

## From the Infrastructural Sublime to Not Interesting Enough

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In a line item entry on Recovery.gov, the now-defunct website originally created to track how funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 was spent, a project in Michigan was titled, “Seeds, Sleeping Bear Dunes, Empire, Michigan.” The small bit of explanatory text elaborated, “Northwest Michigan Youth Conservation Corps will work with park personnel to repair 15 miles of deteriorating hiking trails at Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. Trails will be brushed, tread surfaces repaired and erosion control devices cleaned, repaired, and installed. Amount funded by Recovery Act: \$50,000.00.”

This same website entry was used by Chad Ress as a type of instruction and future caption to his corresponding photograph of a sand dune in the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, a coastal recreation area administered by the US Park Services outside Traverse City on Michigan’s west coast. The dune appears several stories high, perhaps thirty or forty feet. Two visitors sit at the base of the sandy hill in folding lawn chairs while others walk up it, and still more can be seen standing on top, underneath a hazy, cloudless sky. The dune looks as if it has been dumped upon the earth from on high, sand flows down its side and mixes with patches of green grass at its base. The title and caption of the photo, taken directly from Recovery.gov, allude to the dune’s purpose for erosion mitigation while also providing a space for recreation. The visitors in the image are wearing t-shirts and shorts and the many footsteps running up and down allude to the dune’s popularity.

While the composition of the image presents a sweeping scene that expands beyond the edges of the frame, the subject is decidedly un-heroic if read against the popular discourses established by previous government stimuli and the images



Civilian Conservation Corps "boys at work," Prince George's County, Maryland, 1935. Photograph by Carl Mydans.



Boulder Dam, Nevada. Completed in 1936 by the Bureau of Reclamation of the Department of the Interior with \$38,000,000 contributed by the Works Progress Administration. Photograph by Ansel Adams.

made to document them. Iconic examples of the genre include images of “boys at work” from the Civilian Conservation Corp and, as Miriam Paeslack more thoroughly describes, Margaret Bourke-White’s innaugural *Life* magazine cover of the Works Progress Administration-funded Fort Peck Dam. The fact that the site is, by definition, for recreation does little to mark the project as a principle vehicle for infrastructural grandeur or economic recovery. The dune and its reseeding are not the type of large scale building projects traditionally conjured by politicians to sell public works and the funds required to build them. And the people photographed scaling them have little in common to the images of New Deal workers constructing a nation. While the comparison to America’s most celebrated moment of physical nation-building might be unfair or overly rhetorical, it is clear that the people in Ress’s photo are enjoying the land, not toiling upon it. And while the dune spread across the shore may be a striking feature upon the landscape, the Hoover Dam it is not.

### The Infrastructural Sublime

“You can’t build the Hoover Dam twice,” claims critic Ian Volner commenting on both the physical and political legacy of the 2009 stimulus package in *Harper’s*.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging that the stimulus funds did not lead to any infrastructure projects that approached the grandiosity, cultural significance, or sheer environmental imprint of the Hoover Dam, Volner’s statement captures the popular discourse (or lack thereof) surrounding one of President Barack Obama’s early legislative accomplishments and chief domestic policy victories. Discussions around the program were largely conditioned by partisan

posturing and a formal invisibility due, in part, to the political, logistical, and economic environment surrounding the types of projects funded by the bill. In other words, there wasn’t a singular grand plan—no network of dams, no interstate highway system, no mass housing, no stadia or city halls—that could be pinned to the stimulus package so as to whip political and popular support for its passage and success.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, known more broadly as the Recovery Act, or simply the stimulus bill, was passed by the Obama administration in response to the 2008 financial crisis. The bill released \$831 billion into the economy in an attempt to reverse the so-called Great Recession Obama inherited.<sup>2</sup> Comparisons between the Recovery Act and the New Deal were made almost immediately.<sup>3</sup> And writing in retrospect, reporter Michael Grabell claims the stimulus bill was the “biggest economic recovery plan in history.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, journalist Michael Grunwald describes the stimulus bill and Obama’s economic legacy as the “New New Deal.”<sup>5</sup>

However, questioning the lasting cultural, developmental, and infrastructural impact of the 2009 stimulus package, Volner’s statement recalls a key question surrounding one of Obama’s chief domestic policy victories: What, exactly did the 2009 stimulus package do? Not, “did it save the American and/or global economy?” but how did it change the country? Did it provide useful, recognizable infrastructure? Did it forever (or at least for a while) shape our cities? What, in essence, did it look like?

