost their intended working context – both the space and the individuals who selected, arranged, and rearranged the photographs and their supporting documents, including contact sheets, written descriptions by the photographers, editors, or librarians, and business correspondence, which framed the photographs in terms of aesthetic choices, meta-data, market value negotiations, and so on. This original *fonds* maintained a sense of the work that these photographs did and were capable of doing, but it was by no means complete or representative of all of this work, nor did it account for every photograph that passed through the Magnum Photos Photography Library. Over the years, individual photographers withdrew selected images or all of their work when they left the agency, and photographs were sometimes not returned by publishers and never replaced, which occurred more frequently as the market for photography began to grow in the 1970s and individual prints became more valuable. The Magnum Photos Photography Collection is even less complete; some folders are empty, and the only evidence of the work that the photographs

did adheres to the surfaces of the physical prints themselves: signs of handling, such as creases, stains, and markings; the subject categories or locations indicated on the original folders and often written on the versos in pencil or ink along with stamps identifying the photographer and designating where photographs were sent and published; and, in some instances, photocopies of the texts that accompanied their publication are attached.

Although their circumstances and terms of circulation differ, the Magnum Photos Photography Library and the Magnum Photos Photography Collection constitute intentional media environments of visual and textual information related to a wide variety of issues, events, locations, and individuals from the 1930s through the 21st century on which agents and, now, researchers draw to support their work. Beyond the Collection’s lack of the Library’s original *fonds*, the only other significant difference is that the Library continues to grow and change in its digital form while the HRC’s analog Photography Collection is historically finite and materially fixed. This finiteness provides some advantages for the historian; as it limits the pictorial rhetoric of the subjects and types of events to a set moment, the active and emergent historical terms of this rhetoric across and within individual photographs—what Schwartz calls “working objects in their own time”—can be more readily perceived. This holds as long as what remains in this archive, like all archives, is understood to be incomplete and, in some cases, inadvertent.⁹ The question is how to characterize what this work might have been from the vantage point of the present.

The Magnum Photos Photography Library and Collection’s organizational terms—by photographer and subject category—both then and now, provide a set of mediating conditions within which images function as indexes of a visibility, the value of which is, in part, relative to their ready intelligibility and flexibility. Some of this intelligibility derives from the strong signature style of individual photographers as manifested in now-iconic images, such as Robert Capa’s out of focus images of allied troops coming ashore in Normandy on D-Day, Bruce Davidson’s intimate portraits of freedom riders en route to Montgomery, Alabama, or Susan Meiselas’s dramatic color images of Sandinistas in the streets of Nicaragua during the revolution. But other images, including some by these same photographers, derive their intelligibility from a weak visual rhetoric that seems to conform to generic compositional formulas and provide limited information about local circumstances. The extent to which many such photographs appear under multiple categories, and some duplicate images are identified with different location in their verso captions, underscores how a photographer’s compositional choices can disinherit the scope of an image’s subject and reveals the capacity of the Library and Collection for lean efficiency in determining the types of events and situations that are more easily interchangeable than others, thereby enhancing their visibility in relation to their ready intelligibility in general.

Because influential media environments such as the Magnum Photos Photography Library function as an important resource for a wide variety of print publications, they both shape and anticipate the categories and types of imagery and terms of visibility that a picture researcher might use. However, such choices have the potential to enhance or stand in the way of a researcher’s ability to perceive, conceive—and, ultimately, reconceive—the environments that the photographs depict. And while the status of the Magnum Photos Photography Collection as a closed set may render these choices more readily visible, it can also render them more obscure, especially in the case of the photographs that remain filed under “pollution” and its various subcategories of “land,” “air,” and “water.” Although these photographs range from the 1950s through the 1990s, with the plurality dating to the early 1970s, when mass media outlets began to take up environmental issues in response to growing public awareness, they are compositionally quite similar. The vast majority are black and white, and, regardless of the photograph’s vertical or horizontal orientation, all of them situate the horizon line close to the top of the image or eliminate it altogether. Such high or nonexistent horizon lines suggest a relatively intimate, low-angle point of view that provides little to no information about the broader context or situation. Surprisingly, few of the photographs include people, either as agents or victims; rather, they appear by proxy through manufactured objects—dolls, stuffed animals, chairs, cars, or baby carriages—or creatures that have been killed, presumably because of human actions. These inanimate objects pile up in the foreground of the images, framing bodies of water—rivers, lakes, and oceans—and functioning like *repoussoir* elements that draw the viewer into the picture, while the water, the immediate polluted and polluting agent, remains undifferentiated, a blank, if glistening, surface, implying a lack of access and reference to the presence of the camera or the photographer. The lack of color both discourages reading these photographs in terms of the picturesque landscape conventions of painting and further dilutes the local detail so that the images can be representative of, for example, a generalized “America in crisis” along with mass media consumption and uniform tract housing developments.