Volner’s reference to the Hoover Dam can be read in several ways. As a spectacular feat of governmental and environmental engineering, it gave possibility to a populous desert southwest, suburban expansion, and the excesses of

Las Vegas—the most American of cities. Alternatively, the dam holds a vaunted position within the collective imaginary of American ingenuity and brute force. The Hoover Dam proposes a type of welfare-state possibility and creates a visual vocabulary for marking public works and the distribution of public funds. Importantly, the dam stands as a material instantiation of the federal government, one that thinks big and is willing to invest in large-scale infrastructure and the labor required to produce it. The dam's scale is a spectacular reminder of American state-making (both bureaucratically and territorially) at the nascent stage of America's global dominance. The dam, and its heroic images, made the American state visible on a broad popular and political register. It gave American citizens and subjects of the state an image of what early twentieth century America could and should be doing, and what it could and should look like. It could be argued that without the major infrastructure projects of the era stitching together a nationalist social imagination and providing networked services to the country, America's post-World War II ascendance would be much less assured.

The dam has come to stand in for the *idea* of governmental stimulus and infrastructural development in general and the New Deal in particular. And the New Deal has come to stand in for an idealized conception of government stimulus and the best-case possibilities of the American welfare state. Sociologist Robert Leighninger claims it might only be a “slight” exaggeration to say “that there is hardly a community or a citizen in the country who has not benefited from the facilities” developed during the New Deal era.<sup>6</sup> Judging the New Deal as universally beneficial is a contested claim. Historian George Lipsitz has written of lasting racial segregation and employment inequality due to New Deal housing

and welfare policies. But Leighninger is likely correct in that the architectural legacy of New Deal projects can be noted throughout the country.

During the 1930s and early 40s, many agencies and initiatives under the New Deal umbrella including the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Public Works Administration (PWA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Civil Works Administration (CWA) managed the development and construction of projects including public parks, pools, civic buildings, public services and utilities, bridges, tunnels, educational buildings, military installations, hospitals, and courthouses. A report from the WPA claims that over 40,000 buildings were constructed and 85,000 improved under its watch.<sup>7</sup> The New Deal programs quite literally built the country, establishing public spaces and institutions, and connecting them through transportation infrastructure and communication networks.

Architect Paul Cret, who designed many New Deal Projects, defines the style of the era as “WPA moderne,” referring to its aesthetics as “starved classicism” or “Greco-Deco,” a stylistic combination of Greco-Roman classicism and art deco futurism. Less inspirational in tone, historian Phoebe Cutler calls the New Deal style “government rustic,” a type of institutional form pointing towards a frontier aesthetic marked by the prospect of western expansion.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of the genre or aesthetic category, these stylistic designations signal that architects and historians have decided there is *some* style or formal approach with which to group and describe the public works of the New Deal era and that aesthetics itself has played an important role in the “visibility” of the New Deal as a political project.

Read through the photographic media of the day,



Municipal Building, Austin, Texas. Completed in 1939 with \$240,768 contributed by the Works Progress Administration. Photographer unknown.

populated by towering public buildings and courageous men at work, the aesthetic style denotes an infrastructural sublime, an affective quality linking the vast scale of large infrastructural development—both in its size and the effort required to build it—with the overwhelming power of a state that could successfully accomplish such feats. The infrastructural sublime can be understood as an amalgam of David Nye’s various American sublimes—the technological, the geometrical, the industrial, the electrical—but foregrounded by the status of the state as the producer of *shared* infrastructure. In this sense, the infrastructural sublime takes Nye’s charge that the sublime can “weld society together” and posits a collective aesthetic experience as foundational to producing a shared politics. In the case of New Deal public works, their affective aesthetic experience forged a politics in support of spending programs and the government that passed them.<sup>9</sup> Like the Burkean sublime, many of the projects from the era are immense in ambition, obscure in purpose, and of such a scale their totality cannot be easily comprehended. That is, the mediated representation of New Deal projects offer a version of state power and presence, as both physical object and as image, while denying the messy and contested reality of its politics and everyday life.

The aesthetics of government infrastructural projects take on another valence when linked to the large swaths of bureaucratic energy and citizen labor required to construct them.<sup>10</sup> The government is itself a far-reaching and powerful entity that operates as an abstraction in terms of its power to mobilize a workforce and enact policy (this same abstraction, or distance between subject and state is often noted when the government fails to act or gets stuck within its own bureaucratic machinations). The direct line between subject—citizen, resident—and state is obfuscated and abstracted

through layers of bureaucracy, taxation, and political ideology. In the case of the Recovery Act, government stimulus serves as one specific mediating object situated between subject and the state in that it represents state action and ideology in physical form. Stimulus projects stand in as material and formal manifestations of the abstract state—concrete evidence of taxpayer funding and the collective financial and political participation of the population. In the case of the New Deal and the stimulus package, the built works represent the state responding to crisis through the construction of the nation state. Which is to say, one of the primary ways a citizen or state subject interacts with their government is through the use of public spaces and public institutions—whether they be libraries, national parks, courts, or prisons.

Yet if the New Deal’s 40,000 new buildings made a significant spatial imprint on the country, it was arguably these buildings’ photographic representations that secured the programs celebrated place within the national imagination. Forming an impressive archive produced alongside the built works through a type of employment program for out of work photographers and artists, the widely circulated images of construction projects and people at work added a visual analog to the myth of the developing state. Whether simple documentation or state propaganda, these images are marked by the sublime authority of the state and its ability to activate a citizen labor force to complete large-scale public works.

In the intervening years, New Deal programs have come to stand in for the American version of a liberal state. As historian Robert Self writes, the era’s liberalism meant a “modified” welfare state, with redistribution in favor of a largely white, segregated middle class alongside aspirations for racial equality, and an individualist ideology that de-emphasized group

politics.<sup>11</sup> The beneficial aspects of welfare state policies were sold as broad based and universal, but in application they often codified racial difference and individual rights at the expense of social and civil rights. Images of young white men from the Civilian Conservation Corps and photos of newly built public spaces deny the reality of racial segregation reinforce the romanticized history of New Deal programs. The images are coded with a racial and economic narrative that reinforces the impossibility of full equality while at the same time establishes a mythologized representation of “America.” The spatio-photographic representation of the New Deal presents a significant visual benchmark to which government outlays after the New Deal have been (and will likely continue to be) judged, both in terms of architectural design and building development *and* the imagery by which such projects circulate and are consumed.

Seventy years later, the 2009 stimulus bill was signed into law and quickly contextualized within the history of New Deal state-making. The bill introduced more than \$780 billion into “shovel ready” construction projects: those that had been previously planned and were either left dormant due to the recession or were already existing and could benefit from public monies. With Vice President Joe Biden standing behind him at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, President Obama signed the Recovery Act on February 17, 2009. According to Obama, the goal of the bill was to revive the economy by “Making supplemental appropriations for job preservation and creation, infrastructure investment, energy efficiency and science, assistance to the unemployed, and State and local fiscal stabilization, for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2009, and for other purposes.”<sup>12</sup> Obama alluded to the grandiosity of the interstate highway system and

promised funds for a broad array of civic projects but kept his focus on economic growth, financial security, and the promise of jobs. If there were any desired effects for stimulus funds to increase public engagement or revive the country’s civic institutions, they were conspicuously absent from the legislation’s text or his administration’s public relations strategy.