Admittedly, pollution, particularly of water and air, and its consequences are notoriously difficult to represent, as its agents are often either not or no longer present or proximate, and its presence and effects are often invisible, especially in individual, still, mostly black-and-white photographs, which appear to fix a moment in an ambiguous yet perpetual present tense.¹⁰ The temporal and physical limit terms of the Magnum Photos Photography Collection can thus provide an opportunity to think through various approaches to the visual mediation of water pollution alongside the related issue of access to potable water – water as a mediated subject, and water as a medium.

Three photographs by Philip J. Griffiths associated with the 1987 project titled “El Paso’s Perimeter of Poverty: Third World Within America’s Borders” remain in the Magnum Photos Photography Collection. One, filed under the category of “Pollution–Land”

Following Left: Snell family arrive at their home in Campestere with a load of water. Photograph by Philip J. Griffiths from “El Paso’s Perimeter of Poverty: Third World within America’s Border,” 1987.

Following Right: Philip J. Griffiths, [Man holding water sample] from “El Paso’s Perimeter of Poverty: Third World within America’s Border,” 1987.



provides an aerial view of El Paso, TX, that encompasses two residential areas: the Sparks *colonias* (unincorporated settlements of low-income individuals proximate to the Mexico/US border) in the foreground, and Horizon City, a wealthy suburb, in the distance. The other two photographs, both filed under “Water Pollution,” are more directly related to each other. One depicts a man dressed in office clothing—a light-colored, short-sleeved shirt, pen in breast pocket, striped tie, and dark pants—squatting at the edge of a body of water amid what appears to be construction debris, some of which also floats in the water. He holds a small, transparent plastic bag filled with water up to the light. The image is almost evenly bisected by the waterline, and the man and some of the sparse vegetation near the shoreline are crisply doubled as reflections on the surface of the still water. The outline of the Franklin Mountains looms behind him in the background, and buildings in partial ruin, along with piles of more construction materials, occupy the middle distance; none of these location-specifying elements is reflected in the water. The other image is a close-up of two fingers grasping a light-infused, labeled water sample. The caption on the verso of both photographs identifies the man as Forrest Sprester, a health official, and the water as “waste overflow from a stockyard above one of the water suburbs” and notes that the sample contains “a maggot, a rat’s tail and protozoa.” An abstract included on the verso of all three photographs outlines the broader situation that these images were meant to convey collectively: that 20,000 people live without sewage systems or clean running water in the *colonias* and the resulting high levels of toxicity and contamination of accessible water in the proximate irrigation ditches and shallow wells that the residents dig for themselves. When these residents are able to obtain clean water, the only affordable storage containers to which they have access are old chemical drums that contain toxic residues.