Funds from the bill were quickly distributed across the government, earmarked for agricultural and rural development, military construction, homeland security, state grants, unemployment assistance, and other forms of fiscal relief. House minority leader John Boehner and other Republican leaders strongly argued against the bill—most favoring only tax cuts—while left-leaning economist Paul Krugman claimed it was too small and should be increased to at least \$1 trillion.<sup>13</sup>

The “shovel ready” imperative meant there was no large-scale strategic plan or spectacular series of projects for the administration to highlight. Nothing could stand in as an archetypical example of what the stimulus package claimed to represent. Nor was the bill sold on a broad public level, and later, when projects were complete, they weren’t presented as examples of the bill’s success. Furthermore, the stimulus bill contained no funds specifically marked for artists, writers, photographers, or even bureaucrats to document it’s collected projects. If one feature of the New Deal was to enshrine a type of political and visual legacy, both through transforming the built environment and the image-making programs created to document these transformations, the stimulus package contained neither.

In the language of Jacques Rancière, there was no potential for visibility embedded into the legislative language of the stimulus bill. With the highly partisan environment surrounding the bill’s passage, and its stated purpose for alleviating



a crisis, documenting the projects' potential success wasn't considered within its scope. There were no "aesthetic practices" established to disclose and make visible the bill's interventions on the landscape in a way that was "common to the community."<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that the individual projects lacked aesthetic qualities, or that the projects were not documented through websites and the bureaucratic tools of spreadsheets and databases, but that as a whole, they didn't embody a cohesive aesthetic strategy readily legible to a community or population, even one as contested and fragmented as "the public."

Rancière links politics and aesthetics together through the mechanism of visibility as a mediating factor that reinforces certain power structures. Politics, for Rancière "revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time."<sup>15</sup> By applying Rancière's understanding of politics coming from aesthetic experience, the stimulus bill's invisibility meant the bill and its policy implications could not enter into a broader political discourse. However, even if the aesthetic incoherence of the stimulus projects hinders their ascension into the theater of politics, it is not to say the stimulus projects were not marked as political in different ways.

Many of the funded transportation projects—roads, bridges—were advertised by signage designating the project as paid for by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Not necessarily an aesthetic or stylistic marker of the stimulus' lasting visual impact, the signs nevertheless drew the attention of the House Committee on Oversight Government Reform and its chairman, California Republican Darrell Issa. In a report issued by the committee titled *Analysis of the First Year*

*of the Obama Administration: Public Relations and Propaganda Initiatives*, Issa claims, "the signs provide no relevant traveler information—they are purely intended for propaganda purposes."<sup>16</sup> It would be easy to dismiss Issa's claim as mere partisanship or even government accountability, but beyond the partisan-political dimensions of whether or not highway signage is a form of propaganda, the claim illustrates how politics is a battle over the means and methods of visibility. In Issa's conservative point of view, government should be limited, therefore the role of government funding in infrastructure building should be hidden. Allowing the federal government to claim any credit for the potential benefits from stimulus-funded projects would directly contradict conservative dogma that the government is a poor administrator of public services.

Representative Issa and his committee also took issue with the website established by the bill that tracked how stimulus funds were spent. Recovery.gov, stated its purpose as the "government's official website providing easy access to data related to Recovery Act spending and allowing for the reporting of potential fraud, waste, and abuse."<sup>17</sup> Conversely, Issa, concluded the site "multiplies the Administration's investment in promoting the impact of the stimulus by effectively funneling federal dollars through state and local governments to finance propaganda material."<sup>18</sup> Issa's claim dissolves accountability into propaganda and underscores the question of whether or not transparency, or at least access to data and information, plays an important function in democratic governance.

As a nod to public accountability, Recovery.gov compiled a database of basic recovery project information that was categorized by grant amount, governing administration,



American Recovery and Reinvestment Act road sign, Baker, California, 2010. Photographer unknown.

date, recipient, and a brief description of what the funds accomplished.<sup>19</sup> The spreadsheet and database format conformed to the site's technocratic purposes: to make data available for any individual person, government watchdog group, or academic researcher willing to parse it for their own particular purpose. Containing the stimulus bills funding outlays within the narrow confines of the website's particular form of documentation and transactional accountability, the question of whether or not the bill was "working" continued to be refracted through political ideology—as seen explicitly in the Issa report. Political Scientist Suzanne Mettler writes that the bill was so large yet so vague and complicated that most Americans were unaware of how it would affect them, even though most received, at the very least, tax benefits due to its passage.<sup>20</sup> In essence, like most legislation, the bill was a large bureaucratic initiative and it was legislated without explanation or publicity. At the time of its passage the Republican-controlled Congress had an interest in making sure that the bill contained no documentary requirements that could stand as evidence to the programs' utility, thus making the stimulus invisible to the broader public.

The same database and website questioned by Issa was the source document Ress used as the foundation for *America Recovered*. By combing through the Recovery.gov, Ress adopted individual project funding titles and descriptions as both prompts for and future captions to his photographic images. "The conceptual framework of this project" Ress writes, "is to reveal the point where abstract political processes manifest themselves in the physical world, thus providing an alternate means of experiencing the contemporary American landscape."<sup>21</sup> Ress understood that the stimulus bill would have analogs in the physical world and the only platform

created to track and describe the bill's progress displayed project information in the format of spreadsheets and online databases—textual information.

For Ress, the physical reality of the bill was hidden behind two different forms of abstraction. The first was the institutional nature of representative government; any visual or aesthetic representation of the government is by its very constitution abstract, with all interactions between citizen and government mediated through various forms of representation, whether that be website accountability or electoral politics. The second being another form of abstraction intentionally designed by political processes that either deny visual representation—Issa's strategy—or let it exist as a bureaucratic dataset. *America Recovered* is thus a deeply political project in that Ress is attempting to make visible the material forms of government spending. In doing so, he is questioning the way in which the federal government creates a subjective public. More directly, Ress's images ask what it means to be a citizen or subject of the state today—and how would we know if we are or not? As a viewer, the implied question is, what do you see? Simple road repaving, or the state in action? Rendering the stimulus through photography, Ress is prompting the viewer to make a political judgment not only on the form and content of his images, but on the political processes that brought them to be.

### Not Interesting Enough

Contrary to the spectacular presence embodied in New Deal imagery—documentary, nationalistic, or otherwise—*America Recovered* presents the stimulus program with a distance and

instability that questions the affective presence of federally funded works and the visibility of government institutions. As a collection, the photographs allude to the many distinct shifts that have defined American life throughout the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries. Compared to the New Deal era archive, Ress's *America Recovered* images elicit nearly a century of American global domination, insatiable neoliberal expansion, Bill Clinton's end of "welfare as we know it," racial inequality, gender inequality, income inequality, and the seemingly intractable disconnect between the federal government and the people it ostensibly represents.

With the displacement of governance to the private market and the shrinking social safety net that has come to dominate American politics and budgetary discourses the visual vocabulary used to describe previous stimulus programs and public works projects would be incapable of re-creating the mythic story of the welfare state in action. The insufficiency of photography in this respect is not due to the medium's weakness in performing a similar documentary intent, but because the myth of the liberal state has collapsed. And without new, or updated, forms of aesthetic production, the task of making visible the effect of government policy on the space of daily life remains abstract and unseen. The language of aesthetic critique is still dominated by definitions offered by Burke and Kant. Yet the sublime—infrastructural or otherwise—or the beautiful, cannot capture the aesthetic practices of contemporary governance—or the artistic practices used to critique it—because, as Sianne Ngai describes, the aesthetic features or characteristics of such works, and their media representations are not bound in any systematic way to the affective experiences they evoke.<sup>22</sup> The Hoover Dam itself and the photographs depicting it may produce a sublime experience,

but it's unlikely that waiting in a newly installed bus stop will do the same.