Some conclusions can be drawn about Griffiths’s aims from these three photographs. Collectively, they provide a distanced “big picture” aerial view of the situation and generalized, self-reflexive images of the polluted water complete with an official there to analyze it. Although the caption for the aerial photograph notes that “the homes in Sparks are often flooded with malodorous waste from Horizon sewage plant,” none of these images include identifiable agents or victims of the pollution or the victims’ efforts to contend with the situation. As a result of these and other compositional decisions, the images appear to participate in the relatively weak visual rhetoric of most of the other photographs of water pollution that sit alongside them in the Magnum Photos Photography Collection. But a full appreciation of the work that these photographs were meant to do requires consideration of how the Magnum Photos Photography Library was intended to work. While their placement within the categories of “Pollution–Land” and “Water Pollution” anticipates their potential future use as stock photographs, they were originally likely part of a larger sequence that included at least three additional images that currently appear on the Philip Jones Griffiths Foundation

website under the title “El Paso’s Perimeter of Poverty, Texas.”¹¹ Featuring the inhabitants of a *colonia* drawing water from their well, unloading containers of water transported from another site, and an elderly resident in a wheelchair, these three images are more in line with photographs made by James M. Thresher about a month earlier that accompany an article titled “El Paso’s Perimeter of Poverty: Lack of Running Water Creates a 3rd World on the Border” written by David Maraniss, published in the *Washington Post* in August 1987.¹² One of Thresher’s images includes the same health official, now situated in the distant background and accompanied by what appears to be another, similarly dressed official while turbulent water and detritus surge into the foreground, with the oblique angle of the photographer’s vantage point heightening the force and movement of the water. This image, along with the initial image accompanying the article, capture dynamically a clear moment in time and space and the people who occupy and are harmed by the situation, specifically, children caught in midair as they dive into the contaminated water.

Photo stories have always been a central organizing format for most Magnum photographers. For some, this format provided another way of taking control of their images by developing their own shooting scripts, which were usually dictated by writers or journalists. According to Chris Boot, a former director for Magnum, the sequential numbering and filing of individual photographers’ negatives with their “story lists” provided the first key summary of what their work entailed and underscored the central value of reading their work as narrative image sequences rather than discrete images or subjects.¹³ The prints made from these negatives were also filed by subject so that they could continue to earn residuals as stock photographs once they had served their initial purpose as photo stories. Although no publication details appear on the versos of the three photographs of the El Paso *colonias* by Griffiths that remain in the Magnum Photos Photography Collection, their presence in various “Pollution” files presumably signals such an aspiration, and the three images now digitally represented on his foundation’s website may have existed previously as prints in the Magnum Photos Photography Library as well. At some point, Griffiths may have decided to edit the three images remaining in the Magnum Photos Photography Collection out of the story since it came to focus exclusively on the inhabitants of the *colonias*, and, perhaps, prints of the three images on the foundation’s website are currently filed under another broad category in the collection. It would be necessary to cross-reference the entire Collection—a task that the finding aid’s search engine is currently unable to perform—to identify the parameters of yet another sub-category of Magnum’s media environment.

I have been using the term “media environment” to refer to the Magnum Photos Photography Library and Collection, but I needed to expand the parameters of the term to discover the work that Griffiths intended these photographs to do in relation to the contemporary work that other photographers

were doing on water pollution around 1987, which an exclusive reliance on the Collection obscures. During the 1980s, there was a significant upsurge in writing about the *colonias* and other marginalized US communities that lacked infrastructure—in particular, clean water—that led to a shift from images of polluted water to images of the people affected by it, including how they engaged with the situation and attempted to solve the problem of access to water as a medium necessary for life. By gaining a sense of the complexity of the circulation of images within and across media environments in relation to the circulation of water—a sense of who does and does not have access—it is possible to recognize the various kinds of work that individual images do at various times and in various situations, some more visible and intelligible and others less so. Such images are both mediated and reflect varying degrees of interpersonal mediation in relation to the conditions that they depict. Their situatedness with respect to their subjects and the work that they were intended to do, along with their cataloged locations in libraries and archives such as Magnum and the HRC, determine how we access them and conceive of them operating in various registers of representation and as tools for addressing complex environmental inequities.¹⁴

¹ Elizabeth Edwards & Christopher Morton (eds), *Photographs, Museums, Collections: Between Art and Information* (Bloomsbury, 2015); Heather Houser, *Infowhelm: Environmental Art and Literature in an Age of Data* (Columbia University Press, 2020); Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