Ngai's distinction between form and experience (or knowledge and perception, as she puts it) is only amplified when applied to publicly funded architecture and infrastructure spaces. The aesthetic quality of any single project—and certainly the myriad aesthetics of the project as a whole—is unbound from any cohesive or coherent affective experience.<sup>23</sup> What exactly is the affective experience of a concrete drainage culvert? This disconnect between known aesthetic features and affective experience gives way to Ngai's theory of "interesting" as its own, terminal aesthetic judgment—one that can operate, like the sublime and the beautiful, without any pre-defined concept or content, allowing us to "negotiate the relationship between the possible and the actual," with a distinctly future-oriented temporality.<sup>24</sup> This temporality, in contrast to the sublime, allows the work to linger in the mind, calling the viewer to return, and inserting the image or experience into discursive practice. The interesting begs the question, "why is it interesting?" re-representing the object, work, or experience in order to circulate as a discursive object without temporal constraints.<sup>25</sup> The interesting, according to Ngai, is an aesthetic judgment that can bridge, without solving, the aesthetic-affective unbinding, and one that often relies on external conditions—seriality, data, and other outside referents—to complete both the aesthetic practice and experience of the work in question. The interesting provides a critical framework to analyze Ress's *America Recovered* project against the historical context of landscape photography, text-image artistic traditions, and seriality as a conceptual artistic practice. It also opens a space to critique the stimulus bill as a policy proposal that entailed certain aesthetic and material practices

without distinctly claiming them as such.

The strategies of visibility—or the methods of forcing the bureaucratic space of landscape, infrastructure, and building construction and maintenance into the realm of political debate—used by Ress is both an artistic and political practice tied to the production of making stimulus projects both visible and interesting. Many of the images capture a certain environmental vastness, one that verges on emptiness. Others are tightly cropped and documentary. Likewise, the scale and composition of images varies according to subject. But through the repetition of the referent and image relationship (as opposed to a repetition of image content), Ress relies on the unedited administrative dataset to make interesting his compilation of photographic evidence. This appeal to outside information is what Ngai calls an “appeal to extra-aesthetic judgments.”<sup>26</sup> Systems of bureaucratic data management are certain extra-aesthetic judgements, but so too are political positions and ideologies that code the images within a certain political frame. In linking the image to its stimulus function by captioning it with website information, it is not just the collection of photographs that is rendered aesthetically interesting, but the bureaucratic functioning of the state.<sup>27</sup>

If an aesthetic critique of the images veers towards the interesting, their formal composition alludes to the documentary passivity made famous in the landmark *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* exhibition. *New Topographics* opened in 1975 at the George Eastman House and was described by critic Toby Jurovics as “arguably the greatest show never seen.” The collection of photographers and images curated by William Jenkins served to reorient both the field of landscape photography and what the viewer should expect from images of the American landscape.<sup>28</sup> Writing in

the exhibition catalog commemorating the show’s re-hanging in 2009, Britt Salvesen notes that the photographs “survey the here and now” without necessarily defining what that means.<sup>29</sup> Salvesen goes on to list a series of subjects captured in many of the photos—street scenes, motorways, parking lots, office parks, “plainly prosaic views”—and says that even today, “the works offer a cool resistance.” No doubt scenes and comments that could be uttered upon reviewing Ress’s present collection.

The cool resistance Salvesen references has often been interpreted as a unifying style that organized the exhibiting photographers. Indeed, style is one of the aesthetic preoccupations surrounding *New Topographics* and what has later been called the “new topographic outlook,” defined by curator John Rohrbach as “directness, emotional remove, and attentiveness to humanity’s shaping the land.” In particular, human intervention is not just understood as suburban sprawl, infrastructural development, highway planning, etc., but as a shift from the industrial capitalism that defined the World War II era to a service economy and the alienation brought about by highly repetitive landscapes, corporatization, financialization, and the placelessness that dominates post-war suburban expansion.<sup>30</sup>

Acutely aware that visitors, critics, and historians will no doubt read a cohesive and curated style among the exhibition’s artists, Jenkins begins his introduction to the original exhibition catalog by admitting that style is an important problem for the show to contend with. And yet he warns that each individual photograph holds far more meaning; they can’t be reduced to simple aesthetic tropes. Jenkins describes the aesthetic underpinnings he used to select the group of photographers through the language of Frank Gohlke, one of the exhibition’s artists. Gohlke described his framing and shooting technique as the “passive frame.” “Rather than the picture

having been created by the frame, there is a sense of the frame having been laid on an existing scene without interpreting it very much.”<sup>31</sup>

This idea would seemingly remove any boundaries restricting subject or content driven narratives and give added deference to the photograph’s experiential qualities. Gohlke himself captured this best, with a body of work exhibited in the show that didn’t adhere to any dominant subject. Gohlke’s black and white images captured suburban residential neighborhoods, the open fields of Nebraska, water infrastructure, non-descript industrial buildings, a K-Mart parking lot, and scenes from downtown Los Angeles. Salvesen claims Gohlke’s images “do not immediately reveal a unifying idea” and yet they present a version of American landscape that is both typical and specific.<sup>32</sup> The images, according to Salvesen, capture a general idea of America by depicting a few of its discrete landscapes. This was a common refrain for visitors entering the Eastman House and viewing the exhibition. The catalog reprint opens with a recording taken on December 14, 1975 of two visitors and their reactions to the show. While viewing the photographs on exhibition, one of the visitors says, “At first they are really stark nothing, but then you really look at it and it’s just about the way things are. This is interesting, it really is.”<sup>33</sup>

“Interesting” was the same conclusion given by Charles Dearies, writing in one of the exhibition’s few reviews in *Afterimage*.<sup>34</sup> But as Ngai has articulated, the interesting serves not as a marker of negative criticism or a linguistic method to sidestep aesthetic judgment altogether, but as an aesthetic judgment in and of itself. For Ngai the interesting is a judgment that embodies both novelty and seriality; one that attempts to reconcile the rational and the abstract. The

interesting reaches far beyond traditional aesthetic boundaries, addressing aesthetic experiences that are low in affect and easy to miss.<sup>35</sup> Both Ngai and Jenkins locate the artwork of Ed Ruscha as a type of primordial subject for their respective projects. For Jenkins, Ruscha’s work “possessed at once the qualities of rigorous purity, deadpan humor and causal disregard for the importance of the images.”<sup>36</sup>

But where Jenkins is occupied with what he sees as the stylistic neutrality of Ruscha’s work, Ngai’s focus is in its seriality, and in the intertextual possibilities produced by vacillating between the individual and the serial. Part of what makes seriality so important for Ngai is that it imports nonaesthetic qualities, such as external information and conceptual framing, into the realm of aesthetic experience. The serial speaks to a higher order of contextual principles to which the works of art relate. The judgment of interesting alludes to these external, “extra-aesthetic” characteristics that deeply influence our affective and intellectual understandings of the work.

Ress’s *American Recovered* fits within this lineage given its aestheticized, detached or neutral stance, and due to the fact that Ressa’s subjects can only be fully located external to the frame of the image. For Ngai, the notion of type is highly significant for the interesting. The formal breadth of Ressa’s images questions the intended typological reference—and even the need for such ordering. What exactly is the typology of government funding? Ressa answers that question with a broad set of responses, none of which may do much to establish a standard ideal or typological norm. In one image, we see a backhoe moving large boulders in what looks like a grassy riverbed. In another, San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge is seen in the distance with a building in the foreground and an array of solar panels atop its roof. Only through the caption

are we to understand that the subject is the solar panels, paid for by \$118,298.00 of stimulus funds. It is left to the viewer to judge the financial merits of any given project. Another image depicts what looks like the interior of a military building with a single, fatigue-clad soldier walking down the hall and away from the viewer. And yet another is a diptych showing a half-destroyed, wood-framed residential building with a couple of hardhat and construction vest-wearing workers observing from the side. The next image is the same home, now completely destroyed; reduced to a mound of building detritus. Ress's images are both interior and exterior, populated and empty, shifting in frame from perpendicular to angled. Most are taken at ground level, but some are shot from above, and a few from below. Like Gohlke's collection, they offer an *idea* of America, although what that idea is, and what it is trying to represent remains vague and undefined, only somewhat gleaned through the relations established between the images and their textual captions.