² Terry Cook, “The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape,” *Canadian Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (2009): 497–534; Tim Schlak, “Framing Photographs, Denying Archives: The Difficulty of Focusing on Archival Photographs,” *Archival Science* 8, no. 2 (2008): 85–101; Joan M. Schwartz, “Working Objects in Their Own Time: Photographs in Archives,” in Gil Pasternak (ed.), *The Handbook of Photography Studies* (Bloomsbury, 2020), 513–29; Alan Sekula, “Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital,” (1986) in Liz Wells (ed.), *The Photography Reader* (Routledge, 2003), 443–52.

³ Siobhan Angus, *Camera Geologica: An Elemental History of Photography* (Duke University Press, 2024); Elizabeth Edwards & Janice Hart (eds), *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (Routledge, 2004); Paul Frosh, *The Image Factory: Consumer Culture, Photography and the Visual Content Industry* (Berg, 2003).

⁴ Mitchel Levitas, *America in Crisis* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969); David Maraniss, “El Paso’s Perimeter of Poverty,” the *Washington Post* (August 17, 1987): A1, A9; Peter M. Ward, *Colonias and Public Policy in Texas and Mexico: Urbanization by Stealth* (University of Texas Press, 1999).

⁵ Joan M. Schwartz, “Working Objects in Their Own Time: Photographs in Archives,” in Gil Pasternak (ed.), *The Handbook of Photography Studies* (Bloomsbury, 2020), 517. See also Tim Schlak, “Framing Photographs, Denying Archives: The Difficulty of Focusing on Archival Photographs,” *Archival Science* 8, no. 2 (2008): 85–101.

⁶ The collection includes a few color photographs, inkjet prints, and copy transparencies (slides).

⁷ Alison Nordström, “On Becoming an Archive,” in Steven Hoelscher (ed.), *Reading Magnum: A Visual Archive of the Modern World* (Harry Ransom Center and University of Texas Press, 2013), 25.

⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁹ Schwartz, “Working Objects,” 525.

¹⁰ Nixon, *Slow Violence*.

¹¹ The Philip Jones Griffiths Foundation, “El Paso’s Perimeter of Poverty, Texas,” <https://philipjonesgriffiths.org/timeline/usa-texas-el-pasos-perimeter-of-poverty/> (accessed March 23, 2025).

¹² The similarities between the two titles and the phrase “perimeter of poverty,” in particular, seem indicative of a repeated set of contemporary descriptors for impoverished sections of the United States such as Appalachia. David Maraniss did not know Philip J. Griffiths or his photographic work on the border. Jim Thresher, a veteran photojournalist at the *Post*, often accompanied Maraniss when he was working on border-related stories as the paper’s Southwest bureau chief. Email correspondence with the author, 9 December 2024.

¹³ Chris Boot, *Magnum Stories* (Phaidon Press, 2004), 4–5.

¹⁴ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 590, 583.

IMAGE CREDITS

Endpapers

Martin Johnson Heade (American, 1819–1904), *Gremlin in the Studio II*, c. 1871–75. Oil on canvas, 9 1/4 x 13 in. [23.5 x 33 cm]. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT, The Dorothy Clark Archibald and Thomas L. Archibald Fund, 1997.29.1.

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Editorial

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Grazing the Visual Commons

p. 6: Image by Andie Kennedy using Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, *View from the Window at Le Gras*, c. 1826–27, heliograph on pewter, 6.57 x 8 inches [Harry Ransom Center, Austin]. Public domain.

Mediated Visibility: Magnum’s Legacy of Water Pollution Imagery

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Ice-core Media

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Cryospheric Landscapes: On Light, Media, and Coldness

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Simulating Supernovae

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Eyes on the Sky

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In Conversation with John Durham Peters

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Immersive Worlds and Indigeneity

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Digital Plantations

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Media Architecture on the Horizontal Plane

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Postscript to Brutalist Earth

p. 94: Film still from *HOMO SAPIENS*, directed by Nikolaus Geyrhalter, 2016. Image courtesy of © NGF, used with permission.