Ress's range of employed photographic conventions and each image's stylistic restraint serves to dislodge the subject from any immediate photographic type. In Ngai's reading, this opens a gap between knowledge and perception, prompting the viewer to look elsewhere in order to complete the experience of viewing the whole work. Crucial, then, to Ress's collection of photographs are the adjoining captions he took directly from the Recovery.org website. The captions serve as a typological benchmark linking the images together, forming a bridge between the textual demarcation of subject and the varying affective experiences of viewing. Hence, the aesthetic differences between images matter less than the relationship established *across* the series. These relationships work to further reinforce Ress's conceptual field by creating

myriad affective experiences of both image making and being present in the landscape while also linking these experiences to the viewer's subjective status within the bureaucratic state. The serial, database-driven nature of the stimulus project's management, the seemingly endless material variety of their reality, and—crucially—their near invisibility within the landscape emerge, quietly but coherently, in this way. The captions are important not as simple descriptors associated with the image, but as an aesthetic typology of the state. The cool, bureaucratic, and referent-less dataset becomes the base-line typological form of stimulus funding and thus the state as a material actor in the American landscape. The photographic images of disparate and formally distinct instantiations of that typological referent can only be described as “interesting” instances of the larger political-bureaucratic process.

Based solely on their formal or stylistic language, many *America Recovered* images could easily have been included in the *New Topographics* exhibition. For instance, “City of East Lansing, Michigan” initially appears to utilize the tropes of distance and neutrality celebrated by Jenkins and questioned by later writers. Yet when read, literally as it were, with its caption, the formal and conceptual focus of the image is immediately reoriented and the cognitive/aesthetic divide is shifted from a tableau of empty road and trees to the road as an alley-way paid for by government funds to provide services to a new, market and low-income housing project. The image no longer shows a scene from a town in Michigan, but the pervasive nature of government-financed transportation infrastructure. Without the external, textual reference, the visibility of something as omnipresent as the nation state would remain invisible within this particular scene *and* its photographic representation. It is similarly unlikely the role of the stimulus

as alleyway maker has been made visible to the residents of this block.

By reading the images of this book together, *America Recovered* makes a profound claim: that the nation state as a spatial mediator is not visible in the everyday imagination of the citizen and subject population. If anything is meant to follow from this claim, it is not to reify the government, or to reinvest in the mythologizing of New Deal era photography, but to signal the importance of visibility, the promise of discourse, and their constitutive role in representative democracy. By repeating the text-image form *America Recovered* thrusts the landscapes of infrastructural and spatial maintenance into the political realm, making them visible as manifestations of the bureaucratic state *and* as potential for political action.

Ress's ease in shifting between and beyond certain stylistic genres and his desire to mediate the images with textual descriptions makes the project difficult to comprehend or critique on the basis of individual images alone. Ress is inserting a type of visibility into the aesthetic field, inviting viewers to look at his images and see the state at work. More directly, Ress is making a claim that the state itself is invisible, that it works in ways that have become so pervasive that the visual languages of style and form do little to capture its hegemonic presence—whether funding home demolitions in Detroit, Michigan or water infrastructure improvements in Chino, California.

The status of *America Recovered* as a recuperative political project in some sense relies on the discursive power of interest generated through the aesthetic experience of relating images to captions. The collection of images relies not on a sublime judgment to generate a socially constructed

experience but for the project to generate enough interest to cue extra-aesthetic judgments in the service of political action. Through Ress's images, the failure of the stimulus bill to make itself visible and interesting cannot solely be blamed on hyper-partisanship or a lack of large-scale, spectacular infrastructure, but that the projects failed to be received as a unified collection of individual projects representing the full scale of the state at work. The collection of projects, extensive as they might have been, failed to be noticed as a broadly constituted infrastructural or economic stimulus; they were, quite often and often quite literally, invisible. This invisibility meant they failed to make any aesthetic claims and therefore any aesthetic impact, either through their material reality or as images transmitted across the media. Without a project of making visible the serial and highly nuanced nature of the state at work, and the multiple expressions state actions take, the Recovery Act projects might simply be relegated as not interesting enough.

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