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Fossil Fabulation

p. 100: Welding a specimen of *Apatosaurus*, c. 1914. Photo courtesy of Carnegie Museum of Natural History, used with permission.

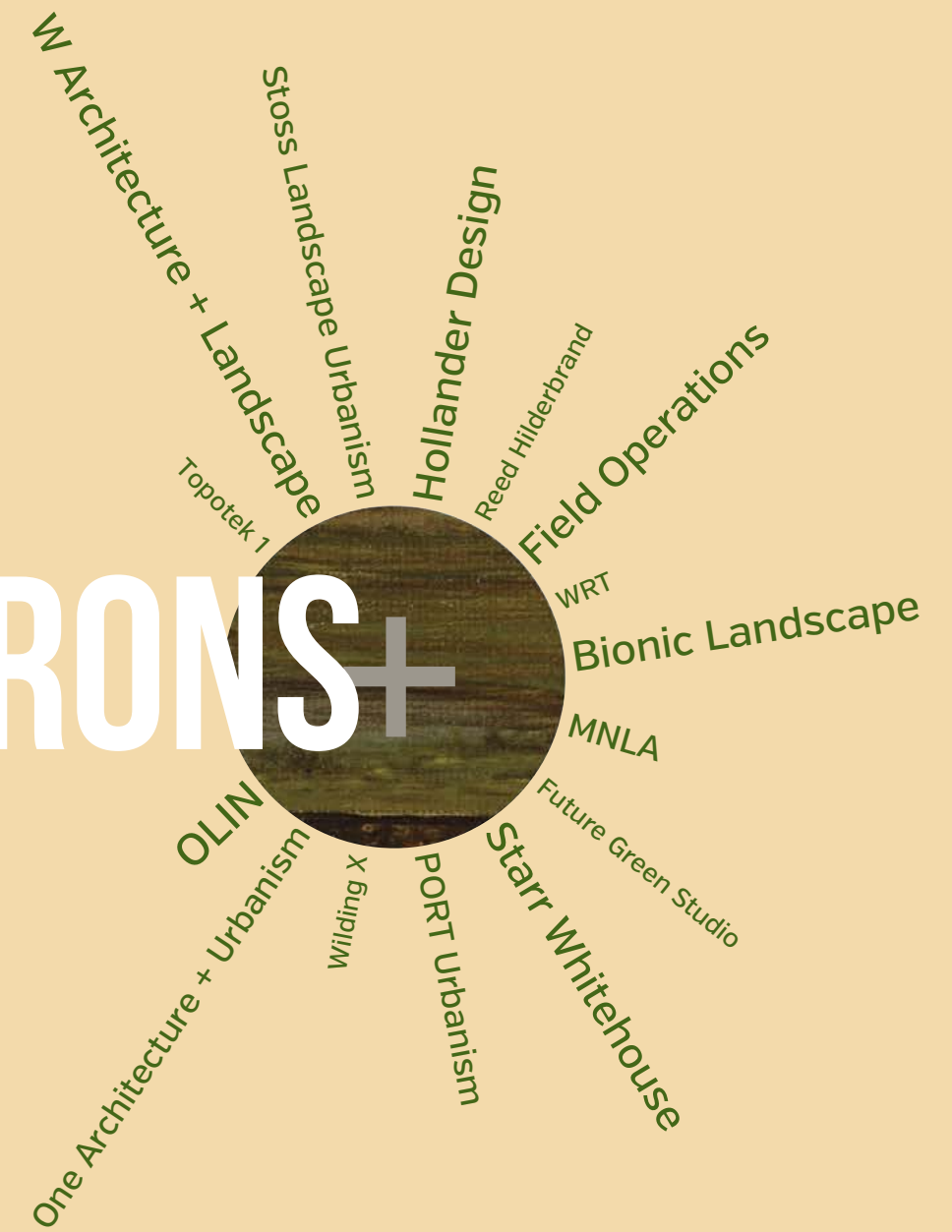
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A Tribute to Richard Weller

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